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A Phenomenological Study of National Distinguished Elementary and Middle School Principals from the Class of 2010

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A Phenomenological Study of National Distinguished Elementary and
Middle School Principals from the Class of 2010.

A Phenomenological Study of National Distinguished Elementary and
Middle School Principals from the Class of 2010.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the leadership experiences and perspectives of five National Distinguished Elementary Principals (NDPs) from the Class of 2010 serving in the Midwest region of the United States. Specifically, the study investigated the application and selection process of recognition as an NDP, their views of school leadership, and their perception of best professional practices. Using a phenomenological approach, the researcher used semistructured phone interviews and analyzed National Distinguished Principal application essays. The required essays focused on balancing leadership and management, promoting parent involvement, supporting and challenging learners, and advancing a positive culture. The findings indicated the application and selection process as NDP has a unique variance between states, NDPs exercise an integrated leadership approach rooted in professional collaboration, and NDPs use a variety of best practices that focus around hiring, terminating, and communicating expectations.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation represents the true meaning of perseverance and is a reflection of my continuous thirst for new knowledge. I want to thank the National Association of Elementary Principals (NAESP) and its commitment to the National Distinguished Principals Program, which has recognized the contribution of school leaders from across the country and around the globe for over 25 years. Attending the National Distinguished Principal Conference in Washington, D.C., in October 2010 was one of the highlights of my professional career, and I want to thank my state colleagues for their endorsement and encouragement that provided the vision for this study as well as the National Distinguished Principals (NDPs) who willingly agreed to participate in this research project to share their insights and understanding of school leadership and their journey toward becoming award-winning principals. In addition, I extend my appreciation to all of my professors, specifically my dissertation committee, for challenging me, guiding me, and assisting me along my leadership journey, which is always a work in progress.

Lastly, I acknowledge the sacrifice my family had to make in order to ensure the completion of this project. May this work serve as an example to my children, Emma, Jack, and Christian, that hard work, dedication, and commitment are important elements in achieving your life-long goals. Lastly and most importantly, I thank my wife Wendy for her unconditional love, her words of encouragement, and her support in helping me achieve my goals.

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction and Overview

The purpose of this qualitative study, which used a phenomenological approach, was to study the leadership experiences and perspectives of five National Distinguished Elementary Principals (NDPs) from the Class of 2010 serving in the Midwest region of the United States. Specifically, the study analyzed the application process for recognition as an NDP, their views of school leadership, and their perceptions of best professional practices. According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), a phenomenological approach seeks to “explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of individual lived experiences” (p. 19).

This chapter begins with an overview of the changing role of the principal. It discusses attributes of effective school principals and the contrasting definitions found in the literature. Following contextual background information is a description of the problem statement with accompanying research questions; furthermore, this chapter includes an overview of the research approach, assumptions, information about the researcher, significance of the study, and key terminology.

Background and Context

The principal’s role has shifted dramatically over the decades. Reitzug, West, and Angel (2008) conducted an in-depth investigation of the changing language used to describe the role of the principal. A principal has shifted from the scientific manager who supervised facility issues of the 1920s, to an instructional leader who focused on teaching and learning issues of the 1990s (p. 694). This shift from organizational manager to an instructional leader has become recognized as a critical element in school performance (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). Leithwood et al (2008). stated, “There is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of

talented leadership” (2008, p. 29). Chrisman (2005) conducted a study of successful schools and concluded that the difference between successful schools and unsuccessful schools when comparing academic programs was not student mobility rate or school size. Chrisman (2005) stated, “The product of how well a school operates depends on the quality of leadership” (p. 17).

Day (2007) concluded that effective principals sustained passionate commitment by setting high expectations, clearly articulating values, and demonstrating open communication. Other attributes included a principal’s ability to manage tension, stay focused on learning issues, and build community among staff members. Day (2007) captured the essence of being an effective educational leader as someone who has “passion for teaching and learning which was articulated and communicated through the structures, culture, relationships, and behavior in the school” (p. 22).

In contrast, within the Blueprint for Reform report (2010), a reform initiative from President Obama’s administration defines an effective principal as one whose students, overall and for each subgroup, achieve high rates of student growth. This contrast between passion and increased federal accountability measures to improve students’ academic success is again changing the role of the principal from instructional leader to high-stakes testing coordinator. Within the federal accountability initiatives No Child Left Behind (2001), the policy legislated that all students must meet proficient and advanced academic targets by 2014 and required that all third through eighth grade students be administered state-designed end-of-year exams in both reading and mathematics to measure academic achievement. Student scores are then compared to yearly federal achievement targets by which each child is labeled below basic, basic, proficient, or advanced. Each year the federal student achievement target increases with the expectation that all students will be proficient or advanced by 2014. Districts not meeting federal targets are

subject to sanctions and increased levels of consequences that include drafting school improvement plans, corrective action, and restructuring. Corrective action and restructuring, the second and third consequence levels, require replacement of staff, including building leadership.

School principal turnover may be appropriate in some situations; however, removing the principal can have adverse far-reaching consequences. According to Bêteille, Kalogrides, and Loeb (2012), “The departure of a principal is associated with higher teacher turnover rates and lower student achievement gains” (p. 905). Samuels (2012) stated that over 20% percent of principals who leave their posts within the first couple of years create a downward academic trend. As a nation, we cannot afford to fire or replace the nation’s school principals in pursuit of closing the achievement gap. Instead, we should be training, mentoring, and preparing our principals to lead change from within to create a sustainable learning environment.

Problem Statement

Never before has the need for the examination and identification of leadership attributes of school principals been so pronounced. Day (2007) stated that effective principals “demonstrated sustained commitment and passion for their work under what are often intellectually and emotionally challenging circumstances” (p. 14). The problem is that principals are receiving mixed messages. Day (2007) describes effective principals as individuals with “commitment, passion, and trust” while reform documents call for the replacement of principals who are not making subgroup growth. Without sustained leadership and research-based strategies, the cycle of replacing principals will replicate itself over and over. The information from our nationally recognized principals could be invaluable in mentoring and supporting our current principals to meet the demands of federal achievement expectations.

Over the past 25 years, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) has honored principals through the National Distinguished Principal Program. They have recognized principals for their accomplishments from each state, the State Department, and the Department of Defense. This group of administrators has been recognized with honors, dinners, plaques, celebrations, and community accolades; however, the research is silent with regard to disseminating their insights, practices, and strategies. The review of the literature generated few studies or research projects that pertain to nationally recognized principals.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study, which used a phenomenological approach, examined the leadership experiences and perspectives of five National Distinguished Elementary Principals (NDPs) from the Class of 2010 serving in the Midwest region of the United States. Specifically, the study analyzed the application process for recognition as an NDP, their views of school leadership, and their perceptions of best professional practices; furthermore, the research study helped answer the following questions:

1. What application process did each award-winning principal experience to be nominated and selected as an NDP?
2. What are the core beliefs, thoughts, and insights of NDPs regarding school leadership?
3. To what practices, thought processes, and experiences do award-winning principals attribute their success?

Research Approach

This study uses a constructivist lens and phenomenological design, allowing me to construct knowledge from a select group of identified subjects. Rossman and Rallis (2011) described a phenomenological study as an investigation into the “lived experiences” of a small

group (p. 97). The phenomenological design was chosen knowing that I share in the similar experience as a National Distinguished Principal from the Class of 2010. As an award-winning principal, I selected a phenomenological approach knowing that my award-winning status would provide credibility and rapport with subjects in order to obtain their insights about their selection process, thoughts about school leadership, and their perspective of best leadership practices. Each of these award-winning principals has been recognized and honored in Washington, D.C., in October 2010; however, their collective insights, practices, and perspectives have not been shared nationally with colleagues.

To learn from our nationally recognized principals and to gain insight into their shared experiences, I conducted semistructured phone interviews with each participant. Rubin and Rubin (1995) found that interviewing is a way of determining what others feel and think about their world. Seidman (1998) noted that phenomenological qualitative interviews put behavior in context and provide access to understanding the participants' actions. The interview approach provided a structured interview process but allowed me the flexibility to conduct follow-up questions with participants to help elaborate on ideas and themes.

In addition to semistructured interviews, I conducted a content analysis of each NPD's national application. Each state principal or school administrator association within the United States nominates and selects its own National Distinguished Principal; however, all states require that participants complete the same in-depth application, a uniform document between all National Distinguished Principals. The application includes essay questions about topics related to leadership, parent involvement, response-to-intervention, and school culture. In addition, the application also includes letters of reference from supervisors, colleagues, and community members. The application served as a vital part of the data collection method, which this

researcher used to analyze for themes, phrases, and patterns between subjects. Analyzing NDP application and essay responses provided a rich understanding of each participant's background, training, years of service, insight into his/her leadership style, and shared experiences. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) identified three types of qualitative content analysis: summative, conventional, and directed. In the following research project, conventional content analysis was applied. Content analysis categories emerge from the analysis rather than through preconceived categories imposed on the data.

Assumptions

By investigating the insights, practices, and perspectives of National Distinguished Principals (NDPs), I brought a number of assumptions to the study. The first assumption is that award-winning principals have a unique interpersonal skill set to construct an organizational climate of trust among staff, students, and their parent community that provides a purpose and direction. The second assumption is that NDPs understand the importance of sharing power by distributing leadership among staff to build leadership capacity among teachers to create programs that promote student success. The third assumption is that NDPs place a high premium on instructional leadership by actively aligning curriculum, designing meaningful staff development, and monitoring student progress. Lastly, award-winning principals are resourceful, knowing how to maximize building, district, and community resources to increase student achievement.

The Researcher

During the research project, I, Mike Dawson, am a doctoral student at the University of Arkansas within the Educational Leadership Program. My educational career has consisted of serving as a classroom teacher and an elementary principal for 11 years in both Southern California and Southwest Missouri. I earned my Bachelor's degree from the University of

Northern Iowa, my Master's degree from the University of California, Los Angeles, in Educational Administration, and a Specialist degree from Missouri State University. In 2010, I was recognized as a National Distinguished Principal from the state of Missouri and participated in the National Distinguished Principal Conference in October 2010 in Washington, D.C. Recently, I have transitioned to the central office, serving as an assistant superintendent of educational services in Southwest Missouri. I am aware that my former position as principal, award-winning status, and current role as assistant superintendent influenced the research design, data collection, and analysis of the project. I acknowledge my subjectivity and partner with my professors and other colleagues to evaluate my data collection procedures, initial data codes, and content analysis to protect the reliability of the research process and data collection procedures. In addition, I provided the necessary safeguards to protect the integrity of the data and the confidentiality of each subject within the study.

Rationale and Significance

The rationale for this study is rooted in my desire to learn more about school leadership and the themes, attributes, and characteristics of our nation's award-winning principals. The goal was to collect and analyze data to share insights, practices, and perspectives of National Distinguished Principals with other school administrators and the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Studying school leadership and effective principals added to the body of literature on educational leadership by illuminating the insight, practices, and perspectives of award-winning principals. In addition, this study has the potential to change the manner in which school administrators are trained and prepared for school leadership by influencing course work, practicum assignments, and internships; furthermore, this research could have an effect on policymakers, educating elected officials on the significant role of a

principal. Additionally, this research has potential to influence the criteria used to evaluate principals for effectiveness.

Definitions and Key Terminology Used in the Study

NCLB is an acronym that refers to No Child Left Behind, federal legislation passed in 2001.

NPDs is an acronym that refers to National Distinguished Principals. These are principals who have been selected by their colleagues and have been honored for outstanding leadership as elementary or middle level principals.

NAESP is an acronym for the National Association of Elementary School Principals.

CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction and Overview

The purpose of this qualitative study, which used a phenomenological approach, was to study the leadership experiences and perspectives of five National Distinguished Elementary Principals (NDPs) from the Class of 2010 serving in the Midwest region of the United States. Specifically, the study analyzed the application process for recognition as an NDP, their views of school leadership, and their perceptions of best professional practices; furthermore, the research study helped answer the following questions:

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3. To what practices, thought processes, and experiences do award-winning principals attribute their success?

To better understand the phenomena of leadership and the different attributes of leadership, the following review will first investigate leadership theories, specifically analyzing elements of transformational, transactional, and situational leadership theories. The review will then examine different elements of educational leadership that include instructional leadership and shared leadership and will conclude by investigating effective leadership practices.

To arrive at the research questions, I conducted an ongoing review of the literature to understand leadership theory and qualities of effective leaders. I used a plethora of resources including books, periodicals, professional journals, and Internet resources. The primary academic databases utilized in the proposed study include ProQuest, Ebsco, ERIC, and Google Scholar. From the review of literature, three themes emerged and were explored, among which

included leadership theory, educational leadership, and leadership impact. The literature from both public and private leadership resources was synthesized to capture a broader understanding of effective leadership. When appropriate, I synthesized findings and explained gaps in the literature. Key words from the literature included leadership, leadership theory, effective leadership, school leadership, and leadership effects.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used throughout the research project illustrates the different influences that have led me to examine the leadership experiences and perspectives of National Distinguished Elementary School Principals. First and foremost, in Spring 2010, I was selected as the National Distinguished Principal (NDP) for Missouri, which connected me to this unique group of people. While attending the NDP conference in Washington, D.C., I had the opportunity to listen to keynote speakers, attend a special reception at the State Department, and participate in roundtable discussions with other designees. We exchanged ideas about current legislation, thoughts about best practices, and reflected upon our leadership styles as school administrators. Having been a school administrator for over 10 years, the roundtable discussions were the highlight of my NDP experience and fed my thirst to learn more about my craft. Throughout my career, I cannot point to a single event that made me a leader, but through a culmination of events and experiences, I have learned how to connect with others, align curriculum, analyze data, and orchestrate change. The NDP Conference was a powerful experience, and I want others to benefit from the cumulative wisdom and experience of NDPs. When I returned home, I felt a deep level of humility about my new designation as a distinguished principal which hindered me from openly sharing my new knowledge. I wanted to share what I had learned but felt I did not have the “big picture” that could only be provided by compiling the knowledge and experience of several NDPs. This project provided the opportunity

to share this information with a broad audience. During the same time I was being honored, I was a doctoral student at the University of Arkansas learning about qualitative research design, research methods, theoretical perspective, data collection, and analysis. Bridging my experience as a graduate student and my new designation as an NDP birthed the idea of combining both to learn more about the leadership experience and perspective from the members of my honored Class of 2010. My research questions would allow me to share the insights, discoveries, and best practices of the award-winning principals in a nonthreatening manner. Figure 2.1 illustrates how each of these core experiences is independent of each other but also woven together to create my conceptual framework.



Figure 2.1
Structural overview of the author's conceptual framework

Leadership Theory

Situational Leadership Theory

The situational leadership model advocates that instead of using one style of leadership, successful leaders change their leadership approach to match the maturity level of their followers. Hersey and Blanchard (1988) articulated the principles of situational leadership by constructing a model with four main leadership approaches that include telling, selling, participation, and delegating. Their model also included four differing levels of readiness (see Figure 2.2).

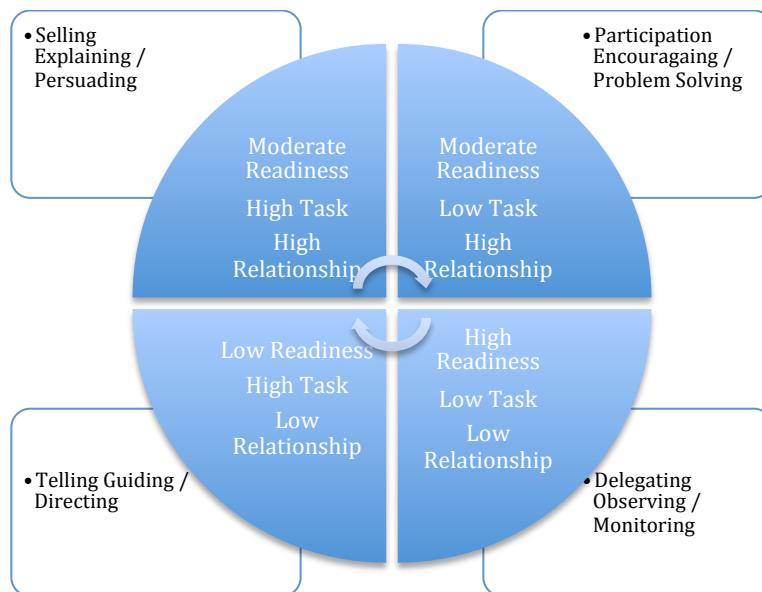


Figure 2.2
Situational Leadership Model

Telling leadership requires a leader to tell people exactly what to do and how to do it at the lowest level. Communication between leaders and subordinates is one-directional and commanding. For example, subordinates must follow the prescribed safety plan exactly to ensure the safety of all employees. Telling leadership can also be used in giving directives to brand new employees who have little understanding about how to perform a prescribed task.

The selling leadership style requires a leader to sell the message in order to get the team to follow. This style promotes open communication between leaders and followers, but the onus is on the leader to sell the task to the followers. Leaders use this style to introduce a new initiative within the organization or to promote an existing strategy. The first two levels of the model focus on task completion and task orientation, whereas the last two levels focus on team development and working interdependently.

Participating leadership focuses more on relationships and less on direction. The partnership between leaders and followers streamlines communication and promotes equal responsibilities and task assignments. Participating leadership can be observed when leaders and subordinates join together and work collaboratively to address concerns, issues, and promote joint problem solving.

Delegating leadership, the highest and most sophisticated leadership level within the model, serves as a tool and enhances individual skill proficiency. Delegating leadership shifts the role of the leader to a resource person to help solve problems. The uniqueness of situational leadership is that it requires the leader to know the full range of skills, abilities, and readiness of each follower. With this knowledge, leaders can foster an atmosphere for success and interdependency.

Hersey and Blanchard (1988) articulated differing levels of readiness in followers that affect which leadership style is chosen. Within the hierarchy of readiness, people who lack the knowledge, skill, or confidence to work on their own are considered at the lowest level. The second level refers to followers who are willing to work but do not have the necessary skills. When followers are ready and willing to help with the task but are not confident in their own abilities, they are considered at the third level of readiness. The fourth and highest level of

maturity is attained when followers are skilled and can work independently. Hersey and Blanchard (1988) described individuals with the highest level of readiness as people with strong skills and commitment who complete assigned tasks. A direct relationship exists between leadership style and employee readiness; the less ready an employee is to perform a task, the more direct or telling leadership style is required (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988).

Within the situational leadership model, researchers have criticized the approach of constantly changing the leadership style to match the readiness level of followers, noting that it creates a short-term focus and distracts leaders from long-term accomplishments; furthermore, critics of situational leadership indicate that adding time sensitivity deadlines may require the leader to employ a more directive leadership model. Transactional leaders who concentrate on simple rewards and punishments offer only immediate gratification for employees that can result in short-term gain and poor decision-making (Bass, 1998).

Transactional Leadership and Transformational Leadership

Leadership models have largely been based upon the transactional model (Hollander, 1978). Transactional leadership is the transaction or exchange that occurs between leaders and followers (Bass, 1998). Specifically, transactional leadership is framed within two distinct components: contingent reward and management by exception (Aydin, Sarier, & Uysal, 2013). Transactional leaders use contingent rewards such as praise, promises, threats, and disciplinary action to ensure objectives are being met (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). In the transactional model, the leader rewards competence of followers for achieved objectives and, in return, the followers receive status, recognition, and esteem (Hollander, 1978). Transactional leaders engage in active management by exception when they monitor a follower's performance and correct a follower's mistakes to ensure organizational objectives are being achieved. The most important

characteristic of a leader within the transaction model is competence. Transactional leaders are expected to render results, show ability, and utilize resources efficiently. Burns (1978) described the core of transactional leadership as "...leaders who approach followers with an eye to exchange one thing for another, jobs for votes, or subsidies for campaign contributions" (p. 3).

Bass (1998) argued that transactional leadership limits the scope when describing the behaviors and relationship between leaders and followers. Bass defined a transformational leader as "a person who develops followers into leaders, elevates the concern of followers, increases the consciousness of what is really important, and moves followers beyond their own self-interests" (p. 2). Transformational leaders contain four components (see Figure 2.3): charisma or idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1988). Transformational leaders increase positive effects on followers beyond their own self-interests by being "charismatic, inspirational, intellectually stimulating, and individually considerate" (Bass, 1998, p. 3).

The first quality of a transformational leader is charisma or idealized influence (Bass, 1985). When leaders are charismatic, they become role models. People tend to admire, trust, respect, and want to emulate them (Bass, 1998). According to House (1977), transformational leaders make a moral statement. A charismatic leader installs confidence in others, and people follow for the greater good of the whole. House found that when goals were achieved, a greater intrinsic value existed for followers. Howell and Avolio (1992) stated that authentic transformational leaders promote ethical policies, procedures, and processes within the organization.

Transformational leaders inspire followers with challenge and persuasion and engage followers in the mission, vision, and goals of the organization (Bass, 1985). Inspired leaders

produce original ideas and encourage entrepreneurship through enthusiasm and optimism by creating a sense of team spirit. Transformational leaders set high expectations, and high achievement is often the result. Kanungo and Mendoca (1996), as cited in Bass and Steidlmeier (1999), linked inspirational motivation to an empowerment process, broadening the scope of participation by followers. Transformational leaders who inspire are inwardly and outwardly concerned about the good that can be achieved for the group (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Inspired leaders create partnerships and increase the level of job satisfaction of employees by developing shared vision and motivating the followers (Aydin, Sarier, & Uysal, 2013).

Intellectual stimulation, the third element of transformational leadership, challenges followers to look at old problems in new ways (Bass, 1998). This transparent approach to problem solving allows followers to question assumptions and to generate more creative solutions to problems (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). According to Aydin, Sarier and Uysal (2013), intellectual leaders motivate their followers to be “innovative, analytic and creative” (p. 807). True transformational leaders change followers’ opinions and values by their merits on issues, rather than controlling or manipulating. Intellectual stimulators embrace how other people’s ideas are different from their own.

Basic Idea of Transformational Leadership

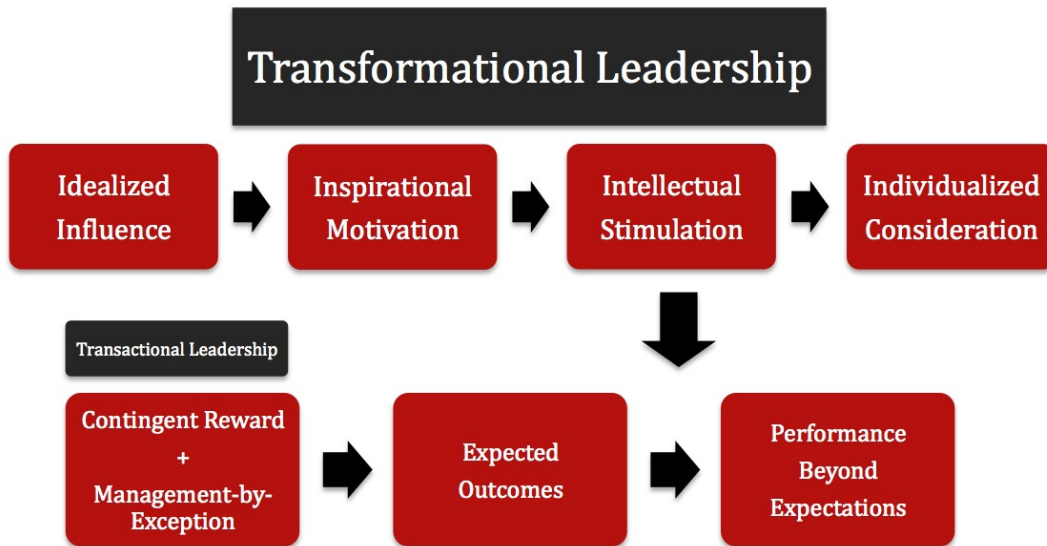


Figure 2.3

Provides a basic overview highlighting the differences between transformational and transactional leadership. Adapted from facultyleadership.com

The fourth component of transformational leadership is individual consideration. The transformational leader treats each follower as an individual and provides coaching, mentoring, and growth opportunities (Bass, 1985). By assuming the role of a mentor, the leader treats every person as a unique individual with unique potential (Bass, 1998). The authentic, individually considerate leader is concerned about helping followers to become more competent and successful. With some individuals, the transformational leader will provide more encouragement while providing others more task structure, meeting the needs of each individual follower.

A transformational leader is an open, honest, charismatic leader who motivates followers to do more than they intended or thought possible. Transformational leaders inspire others by creating a work environment that is enthusiastic and that engages followers in the process of decision-making and creativity to enhance the organization. A true transformational leader meets the needs of followers by exhibiting individual consideration through mentoring,

coaching, and encouragement. Hickman (1996) stated "...true transformational leaders identify the core and unifying purpose of the organization and its members, liberate their human potential, and foster pluralistic leadership and effective, satisfied followers" (cited in Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999, p. 211). Hallinger (2003) described transformational leadership as a leader who builds the organizational capacity to select its purpose and to support change.

Transformational leaders create a positive organizational climate. They reach goals more easily and increase the level of job satisfaction and commitment of stakeholders as a result of motivating followers and paying close attention to them (Aydin, Sarier & Uysal, 2013). Bennis (1959), cited in Leithwood and Jantzi (1999), state that "...transformative leadership – the ability of a person to reach the souls of others in a fashion which raises human consciousness, builds meaning and inspires human intent that is the source of power" (p. 5).

After reviewing and analyzing the elements of situational, transactional, and transformational leadership, it is evident that one leadership theory alone fails to fully define the relationship between leaders and followers. Leithwood & Riehl (2005) stated that "Leadership is difficult to define and too narrow a definition might unduly restrict thought and practice" (p. 13). To further understand leadership within the context of schools, the next section reviews the literature on educational leadership.

Educational Leadership

Over the years, the description of principals has changed from scientific managers of the 1920s to instructional leaders of the 1990s (Reitzug, West & Angel, 2008). This changing language has prompted researchers to define educational leadership. Leithwood and Riehl (2005) explained the difficulty in defining school leadership that "might unduly restrict thought and practice" (p. 13). This means that too narrow a definition may restrict the scope of educational leadership and too broad a definition may create confusion in daily practice. After

extensive review of the literature, the authors concluded that school leadership is “the work of mobilizing and influencing others to articulate and achieve the school’s shared intentions and goals” (p. 14). This definition leads to several questions. (1) How should building principals behave to be effective leaders? (2) Where should principals spend their time, energy, and efforts to achieve desired outcomes? (3) Should leaders focus on the elements of transformational leadership and inspire a school climate that nurtures students and teachers? (4) Should principals be instructional leader and evaluate best instructional practices to yield desired student achievement outcomes? The next section will explore the different schools of thought regarding educational leadership.

Instructional Leadership

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the effective schools movement was a turning point in clarifying the relationship between instructional leadership and student outcomes. The effective schools movement prompted a push for standards-based reform and accountability to improve student performance (Prestine & Nelson, 2005). Within this movement, instructional leadership emerged as the model of choice to explain effective school leadership. Hallinger (2003) synthesized the role of an instructional leader who assumed responsibility for instructional decisions, coordinated instructional programs, and emphasized academic standards. To further illustrate the scope of the definition, Hallinger stated that instructional leaders were “hip-deep” in curriculum, working with teachers to improve student performance (p. 332); furthermore, Hallinger (2003) summarized the body of research regarding instructional leadership and concluded that instructional leaders indirectly influence student achievement by sharpening the goals and purpose of the school through the alignment of school structures. Instructional leaders also closely monitor instructional implementation. Smith and Andrews (1989) concluded similar results and stated that instructional leaders were actively spending more time on curriculum and

instructional issues, advocating for instructional practices, and supervising teachers closely to ensure consistent classroom implementation. Glickman (1985) broadened the definition of instructional leadership into five primary tasks that included assistance to teachers, group development, staff development, curriculum development, and action research.

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) analyzed 70 studies and found effective instructional leaders focused on 21 key areas of responsibility. These key areas included culture, order, discipline, resources, curriculum/instruction/assessment, knowledge, focus, visibility, contingent rewards, communication, outreach, input, affirmation, relationship, change agent role, optimizer role, ideals and beliefs, monitoring and evaluation, flexibility, situational awareness, and intellectual stimulation. More recently, Bambrick-Santoyo (2012), who compiled an analysis of best teaching techniques, concluded that “What really makes education effective is well-leveraged leadership that ensures great teaching to guarantee great learning” (p.6).

Researchers have cited limitations of the instructional leadership model as too narrow and restricting the influence of effective school leadership. According to Barth (1986), the instructional leadership movement required principals to “know it all” and prescribed to a “list logic” of expectations that had too narrow a scope to summarize effective leadership. It encouraged schools to develop a “community of learners” (p. 296); furthermore, Cuban (1988) stated, “The influence of the instructional leadership role of principals must be acknowledged; however, it was not and will never be the only role of the school principal” (p.334). Lastly, Hallinger (2003) acknowledged that instructional leadership is more aligned with transactional leadership, controlling followers for a desired outcome rather than collectively inspiring systematic change. Leithwood (1994) stated that exclusively focusing on instructional leadership

strategies, referred to as “first-order” change or standard operating procedures, without the support of transformational ideals will produce failed initiatives.

Instructional Leadership Through Organizational Management

Horng and Loeb (2010) argued that instructional leadership should not be defined as a school leader’s ability to conduct instructional observations, be “hands-on” with curriculum, provide pointed feedback, or model effective instructional practices but should include a principal’s ability to provide effective organizational management skills. After conducting research that surveyed 800 principals, 1,100 assistant principals, and 32,000 teachers across the country, the authors concluded that growth in student achievement is more likely achieved through a school leader who possesses effective organizational management skills. The authors defined effective organizational management as a leader’s capacity to incorporate personnel practices and to allocate resources to improve instructional practices. This change from a traditional view of instructional leadership does not mean principals should abandon classroom observations or be uninvolved with curriculum decisions, but it means principals should spend more of their time on organizational management issues, hiring the people and allocating resources to promote a positive working environment that places an emphasis on instructional improvement. The argument is that schools are too large, curriculum is too diverse, and it’s impractical for one leader to be an expert in all aspects of teaching and learning. Horng and Loeb (2010) states, “Effective organizational managers strategically hire, support, and retain good teachers while developing or removing less effective ones” (p.68). The bottom line is that organizational managers find ways to recruit and retain high-quality teachers, explore ways to help staff improve their craft through purposeful staff development, and eliminate teachers who do not fit the school culture for instructional improvement. Robelen (2009) summarized the work “What Makes an Effective Principal? The Characteristics and Skills of Quality School

Leaders” stating “...that the principals who are effective in improving student achievement tend to have higher turnover rates among their teachers but that is because those actions are producing a strong workforce” (p.2). This type of instructional leadership requires school leaders to confront personnel issues that are a contradiction to the mission of the school by systematically improving instructional practice through purposeful coaching.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership, within the context of schools, emerged in response to many of the top-down policies of the 1980s. It argued that school administrators needed to embrace the ideals of transformational leadership that idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration to sustain school change and achieve desired outcomes. Leithwood (1994) stated that leaders needed to employ a transformational leadership model to engage followers in the mission, vision, and goals of the organization. They needed to inspire followers through a sense of team spirit by working collaboratively with teachers to achieve desired outcomes. The collaborative effort between school administrators and teachers provides a framework that allows principals to model high expectations, foster a collaborative working environment, and inspire followers to change for the greater good.

Leithwood and Jantzi (1999) replicated a quantitative study analyzing the effects of transformational leadership practices on different organizational conditions and student engagement within school. The authors surveyed 1,818 teachers and 6,490 students from 94 elementary schools in Canada. The results were consistent with previous studies which stated that transformational leadership has a modest effect on student engagement but a strong effect (.80) on organizational conditions, concluding that transformational leadership is grounded in understanding and supporting the individual needs of staff rather than the controlling focus on instructional leadership.

In summary, both instructional and transformational leadership models create a focus on shared purpose, increase performance expectations, and promote intellectual stimulation; however, the two models differ in their approaches to promoting educational change through effective leadership. Transformational leadership seeks to empower followers to change from within, creating more ownership for instructional reform. Instructional leadership is referenced as a top-down model which controls instructional practice implementation. According to Marks and Printy (2003), transformational leadership “provides intellectual direction and aims at innovating with the organization while empowering and supporting teachers as partners in decision making” (p. 371). This conflict in the leadership approaches of instructional leaders and transformational leaders sends conflicting messages. This demonstrates the need for educational leaders to possess skills that provide instructional direction and empower followers to create systematic changes to increase student performance.

Shared Leadership

In the late 1990s, a mixed mode of educational reform began to evolve with a combination of instructional and transformational leadership. This shared leadership model integrated the core beliefs of instructional leadership. It actively engaged the principal in instructional processes that had an impact on student performance. The principles of transformational leadership supported and empowered teachers as partners in the reform process. This integrated leadership practice promoted positive collaboration between the principal and teachers. Marks and Printy (2003) stated that “When principals who are transformational leaders accept their instructional role and exercise it in collaboration with teachers, they practice an integrated form of leadership” (p. 376). This shared approach provides the structure for building level leadership to invite teachers to be part of the reform process by jointly crafting their purpose for school. This approach “...elicits high levels of commitment and professionalism

from teachers and works interactively with teachers in a shared instructional leadership capacity” (Hallinger, 2003, p. 345).

Leadership in Context

Researchers repeat the notion that school context has a significant influence on leadership approaches. The constraints of the school or the resources available impact the chosen leadership approach. Fullan (2002) stated that school improvement is a journey and that the leadership model that a principal employs is influenced by the context of the school. Other researchers concluded similar findings. Hallinger (2003), Hallinger and Murphy (1987) and Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) stated that principals need to learn the context of the school before enacting a specific leadership approach to maximize effectiveness. Day (2011) extended this thinking, stating that a leadership approach should change over time depending on the context and needs of the school.

This section about educational leadership illustrates the evolving nature of effective school leadership, highlighting the need for school leaders to possess a range of leadership behaviors that include the ability to inspire followers to reach new heights, to create the laser focus of an instructional leader, and to empower teachers to lead change. School leaders accomplish this while evaluating the context and conditions of the school to make appropriate leadership decisions. In the next section, the literature review transitions from a global exploration of different approaches of educational leadership to investigation of the impact of effective leadership.

Leadership Impact

The impact of school leadership has produced mixed results. Leithwood and Riehl (2005) reviewed both qualitative and quantitative studies and concluded that studies that focused

on exceptional leadership using a case study design demonstrated significant impact on student achievement, whereas large-scale studies demonstrated only average leadership effects.

Pitner (1988) outlined five different approaches, which measured school leadership impact that included direct-effect, antecedent-effects, mediated-effects, reciprocal-effects, and moderated-effects. Each model provided a framework for measuring the effects of school administration. The direct-effect models concluded that a school leader's quantifiable behaviors have a direct effect on student outcomes; however, these models did not account for teacher commitment, school culture, or other outside variables such as socioeconomic levels. The mediated-effect models conceptualized that school leaders achieved outcomes through indirect paths, which were mediated by other people and factors. The reciprocal-effect models stated that school administrators adapted to the organization in which they worked to initiate change to produce needed results. Administrators then changed focus on other targeted areas such as curriculum alignment.

Hallinger and Heck (1998) conducted a metaanalysis of 40 qualitative studies from 1980 to 1995 exploring the relationship between principal leadership and student achievement. For a study to be considered, each had to meet criteria that included principal leadership as a dependent variable, a measurement of student performance, and an international perspective. The core of the analysis is rooted in Pitner's (1988) five leadership models explaining the relationships between principal leadership and student achievement. The study concluded that depending on the leadership model under investigation and the richness of the data analysis, results could differ. When analyzing studies that used a mediated-effect model, studies generated more consistent findings. Within the mediated-effect model, "leaders achieve their effect on the school outcomes through an indirect path" (Hallinger & Heck, 1998, p. 167). An

indirect path indicated that outcomes are almost always the result of other people, events, and the organization, such as teacher commitment, instructional practices, or school culture. Hallinger and Heck (1998) concluded from the metaanalysis that “The general results drawn from this review support the belief that principals exercise a measurable, though indirect effect, on school effectiveness and students” (p. 157).

The literature suggests that while leaders do not have a direct impact on student performance, leaders’ behaviors can indirectly influence teaching and learning to promote student achievement. Leithwood (1994) provided a theoretical leadership framework for exploring indirect leadership effects on school improvement. He claimed that principals have the most influence in providing direction, setting goals, and building the capacity of teachers to be decision makers. Jacobson, Johnson, Ylimaki, and Giles (2005) used a similar framework and concluded that effective school leaders provide a well-articulated mission of the school that provides a sense of purpose, develops people individually and collectively, and creates a organization structure to promote teacher inquiry. These repeated themes are the cornerstones of effective school leadership and effective schools. The sequence of the themes is deliberate, building upon previous themes to transform and sustain organizational change.

Developing People

The literature suggests that effective leaders focus on the needs of their followers and develop followers as leaders. Leaders build trust and meaningful relationships with teachers to stimulate inquiry and professional collaboration to promote a positive school climate to achieve organizational goals. Fullan (2001) stated, “It has become increasingly clear that leadership at all levels of the system is the key lever for reform, especially leaders who focus on capacity building and develop other leaders who can carry on” (p. 21); furthermore, Jacobson et al. (2005) stated that a key element of effective principals was “...enhanced by the reciprocal, caring

relationships they created with faculty, students and parents” (p 613). Capacity building is rooted in the belief that creating an environment of trust promotes the necessary school environment for sustainable change that comes from people, not dictated programming.

Subscribing to this pattern of thinking, change comes from people, and for people to change, it takes time and trust. It becomes clear that building trust is largely dependent upon the trustworthiness of leaders. Telford and Gostick (2005) reported a highly valued character trait in principals is their ability to be honest yet modest. When leaders are perceived as honest, they are willing to admit mistakes even about seemingly trivial matters, creating a sense of trust between leaders and followers. Covey (2009) stated that the foundation of trust is personified in a leader’s personal credibility, sincerity, honesty, and integrity. It becomes apparent that once a leader is perceived as trustworthy, school climate is strengthened. Kouzes and Posner (2012b) stated, “It’s about leaders who create the climate or culture in which people turn challenging opportunities into remarkable success” (p. 3). In the school setting, trust is developed between principals and teachers when the school leaders’ beliefs and actions are consistent with school goals, beliefs, and actions of staff.

Purpose and Goals

Research shows that effective school leaders bring stakeholders together to articulate the mission or purpose of the school by setting goals to improve desired outcomes. Hallinger and Heck (1998) concluded that the most common mediating variable through which leadership effects were evident was the establishment of school goals. The principal’s involvement in “framing, conveying, and sustaining the school purposes and goals represent an important indirect influence on school outcomes” (p.171). Other researchers found similar results that goal setting plays an important role in improving student achievement, engaging followers, providing

a shared purpose, and assisting in making program decisions (Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger & Murphy, 1987; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008).

Furthermore, researchers have claimed that when leaders help establish building level goals, they are creating a value statement for what they believe and what they will monitor. Hallinger (2011) stated that principals are value leaders, and they must connect their core values and beliefs to the values of the school community. Kouzes and Posner (2012a) stated that goal setting is a direct reflection on the values of leaders and that when leaders help craft goals, they are communicating their own values and what they are willing to protect and how resources will be allocated.

Professional Collaboration

In a transactional model of leadership, leaders provide directives and command followers within a hierarchy model. Research associated with effective school leadership describes an opposite approach that empowers followers by designing school structures that cultivate the talents of others to improve desired outcomes. Sergiovanni (1990) stated that instead of thinking about controlling followers from the top-down as the driving force to move people forward, leadership should design an organizational structure that promotes empowerment. Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001) described this organizational structure and leadership approach as a way of “weaving together people, materials, and organizational structures in a common cause” (p. 1). This empowerment approach is more closely linked to transformational leadership whereby leaders stimulate intellectual dialogue among followers by embracing their thoughts, ideas, and implementation even though they may be different than their own. Prestine and Nelson (2005) stated that empowering others is a way to “stretch” leadership over multiple followers. Other researchers found similar results, concluding that effective school leaders

design structures that allow teachers to work collaboratively in professional learning communities to meet desired outcomes (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Scherer, 2012).

When principals design school structures that promote professional learning communities, teachers make an impact beyond their classrooms. This structure allows teachers to collaborate, take ownership, and meet the needs of their students. Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) described professional learning communities as “teachers working together and engaging in continual dialogue to examine their practices and student performance and to develop and implement more effective instructional practices” (p.49). Little (1990) called teacher collaboration “joint work” centered on “thoughtful, explicit examination of practices and their consequences” (p.520). Ultimately, professional learning communities create new levels of accountability (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002; Guttman, 2011; Martin & Brown, 2007).

The benefit of designing a school structure that empowers teachers to work in collaborative groups is that it creates the tone that power is shared among stakeholders. This, in turn, constructs a system of accountability between stakeholders. Scherer (2012) stated, “What great schools, great principals, and great teams know is that you support teachers by structuring group collaboration for planning curriculum, by building professional learning communities, by encouraging ongoing inquiry into practice” (p. 9). This collaborative process shifts the thinking from the individual teacher to serving all students. Similarly, Cotton (2003) found that when principals share leadership with their staff and share decision-making authority, the entire school benefits.

School Climate and Culture

Once trust has been established, the purpose of the school is well articulated and teachers have formed professional learning communities, schools are charged with sustaining a positive school climate and culture. During the review of literature, school climate and school culture

seemed to be interchangeable terms which described the collective actions and values within the school; however, Hoy (1990) conducted an in-depth investigation of the difference between school climate and culture demonstrating how the two concepts were related but distinctively different. School climate was defined by the conditions of the school, which are measurable and distinguish it from other schools such as high expectations, school safety, and instructional goals that promote student achievement. Put simply, schools with healthy school climates have measurable attributes that influence the behavior of students and teachers.

The notion of school culture refers to the belief system and values within the school. Schwartz and Davis' (1981) definition of school culture included a pattern of beliefs and expectations shared by the organization's members that produced norms that powerfully shaped the behavior of individuals or groups in organizations. Deal and Kennedy (1983) described organizational culture as "the way we do things around here" and identified it as the shared values, beliefs, rituals, and ceremonies. Deal and Kennedy (1983) further explained internal and external factors that contribute to the essence of a strong school culture. Internal factors consist of subcultures within the school such as teachers, support staff, students, and administrators being driven by the same values and working toward common goals. External factors involve outside groups such as community members and parent groups that support internal groups.

Deal and Kennedy (1983) described three ways for school leaders to evaluate school culture. The first recommendation is to investigate and learn about the culture of the building by listening, observing, asking questions, and gathering data. The key to learning about a school culture is identifying patterns of human behaviors such as staff meetings, what parents value, classroom instruction, and key "heroes and heroines" (p. 15). The second component of Deal and Kennedy's research (1983) entailed the analysis of data to see what is valued and to "determine

how the school culture might encourage or undermine educational performance” (p. 15). The authors concluded that when a school culture has been compromised or weakened, leaders need to reexamine the core values or measurable influences of the school to ensure alignment of beliefs and behaviors.

Chapter Summary

Leadership is a constant work in progress. From the review of literature, it becomes clear that the underpinning of effective school leaders is rooted but not limited to the ideals of transformational leadership. Effective school leaders are intentional in building trusting relationships, inspiring followers with a sense of purpose, and engaging teachers in meaningful work to influence student performance.

Even though school leaders do not have a direct impact on student performance, their actions and behaviors do have an impact on sustaining a positive school climate and culture which influences teacher behavior and directly impacts student achievement. A principal’s ability to build trusting relationships with staff is essential in creating a sense of security and focus among staff members. Trustworthiness sets the tone for a leader to gather support and assist staff in articulating the mission, vision and values of the school and provides a sense of collective purpose. Goldring and Pasternack (1994) concluded that a principal’s role in establishing school goals and a clear mission were predictors of school outcomes.

Furthermore, effective leaders empower teachers by designing school structures that engage teachers in meaningful work rather than dictating orders from a top-down position. Cotton (2003) found that when principals share leadership with their staff and share decision-making authority, the whole school benefits through trust building, goal setting, and empowering teachers in a collaborative team. This promotes a school climate for student and teacher behavior which promotes core beliefs and values. In summary, effective leaders set goals within

a positive work environment, invest and inspire followers to achieve more than they thought possible, and create an organizational structure that promotes genuine, authentic conversations about real work.

CHAPTER THREE – METHODOLOGY

Introduction and Overview

The purpose of this qualitative study, which used a phenomenological approach, was to study the leadership experiences and perspectives of five National Distinguished Elementary Principals (NDPs) from the Class of 2010 serving in the Midwest region of the United States. Specifically, the study analyzed the application process for recognition as an NDP, their views of school leadership, and their perceptions of best professional practices. According to Creswell (2007), a phenomenological study “describes the meaning of several individuals of their lived experiences” (p. 57).

The information obtained through this study has the potential to assist building level administrators in constructing their own definitions of leadership and to guide school leaders in emulating the best practices of award-winning principals. In addition, this project has the ability to promote productive dialogue at the National Association of Elementary School Principals national office with regards to the application process and perceived best practices. The results could affect building administrator training, mentoring, and future professional development to support aspiring leaders and current practitioners; furthermore, the proposed research design will help answer the following questions:

- 1) What application process did each award-winning principal experience to be nominated and selected as an NDP?
- 2) What are the core beliefs, thoughts, and insights of NDPs regarding school leadership?
- 3) To what practices, thought processes, and experiences do award-winning principals attribute their success?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical perspective describes the author's lens of knowledge construction. I believe that knowledge is constructed from insights and experiences and is not prescribed through an absolute lens. The interpretive approach of this study will build upon knowledge and construct meaning from insights and experiences of award-winning principals. Raskin (2011) explained a constructivist viewpoint as "knowledge that is not passively received but actively constructed by people" (p. 224). The construct of knowledge is lived and developed through experience and human interaction.

This research study used a phenomenological approach to gain insight and understanding of award-winning principals as a technique to capture the experiences of each subject. Welman and Kruger (1999), cited in Groenewald (2004), describe a phenomenological approach as "...understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved" (p.189). According to Rossman and Rallis (2011), a phenomenological design is for "the researcher to seek understanding and deep meaning of a person's experiences and how she (he) articulates these experiences" (p. 97). As an award-winning principal, I selected a phenomenological approach knowing that my award-winning status would provide credibility and rapport with research participants. This shared experience assisted me in obtaining participant insights about their application and selection process, thoughts on school leadership, and their perceptions of best professional.

The research design examined the spoken words of distinguished principals through semistructured interviews and through data analysis of the submitted National Distinguished Principal applications. Seidman (1998) noted that phenomenological qualitative interviews put behavior in context and provide access to understanding the participants' actions. In addition to

participant interviews, I conducted content analysis of each NDP’s written essays on leadership, parent involvement, responses to intervention, and school culture that were submitted with their application. Content analysis is a “systematic examination of forms of communication to objectively document patterns” (Rossman & Rallis, 2011, p. 198). To validate the findings, I sought the input of other researchers, protected the confidentiality of the participants, and provided integrity to the data collection process. Figure 3.1 illustrates how my theoretical perspective of how knowledge construction and elements of my research methodology.

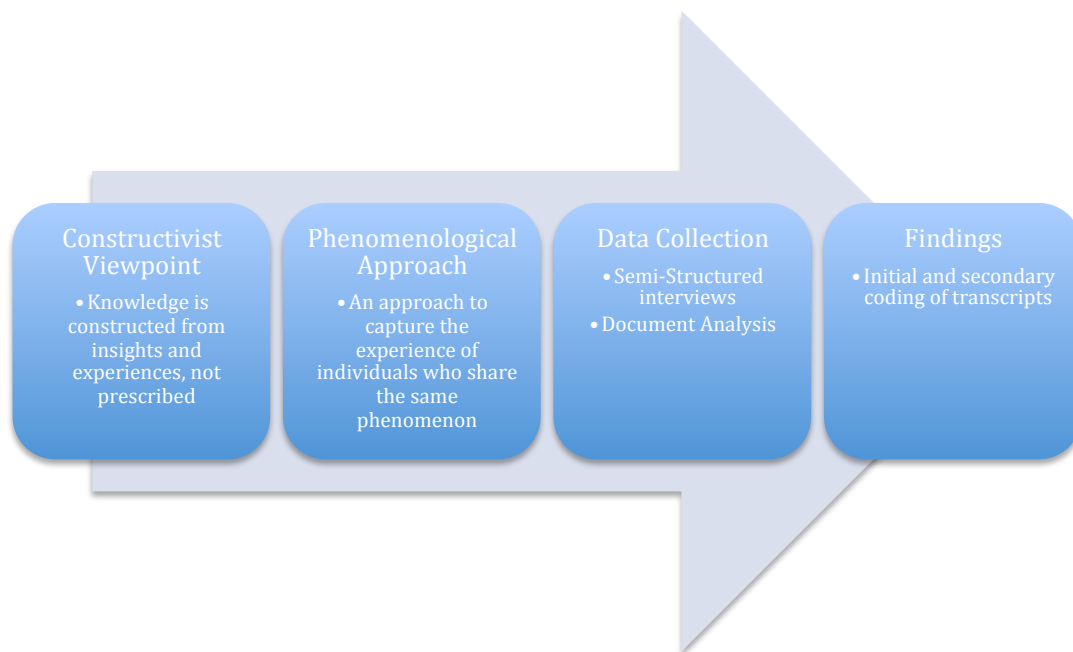


Figure 3.1.
Provides a visual reference regarding the author’s theoretical framework.

Research Sampling

Criteria-based sampling served as the sampling strategy in the study because it requires that all participants share in the same experiences or specific characteristics (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Roulston, 2010). In this study, all participants were honored as 2010 National Distinguished Elementary School principals. The participants for this study were drawn from the

National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) National Distinguished Principal Program. NAESP is a national organization structured to support the needs of kindergarten through eighth grade principals across the country. NAESP provides mentoring to principals in the field, shapes federal legislative priorities, and organizes an annual convention for practitioners to showcase best practices in the field. NAESP is comprised of nine different zones across the country, chunking states and regions to help coordinate services and representation on the governing board. In addition, NAESP also coordinates the National Distinguished Principal program, a program designed to recognize one elementary or middle level principal from each state for his or her service, leadership, and effectiveness. In 2010, the program recognized 62 principals from public, private, and overseas schools from the Department of Defense and State Department. Recipients were chosen as NDPs through their state affiliate selection process. All nominees completed a national application, maintained an active membership in NAESP, and served a minimum of five years as a building level principal.

The participant sample was comprised of representatives from two different zones within the NAESP structure that represent Midwestern states. Even though NAESP recognizes public and private school principals, this project focused on investigating NDPs from the public school sector because each public school principal is held to the same federal accountability measures. The small sample allowed me to deeply investigate the experiences and insights of a few NDPs to share their stories with the rest of the country. Participants were selected due to their proximity to the researcher or because rapport had been established with the group at the NDP Conference in October 2010.

To analyze the perspective of each subject, I used semistructured interviews with each participant. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) refer to semistructured interviews as a planned and

prepared interview protocol with open-ended questions that allow a common starting point for each interview; however, the structure maintains the flexibility for the researcher to provide follow-up questions depending on what the participant shares. In addition to participant interviews, I conducted content analysis of each participant's National Distinguished Principal application, which includes essays on leadership, parent involvement, responses to intervention, and school culture. Content analysis is a "systematic examination of forms of communication to objectively document patterns" (Rossman & Rallis, 2011, p. 198). The application is a vital part of the process of recognition as an NDP and assisted in identifying the patterns of thinking, key phrases, and insight into each award-winning principal's perceptions of leadership.

Overview of Information Needed

Qualitative research requires multiple data sources to provide credibility to the research process, to assist in making meaningful analysis, and to justify claims. Shank (2006) summarized the importance of qualitative data gathering, as it requires carefully planned procedures to provide credibility to claims and analysis; furthermore, well organized data collection can help researchers make comparisons over time and provides opportunities for researchers to examine methods and research techniques.

As part of the research study, I collected a wide variety of information from each participant to gain insight into the lived experiences of the NDPs to understand their beliefs as school leaders and to examine the data collected to make meaningful claims. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) describe four areas of information needed for qualitative research to assist in answering research questions, including the contextual, perceptual, demographic, and theoretical areas. Each area of information contributed to better understanding each participant's thinking and assisted me in analyzing the data for patterns to make credible claims. The following is an

overview of the information and procedures I followed to gather contextual, demographic, and perceptual information used for the study:

1. Investigated related literature associated with leadership theory, dimensions of school leadership, and effective school leadership practices. Examined the findings and limitations surrounding current literature.
2. Developed an informed consent document as part of the IRB approval process at the University of Arkansas to ensure the safety and confidentiality of all participants.
3. Made initial contact with potential participants to answer questions and provide clarity regarding the research study.
4. Obtained a copy of NPD applications that contains biographic information on each participant, demographic information on each participant's school, and NDP application essays.
5. Developed a semistructured interview protocol that was used for the interviews to help answer the stated research questions.
6. Secured digital and video recording devices to accurately document semistructured interviews with each participant.
7. Developed transcriptions of each participant interview that accurately captured the interview that was used for data analysis.

Contextual Information

From the review of literature pertaining to school leadership, it was evident that school context is an important element to consider when analyzing effective practices. Day, Harris, and Hadfield (2001) conducted a thorough investigation of effective school principals within the United Kingdom and concluded “effective leadership was both highly contextualized and

relational” (p.40). Knowing how school context influences the manner in which leaders lead, I collected contextual information using two different techniques. First, each interview began by collecting background information on each participant’s leadership experiences, formal training, earned degrees, and current position. The second method used to collect contextual information was to analyze each NDP’s application that included vital information of the participant’s leadership background and school setting. The application included total student enrollment, student ethnicity, and the percentage of students who receive free and reduced lunch. Collecting contextual information from both interviews and document analysis provided valuable insight into the background of each participant and school setting to assist in drawing meaningful conclusions.

Demographic Information

I collected demographic information of each participant to better understand each participant individually and collectively. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) described demographic information as “participant profile information that describes who the participants are in your study” (p.105). I collected demographic information through each participant’s spoken word via participant interviews and also by analyzing the content of their individual applications. The National Distinguished Principal application asks candidates to identify their gender, educational training, years of service, different professional leadership positions, community involvement, and professional affiliations. Demographic information collected from interviews and content analysis was placed on a table with contextual information. This allowed me to analyze the information for themes, patterns, similarities, and differences among research subjects.

Perceptual Information

Perceptual information refers to the relationship between the participants and the research questions under investigation. To understand participants’ nomination and selection process,

their core beliefs, thoughts, and insight and practices, thought processes, and experiences as award-winning principals, I conducted in-depth one-on-one interviews with each participant.

According to Seidman (1998), the phenomenological interview:

provides access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of the behavior. A basic assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experiences affects the way they carry out that experience...Interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their actions (p.4).

Using a semistructured interview approach allowed me to build a framework of anchor questions to make sense of each participant's relationship to the research questions and the flexibility to present follow-up questions based on the participant's answers. Barriball and White (1994) discussed the advantages of using semistructured interviews as a tool, knowing that not all words mean the same thing to all subjects. Semistructured interviews provided the flexibility to change the wording of interview questions to ensure understanding without changing the intent of the question.

In addition to semistructured interviews, I used each subject's National Distinguished Principal's application, which contained four essays written by each participant. The essays provided deep insight into each participant's perceptions regarding a wide range of topics including insights on school leadership, parent involvement, response-to-intervention, and school culture. First and second cycle coding was used as a process to discover emerging themes among the participants' responses.

Research Design

This study used a constructivist lens and phenomenological design that allowed me to construct knowledge from a select group of identified subjects. Rossman and Rallis (2011) described a phenomenological study as an investigation into the "lived experiences" of a small group (p. 97). As an award-winning principal, I selected a phenomenological approach knowing

that my own award-winning status would provide credibility and rapport with subjects. This inside knowledge helped build rapport with participants to obtain their insights about their selection process, thoughts about school leadership, and their perspectives on best leadership practices.

Within the research design, I examined the leadership experiences and perspectives of five National Distinguished Elementary Principals (NDPs) from the Class of 2010 serving in the Midwest region of the United States. Specifically, the study analyzed the application process for recognition as an NDP, their views of school leadership, and their perceptions of best professional practices. Dukes (1984) suggested that when using a phenomenological approach, studies should select between 3 and 10 subjects. This limited scope assisted me in constructing deep understanding and insight about subjects' shared experiences.

Data was collected through semistructured phone interviews followed up with content analysis. Holt (2010) described a number of advantages to using phone interviews to collect data. Phone interviews provide a pure approach to data collection because phone interviews rely on the text only and are not clouded by human behavior or human judgment. Holt also stated that phone interviews create a better degree of control for the subjects because they are allowed to set the date and time of interviews. In addition to semistructured phone interviews, I used the uniform NDP application for content analysis. The application provided contextual data regarding the applicants' leadership background and school setting; furthermore, the application contained written essays from each subject as well as letters of recommendation. To make sense of the data for analysis, first and second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009) was used to help chunk data into themes and patterns to provide insight in order to make meaningful claims.

Interviews

To learn from our distinguished principals and to gain insight into their shared experiences, I conducted in-depth interviews with each participant. Seidman (1998) described the purpose of phenomenological interviews as a way to capture and comprehend the insights, attitudes, and experiences of each participant. Rubin and Rubin (1995) found that interviewing is a way of finding out what others feel and think about their world. In this particular study, phone interviews were conducted to gain insight and understanding of each national distinguished participant. Holt (2010) stated that phone interviews are a more practical option for geographically dispersed subjects; furthermore, phone interviews require researchers to be more engaged with the spoken word of the participant and to rely solely on the text of the interview for analysis. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to capture the insights and experiences of award-winning principals.

Analysis of Documents

Analysis of each NDP's application provided a rich understanding of each participant's background, training, years of service and insight into their leadership styles and shared experiences. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) identified three types of qualitative content analysis: summative, conventional, and directed. This research project utilized conventional content analysis. Using conventional content analysis, categories emerge from the data rather than through preconceived categories imposed on the data. Each state affiliate within NAESP designs its own process of nominating and selecting its National Distinguished Principal; however, all participants completed an in-depth application that included contextual, demographic, and perceptual data. The applications have a common structure including essay questions that each participant is required to complete.

Data Collection Method

Data collection was conducted in three phases. The first phase was conducted in Fall 2012 by updating the contact information for potential subjects, as two years had passed since the National Distinguished Principal Conference in 2010. Once the list was updated and complete, I sent all potential participants a cover letter (see Appendix A) explaining the purpose of the study and enclosed an Institutional Review Board (IRB) informed consent form (see Appendix B) detailing the study, potential risks, and confidentiality measures implemented to protect each participant. Within the enclosed mailing, participants received a stamped and addressed envelope to return the informed consent signature page. All informed consent signature pages were locked in a two-drawer filing cabinet in my office to which I have sole access. Following the initial mailing, I conducted follow-up phone calls to each potential subject to answer questions and to arrange interview appointments. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to capture the insights and experiences of award-winning principals. All digital recordings were secured on my hard drive and assigned an access password to protect the confidentiality of each subject. Once participants agreed and informed consent documents were on file, I proceeded with phase two of the data collection process.

Phase two of the process involved a semistructured interview with each participant between Fall of 2012 and Fall 2013 using the designed interview protocol. Barriball and White (1994) stated that semistructured interviews are “suited for exploration of the perception and opinion of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues” (p.330) and allow the further probing of respondent answers that structured interviewing does not allow. At the conclusion of each interview, I transcribed the recordings of each interview to ensure accurate records were on file.

Phase three of the data collection process required me to obtain a copy of each participant's National Distinguished Principal application to garner contextual, demographic, and perceptual information regarding leadership background and the school setting. The application is a uniform document between all National Distinguished Principals and includes essay questions on topics related to leadership, parent involvement, response-to-intervention, and school culture. A complete application also included letters of reference from supervisors, colleagues, and community members. The application served as a vital part of the data collection process as used to analyze themes, phrases, and patterns between subjects.

Instrumentation

Interviewing is an art and a science. The science ensures that the researcher drafts appropriate questions, has working equipment, and a system for note taking to capture major ideas. The art of the interview is the researcher's ability to listen carefully and ask probing questions to dig deeper into the thoughts expressed. Within this phenomenological study, I created an interview protocol with a wide variety of questions to capture the insights and experiences of each participant (see Appendix C). Roulston (2010) described the essence of semistructured interviews as an interview that is structured with open-ended questions but flexible to ask follow-up "probing" questions based upon interviewee responses. A probing question is used to dig deeper into participants' thoughts, experiences, and ideas based on something they answered previously.

The interview protocol was structured into different components. The first component was designed to garner contextual and demographic background information including years in administration, length of time as an elementary principal, and earned educational degrees. The second component focused on the NDP's interview and selection process for the participants' individual states. The selection and interview process yielded valuable information to better

understand the criteria and selection process of each subject. The other components explored the participants' major duties and responsibilities as building principals, their perceived leadership styles, and their prescription of best professional practices. Finally, the instrument concluded with asking participants to elaborate on topics or questions not asked during the interview process.

Field Testing

To help refine the interview protocol, I conducted a field test interview with the 2009 Missouri National Distinguished Principal as a means to test recording equipment and to ensure the interview protocol matched the research questions under investigation. According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), "Piloting will yield a description of initial observations useful to demonstrate not only one's ability to manage this research but also the strengths of the genre for generating enticing research questions," (p. 96). The field test consisted of reviewing the proposed study, signing the IRB, and conducting a face-to-face interview. The pilot interview was summarized, transcribed, and coded as a reflection tool prior to engaging in formal interviews with research participants. The field test provided insight to the interview protocol, the use of the recording equipment, and assisted me in learning how to manage and conduct a thorough interview.

Timeline

Upon IRB approval, I conducted a field test interview in Summer 2012 with the 2009 Missouri National Distinguished Principal. Once field-testing was complete, the interview was transcribed and used as a reflection tool to ensure the interview protocol questions aligned with the research questions. In Fall 2012, I made initial contact with all potential participants by sending a detailed cover letter explaining the purpose of the phenomenological study with an enclosed IRB consent form. After the mailing, I initiated follow-up phone calls to each

participant to clarify the purpose of the research project and to schedule telephone interviews. Once informed consent forms were collected and on file, I sent each participant a stamped and addressed envelope and requested the contents of their National Distinguished Application for analysis. I scheduled and transcribed interviews between Fall 2012 and Fall 2013. Content analysis was conducted at the completion of the interview phase with first cycle and second cycle coding techniques.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

After transcribing the data, I started to look for familiar patterns, ideas, and themes to make credible findings. This research study implemented an analysis approach by which the data was thoroughly investigated, initially coded, reflectively considered, recoded with emerging concepts, and carefully synthesized (Creswell, 2007). This approach allowed me to continually interact with and reflect about the data to manage a large amount of collected material and to organize it into smaller, usable chunks that were utilized to make credible findings.

Raw data from research study included interview transcripts and the written essay responses of each participant's Distinguished Principal application. Data from this study was organized and analyzed using ATLAS.ti. Creswell (2007) lists a number of advantages to using a computer program to help organize qualitative data, including allowing the user to create codes, annotate, drag and drop codes within text, retrieve information quickly, and to build a visual display to see connections.

The first step in the process was to initiate first cycle coding in the form of descriptive and in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2009). This approach required that each line of the data be linked with rich descriptive text to capture actual quotes from a participant's interview. The intent of this initial approach was to preserve the meaning, emotion, and setting of the data. The key to first cycle coding is for the researcher to think critically about the data, assign initial codes,

reflect on response patterns, and resist the temptation of clustering or categorizing the codes prematurely. This process allowed for the data to naturally come alive and tell the participants' stories using their words and ideas rather than using predetermined codes. To ensure clarity and consistency, all codes were tagged and defined to provide general meaning of the expressed language and used throughout the research project to promote continuity.

To strengthen the coding process and to ensure authenticity, I utilized inter-rater reliability with principals within my region. I reviewed the initial codes to make certain that codes were consistent, understandable, contextualized from the text, and not predetermined. Throughout first cycle coding, I fully examined all codes to ensure that codes captured the meaning of the participants' answers. When necessary, I reworked codes to better reflect the ideas being communicated within the data.

After first cycle coding was complete, I pursued second cycle coding analysis. The goal of second cycle coding was to begin the process of synthesizing the data into groups, categories, and themes, and to think critically about the emerging patterns from the data (Saldaña, 2009). Charmaz (2006) illustrates that second cycle coding is supposed to “assemble these bones into a working skeleton” (p. 45). This process created a framework for my findings. I linked all of the coded data into concept maps to assist me in viewing the data independently and holistically. The use of concept maps ensured codes were linked clearly and connected to observe emerging patterns and categories. At this time, I was able to recognize similarities and differences and also identify areas that needed further investigation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

Throughout both cycles of coding, I crafted analytical memos to capture critical thoughts, reflections, discoveries, and insights during data collection, coding, and analysis phases. Marshall and Rossman (2011) described the use of writing analytical memos as a tool that allows

researchers to think deeply about the data collection process. Analytical memos assisted me in capturing my thoughts and forced me to think critically about the interviews, coding process, and emerging categories.

Ethical Considerations

Safeguards were established to ensure confidentiality of participants. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Arkansas reviewed the study and approved the project prior to data collection. The purpose of the IRB is to ensure the safety of human subjects and transparency of the project. As part of the IRB process, a cover letter was generated explaining the purpose of the research study. The letter was shared with participants upon approval and mailed in conjunction with an informed consent form to ensure clarity, understanding, time commitment, and any risks associated with participation. Once participants were informed and consent documents were on file, I began gathering documents and arranging interviews. While arranging interviews, I informed participants that they could potentially benefit from the research study by sharing their stories, knowing they were contributing to research that had potential of assisting other administrators in the field.

Informed consent forms were designed to ensure the confidentiality of each participant. The form outlined the security of the data, potential risks to participants, and anonymity in reporting research findings. Subjects in this study were given an identification code to ensure anonymity. All original field notes, including notes from the pilot interview, recorded interviews, transcriptions, and essay responses were locked in my personal filing cabinet. All digitally transcribed notes and recordings were housed on my personal computer and secured with document password protection.

Subjectivity

Potential ethical issues of this project involved my own subjectivity and reflectivity. The challenge was to find a balance between each participant's voice and my own subjectivity, knowing I also shared the same award-winning status as a 2010 National Distinguished Principal. Though I experienced similar events, workshops, and celebrations, it was imperative that participant voices and perspectives be treated equally and ethically and not overshadowed by own experience; however, I also realized that my subjectivity would be viewed as a strength within the study allowing me to relate to participants, identify with their situation, and understand their roles as school leaders. Bott (2010) stated that subjectivity and reflectivity are gaining strength within qualitative research. To avoid any overreaching of the project, I relied on colleagues in the region to review the assigned codes and findings to ensure the voice of each participant was authentic and not influenced by my own beliefs, attitudes, and experiences.

Trustworthiness

Credibility and integrity of this study was achieved in a number of ways. First, I fully recognized my own subjectivity within the study by being open, transparent, and honest about my personal experiences and recognition. In addition, I used multiple data sources as a way to triangulate the information to make credible claims and to report authentic findings. According to Tobin and Begley (2004), triangulation of the data promotes completeness, maintains integrity, and establishes the validity of the research.

Dependability of the study is rooted in sound methodology for data collection and data analysis. The study used semistructured interview transcripts and NDP application documents to analyze the application process for recognition as an NDP, their views of school leadership, and their perceptions of best professional practices. During data analysis, I used first and second cycle coding as a means to allow the voice of each participant to be heard. This approach

allowed codes, categories, and themes to emerge from the data and prevented my subjectivity from influencing the research findings; furthermore, I employed inter-rater reliability to review the coding process and emerging themes to protect the integrity of the research and the participants' voices. Lastly, I sought the approval of the Institutional Review Board at the University of Arkansas to safeguard participants and the confidentiality of the gathered material.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations associated with the study's design that could have influenced the overall findings and analysis of the study. Since I shared the experience of being recognized as an award-winning principal, a potential limitation is my own researcher bias. I clearly recognized my own subjectivity within the research by being open, transparent, and honest about my personal experiences and recognition. I stayed true to the data collection and analysis phase by compartmentalizing my voice to the analysis section of the study as a means to protect the investigation from my own bias.

Selecting a narrow sample size by choosing five participants could be seen as a limitation to the study, knowing that 62 potential research participants exist. Selecting five research participants may narrow the scope of the study; however, the small sample allowed for more in-depth interviews and insights from each participant. In addition, choosing participants from the Midwestern of the United States may have narrowed the point of reference to a regional perspective, limiting the transferability of the findings, knowing that participants reside in all fifty states and overseas; furthermore, choosing participants from a single year could also limited the analysis, knowing that the National Association of Elementary School Principals has recognized outstanding principals for over 25 years. Limiting the study to a specific class could narrow the findings versus gathering longitudinal data from each award-winning class.

Due to geographical restraints, I selected phone interviews as a method of data collection. Opendakker (2006) outlines the advantages and disadvantages of conducting phone interviews and stated that phone interviews can assist with time and space constraints but can have limits because of the lack of social cueing that naturally takes place during face-to-face interviews. Phone interviews may be viewed as impersonal and seen more as a task for each subject to complete. From my perspective, principals are relational people who strive to make human connection as a way to build trust. Using phone interviews could have been a barrier to making a personal connection and establishing trusting relationship with each subject. This approach could have limited the depth of the interview knowing that phone fatigue could have occurred, making responses limited; however, phone interviews also provided an uninterrupted opportunity to answer questions and share stories without any cueing barriers.

Lastly, the issue of making generalizations within qualitative research is a limitation. Specifically, limiting sample size may restrict the ability to make strong claims and limit transferability of the findings to other leaders and the usefulness of the study to NASEP. Overall, the limitations outlined are noteworthy and potential roadblocks to the study, but I am confident that the selected research design and data collection methods allowed me to capture authentic perspectives from each participant and establish a starting point for future research with NDPs.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided insight into my theoretical perspectives, which is the lens through which I see knowledge constructed. My constructivist perspective influenced my decision to select a phenomenological approach to gain insight and understanding of award-winning principals. This technique captures the experiences of each participant knowing that I share in

the same experience having been recognized as a National Distinguished Principal in 2010. In addition, the chapter outlines my methods for collected data through semistructured phone interviews and document analysis, knowing that each participant completed a standardized application providing insight to his or her thinking on educational leadership, parent involvement, and school culture; furthermore, I explained how the data was coded using first and second cycle coding to support my findings and analysis. Lastly, I discussed research safeguards of the study by seeking IRB approval, recognized my own subjectivity as a researcher, and outlined the limitations of the project that included sample size, the limitation of using phone interviews, and the transferability of the findings to a larger audience. Overall, the approach and methods support the theoretical perspective and have been thoroughly investigated to ensure research integrity.

CHAPTER FOUR – FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study, which used a phenomenological approach, was to study the leadership experiences and perspectives of five National Distinguished Elementary Principals (NDPs) from the Class of 2010 serving in the Midwest region of the United States. Specifically, the study analyzed the application process for recognition as an NDP, their views of school leadership, and their perceptions of best professional practices; furthermore, the research study helped answer the following questions:

1. What application process did each award-winning principal experience to be nominated and selected as an NDP?
2. What are the core beliefs, thoughts, and insights of NDPs regarding school leadership?
3. To what practices, thought processes, and experiences do award-winning principals attribute their success?

Personal Experience

This project enlightened and refined my journey as a leader. The most difficult aspect of the research project was awareness of my own subjectivity and the balance between the role of investigator and my experience as a National Distinguished Principal (NDP). As an “insider,” I had the privilege of sharing a similar experience with each subject. We attended the NDP conference in Washington, D.C., listened to keynote speakers, attended a special reception at the State Department, and participated in roundtable discussions with other designees. In addition to the pomp and circumstance, I exchanged ideas about current legislation, thoughts about best practices, and reflected upon my leadership style as a school administrator. Having been a

school administrator for over 10 years, the roundtable discussions were the highlight of my NDP experience and fed my thirst to learn more about the NDP application process and each of the NDPs. When I returned home, I felt a deep level of humility about my new designation as a distinguished principal, which hindered me from openly sharing what I learned without presenting myself in a boastful manner. Conducting this research project was an extension of those roundtable experiences and provided a voice for others as well as myself to answer the research questions presented.

Summary of Participants

In this study, all participants were 2010 National Distinguished Elementary School Principals. The participants selected for this study were drawn from the National Association of Elementary School Principals' National Distinguished Principal Program. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), a national organization structured to support the needs of kindergarten through eighth grade principals from across the country, provides mentoring to principals in the field, shapes federal legislative priorities, and organizes an annual convention for practitioners to showcase best practices in the field. NAESP is comprised of nine different zones across the country, consolidating states into regions to help coordinate services and representation on the governing board. In 2010, the Distinguished Principal Program recognized 62 principals from public, private, and overseas schools representing the Department of Defense and the State Department. Recipients were chosen as NDPs through their state affiliate selection process. All nominees completed a national application, maintained an active membership in NAESP, and served a minimum of five years as a building level principal.

Within this research study, participants represented two different zones within the NAESP Midwestern states. Even though NAESP recognizes public and private school principals, all five participants in the study were selected from the public school sector since they are held to the same federal accountability measures. The sample included three men and two women. At the time of the interviews, two of the participants were retired, one was working in a district level leadership position, one was working in a state leadership position, and one was serving as an active principal. Figure 4.1 displays demographic information during the time the NDP was designated that includes years in education, years served in the principalship, and the configuration of the school in which each NDP was serving; furthermore, the table includes school enrollment data and the poverty level as reported by the percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch according to the National School Lunch Program eligibility criteria.

Subjects	Gender	Status at Time of Interview	Years in Education	Years as Principal of NDP School	NDP School Configuration	School Enrollment	Free/ Reduced Lunch (%)
Participant 1	Male	Retired	34	18	K-4	320	40%
Participant 2	Male	School Improvement	13	6	5-8	825	24%
Participant 3	Female	Principal	39	28	K-2	450	35%
Participant 4	Male	Retired	36	10	PreK-2	585	54%
Participant 5	Female	Central Office	23	8	PreK-4	500	50%

Figure 4.1
Participant Demographic Information at Time of NPD Designation

A Systematic Procedure for Data Analysis

Raw data from this research project was generated from phone interview transcripts and the review of each participant’s National Distinguished Principal application essay responses. Phone interviews lasted approximately one hour per participant and essays included responses to

topics about school leadership, parent involvement, school culture, and response to intervention. According to the application, essay responses were limited to 500 words per essay. Using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative research tool, I uploaded each transcript and essay and created document folders for each essay response, placing participants' documents into their own folders. For example, all essays about parent involvement were loaded into the same folder.

Once documents were uploaded and organized, the first step in the process was to initiate first cycle coding in the form of descriptive and in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2009). This approach required that each line of text be tagged with rich descriptive language to capture actual quotes from participants' responses. This process helped preserve the meaning, emotion, and setting of the shared ideas and thoughts. The key to first cycle coding was to critically analyze the data, assign initial codes, reflect on response patterns, and resist the temptation of clustering or categorizing the codes prematurely. This process allowed for the data to naturally come alive and tell the story of participants using their words and ideas rather than using predetermined codes. To ensure clarity and consistency, all codes were tagged and defined to articulate a general meaning of the expressed language used throughout the research project to promote continuity.

To strengthen the coding process and to ensure authenticity, I utilized inter-rater reliability with principals within my region. Colleagues within my immediate region reviewed the initial codes to make certain that codes were consistent, understandable, contextualized from the text, and not predetermined. Throughout first cycle coding, all codes were constantly evaluated and analyzed to ensure that codes reflected the meaning of the participants' answers. When necessary, I reworked the codes to better reflect the ideas communicated within the data.

After first cycle coding was completed, I pursued second cycle coding analysis. The goal of second cycle coding was to begin the process of synthesizing the data into groups and categories to think critically about the emerging patterns from the data (Saldaña, 2009). Charmaz (2006) illustrated that second cycle coding was supposed to “assemble these bones into a working skeleton” (p. 45), creating a framework for the findings. Using ATLAS.ti, I clustered and linked codes to report my findings. To provide clarity, I disaggregated the data into groups that included interview data and essay data. Figure 4.2 and Figure 4.3 display the different codes and categories that emerged to support my findings. This important step allowed me to recognize similarities and differences and to also identify areas that could use further investigation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

Interview Category: NDP Application Process		
Celebration Honor Memorable Surprised Application Packet Essay Questions	State Department Round Table Committee Interview Visitation Team Scoring Guide Washington, D.C.	Recognition Designation Announcement Process Nomination Interviews
Interview Category: High Quality Staff		
Trust Hiring Process Termination Bulletin Leadership Team Intervention Data Teams	Change Intervention Relationship Building School Culture Teacher Evaluation Data Analysis	Class Lists Communication Teacher Dismissal Time Management Staff Meetings
Interview Category: Collaborative Partnerships		
Collaboration Partnership Principal Support Team School Structures Teacher Development	Shared Leadership Distributive Leadership Empowerment Leadership Mission Leadership Advice Leadership Team	Instructional Leadership Leadership Style Shared Leadership Transformational Leadership Collaboration Common Core

Figure 4.2
Interview Categories and Codes

Throughout both cycles of coding, I crafted analytical memos to capture critical thoughts, reflections, discoveries, and insights during the data collection and coding process. Marshall and Rossman (2011) described the use of writing analytical memos as a tool that allows researchers to think deeply about the data collection process. Primarily, the use of analytical memos helped me reflect on the interview process, capturing my immediate reflections and thoughts from each interview.

Essay #1 Category: Distributive Leadership		
Empowerment Shared Leadership Building Procedures	Support Staff Leadership Team Time Old School	Chain of Command Distributive Leadership Instructional Responsibilities Supporting instruction
Essay #2 Category: Structures		
Trust Hiring Process Termination Bulletin Leadership Team Intervention Data Teams	Change Intervention Relationship building School culture Teacher Evaluation Data Analysis	Class Lists Communication Teacher Dismissal Time Management Staff Meetings
Essay #3 Category: Needs of Learner and Professional Development		
Collaboration Partnership Principal Support Team School Structures Teacher Development Differentiated Instruction Professional Development	Shared Leadership Distributive Leadership Empowerment Leadership Mission Leadership Advice Leadership Team Targeted	Instructional Leadership Leadership Style Shared Leadership Transformational Leadership Collaboration Common Core
Essay #4 Theme: Intentional		
Availability Visibility Collaboration Down Time Team Builders People Matter	Trust Staff Social Celebration Procedures Discipline Procedures Protocols	Systems Leadership Team Safe Place Holiday Breakfast Staff Luncheon Intentionally

Figure 4.3
Essay Categories and Codes

Overview of Major Findings

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) described the analyzing phase of qualitative research as “about discovery” (p. 96). After reviewing the data, seven categories emerged. I split the findings into two different domains that included interview findings and essay application

findings. The essay findings represented each of the required essays from the NDP application process.

Interview Findings

1. The application process for nomination and designation as an NDP varied by state affiliates.
2. NDPs from the study viewed themselves as collaborative leaders who shared decisions with teachers.
3. NDPs used a variety of best practices that focused around hiring, terminating, and communicating expectations.

Application Findings

1. NDPs balanced leadership and management duties by distributing building level management responsibilities and sharing instructional decisions with staff.
2. NDPs recognized and valued community involvement by creating structures that allow parents to volunteer and serve the school.
3. NDPs supported learning through differentiated instruction, providing targeted staff development, and monitoring student results.
4. NDPs cultivated a positive climate by their availability and visibility to staff and children along with being intentional about creating school-wide protocols for student discipline and celebrations.

Interview Finding One

The application process for nomination and designation as an NDP varied by state affiliates. During the interview process, I asked participants to describe their nomination and application process, specifically addressing how they were selected as their state NDP. There was variance between participant responses. Some of the NDPs had little to no involvement in the process, literally being surprised by the announcement. Other participants described intense on-site visitation teams verifying and ensuring that application statements were congruent with building level practices. Below are quotes from different NDP recipients that demonstrate the diverse nomination process and its variances between state affiliates. The first quote describes the depth and competitive nature of the selection process and the vetting that each top candidate underwent prior to designation as an NDP:

Participant 5: First, you get nominated by a peer or supervisor. Then you are notified that you have been nominated and then if you would like to apply, there were essay questions and a data chart. And your essay questions could only be 500 words. Once you turned in all that data, it was narrowed down to the top 10. Once they (state affiliate committee) narrowed it down to the 10 finalists, then they went and visited those schools and had a rubric. So there is a team of people, but they have core members that went to every school, every one of the 10 schools. So basically what they were doing was making sure that what you put in those essays was real. I knew it was all real; I wasn't going to lie in my essays.

Participant 5 emphatically told me that the application process involved a mechanism to ensure that candidates were truthful in their statements. From the interviews, Participant 5 described the most intense process; furthermore, she indicated that her state affiliate also awarded a monetary gift to the designated recipient. Among the five interviews, Participant 5 is the only recipient who received a cash prize for her award-winning status.

The second quote from Participant 4 illustrates the other end of the spectrum, whereby Participant 4 was nominated and designated by his peers without prior notification. Again, I

asked the NDP to recall his nomination process. “Actually, I didn’t do much of anything....[the state’s] outstanding principal automatically gets nominated for the NDP award.” When I probed further to better understand this lack of involvement, Participant 4 described attending the state administrator conference when, during one of the general sessions, his name was announced as the NDP. Participant 4 did not complete the national application nor answer any required essay questions prior to his selection. From the interview, a state level committee accepted nominations and designated a state administrator of the year who automatically became the state NDP. After the announcement, the designee was handed the national application and directed to complete the assigned essay questions. The designation shocked Participant 4. Other participants recalled what I would describe as a more “traditional application process” by which participants were nominated by a peer through a written letter of recommendation. This triggered the participants’ completion of the required application, a peer review by members of the state affiliate, and the announcement of their award-winning status.

In summary, through semistructured interviews and asking the distinguished principals to recall their nomination and application process, it was evident that designees had a wide range of experiences prior to their formal designation. This uniqueness provided insight and a contextual backdrop for the selection of the NDPs and highlighted the differences between state affiliates in nominating, selecting, and announcing distinguished principals. The differences between state affiliates and the application process opened the door to a wide range of interpretations including the significance of the designation as a National Distinguished Principal within NAESP.

Interview Finding Two

NDPs from the study viewed themselves as collaborative leaders who shared decisions with teachers. Throughout the interviews, I asked participants to describe their

leadership styles to gain a better understanding of their personal approach to leading others. From the interview data, NDPs described the importance of being leaders with a vision and goals for the school. In addition, they valued working in collaborative partnerships by empowering staff to assist in making school decisions. Participants described the ideals of this shared leadership approach of solving problems collaboratively and working side-by-side with staff rather than employing a top-down model of leadership that dictates action. This theme of sharing decision making with staff was illustrated by Participant 2, who stated, “I was a disciple of distributed leadership, and I wanted more of us to sit down and examine the problem together and come up with the possible solutions.” Participant 3 stated, “I really like leaving some of these decisions to the teachers because I really am not in the classroom teaching to know what is going to always be best.” Participant 5 describes the importance of trust as the foundation for building collaborative teams stating:

There has to be two-way trust where I am going to provide this framework (goals / vision) for success and so these are the things that we’re going to end up. Here is where we are going to end up, and you all help me decide the plan on how we are going to get there and what we need to do.

When asking NDPs to describe their leadership styles, the dominant theme that emerged was the partnership they formed with teachers to tackle problems, start initiatives, monitor progress, and conduct professional development. There was an overwhelming sentiment that teachers know what works, and leaders need to work in tandem to create structures that support teaching and learning.

This approach echoed the Hornig and Loeb (2010) argument that instructional leadership should not be defined as a school leader’s ability to model effective instructional practices but should include a principal’s ability to provide effective organizational management skills.

Effective principals create an environment and committee structures that focus on instructional issues utilizing the teachers as experts. Principals effect change by empowering teachers and monitoring student progress. The premise is that schools are too large, the curricula is too diverse, and it is impractical for one leader to be an expert in all aspects of teaching and learning. In essence, principals must find ways to partner with teachers to focus on teaching and learning issues.

Interview Finding Three

NDPs used a variety of best practices that focused around hiring, terminating, and communicating expectations. During interviews, I asked participants to describe their best practices as award-winning school administrators that contributed to their designation as an NPD. Immediately, candidates talked about the importance of having competent teachers in the classroom delivering high quality instruction and providing effective two-way communication with families. As I inquired, I asked the NDPs to describe the process they used to ensure that competent teachers were in each classroom. The conversation did not focus on providing high-quality feedback and writing informative summative evaluation reports. The key was hiring quality staff, terminating incompetent teachers, and constantly communicating expectations. To better understand each of these components, I probed further and structured this finding into three subcategories to show their importance and to provide clarity.

Hiring Process

While describing best practices, the hiring process emerged as a theme. NDPs placed an emphasis upon hiring the best possible candidates for their buildings. The participants expressed the idea that hiring the right people had more impact on their building than any other program or process. Having quality teachers created the most impact on student learning. To better

understand, I asked candidates to explain their hiring processes to ensure they attracted and hired the most competent teachers. When describing the process, NDPs stated that hiring was done in collaboration with other staff members that on occasion included classified employee representation. In addition, the NDPs placed an importance on directing significant energy in the pre-interview phase, vetting teacher candidate credentials, calling references, and speaking to other administrative colleagues to gather as much information as possible before inviting candidates to the building for a committee interview. Participant 1 described his process for conducting all pre-hiring reference checks prior to interviewing candidates:

Once I narrowed it down, I did all my screening calls before I interviewed. I have talked to other principals who did not do it that way. I personally like to do it first because if I'm going to interview them then I already know they have the skills to do the job. I would tell the applicants when they came in that I have already referenced checked you, screened and have checked references and I just tell them up front you've got the skills. Now we can see if it fits the best with what we are looking for.

Participant 5 described another phase of the interview process that consisted of a second interview of the teaching candidates that involved teaching a lesson to the committee or a classroom of students. This NDP expressed that anyone can interview and have the right answers, but not everyone can teach. Having candidates teach not only provided insight into their preparation and seriousness but also communicated that teaching expectations were high for the building. Participant 5 described this phenomenon of having teacher candidates "teach" as part of the interview process:

I would always ask them to bring me a lesson that they taught at their old school or designed in college. We had them teach it to a class or teach it to the interview committee. So we started doing that and that's a lot more telling than how they answer a question.

Principals wanted the best possible candidates teaching in their buildings to influence student achievement. Horng and Loeb (2010) reverberated this point, saying, "School leaders

can have a tremendous effect on student learning through the teachers they hire, how they assign those teachers to the classroom, how they retain teachers, and how they create opportunities for teachers to improve” (p.66). As a follow-up to the interview process, I asked NDPs to describe the characteristics for which they looked in teaching candidates. The answers were consistent and equally important that quality teacher candidates needed to have knowledge and background to organize and deliver content; however, NDPs equally looked for teachers who could make a personal connection with students and staff. It was evident that neither content nor relationship building was better than the other but that they were equally important. Only teachers who possessed both qualities were extended a teaching contract.

From the interviews, NDPs insisted on making the hiring process an inclusive, rigorous event to ensure that only the most talented people were offered teaching positions. When probing further, it was evident that NDPs valued both content knowledge and relationship building as equally imperative qualities to ensuring high quality instruction. They concurred that the principal was only as effective as the teachers in the building, and effective principals must do everything possible to make their school attract and retain the best teaching candidates who, in turn, improve student performance.

Termination

As NDPs talked about the hiring process, it seemed only natural to ask participants to talk about teachers who did not meet their expectations and how they coached these teachers to improve. It was an interesting topic to pursue and appeared to be a source of strong conviction for each NDP. The sentiment was that NDPs would coach an ineffective teacher with the hope they improve their area of deficiency. However, from the interviews, all five NDPs indicated that coaching was only part of the process. If teachers did not meet expectations after

administrative coaching, NDPs pursued removal of teachers from the classroom by “forcing them out” or not renewing their contract. A force out referred to teachers resigning at the end of the year rather than making a non-contract renewal to the local governing board of education. It appeared as a point of pride to have removed ineffective teachers from their buildings. In some fashion, they recognized this as what set them apart from other administrators. The following quotes capture NDPs recalling times when they terminated or coached teachers out of the profession:

Participant 4: I had a teacher who was 60-some year old and totally ineffective and had been there for years and years and didn't have anything else in life and didn't want to retire. That was her life so I had to force her out. Actually, she ended up retiring, but it was a force out.

Participant 3: Put quite frankly, if they are not good, you're either good or you're gone. At my school after the first year, we might do a second year depending on what type of growth we see. If not, they're just not renewed.

Participant 5: It's just not working here and that is a hard conversation because it is a very personal deep attack, and it is hard but I drive those kind of conversations with one question. Would I want one of my kids in that class? If the answer is no, I am not putting any kid in that class.

In summary, all five participants described an experience of removing an ineffective teacher from the classroom. When asked how they described ineffective teachers, they all discussed the following attributes: the inability to engage students in the learning process, to accept and employ constructive feedback, or to build trusting relationships with families and co-workers. This notion that ineffective teachers needed to be removed emerged as a best practice by NDPs in making their building a positive learning environment. Participants eliminated ineffective teachers from their buildings to ensure that “their” students were getting the best possible chance to succeed.

Communication Skills

Seeing the value placed on attracting and retaining the best possible staff, I inquired about the NDPs' communication of their expectations to ensure that high-quality instruction was the norm within the building. NDPs expressed the importance of providing regular, consistent, and transparent communication. Asking for clarification about how they provided that kind of communication, NDPs explained the importance of communicating face-to-face with staff and using a weekly newsletter to communicate events and expectations. Specifically, Participant 4 talked about utilizing a weekly bulletin, and Participant 3 expressed the importance of having strong communication skills:

Participant 4: I had a weekly bulletin. It would come out every Friday afternoon or Monday morning. It would have the schedule for the week, where I would be for the week as my calendar was on there. It had announcements that needed to be made, updates on projects that were going on, and always something positive to promote staff members.

Participant 3: I think that effective leaders need to be compassionate, have empathy but also be able to be strong and direct communicators when you need to be. First, I think for me, it is easy to be strong and direct because the teachers know that first and foremost that I care.

In summary, when NDPs described their best practices, they quickly referred to the importance of making sure they attracted and retained the best possible staff. They communicated that vetting potential teaching candidates to ensure they possessed both content knowledge and relationship skills were the most important elements. The pervasive belief was that building leadership matters, but teachers have the most impact on student learning. Having effective teachers made the most significant difference in the classroom. In addition, NDPs indicated that if teachers were not meeting expectations, they found a way to “force out” staff. This was accomplished by accepting letters of resignation or by making a non-renewal contract recommendation to the local board of education. Removal of staff was a consistent value from

all research participants. Lastly, being strong, consistent, and transparent communicators through face-to-face meetings or through a weekly bulletin was an important mechanism of the NDPs to communicate expectations.

Application Essay Findings

Analysis of the NDP's applications provided a rich understanding of the participants' background, training, years of service, and insight into their leadership styles. Each state affiliate within NAESP designs its own process of nominating and selecting its National Distinguished Principal; however, all participants completed an in-depth application that included contextual and demographic data. The applications were unique to each participant but had a common structure that included essay responses to four questions. The essays focused on balancing leadership and management, parent involvement, supporting and challenging learners, and advancing a positive culture. Responses were limited to 500 words per question. Using ATLAS.ti, I conducted first and second cycle coding to capture phrases and themes from each essay question. I organized the findings by each question and embedded quotes to support the voices of the NDPs within the study.

Essay Finding One

NDPs balanced leadership and management duties by distributing building level management responsibilities and sharing instructional decisions with staff. NDPs balanced management duties with instructional responsibilities by establishing building level procedures and empowering support staff to oversee different managerial tasks that included the day-to-day operations. Support staff provided leadership for tasks that included overseeing the school budget, communicating with other district departments, and managing the school calendar. NDPs stated that using their staff to run the managerial tasks provided them the time to focus on

instructional issues that included meeting with staff and conducting evaluations. NDPs described the importance they placed on ensuring management was in place, which allowed them to spend more of their time supporting instruction. Participant 3 stated, “With school procedures in place, I am able to focus my day on being visible to students, parents, and staff.” Participant 1 and 4 added:

Participant 1: While I tend to think of management as ‘old school’ thinking, effective management allows a successful building principal to focus on important teaching and learning issues. My office staff provides significant input concerning disciplinary actions, maintenance and cleaning needs, purchasing ordering, and master scheduling so that I am able to spend less time managing non-instructional tasks.

Participant 4: With this community of leaders (teacher / support staff) in place, our school runs well and is committed to learning. This atmosphere enables me to regularly visit classes and activities, so I can observe and critique effective strategies, evaluate data, and highlight successful models with our own building for others to follow.

Reading and analyzing the essay question associated with balancing leadership and management duties provided insight as subjects established clear school procedures and delineated the roles and responsibilities of staff so that the building leader could focus on supporting instructional issues.

Essay Finding Two

NDPs recognized the value of community involvement by creating structures that allowed parents to volunteer and serve the school. Participants placed a high value on partnering with parents. The responses surpassed the rhetoric of wanting parents to be involved by identifying concrete activities and committees for parent participation. NDPs not only valued parent involvement but also created structures for parent and community involvement. The following quotes expressed the value of having parents involved as well as the different

structures channeling parent involvement. Participant 4 captures this idea of moving past endorsing parent involvement and provides concrete examples of parent involvement:

Various programs and activities attract a wide range of community volunteers. Senior citizens prepare weekly fluoride treatments for students, while Kids Hope participants meet with students for weekly mentoring sessions. Motor Mania is another volunteer-run program that helps students develop both sides of their brain learning by participating in a weekly series of gross motor challenges. Junior Achievement taps members for our business community to teach economic lessons.

The essays indicated that parent involvement was important and necessary in the creation of a school culture that promoted student achievement. NDPs provided a layered approach to parent involvement, allowing parents and community members to participate at a level that matched their commitment. For example, programs ranged from stand-alone events, like a math night, to active engagement at a school governing level helping shape programs and initiatives; furthermore, creating these partnerships and structures helped showcase the school within the greater community. Participant 3 stated, “It is my conviction that community support for our programs and thus, student achievement, will be easier to secure when our community citizens see us in action.” Providing parent involvement structures allowed for the community to observe the interworking of the school, which helped promote a positive image of the school, programs, faculty, and the leader.

Essay Finding Three

NDPs supported learning through differentiated instruction, providing targeted staff development, and monitoring student results. NDPs integrated three distinct strategies to meet their students’ needs that included the following: an emphasis on differentiated instruction, providing targeted staff development, and using instructional data to monitor student progress. It was evident from the responses that all three strategies were valued and considered equally important to meet their students’ needs.

NDPs believed that all students could learn and instruction should meet the learning readiness of all students. Participant 2 emphasized this point by stating, “It is also expected that teachers utilize state frameworks and craft instruction in a manner that supports all levels of individual and collective groups of student learning.” Instruction in NDP’s buildings shifted from whole group to differentiated small group instruction. To meet students’ needs, teachers provided a layered approach to instructional delivery.

In addition to providing differentiated instruction, teachers needed to be learners of instruction. To meet the needs of children, teachers needed to be honing their craft through targeted professional development. They learned research-based instructional strategies to support differentiated learning in the classroom. The premise was that the expectation of differentiated instruction in the classroom is unreasonable if teachers are not trained to deliver this personalized instruction. NDPs shifted away from traditional staff meetings whereby information was delivered through announcements. Rather, NDPs used their time with faculty to improve instruction by learning new strategies or analyzing student data. NDPs creating school systems to promote differentiated learning and teacher collaboration for planning, data analysis, and progress monitoring were essential elements of meeting the needs of all learners. Both Participants 3 and 4 emphasized this point. Participant 4 stated, “Teacher training in new technologies and techniques to differentiate instruction further assures that each student achieves at a high level.” Participant 3 concurred, “Without knowledge of new instructional strategies, it would be difficult to meet the needs of our learners.”

NDPs monitored student progress through systematic data collection and analysis. To meet students’ needs, leaders monitored their progress through formative and summative assessment data. Using instructional data was essential to adjusting instruction in the classroom

or to implement real-time intervention to assist students in meeting essential learning outcomes. NDPs conveyed the idea that without reliable student data, building leaders cannot make informed decisions about student progress. Participant 1 explained the use of student intervention teams to analyze data. “We utilize SIT Teams (Student Intervention Team) including an early intervention component for children needing support. We meet twice a month with each grade reviewing Student Improvement Plans and Student Intervention Logs monitoring student progress.”

To meet the needs of all students, schools must differentiate learning to meet the needs of all learners. In addition, NDPs stated that in creating a differentiated learning system, teachers must receive targeted professional development to improve instruction in the classroom. Lastly, to monitor student progress, NDPs used formative and summative data as key elements to ensure students were meeting expectations.

Essay Finding Four

NDPs cultivated a positive climate by their availability and visibility to staff and children along with being intentional about creating school-wide protocols for student discipline and celebrations.

Two themes emerged from the data. First, NDPs recognized that availability and visibility as a building leader had an impact on creating a positive school environment. Visibility in the school building created a sense of community, helped NDPs monitor instruction, and modeled positive interactions to promote the desired building culture NDPs were trying to obtain. NDPs placed importance on their availability to students and staff “between the bells” and prioritizing other responsibilities to “after the bells” to maximize their ability to support students and staff. Participant 1 emphasized his view of visibility and availability in shaping the

culture of the his building, stating, “Each morning, I visit each classroom shortly after attendance is taken to welcome children and staff to school. This has been an ongoing practice for the past sixteen years.” Participant 5 articulated the value of modeling proper interaction by being available and visible in the building stating:

As a symbolic leader, it is my job to signal to others what is valued and what is important through selective attention. I provide specific feedback to students and staff throughout each day. I also model important attitudes and respectful and nurturing behaviors. I communicate my vision through words and actions with full knowledge that others will see what is important in our school and emulate these desired behaviors.

In addition, NDPs placed an emphasis on implementing school systems that were intentional about creating structures for school discipline and celebrating accomplishments. Even though participants took different approaches, each expressed the importance that all staff endorse a building philosophy for student discipline and follow an agreed-upon structure to promote a positive classroom and building climate. NDPs created a systems approach that required everyone to use a similar vocabulary to ensure consistency and predictability throughout the building. Participant 2 expressed this idea by stating, “You can’t run a building if everyone is doing their own thing. Teachers and students must know and follow common expectations to build a consistent school culture.” Additionally, Participant 4 provided an example of this point of having a common language, but giving teachers autonomy in the classroom stating, “Since the district adopted Love and Logic, it was essential to train everyone in this positive approach to discipline. Teachers still use their own techniques for classroom management, but this philosophy is at the core.”

Furthermore, NDPs placed an emphasis on creating systems to celebrate the work of students and staff to promote positive relationship and increase motivation. The Wallace Foundation (2011) concluded similar results indicated that school leaders primarily affect student

learning by influencing teachers' motivations and working conditions. For example, there was a dedicated time embedded into weekly assemblies or grade level meetings to celebrate teacher and student accomplishments. It also provided time to honor the collaborative work completed in the building. NDPs were intentional about setting time aside as a mechanism to boost building level morale, increase motivation, and to promote positive school relationships. Participant 1 expressed this intentional approach to celebrating staff, observing, "Each month a different grade level team hosted an 'Attitude Party.' All certified and classified staff is invited. The purpose is to gather one day after school to celebrate our friendship as professionals." Similarly, Participant 3 added, "Grade-level teams use Town Hall Meetings each Friday to celebrate student achievements such as high interim assessment scores, Students of the Week, perfect test scores and 'Do Good' efforts as well as address problems."

It was evident that these award-winning principals placed an emphasis on connecting with people within the organization by their visibility and availability to attend to human needs. In addition, the NDPs expressed their construction of different systems within the organization to ensure that everyone had the same foundational knowledge and understanding for school discipline; furthermore, NDPs shared that they were intentional about creating building procedures to celebrate and promote positive relationships, using celebrations to promote a positive school culture.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the leadership experiences and perspectives of five National Distinguished Elementary Principals (NDPs) from the Class of 2010 serving in the Midwest region of the United States. Specifically, the study analyzed the application process used to select NDPs, their views of school leadership, their perception of best

professional practices, and their strategies for coping with organizational change. The study used a phenomenological approach to gain insight and understanding of award-winning principals. According to Rossman and Rallis (2011), a phenomenological design is for “the researcher to seek understanding and deep meaning of a person’s experiences and how she (he) articulates these experiences” (p. 97). This chapter captured an overview of the data collection and analysis process to articulate my findings. Raw data from this research project was generated from phone interview transcripts and the review of each participant’s National Distinguished Principal application essays. Using ATLAS.ti, I uploaded each transcript and essay document to conduct first and second cycle coding and analyzed codes and categories to report my findings. The findings were divided into two categories that included interview findings and essay findings. Evidence of the findings was rooted in quotes from the participants, which captured their insights as award-winning principals.

CHAPTER FIVE – ANALYZING AND INTERPRETING FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study, which used a phenomenological approach, was to study the leadership experiences and perspectives of five National Distinguished Elementary Principals (NDPs) from the Class of 2010 serving in the Midwest region of the United States. Specifically, the study analyzed the application process for recognition as an NDP, their views of school leadership, and their perceptions of best professional practices; furthermore, the research study helped answer the following questions:

1. What application process did each award-winning principal experience to be nominated and selected as an NDP?
2. What are the core beliefs, thoughts, and insights of NDPs regarding school leadership?
3. To what practices, thought processes, and experiences do award-winning principals attribute their success?

The purpose of this chapter is to articulate the process I used to critically analyze the findings and articulate how the analysis integrated with the reviewed literature. This chapter also discusses the implication of the themes that emerged from the project as it related to the research questions. Unfortunately, school leadership is not a simple, single dimensional concept but is a multitude of interconnected attributes, strategies, approaches, and best practices. Even through this chapter isolates the themes, it is evident that each is interrelated, woven together, and supported by the other to represent the scope and depth of effective school leadership. Lastly, the chapter concludes with limitations within the study and proposes future research projects to extend this work of investigating NDPs.

Data Analysis

Analysis and reflection were constant throughout the duration of the research study. Creswell (2007) stated, “The processes of data collection, data analysis, and report writing are not distinct steps in the process; they are interrelated and often go on simultaneously in a research project” (p. 150). Throughout this process, a data analysis spiral was used to help organize the data into workable chunks and themes to make credible conclusions. The spiral (see Figure 5.1) adopted from Creswell (2007), illustrates the integrated motion of my research procedures in blue and the uninterrupted reflective process in red. The figure exhibits how my research procedures and research reflection were integrated throughout the study.

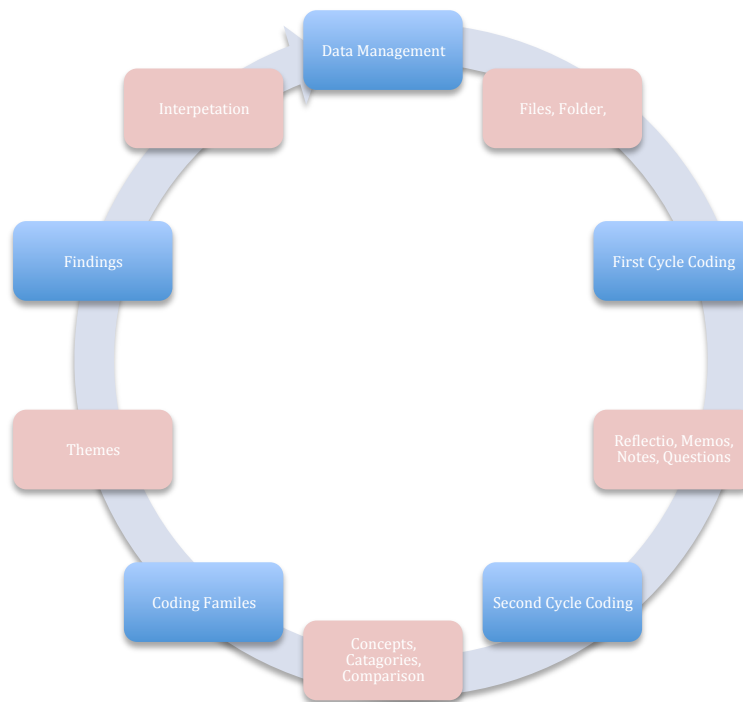


Figure 5.1
Data Analysis Spiral

Data management starts the spiral. ATLAS.ti was used to warehouse all the collected data from the project. To begin, I started by uploading all interview transcripts and participant essay response documents. Within ATLAS.ti, I created folders for each participant to store

interview transcripts and written essay responses; furthermore, I created folders for each essay question. Uploading essay responses into two different folders allowed me to access information by research participant and by specific essay response. Once the data was organized, I paused and read all the transcripts and essay questions thoroughly, reflecting, making notes, and becoming an expert in the data to articulate meaningful themes from the project.

Once documents were uploaded and organized, I conducted first and second cycle coding by tagging the text with rich descriptive language in order to capture actual quotes from participants' responses. This process helped preserve the meaning, emotion, and setting of the ideas and thoughts being shared. The goal of second cycle coding was to chunk the codes into groups and categories to think critically about the emerging patterns (Saldaña, 2009). Second cycle coding moved the data from raw quotes to categories of data. Using the categories, I continued to refine the data by placing the categories into data themes. The themes that emerged were expanded and compared to the reviewed literature to draw meaningful conclusions. This important step allowed me to connect the literature and simultaneously pull back from the data to identify areas that could use further investigation for analysis. Figure 5.2 provides an example of a data theme regarding leadership approach. Themes helped narrow the data into manageable clusters for analysis.



Figure 5.2
Sample Intergrated Approach Theme

Interpretation

Creswell (2007) stated, “In the process of interpretation, researchers step back and form larger meanings for what is going on in the situation or sites” (p.154). While investigating and analyzing the leadership styles and best practices of National Distinguished Principals, it seems almost unjust to confine this unique group of individuals into categories and themes. To strengthen the interpretation, I purposefully cycled back to compare or contradict the literature of effective school leadership to reinforce my conclusions. The themes that emerged from the project included the celebration of school leaders, the use of an integrated leadership approach by NDPs, and the practice of being intentional in providing structures for continuous improvement.

Celebration

Throughout this process, I immensely enjoyed the opportunity to interview and learn about each of the honored principals, their perspectives, and best practices. As a researcher and fellow award-winning principal, I sensed the interviews provided an opportunity for each designee to reflect, speak freely, and share their knowledge, story, and advice. The interviews

included powerful moments that exceeded my expectations as a researcher. The content of the interviews were often deep, meaningful, and at times emotional. Semistructured interviews provided a baseline for interview questions, but each interview was unique and provided insightful information about each leader, their practices, and the context in which he or she operates. At the end of the interviews, participants shared how thankful that they were to be part of the study, to discuss their nomination process, and perceived best practices. I sensed that each participant felt like his or her participation was a small way to give back and help others. From the stories and practices that emerged, I reflected upon the research of Day (2007). He identified the essence of being an effective educational leader as someone who has “passion for teaching and learning which was articulated and communicated through the structures, culture, relationships, and behavior in the school” (p. 22). From the interviews, it was apparent that each participant communicated a passion for their building, their faculty, and strove to make a difference for children entrusted to them each day. By Day’s definition of effective school leadership, it was easy to conclude that each designee was worthy of his or her recognition, honor, and award-winning status. I’m grateful for the time I was able to spend with each participant to record their story for this project.

While analyzing the codes and categories from the nomination and selection process, a conflict emerged between each participants’ nomination process. This made me pause, take note, and pursue this difference. The persona and recognition as a National Distinguished Principal communicates that the selected principal is the most effective leader within the state for that given year. This is not true. Because each state has the authority to design, nominate, and select its state representative, not all NDPs are selected equally. Each NDP participant shared similar traits and best practices, but it’s impossible to say that each were equally distinguished, knowing

that each were nominated and selected in different ways. For example, one state created a process that included a visitation team designed to ensure that nominees had accurately represented themselves throughout the process. Other states appeared to have conducted the nomination and selection process in secret. From the research and my own experience of being honored as a National Distinguished Principal, the award is less about the individual being recognized and more about the ideals of effective school leadership that the person represents.

The nomination and selection process created a moment in time for one principal, but the recognition should embody the celebration of effective school leadership throughout the country. I believe that each participant is worthy of his or her recognition, but not because of who they are, but because of the ideals they represent as effective school leaders. During the recognition banquet in Washington D.C., each award-winning principal is presented a gold hand bell. The ringing of the bell is a tradition at the conference. The echoing tones being produced should not be about the designee, but should be a resounding ring of endorsement for all the effective principals who are not able to attend the conference.

The nomination for this award was humbling for all participants. During my own application process, I was very aware that other principals in my region and state were exceptional school leaders with higher test scores, better collaboration, and more innovative practices. This feeling was echoed through the interview process. Each NDP interviewed was quick to defer his or her recognition to others that included their staff, mentors, parent community, and colleagues. For example, Participant 1 stated, "I received this award because of the great staff I work with each day. They made me look good." After investigating this unique group of participants, it was clear that the award and recognition reached beyond the designee. An NDP represented the ideals of effective school leaders that included cultivating a positive

school culture, empowering others, and creating structures for continuous improvement. Furthermore, NAESP required each nominee to be a member of the national organization and have served 5 years as an active principal. This stipulation narrowed the field in which a person could be honored and recognized. With this requirement, only a handful of people were considered for this unique honor, which in turn, overlooked many effective principals. This led to the question, should the nomination process be open to non-members? If the award embodies the ideals of effective school leadership, I recommend that the national office create an at-large nomination process to recognize outstanding principals who have made a significant difference in their buildings who are not members of the NAESP. This would create more opportunity to recognize effective school leaders who don't have a membership but who are making a difference.

States should still have the autonomy to pick their own representative, but I recommend that the national office create similar criteria and a scoring rubric for their selection process. This would help to ensure that candidates represent the ideals of effective school leadership. For example, the criteria could possibly include active membership in local and state organizations, how they create school and community connections, and how they meet the needs of all students. The application process does include essay questions on these specific topics. In addition, I would recommend that the final three candidates from each state receive an on-site visit as part of their selection process. While interviewing NDPs, it was apparent that this extra layer of an on-site visit increased awareness of the honor and elevated the importance of being a practicing principal who is implementing effective school leadership practices.

Adding these three recommendations including creating an at-large nomination process to allow more individuals to be honored, developing a consistent scoring guide, and adding on-site

visits would preserve the autonomy of the states, but create consistent designees between the states. The proposed changes to the nomination and selection process would move the recognition from subjective to consistently honoring representatives who embody the traits of effective school leaders. This shift would move the emphasis away from a single person to the more global celebration of effective school leadership, which the award truly represents.

Integrated Leadership Approach

Leithwood (2005) stated, “Leadership is a highly complex concept. Like health, law, beauty, excellence, and countless other equally complex concepts, efforts to define leadership too narrowly are more likely to trivialize than help bring greater clarity to its meaning” (p.2). Knowing the complexity of school leadership, it seems misleading to identify one dominant leadership style or approach that captures all NDPs. From the interviews, findings, and analysis, I’ve concluded that NDPs utilize an integrated collaborative leadership. This approach combines shared instructional leadership with elements of transformational leadership that inspires others to create change. Marks and Printy (2003) stated, “When principals who are transformational leaders accept their instructional role and exercise it in collaboration with teachers, they practice an integrated form of leadership” (p. 376). At its base, a transformational leader triggers an emotional response with followers, touching their hearts, engaging their ideas, mentoring their next steps, and personalizing their efforts. Bass (1985) defined transformational leadership as “a person who develops followers into leaders, elevates the concern of followers, increases the consciousness of what is really important, and moves followers beyond their own self-interests” (p. 2). While interviewing NDPs, it was evident that they embodied this effective approach. They motivated their followers by caring deeply about each person in the organization and

inspiring them to reach beyond their potential. Participant 1 echoed this idea by stating, “My job was to build them up to be more than they thought they could be.”

NDPs recognized that caring deeply and inspiring followers was not enough to make positive change. To maximize impact, NDPs combined the effective elements of transformational leadership with shared instructional leadership. They created teacher partnerships and empowered followers to make critical decisions to shape the culture of the building and increase student performance. This idea of sharing decisions was evident when Participant 3 stated, “I really like leaving some of these decisions to the teachers because I really am not in the classroom teaching to know what is going to always be best.” Transformational leadership theory and shared instructional leadership work interdependently, relying on the other to create a positive organizational climate that inspires continuous improvement. Deal and Kennedy (1983) echoed this conclusion emphasizing that school leaders need to address school culture before creating action plans for academic improvement.

NDPs identified in this research project combined the elements of transformational leadership theory with shared instructional leadership. The principals were actively engaged in motivating followers and sharing instructional leadership decisions with teachers to increase student performance. Figure 5.3 displays the elements of an integrated leadership approach.



5.3 Figure
Intergated Leadership Approach

It's my recommendation that NAESP place more emphasis on this integrated leadership approach when seeking keynote speakers, approving breakout sessions, designing workshops, and crafting mentoring programs. New and developing principals must be able to recognize the foundational elements of transformational leadership in practice as it applies to caring and motivating followers. This is essential in creating meaningful partnerships rooted in shared instructional leadership. Once this transformational foundation is put into practice, principals are able to partner and empower teachers to focus on critical building improvement issues. The position of the principal needs to shift from a position of power to a position of influence, moving away from controlling staff to empowering followers. Sergiovanni (1990) stated that instead of thinking about controlling followers from the top-down as the driving force to move people forward, leadership should design an organizational structure that promotes empowerment.

Furthermore, educational leadership programs should be more intentional about pairing graduate students in the field with proven effective school leaders. More time than not, graduate students are asked to "get" practicum hours and in most cases are left to their own accord to make arrangements. The principalship is too complex to be randomized. To increase the success of new and developing leaders, principal leadership training programs should seek out the most effective building principals, along with past NDPs to serve as formal and informal mentors. NDPs are recognized but nothing is expected of them after their "moment in time." NAESP should require that NDPs host regional meetings, conduct breakout sessions, and mentor others sharing their best practices with others in the field.

Employing an integrated leadership approach is the foundation of principal effectiveness and should be given more emphasis by NAESP. Educational leadership training programs could

partner with current and past NDPs to demonstrate how theory and practice could be integrated to make an impact on staff morale, empowerment, and student achievement. In the age of professional collaboration, this integrated approach must be emphasized, modeled, and studied to produce the next generation of effective building leaders.

Intentional Structures

Throughout the data analysis process, the theme of intentional structure surfaced as an important leadership practice among NDPs. NDPs did not leave procedures, processes, and decisions to fate but created school systems and structures that possessed intentional management strategies. Horning and Loeb (2010) conducted a large-scale research project surveying over 800 principals and conducted more than 250 interviews with principals. They concluded that, “Despite the differing context and district policies represented by these three districts, we consistently find that schools demonstrating growth in student achievement are more likely to have principals who are strong organizational managers” (p.67). The authors defined effective organizational management as a leader’s capacity to incorporate personal practices and allocate resources to improve instructional practices.

Throughout the analysis process, the data indicated that NDPs are intentional about whom they hired, how they communicated with staff, and how they celebrate accomplishments. This intentional behavior transferred into creating intentional school structures for conducting professional development, providing structures for student intervention, and designing structures for managing student discipline. Halverson and Diamond (2001) described organizational structures as a way of “weaving together people, materials, or organizational structure in a common cause (p. 1). NDPs had this knack of bringing people together around a common cause. They cultivated a positive school climate with laser focus to improve student performance.

NDPs balanced management duties with instructional responsibilities by establishing building level procedures and empowering support staff to oversee different managerial tasks that included the day-to-day operations. Support staff provided leadership for tasks that included overseeing the school budget, communicating with other district departments, and managing the school calendar. NDPs stated that using their staff to run the managerial tasks provided them the time to focus on instructional issues that included meeting with staff and conducting evaluations. Participant 1 stated, “My office staff provides significant input concerning disciplinary actions, maintenance and cleaning needs, purchasing ordering, and master scheduling so that I am able to spend less time managing non-instructional tasks.”

Each NDP placed importance upon creating structures for hiring and removing staff. Horning and Loeb (2010) stated, “Effective organizational managers strategically hire, support, and retain good teachers while developing or removing less effective ones” (p.68). Ineffective teachers needed to be removed. This task emerged as a best practice by NDPs in making their building a positive learning environment. Participants eliminated ineffective teachers from their buildings to ensure that “their” students were getting the best possible chance to succeed.

With the emphasis on building principals serving as instructional leaders, the art of creating strong organizational managers was being lost. New and developing principals need to learn how to create school systems, evaluate staff strengths, and delegate responsibilities so that they can channel their energy toward supporting instruction. From the research, it would be worthy to have new and developing principals learn about teacher evaluation due process as well as study research on the art of hiring and terminating ineffective teachers. It was apparent that creating school structures and having concrete conversations with ineffective staff were effective practices of NDPs.

Conclusion

After conducting this research project, I found the project enlightening and inspiring. It provided a better understanding of the NDP application process, the leadership approach of NDPs and NDPs' perception of best practices. The findings provided a baseline of important knowledge from award-winning principals about the application process, leadership approach, and best practices of National Distinguished Principals from the Class of 2010. NDPs are highly regarded school leaders. The recognition as an award-winning principal truly encapsulates the skills of effective school leaders. The notion that one principal is better or more deserving than another in his or her state is incorrect. Even though these individuals were worthy of their recognition, there was a sense that they were a "stand in" representing the ideals of effective school leaders throughout each state. When describing a specific leadership approach, NDPs relied on an integrated approach. They combined the ideals of transformational leadership theory with the principles of shared instructional leadership. Thus, they empowered followers, which placed the principal in a lateral relationship with teachers to jointly make instructional decisions for the building. The underpinning of this integrated approach emphasized that the building's leadership needed to cultivate a positive learning environment and empower teachers to make instructional programming decisions. Through this investigation, it was apparent that NDPs were intentional about their behavior as school leaders. This transferred into creating intentional school structures to improve student achievement by promoting professional collaboration, hiring quality staff, and removing ineffective staff.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations associated with the study's design that could have influenced the analysis and overall findings. Selecting a narrow sample size by choosing five

participants could be seen as a limitation to the study. Sixty-two potential research participants existed. Selecting five research participants may have narrowed the scope of the study; however, the small sample allowed for more in-depth interviews and insights from each participant. In addition, choosing participants from the Midwestern section of the United States may have narrowed the point of reference to a regional perspective. This may have limited the transferability of the findings knowing that other participants resided in all 50 states and overseas; furthermore, choosing participants from a single year could have limited the analysis knowing that the National Association of Elementary School Principals has recognized outstanding principals for over 25 years. Limiting the study to a specific class could have narrowed the findings versus gathering longitudinal data from each award-winning class.

My recommendation to continue this investigation is twofold. To extend this research, I would expand the research sample to include all award-winning principals from a designated class. For example, I would seek the input of all 62 recipients from the Class of 2016 to create a larger data set. I recommend a research design with a mixed method approach that includes a quantitative leadership survey with qualitative face-to-face interviews. In addition, data collection should be conducted at the National Distinguished Principal Conference in Washington, D.C. This approach would allow access to all participants and help the research capture the “lived experience” from the ground level. These recommendations would counter the limitations mentioned in this study that narrowed the focus to five participants from Midwestern states. Expanding the design would provide a more holistic investigation into the thoughts and perspectives of our nation’s award-winning principals and provide a nationally representative perspective about school leadership and perceived best practices. This study focused on NDPs as participants. Expanding this study to learn the perspective of the NDP’s

teachers and support staff would bring another valuable set of data to help analyze the best practices and leadership approach of the NDPs. Conducting more in-depth research into this unique population has the potential to yield significant results that have the potential to influence new and developing principal training.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the leadership experiences and perspectives of five National Distinguished Elementary Principals (NDPs) from the Class of 2010 serving in the Midwest region of the United States. Specifically, the study analyzed the application process used to select NDPs, their views of school leadership, and their perception of best professional practices. The study used a phenomenological approach to gain insight and understanding of award-winning principals. This chapter provided insight into the spiral analysis approach that was conducted throughout the study to make creditable interpretation of the data. From the data analysis, the interpretation focused on the celebration of the principals, the use of an integrated leadership approach that combined the elements of transformational leadership and shared leadership, and building intentional school systems to promote a positive school culture and quality classroom instruction. The chapter concluded with limitations of this study and recommendations for future research which would help to better understand the nation's award-winning principals.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – National Distinguished Principal Initial Cover Letter

Dear NDP:

As National Distinguished Principals (NDPs), we are part of a small group of honored leaders representing the hard working elementary and middle level principals from across the United States. As the Missouri NDP of 2010, I was honored to sit side-by-side with you during this “mountain top” experience to learn about your school and best practices as a successful school administrator. Upon returning from the National Distinguished Principals Conference in October 2010, I was so moved that I’ve channeled my doctoral studies at the University of Arkansas around telling your story and sharing your best practices. What sets us apart? To whom do you attribute your success? What common themes do we all share? What “best practices” do we share?

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to examine the leadership experiences of award-winning elementary and middle level principals through their spoken words and by reviewing the content of their National Distinguished Principals (NDP) applications. This qualitative study will examine the experiences of National Distinguished Elementary Principals from the class of 2010 to gain an understanding of their practices and how they cope with the ever-increasing accountability measures as award winning principals.

My hope is that each of you will assist me by agreeing to participate in this unique study by setting aside time for an *interview* and by granting permission to *review the contents of your NDP application* to learn more about you and your experiences. Included in this packet is an informed consent from the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board (IRB) outlining the purpose of the study, benefits, confidentiality protocols, and any risks that may pertain to your participation. I’m requesting that you review the IRB, grant permission with your signature, and return the IRB so that I can move forward by telling your story. Your signature only grants permission to conduct the study; you can withdraw at anytime.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact my office at 417.235.7422. I look forward to working with you and learning from you and sharing your story.

Sincerely,

Michael J. Dawson
Missouri – National Distinguished Principal, Class of 2010

Appendix B – University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board (IRB) Informed Consent

A Phenomenological Study of National Distinguished Elementary Principals from the Class 2010

Informed Consent

I, _____, agree to participate in the research study titled “A Phenomenological Study of National Distinguished Elementary Principals from the Class of 2010.” This research is being conducted by Michael J. Dawson (University of Arkansas). I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can refuse to participate or stop participating at any time without giving any reason and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to examine the leadership experiences of award-winning principals through their spoken words and by reviewing the content of their National Distinguished Principals (NDP) applications. According to Creswell (2007, p.57), a phenomenological study, “describes the meaning of several individuals of their lived experiences.” This qualitative study using a phenomenological approach will examine the professional practices of National Distinguished Elementary Principals from the Class of 2010 to learn from their insights on leadership and experiences and how they cope with the ever-increasing demands of the principalship.

If I volunteer to take part in this study, I may be asked to do the following things:

- 1) Be personally interviewed up to 2 times, with each audio-taped interview lasting approximately 90 minutes.
- 2) Answer via telephone or e-mail any follow-up questions the researcher may have.
- 3) Provide a copy of your NDP application in full.
- 4) Review interview transcripts and findings for accuracy.

I will not receive any monetary compensation for participation in this study. Any compensation I receive is in the form of perceived benefit from possible feedback and insight gained by reviewing the said recordings. It is believed that the benefits of participating in this study outweigh any potential risks.

Information collected will be stored in a secure, locked location. Unless required by law, no individually identifiable information about me will be publicly disseminated. Participants and their districts will be provided pseudonyms, and all persons or places to which they refer will also be pseudonymized. Where details might allow outsiders to intuit identities, such details will be removed or changed. Interviews will be transcribed by the researcher, thus ensuring confidentiality. Records of participant names will be kept in a separate file from any other documents. Audio files will be stored on the secured computer. Only the researcher will have access to these files. Audio files will be destroyed through magnetic erasure methods after five years in December 2018. The investigator will answer any further questions about the research now or during the course of the project.

I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in this research project and understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form for my records.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, please call or write:

Ro Winderwalker, CIP

Institutional Review Board Coordinator

Research Compliance

University of Arkansas

120 Ozark Hall

Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201

479-575-2208

irb@uark.edu

September 24, 2013

Name of Researcher: Michael J. Dawson

Researcher's Signature: _____

Researcher's Telephone: (417) 235.7422

Researcher's Email: mjdawson@uark.edu

Faculty Advisor: John Pijanowski

Advisor's Email: jpijanow@uark.edu

Name of Subject: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C – Interview Protocol

Name of Interviewee: _____ Date: _____

Preliminary Script: “This is Mike Dawson. Today is _____ (date/ time) and I am here at _____ (location) with _____ (name) , 2010 National Distinguished Principal for the state of _____ (state).”

We’ll be discussing the topic of being an effective principal, leadership, and your ideas about change.

1. Briefly summarize your educational experiences and professional background.

- a. How long have you been with the school system?
- b. How long have you been in this position?
- c. How long have you been in administration?
- d. How long have you been in education?
- e. What is your educational background / Degrees / Where was your degree(s) earned?

NDP Process

Describe the process you went through to be nominated and selected as NDP.

What was the highlight of your time in Washington, D.C.?

To what do you attribute your success as an NDP?

Leadership Style / Leadership Traits / Training

What do you see as your major duties and responsibilities as a building principal?

Tell the story that best describes your leadership.

On what basis do you believe you should be evaluated for your effectiveness as a principal?

What do you believe are the most important traits of an effective principal?

Tell me the difference between leadership and management.

What words of wisdom or advice would you give to other principals who strive to make a difference?

Can you describe some experiences that you had during your preparation to become a school leader or professional development once you were in the job that you feel really helped you arrive where you are today?

Instructional Leadership / Culture and Climate

What would you consider to be your best practices as a building principal?

How have you encouraged leadership at your site?

What have you done to inspire great teachers to achieve more with their students?

What have you done to encourage less effective teachers to leave your site and/or the profession?

As you visit classrooms, what do you notice?

Tell how your site has attempted to close achievement gaps between various groups in your school.

What role does school culture and school climate play as a factor in student performance?

Tell about pieces of your existing school culture that you have intentionally built and why you have done so.

Change

Describe the school prior to your appointment.

Describe what initiatives, policies, or circumstances driving change that you are currently experiencing.

What do you do with teachers who are not “making the grade” in your building? What is the effect on the staff?

How do you balance internal pressures for change and external pressures for change?

Tell me about a time when you needed to change something at school.

How do you go about implementing change? What process / system do you use?

The job is very complex and demanding, how do you manage change? How do you stay fresh?

What are your thoughts about nationalizing public education?

Closing

Is there anything I haven't yet asked you that you think would help me better understand the success of the building?

What question(s) do you wish I had asked? How would you answer those questions?

What else would you like to add about your experience as a principal?