Instructional Leadership Supports and Collaboration with Central Office Leaders: Middle School Principals' Perspectives

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. To my loving husband Ricardo, who has carried our family throughout this process, who encouraged me when I could not find the strength to go on and did not allow me to quit. To my beautiful children, Ella and Noah, who are my greatest pride, for your immense love and tenacious support. I love you to the moon and back.

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William Butler Yeats wrote, “Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire.”

Abstract of Dissertation

Instructional Leadership Supports and Collaboration with Central Office Leaders: Middle School Principals' Perspective

This qualitative study examined 12 middle school principals' perceptions of the instructional leadership supports and professional learning experiences provided to them by central office leaders. The findings from this study reveal that middle school principals need specific instructional leadership process supports, such as coaching strategies, using data for improvement planning, and conducting walkthroughs and informal observations. Participants also desired tailored professional learning experiences from central office leaders who were familiar with secondary program structures, as well as the academic and social emotional needs of adolescent learners, based on principals' individual needs, school context, and district initiatives. Trusting relationships, ongoing collaboration and consistent support positively impacted collegial partnerships between middle school principals and central office leaders and those antecedents allowed central offices to provide more meaningful instructional leadership supports to middle school principals. The findings also stress the significance of central office leaders intentionally building collaborative relationships with middle school principals in their joint pursuit of improved student performance.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

Historically, principals have been responsible for managing daily school operations. However, recent years have brought about increased accountability measures. The ongoing implementation of educational reforms and legislations, such as the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002) and *Race to the Top* (2009), have continued to add responsibilities to the already complex role of school leadership (Thompson & France, 2015). Federal, state, and district mandates hold principals and districts accountable for student performance (Gieselmann, 2009; Hvidston et al., 2018; Retna, 2015). The mandates require principals to be involved with instructional practices, making it evident that principals have a critical and direct impact on student achievement (Fullan, 2002; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Gurley et al., 2015; Leithwood et al., 2020). Middle school principals have a unique role, as they are responsible for creating an academically engaging and safe school environment that is also appropriate for adolescent learners who are experiencing physical changes and undergoing emotional and cognitive development (Brown, 2004; Gale & Bishop, 2014; Spernes, 2020; Williams et al., 2010).

As instructional leaders, middle school principals focus on teaching and learning and, thus, improve student achievement. In addition, they are responsible for drafting the school mission, manage the instructional program, create a positive school climate, and improve and redesign the organization (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Leithwood et al., 2006; Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011). However, principals depend on the central office for professional learning and support around instructional leadership, necessitating collaboration between the principals and the central office leaders who are indispensable

to the success of principals and their schools (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018). Central office leaders who understand their responsibility for professionally developing principals are most effective at developing principals as instructional leaders (Honig & Rainey, 2015).

With increased accountability and school reform initiatives, central office leaders have transitioned their work from bureaucratic tasks to tasks associated with teaching and learning (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011). School districts set expectations around teaching and learning and determine accountability measures while monitoring student performance and managing human capital, operations, and community partnerships (Honig et al., 2010; Psencik & Brown, 2018). Central office leaders are responsible for building principals' leadership capacity, providing resources, and partnering to meet work-related challenges. To help schools achieve their academic goals, central office leaders need to partner with principals to help them meet the challenges and demands of school leadership (Hirsh et al., 2018; Honig et al., 2010). The added instructional leadership responsibilities create a direct pathway for central office leaders to positively impact student outcomes by supporting and engaging in professional learning with principals (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Zepeda & Lanoue, 2017). However, for principals and central office leaders to effectively partner for school improvement, they need to have a collaborative relationship with each other, a relationship that encourages open communication and trust. Furthermore, middle school principals cannot work in isolation; they need central office support with instructional leadership.

The central office leaders play a significant role in supporting schools and providing principals with professional learning around instructional leadership. They

create a district-wide culture that prioritizes teaching and learning and makes student achievement the primary responsibility of every staff member in the district (Hallinger, 1998; Iver et al., 2008; Quellmalz et al., 1995). However, there is currently a lack of research on middle school principals' perspectives on the support they receive from central office leaders that impact principals' instructional leadership practice. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the instructional leadership support and learning experiences from central office leaders that middle school principals identified as most influential on their practice. Also, this study sought to explore relationship factors that contributed to middle school principals' abilities to collaborate with or learn from central office leaders.

Statement of the Problem

Various articles describe principal roles and responsibilities. For example, Banjarnahor et al. (2018) stated, "Principals play a very important role in determining the quality of education in schools" (p. 869). According to Sowell (2018), "the middle school principal is expected to continually facilitate student success and school improvement" (p. 7). These definitions underscore the expansive roles of principals within their respective buildings. Most importantly, principals, as instructional leaders, influence student achievement by establishing an ideal learning environment where teachers receive necessary supports to advance student learning (Boren et al., 2017; McAdamis, 2010; Williams, 2015). Moreover, principal leadership affects teacher efficacy around teaching and learning (Lambersky, 2016; Liu & Hallinger, 2017; Park et al., 2019). This study investigated the instructional leadership support from central office leaders that middle school principals identified as most influential on their practice.

Today, principals face responsibilities pertaining to educational reforms and legislation while also being expected to be effective instructional leaders and sound managers of daily operations (Fullan, 2002, 2014; Hvidston et al., 2018). As instructional leaders, they need to be able to speak to pedagogy as they build trusting relationships with teachers. They need to create systems and processes to encourage collaboration and ongoing professional learning to provide support and give teachers the autonomy to meet their student's academic needs (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). On the one hand, evidence documents that principals have continually risen to the occasion to be a positive influence on student achievement (Goldring et al., 2018), reduce the achievement gap (Wise & Cavazos, 2017), and effectively lead schools (Nasreen & Odhiambo, 2018). On the other hand, empirical literature elucidates the struggles secondary principals face in meeting all of the demands placed on them and the need for support and professional learning from the central office that will allow them to effectively guide schools as instructional leaders (Gawlik, 2018; Honig, 2008; Nasreen & Odhiambo, 2018; Service & Thornton, 2021).

Middle school principals have the unique task of creating an appropriate school environment for adolescent learners based on their developmental and educational needs as opposed to their elementary and high school counterparts. Based on the recommendations made by the *1987 Task Force on the Education of Young Adolescents*, which was established by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century*, and *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association, 2010), Angelle (2010) emphasized components critical to the middle school leadership structure. These

recommendations stressed the significance of (1) shared decision making; (2) instruction centered around a core curriculum; (3) common planning time for teachers and a strong emphasis on professional learning; (4) interdisciplinary teaming; and (5) alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and (6) advisory groups and small learning communities. Moreover, it is crucial to the middle school framework to employ teachers who understand the social and emotional needs of students and the importance of relationships for this age group. Stakeholder involvement in the school and the community was also identified as a key component of a successful middle school (Angelle, 2010; Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Central office leaders have the potential to support middle school principals' instructional leadership in order to improve student learning outcomes. Furthermore, central office leaders are responsible for principal professional learning, as they cultivate a culture of learning and create conditions for continuous improvement (Psencik & Brown, 2018). Hence, collaboration, rooted in trust and communication, allows for a supportive and reflective relationship between principals and central office leaders (Avolio et al., 2009; DeWitt et al., 2017), as they share the same vision and goals for student achievement (Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Thessin, 2019). Considering the responsibilities of middle school principals to improve student outcomes and the complexity of school leadership, they need both ongoing support and professional learning opportunities from central office leaders. In essence, there was a need to explore how middle school principals perceived instructional leadership support from central office leaders for the purpose of determining how central office leaders can refine the

support they provide and their practices to best meet the needs of middle school principals.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the instructional leadership support from central office leaders that middle school principals identified as most influential on their practice. This study investigated factors pertaining to the relationship between middle school principals and how the central office contributes to middle school principals' abilities to collaborate and learn from central office leaders. While current research documents the role of central office leaders and how they support principals, and current research discusses the significance of trust and relationships between principals and central office leaders, gaps in the research remain around how middle school principals, in their unique role of needing to meet the academic needs of adolescent learners, perceive instructional leadership support from central office leaders. To address this gap, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What instructional leadership supports from central office do middle school principals identify as most influential on their practice?
2. What types of professional learning experiences from central office do middle school principals describe as most influential on their instructional leadership practice?
3. What other factors pertaining to relationships contribute to middle school principals' abilities to collaborate with or learn from central office?

Statement of Potential Significance

This study sought to contribute in specific areas by attempting to contribute to the academic body of knowledge about middle school principals' instructional leadership support from the central office. Though there is existing research on instructional leadership, there is a lack of research on middle school principals' perceptions of the effectiveness of support the central office provides as they seek to grow their instructional leadership practice. This study also contributed to instructional leadership by providing a voice to middle school principals. As a result, this study offered the potential for a more thorough understanding of effective instructional leadership support for the unique needs of middle school principals. The findings from this study enabled central office leaders to understand better the type of instructional leadership supports that middle school principals identify as being effective and impactful on improving teaching and learning. The results from this study should encourage central offices to provide more meaningful instructional leadership support to middle school principals. In their joint pursuit of improved student performance, it should compel central office leaders to intentionally build collaborative relationships with middle school principals that embed effective and conceptual communication.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The collaborative leadership theory (Chrislip & Larson, 1994) is a theoretical framework that analyzes the collaborative relationship between middle school principals and central office leaders. This theory is focused on building capacity, creating a shared purpose and goals, and emphasizing the significance of building trusting relationships within a hierarchy to improve middle school principals' instructional leadership practices.

The support, professional learning, and collaborative relationship between central office leaders and middle school principals work jointly to increase middle school principals' capacity in instructional leadership. Considering the components of effective instructional leadership, the collaborative leadership theory includes authentic shared vision, goal attainment, professional learning, and support (Chrislip & Larson, 1994). These elements are critical in school leadership when the common objective is increasing student performance within hierarchical relationships, such as central office leaders and middle school principals. It was essential to this study to understand the instructional leadership support from the central office leaders that middle school principals identify as most influential in their practice. It was also necessary to explore other factors about relationships with the central office and how they contribute to principals' abilities to collaborate with or learn from the central office.

The conceptual framework considered the collaborative relationship between middle school principals and central office leaders and the instructional leadership support provided to middle school principals that they identify as being practical. Three domains informed the conceptual framework for this study. The first concept centered around middle school principals and central office leaders (the actors), the second focused on the support and collaboration between middle school principals and central office leaders, and the third dealt with instructional leadership practice (the sought result). These domains were explored and connected to existing empirical studies to support this researcher's purpose. The middle school context was also influential within this framework due to the unique structure of middle schools and the specific needs of

adolescent learners who are transitioning from elementary school and then, within three years, transitioning to high school.

Summary of Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative approach to understand better the instructional leadership support from central office leaders that middle school principals identify as most influential on their practice. A basic interpretive qualitative study examines phenomena through participants' experiences and their interpretation of a situation within its real-world context (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2015; Yin, 2014). By exploring the phenomenon of instructional leadership development with these particular middle school principals, this study sought to gain a more thorough understanding of the indispensable facets of instructional leadership development of middle school principals that would further benefit practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. This approach allowed for varied perspectives of instructional leadership support and the development of middle school principals by central office leaders to be revealed. Participants offered their perspectives and perceptions, which were later compared across and among the participants to identify commonalities.

Participants were recruited from a single East Coast school district. The district is among the largest in the United States, with a diverse student body and varying socio-economic statuses, with many students impacted by socio-economic factors, yet maintains a high graduation rate. The anticipated sample was 12-20 middle school principals. I expected to recruit a diverse sample by gender, race, and years of experience, all with at least two years of principalship experience. Recruitment involved direct contact with the school district with other options considered, including the use of social

media to recruit principals through professional organizations such as the George Washington University Educational Leadership and Administration Cohort, and Maryland Association of Secondary School Principals (MDMASSP). I emailed all middle school principals within the selected district inquiring about their voluntary participation in the study, which would involve a 60-90 minute Zoom interview. No other recruitment methods were needed.

Limitations and Delimitations

There were limitations inherent to this study that need acknowledgment. This study relied upon individual perspectives and experiences of middle school principals, and the data obtained through the interviews may not be generalizable due to the limitations presented by self-reporting and demographics. Due to the small sample size of the participants in a single district, the demographics might not be transferable to the larger population.

Time of data and length of data collection was another limitation. First this study followed a global pandemic, which caused significant instructional and operational disruptions to schools from March 2020 to June 2021. The data was gathered after schools reopened in spring of 2022. Additionally, a longitudinal study would be necessary to determine the types of instructional leadership support from central office leaders that middle school principals found most effective in helping them improve student achievement. Furthermore, because I am a novice researcher, my confidence may have impacted the analysis of the data and the subsequent findings (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2015).

When designing this study, I chose specific delimitations that helped define the parameters of the investigation. The intentionality of focusing on middle school principals created a delimitation, as it confined the study's sample. This study also used a general definition of instructional leadership applied to teaching and learning. Instructional leadership can be explored through multiple perspectives, but in this study, it was bound to middle school principals. This study was also bound by geography, the leadership position of the participants, employment status, and time for data collection. I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis because it allowed me to follow a systematic, established approach to conducting data analysis. As a novice researcher, I used hand coding to thoroughly analyze the data and extract relevant themes rather than relying on software.

Summary

Middle school principals play a significant role in creating a school environment that meets adolescent learners' academic and social-emotional needs. As instructional leaders, they create the school mission, manage instructional programs, and ensure a positive school climate to improve student achievement. To effectively lead their schools, middle school principals need support and ongoing professional learning opportunities from central office leaders. To help schools achieve their academic goals, central office leaders need to collaborate and partner with middle school principals to help them meet the challenges and demands of school leadership. Next, I reviewed relevant empirical literature to gain a deeper understanding of the unique demands of middle school principals, the role of secondary principals as instructional leaders, and the collaborative partnership and support from central office leaders.

Definition of Key Terms

1. *Achievement indicators* are defined as assessments that include end-of-course subject pass rates (i.e., English, math, social studies, and science), attendance rates, and graduation rates, and can also include district, state, and national assessments (Sanzo et al., 2011).
2. *Adolescent learner* is defined as a middle school student experiencing physical changes, specifically puberty, as well as emotional and cognitive development (Brown, 2004; Spernes, 2020).
3. *Central office leader* is defined as personnel in a school system that fosters a culture of learning, sets expectations, builds principals' capacity through professional learning, provides resources that help schools achieve goals, monitors results, holds educators accountable when outcomes are not met, and meets the challenge of the complex school leadership work (Hirsh et al., 2018; Psencik & Brown, 2018).
4. *Collaborative leadership* is defined as collaboration among stakeholders that contributes to building team members' capacity and creating a shared purpose and goals. It also emphasizes trusting relationships within a hierarchy (Chrislip & Larson, 1994).
5. *Director* is a central office leader who directly supervises principals in the district in which the study was conducted.
6. *Distributed leadership* is defined as sharing and distributing leadership work across individuals and roles within an organization (Angelle, 2010).

7. *Effective school principal as an instructional leader* is defined as a principal who creates a strong school vision for the school and a positive climate that is goal-oriented and emphasizes teaching and learning. The school should support and empower teachers, creating structures and processes that encourage them to collaborate, reflect on their instructional practices, analyze student data, and adjust practices to improve student outcomes. They meet accreditation and achievement standards as defined by a series of indicators identified by the state and federal government that reflect student achievement. According to researchers, successful schools usually have active, skillful, reflective, and collaborative leaders who encourage collective learning and focus on instructional leadership (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Sanzo et al., 2011; Urick & Bowers, 2014).
8. *Instructional leadership* is defined in this study as a model of school leadership that focuses on defining the school mission (setting and communicating goals), managing the instructional program (evaluating instruction, coordinating curriculum, and monitoring student progress), creating a positive school climate (protecting instructional time, promoting professional learning, and maintaining visibility), and improving and redesigning the organization (Hallinger & Murphy; 1985; Leithwood et al., 2006; Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011).
9. *Middle school* is defined as an educational institution consisting of grades 6-8 students. Students in these schools have completed an elementary or primary school program but are not considered high school students. In the U.S., the

middle school structure emphasizes academics, citizenship, and the social-emotional development of adolescent learners (Sanzo et al., 2011).

10. *Professional learning* is defined as interactive, collaborative, job-embedded, and continuous learning aligned with school goals, specific content, standards, and assessments. Professional learning encourages teachers to take responsibility for their learning and to practice in their teaching contexts (Scherff, 2018).
11. *Professional learning community (PLC)* is defined as a vehicle for adult learning in which both teachers and principals engage in discourse about school improvement and teaching and learning, working collaboratively to improve instructional practices and academic performance of students (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008, p. 463).
12. *Rigorous curriculum* is defined as a curriculum that is equal to or sufficiently prepares students to be successful in college-level courses (Wyatt et al., 2011).
13. *School climate* is defined as a multi-dimensional concept and refers to a school's general feel, ideology, and environment (Dutta & Sahney, 2016).
14. *School culture* is defined as the guiding beliefs and values evident in how a school operates (Fullan, 2016).
15. *Secondary principal* is defined as a school leader who supervises middle school (grades 6-8) or high school (grades 9-12).
16. *Transformational leadership* is defined by six characteristics in school leadership that empower and motivate principals and teachers to (1) build a school vision and set goals; (2) provide intellectual stimulation, such as problem-solving processes to further promote innovation, organizational change and improvement;

(3) offer individualized support; (4) model professional practices and values; (5) demonstrate high performance expectations; and (6) develop structures to foster participation in school decisions (Leithwood, 1994; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Urick & Bowers; 2014).

Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature

As instructional leaders, middle school principals are responsible for creating a positive school climate, building the capacity of teachers, managing operations, and ultimately, ensuring that students meet federal and state student achievement measures (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Fenton, 2016; Park et al., 2019; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). To fulfill these duties, middle school principals need support and professional learning to be effective instructional leaders (Honig et al., 2017). However, principals receive insufficient support from central office leaders who lack general resources, time to collaborate, and uniformity in providing district-wide support (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Blaik Hourani & Stringer, 2015; Lochmiller, 2018; McKetty, 2016; Saltzman, 2016; Tingle et al., 2019; Wilkinson et al., 2019). Middle school principals are uniquely responsible for fostering welcoming and collaborative educational environments to help students academically transition from elementary school and prepare them for high school within three years. Hence, middle school principals need to be effective instructional leaders who focus on teaching and learning to meet adolescent learners' academic and social-emotional needs as they transition through various developmental stages (Brown, 2004; O'Donnell & White, 2005; Spernes, 2020). The purpose of this study was to identify the instructional leadership support from central office personnel deemed by middle school principals as the most influential on their practice. While ample research exists documenting principal leadership and the role of central office leaders, studies documenting the perceptions of middle school principals regarding instructional leadership support provided by central office leaders are scarce (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Kimball et al., 2015; Wright & da Costa, 2016).

Summary of Literature Search

Most of the literature reviewed for this study was from 2000 through 2021, with additional historic seminal works relevant to the topic. I relied on the Gelman Library System and the EBSCOhost, ProQuest, ERIC, and JSTOR databases. Terms searched included variations of words and phrases on *middle school principals, secondary principals, central office leaders, instructional leadership, principal supervisors, building relationships, and student achievement.* The referenced collection of articles, studies, and books exhausted the current literature on the topic of this study.

The literature review contains three overarching sections. The first section of the literature review explores the role of middle school, secondary principal, and K-12 principal instructional leadership. The next section describes the support and professional learning central office leaders provide to principals to build their capacity as instructional leaders. The final section outlines the collaborative relationship between principals and central office leaders that facilitates student achievement. Following the empirical research, inferences for the forthcoming study appear in the fourth section.

The Theoretical Framework for the Forthcoming Study

The theoretical framework for the forthcoming study guides the reader and directs the organization of the empirical research. The collaborative leadership theory (Chrislip & Larson, 1994) focuses on the collaboration among stakeholders, which includes building team members' capacity, creating a shared purpose and goals, and emphasizing trusting relationships within a hierarchy (Archer & Cameron, 2009; Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Hsieh & Liou, 2018; McGuire & Silvia, 2009). I chose this theory because it focuses on collaboration, professional learning, and the importance of meaningful

relationships, which are imperative to the partnership between middle school principals and the central office leaders supporting them with instructional leadership. The literature on the role of secondary principals as instructional leaders showed the complexity of the position and the need for ongoing support and development by central office leaders to lead student achievement.

This study's theoretical framework and lens was Chrislip and Larson's (1994) collaborative leadership theory. This theory "is considered the most popular and dynamic leadership theory" (Hsieh & Liou, 2018, p. 84) because collaborative leadership is comprehensive and encompasses aspects of transformational and instructional leadership (DeWitt et al., 2017). Multiple leadership styles, including "shared," "collective," "collaborative," "emergent," "co-," and "democratic" (Bolden, 2011, p. 251), and distributed appear within education, and each emphasizes collaboration. Kocolowski (2010) identified the interchangeable use of leadership terms, such as shared, collective, and distributed, with collaboration underpinning many commonly discussed leadership theories (Bissessar, 2014). Collaboration between middle school principals and central office leaders is critical to ensure that these principals receive ongoing instructional leadership support from the central office to improve student achievement, leading to the selection of the collaborative leadership theory as the theoretical framework for the study.

Collaborative leadership theory incorporates authentic shared vision, goal attainment, professional development and learning, and support (Chrislip & Larson, 1994). These elements are essential in education when the shared goal is increasing student achievement amid hierarchical relationships, such as central office leaders and middle school principals. Hsieh and Liou (2018) observed that "successful collaborative

structures involve dependence and resource distribution among the collaborating parties" (p. 87). At the school level, principals are dependent upon central office leaders for professional development opportunities, support, and guidance with instructional leadership (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Fenton, 2016; Honig et al., 2017; Rowland, 2017; Thompson & France, 2015). Central office leaders need effective principal leadership to increase student achievement. This mutual goal establishes a collaborative relationship that can develop a shared vision for effective instructional leadership.

This study explored the instructional leadership support from central office leaders that middle school principals identified as most influential on their practice. It is first essential to understand the relationships between middle school principals and central office leaders through the collaborative leadership lens. Incidentally, central office leaders are responsible for promoting principals' leadership for the common purpose of improving student academic achievement (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Fenton, 2016; Grissom et al., 2019; Honig et al., 2017; Hvidston et al., 2018; Rowland, 2017; Thompson & France, 2015). With collaborative leadership theory, Chrislip and Larson (1994) posited, "If you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic vision and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organization or community" (p. 14). As such, collaborative leadership encompasses a shared vision and values, interdependence and mutual responsibility, respect, empathy, and willingness for honest collaboration (Lawrence, 2017). As school leaders, middle school principals have a hierarchical yet collaborative relationship with central office leaders, who supervise principals while preparing, developing, coaching, supporting, and guiding them to increase their capacity in

instructional leadership. The shared vision of increased student achievement is possible through the improved instructional principal leadership that results from this collaboration (Bissessar, 2014).

Collaborative leadership requires time to develop, as it "is founded upon a precept of human values, including safety, trust, dignity, and respect. This provides an intrinsic base for human satisfaction and identification" (Dentico, 1999, p. 4). In removing the hierarchical relationship during collaboration, leaders and subordinates can create mutual goals, another facet of collaboration and collaborative leadership (Friend & Cook, 2007). When supervisors and subordinates openly discuss goals, communicate needs, share resources, exchange ideas, and strategize steps toward success, they build trusting relationships founded on mutual respect and shared commitment toward goal attainment (Friend & Cook, 2007; Larson et al., 1989). Collaborative relationships between principals and central office leaders have a foundation of reciprocal trust, improving communication and empowering principals as instructional and transformational leaders (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Lawson et al., 2017; McAdamis, 2010).

There is ample literature documenting the power of collaborative leadership in education (Avolio et al., 2009; DeWitt et al., 2017), and within these recent studies, scholars demonstrated a lack of principal professional development and support. Therefore, it was necessary to explore how middle school principals perceive instructional leadership support from central office leaders to determine how they can refine their practices to best meet principals' needs. Fulford (2013) found that high-performing principal-central office leader teams are a byproduct of collaboration and teamwork that also improves "faculty morale and student performance" (p. 1). The

necessity for principal and central office leader collaboration justified the collaboration leadership theory as the theoretical framework.

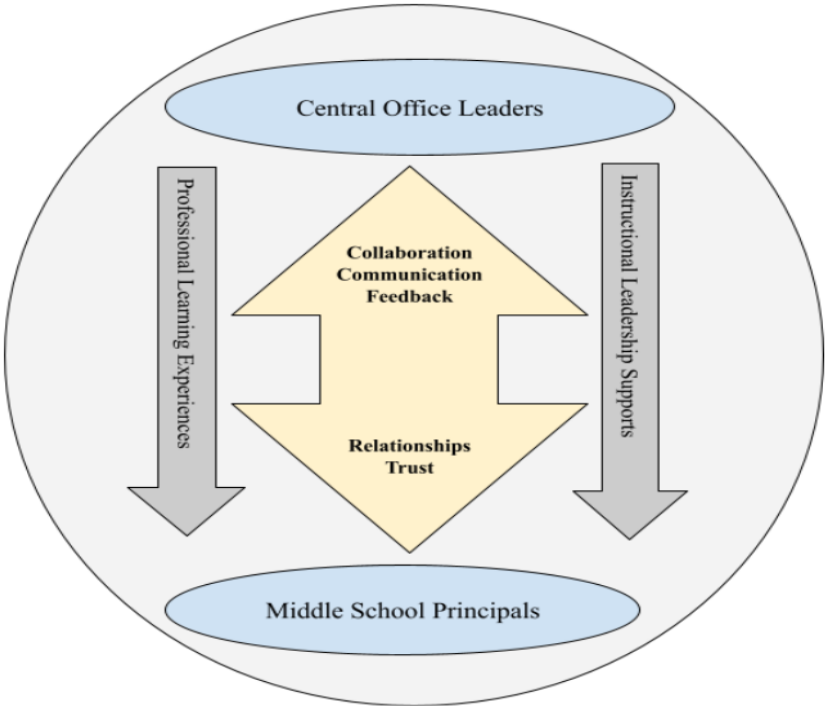
Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study emerged from scholarship in the fields of instructional leadership, middle school principals, and central office leadership to understand the central office support that middle school principals find effective for their growth as instructional leaders. Effective instructional leadership requires ongoing professional learning, time, and resources. As instructional leaders, principals need to facilitate the creation of a school mission, manage instructional programs, create a positive school climate, and improve the organization (Flood, 2004; Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011; Terosky, 2016). On the other hand, central office leaders are responsible for building principal capacity in those areas and supporting them as partners and supervisors in the work (Honig & Rainey, 2015).

Principals and central office leaders face barriers in effectively implementing instructional strategies and providing necessary support. These foundational principles of instructional leadership form the basis of a conceptual framework of how central office supports can improve middle school principals' instructional leadership practices. Furthermore, exploring and understanding the unique needs of adolescent learners and the context of middle school principals' leadership is a significant consideration in a conceptual framework. Figure 1 is a visual representation of the conceptual framework used in this study.

Figure 1

Connection Between Middle School Principals and Central Office Leaders



A strong and collaborative partnership between middle school principals and central office leaders is critical in ensuring an effective relationship that allows for open communication and trust (Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Honig & Rainey, 2015; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011). Relationships and collaboration encircle the framework because they are critical to the successful partnership between middle school principals and the central office. Central office leaders engage principals in professional learning experiences to ensure district alignment of resources to a teaching and learning mission (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Ikemoto et al., 2014; Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011; Leithwood & McCullough, 2016; Louie et al., 2019). Central

office leaders also serve as evaluators, coaches, and professional development liaisons, informing principals' practices and advising management and instructional leadership (Goldring et al., 2018). An effective relationship between principals and central office leaders could be the linchpin that holds together district initiatives and system-wide reform (Coplan & Knapp, 2006; Daly & Finnigan, 2010).

The top oval represents the role of the central office in supporting middle school principals with instructional leadership and professional learning experiences. Middle school principals require ongoing professional development and various types of supports from central office leaders to better manage the complexity of the work and ensure effective instructional leadership focused on teaching and learning (Goldring et al., 2018; Grissom et al., 2019; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2015; McKetty, 2016; Olivier & Huffman, 2016; Service & Thornton, 2021; Wilkinson et al., 2019; Zepeda & Lanoue, 2017). Meanwhile, the bottom oval represents the work of the middle school principals responsible for instructional leadership and school improvement engaged in a partnership with the central office leaders.

The double arrow between central office leaders and middle school principals signifies the importance of a collaborative relationship rooted in communication and trust that fosters ongoing feedback in their joint work of school improvement. As instructional leaders, effective middle school principals create a learning environment conducive to effective teaching and learning (Blase & Blase, 1999; Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; O'Donnell & White, 2005). Furthermore, as instructional leaders at the middle school level, principals are responsible for meeting the developmental needs of early adolescent learners who experience profound physical and

developmental changes within a very short period (Brown, 2004; O'Donnell & White, 2005).

The left arrow represents the professional learning experiences, and the right arrow indicates the instructional leadership support central office leaders provide to middle school principals. Both are influential in middle school principals' practice. Instructional leadership encompasses defining the school's mission, managing instructional programs, promoting a positive school climate, focusing on goals and expectations for student achievement, keeping track of teachers' professional development needs, and creating structures and opportunities for teacher collaboration (Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010; Myran & Sutherland, 2019). As instructional leaders, principals influence all aspects of teaching and learning (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007; Hitt & Tucker, 2016).

This conceptual framework served as a lens for the literature review to explore instructional leadership support from central office leaders that middle school principals identify as most influential on their practice. Middle school principals have a unique role as they need to be intentional in creating an educational environment in which adolescent learners can thrive academically. The next section provides a background for the study.

Background for the Study

Evolution and Historical Perspective on Instructional Leadership in Middle Schools

Before the concept of "instructional leadership," researchers explored leadership characteristics and styles that positively impacted teaching and learning. As a result, there is a multitude of leadership definitions in education (Flood, 2004). Specifically, the 20th-century leadership theories progressed from the great man theories of the early 1900s, to

group theories of the 1930s, to the trait theories of the 1940s and early 1950s, to behavior theories of the late 1950s and early 1960s, to the contingency and situational theories of the late 1960s and 1970s, to the transformational theories of the present (Flood, 2004, p. 56).

Before the term instructional leadership, researchers explored leadership characteristics and styles that positively impacted teaching and learning. As a result, many leadership definitions exist in education (Flood, 2004). Specifically, the 20th-century leadership theories progressed from the great man theories of the early 1900s to group theories of the 1930s, to the trait theories of the 1940s and early 1950s, to behavior theories of the late 1950s and early 1960s, to the contingency and situational theories of the late 1960s and 1970s, to the transformational theories of the present (Flood, 2004, p. 56). During the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, perceptions of instructional leadership were from two perspectives: the narrow and the broad (Sheppard, 1996). The older, narrower definition focused on instructional leadership as a stand-alone component of principals' work.

Narrow instructional leadership also pertained to principals' responsibilities for managing the curriculum and teaching, leading staff development, monitoring student and teacher performance, and recognizing and rewarding good work (DeBevoise, 1984; Dwyer, 1984; Leithwood, 1994). However, the broad definition encompassed all student learning influences, including resources (both curricular and financial), communication, and principal visibility (Andrews & Soder, 1987; O'Donnell & White, 2005). Considering prior research and building upon it, Hallinger and Murphy (1985) presented a conceptual framework of instructional leadership comprised of three dimensions: (1)

defining the school's mission, ensuring that the school has a clear mission focused on the academic progress of students; (2) managing the instructional program and monitoring and developing the school's instructional program; and (3) creating a positive school learning climate characterized by high standards and expectations, capacity development, and continuous improvement (Shaked & Schechter, 2016).

Furthermore, if instructional leadership was to be effective, it had to be "defined in terms of observable practices and behaviors that principals can implement" (Hallinger & Murphy, 1987, p. 55). Flood (2004) stressed that principals are the cornerstone of academic excellence, building from Lashway's (1995) previous description that emphasized how empowered principals are the leading academic leaders who shift their focus from bureaucratic school management to teaching and learning. To determine principal effectiveness, there need to be measurable outcomes for student performance with clear actions and behaviors exhibited by principals with intentions to create a collaborative environment with clear expectations and resources that prioritize teaching and learning (Flood, 2004; Hallinger & Heck, 2009). However, because schools do not function in isolation and student success depends on many factors, such as resources, school climate, and stakeholder collaboration, identifying specific characteristics of effective instructional leaders presents a challenge (Flood, 2004).

Defining Instructional Leadership for the Purpose of This Study

As cited in the empirical literature, leadership is second only to teaching in its importance for student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Wahlstrom, 2008). Leadership plays an essential role in influencing the conditions and processes in schools, and instructional leadership is crucial to that work (Myran & Sutherland, 2019). Despite

varying definitions of instructional leadership, the concept itself has evolved, with the commonality among the definitions centered on school leaders using their expertise and insights to improve teaching and learning and, ultimately, student performance.

Instructional leadership entails defining the school's mission, managing instructional programs, and promoting a positive school climate (Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Myran & Sutherland, 2019). Other scholars have stressed focusing on goals and expectations for student achievement, keeping track of teachers' professional development needs, and creating structures and opportunities for teachers to collaborate (Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Further expanding the definition of leadership includes providing teachers with specific feedback to change and improve instructional practices, setting a vision, focusing on organizational culture, and modeling learning (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011). Moreover, within various accountability policies, effective school leadership and successful teaching and learning are "most defensible when justified by quantitative evidence linking the practices to standardized measures of student achievement" (Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010, p. 66).

A single individual cannot accomplish instructional leadership. Instead, leadership is a complex and demanding concept encompassing a collaborative process in which principals, teachers, and school community members jointly commit to improving teaching and learning to improve student achievement (Flood, 2004; Terosky, 2016). Myran and Sutherland (2019) observed:

> Learning is dependent on the active and deliberate agency of the learner, along with a host of introspective outlooks and behaviors, and second, with this agency situated within complex and dynamic social contexts that serve to mediate, shape, or constrain the construction and co-construction of knowledge (p. 658).

Effective instructional leaders understand their role in creating an educational environment centered around student achievement. These leaders engage the stakeholders in a collaborative process that allows for both adult and student learning. For this study, instructional leadership is defined as a model that focuses on the school mission (setting and communicating goals), managing the instructional program (evaluating instruction, coordinating curriculum, and monitoring student progress), creating a positive school climate (protecting instructional time, promoting professional development, and maintaining visibility), and improving and redesigning the organization (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Leithwood et al., 2006; Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011).

Middle School Principals

Middle school principals need to encourage and embrace positive interpersonal relationships in a school environment that is nurturing, safe, and academically challenging (Brown, 2004). The role of the middle school principal is unique, including expectations to help students transition twice, once from elementary to middle school and then from middle to high school (O'Donnell & White, 2005). The articulation process between the various levels is critical because middle school principals need to clearly understand students' performance as they enter middle school. Further, middle school principals need to collaborate with high schools to ensure a successful transition that meets students' academic and social-emotional needs.

Middle school principals are responsible for helping adolescents transition from a smaller environment to a larger one, which requires them to manage a new academic structure, new peers, and their own physical and emotional changes (Brown, 2004). In addition, middle school principals collaborate with students and parents alike while

creating a school environment sensitive to the developmental needs of adolescent learners. Students are at various developmental stages during the middle school transition, specifically regarding puberty, which encompasses physical, intellectual, emotional, and social changes (Spernes, 2020). Middle school principals also need to support teachers to become skilled in using pedagogy that is developmentally responsive for adolescents who are not only experiencing physical, social-emotional, and cognitive changes but also managing changes in their relationships with parents, peers, and teachers (Allison & Rehm, 2007; Clark & Clark, 2004).

Effective middle school principals should intentionally meet the myriad needs facing adolescent learners. They also need to support their teachers and community members by inspiring, empowering, and guiding them toward a student-centered school vision (Bauck, 1987; Brown & Anfara, 2003). Effective principals engage in shared decision-making to create clear, measurable goals for student achievement, understanding what it will take to achieve the desired results (Brown & Anfara, 2003).

According to the National Middle School Association (2010), another characteristic of effective middle schools is collaborative leadership, which lends itself to learners' communities, including teachers, administrators, parents, and community members. Through collaborative leadership, the stakeholders work jointly to meet the social-emotional needs of young adolescent learners, providing age-appropriate pedagogy and curriculum that is engaging and academically challenging (Brazee, 2002; Flood, 2004). Furthermore, effective middle school principals understand the significance of a positive school culture built on honesty, integrity, and mutual respect (Brown & Anfara, 2003). As O'Donnell and White (2005) emphasized,

> Effective instructional leaders must create environments where trust is felt and taking a risk can occur with high levels of comfort. For teachers to feel appreciated and to become followers, principals must spend time and effort developing this trust. Effective principals display caring attitudes toward staff members, students, and parents. Most important, effective principals expect and help teachers to design and facilitate learning experiences that inspire, interest, and actively involve students. (p. 68)

Finally, effective middle school principals focus on meeting adolescent learners' needs as they collaborate and share decision-making with their teachers. Principals create professional learning communities and engage in ongoing professional development to improve instructional practices and overall teaching and learning (Brown & Anfara, 2003, p. 22).

Instructional Leadership for School Improvement

Major educational reforms, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2002) and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), and their accountability measures have contributed to the ongoing expansion of principals' roles, influencing all facets of education within their respective schools. Based on their current roles, principals are second only to teachers regarding their influence on student achievement (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Park et al., 2019; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). The educational environment includes closely monitored accountability pressures for student performance. Principals' impact on student learning is visible in the school cultures they create and how they support, foster, and prioritize teaching and learning (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015). Successful school leaders build and communicate a shared vision and goals, create high-performance expectations and structures for ongoing professional development, foster collaboration and provide support, build trusting relationships with and among all stakeholders in a safe school environment, ensure a school-wide focus on instruction, and

closely monitor and analyze school performance to improve teaching and learning (Leithwood et al., 2020). Principals who are effective instructional leaders favorably influence student achievement (Nasreen & Odhiambo, 2018).

School reform literature shows that secondary principals need to create a trusting, collaborative environment where teachers are willing to be vulnerable in sharing ideas and student data while having the autonomy to make decisions regarding pedagogy and individual student needs (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). To lead schools effectively, secondary principals need to build trusting relationships with teachers by engaging in instructional leadership and ensuring collaboration that encourages honesty and vulnerability with and among teachers, positively impacting student achievement (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Hence, effective school leaders inspire, orchestrate, and influence the workings of the organization; create a community that shares a common goal; and work together in pursuit of student achievement. Expectations of principals include balancing and managing a multitude of responsibilities ranging from instructional practices to operations while assuming responsibility for student achievement and teacher professional development. Principals often face challenges that require them to be transformational leaders, thinking creatively to move the school forward (Christie et al., 2019).

This section describes the available empirical literature on principal instructional leadership. Prepared and supported secondary principals can effectively lead schools and emphasize teaching and learning. The first subsection explores how K–12 principals lead school improvement by focusing on teaching and learning. Specifically, principals create structures and processes focused on pedagogy, teacher collaboration, and ongoing

professional development to influence student achievement. The following subsection explains how secondary principals serve as instructional leaders by focusing on teaching and learning and the needs of both teachers and adolescent learners. The literature review offers the current understanding of secondary principals' role in their quest as instructional leaders. The final subsection demonstrates the unique role of middle school principals as instructional leaders.

K–12 Principal Instructional Leadership

The complex nature of instructional leadership requires continuous collaboration between multiple stakeholders. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) studied faculty trust in principals' and principals' leadership behaviors that impact the school climate and teaching and learning. As instructional leaders, principals are responsible for creating the school vision, engaging teachers in a school improvement cycle and professional development, creating a safe and welcoming environment, and, most importantly, improving student outcomes. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis examined two school districts that were economically and ethnically diverse and situated in both urban and suburban settings in the U.S. Participants were 3,215 teachers from 64 K–12 schools who completed anonymous surveys, enabling the researchers to use correlational and regression analyses of the variables. The results indicated a correlation between principal trustworthiness, collegial and instructional leadership, and student achievement. Principals set the tone for school climate, professional development, and collaboration, engaging with teachers and welcoming honest dialogue about teaching and learning.

One of the limitations of Tschannen-Moran and Gareis's (2015) study was the inconsistency in administering teacher surveys. One group completed electronic surveys

independently; the other completed paper surveys administered at a staff meeting, possibly impacting the schools' scores. Nonetheless, the study acknowledged the principals' role in influencing teacher pedagogy, setting academic expectations, creating a space for effective ongoing professional development and collaboration, and influencing student achievement. Furthermore, as instructional leaders, principals are essential in impacting the school climate, creating professional development structures, and encouraging and modeling collaboration, with trust as an essential overarching component of those processes (Hallam et al., 2015; Leithwood & Wahlstrom, 2008; Tschannen-Moran, 2001). To effectively lead their schools as instructional leaders, middle school principals need to have a collaborative partnership with central office leaders who will support them, build their skill sets, and engage in work focused on teaching and learning.

As instructional leaders, principals can influence student achievement through various modalities and practices. Hitt and Tucker (2016) identified and correlated empirical research from 2000 to 2014 on how school leadership impacts student achievement, finding that as instructional leaders, principals should focus their work to ensure student academic growth. Hitt and Tucker categorized effective conditions for school improvement into five areas: leadership, parental involvement, professional capacity, student-centered learning environment, and rigorous instruction. The findings that emerged from the literature review indicated five critical general areas, or domains, of effective school leader practices: (a) establishing and conveying the vision; (b) facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students; (c) building professional capacity; (d) creating a supportive organization for learning; and (e) connecting with

external partners. Accordingly, training on leadership practices needs to simultaneously foster dynamic and innovative learning environments for teachers and students.

There were a few limitations in Hitt and Tucker's (2016) study. One limitation pertained to the nature of synthesizing and, therefore, the researcher's interpretation of the original work. The other was the unintentional omission of information in dimensions due to possible biases and the overall organization of the domains. However, this framework has important implications for principals, district-level leaders, policymakers, and researchers because it includes concrete instructional leadership practices supporting student achievement. The findings demonstrated that principals influence teachers and the school environment, thus having an indirect impact on students and, ultimately, the most essential school-based factor: effective teaching. Accordingly, the framework also guides professional development for principals as instructional leaders.

Urick and Bowers (2014) also explored principal instructional leadership's impact on student achievement and teacher retention. The researchers focused on principals' perceptions of their leadership styles, the impact of school context on the style, and how principal background characteristics influenced these styles. The study also explored how the principals demonstrated a two-dimensional relationship between transformational and shared instructional leadership. Transformational leaders develop, engage, and empower teacher involvement in school leadership. In contrast, instructional leaders work directly with teachers to guide the curriculum and instruction. The third style, shared instructional leadership, supports collaboration between principals and teachers around instruction.

Urick and Bowers (2014) used latent-class analysis to identify various types of principals across the United States. Next, they analyzed the 1999–2000 Schools and

Staffing Survey results, initially collected by the National Center for Education Statistics, which included unique leadership measures. The analysis included 7,650 public schools and principals. Urick and Bowers defined principals' leadership styles by the degree of principal and teacher leadership. The study's findings showed that leadership styles are complex and include both transformational and shared instructional leadership. The researchers concluded that the principals surveyed were of the integrating type, defining their behaviors as distributing the leadership in the school while also providing an instructional focus and climate around which teachers have a mission, community, and professional development.

While Urick and Bowers published their work in 2013, the data used for the analysis were from the 1999–2000 Schools and Staffing Survey. Although the specific data were nationally representative, using 13-year-old data was a limitation. To maximize their capacity as instructional leaders, secondary principals need to create a collaborative environment around instruction that supports innovation and change, leading to improved teaching and student achievement.

Successful principals create instructional environments that facilitate student achievement. Tran et al. (2018) explored how Vietnamese principals, as instructional leaders, guided and structured teachers' professional learning by conducting an exploratory case study of leadership and teacher learning in four successful North Vietnamese schools within different geographical regions and levels. The sample included one middle school and one high school, with qualitative data collection through semi-structured interviews with principals, open-ended questionnaires completed by teachers, and direct observation of professional development activities led by principals.

Data analysis entailed identifying exemplar practices of four Vietnamese principals who, as instructional leaders, led teacher learning in their schools. The findings showed that principal leadership was essential to determining the extent of teacher participation in professional development. Furthermore, Tran et al. discovered four leadership practices that most impacted teacher learning: moral purpose, collaboration, learning support, and motivational strategies.

Tran et al. (2018) identified specific components of meaningful leadership practices. However, they did so in a case study of four principals, which Yin (1994) described as a small, nonrepresentative sample. As a result, the findings were not representative of the larger Vietnamese school population, which was a possible limitation. Despite the study's limitations, its implications are twofold and vital in furthering the field of effective principal instructional leadership. First, the principals noted the collaborative process of staff development rooted in trust as essential to their work and teacher engagement. Second, the principals identified four general leadership practices to motivate, support, and sustain their teachers' professional learning.

A continuous cycle applied through the leadership practices has centered on moral purpose, collaboration, learning support, and motivational strategies (Tran et al., 2018). Principals in this study used relationships to create an opportunity for meaningful professional development, which led to improved instructional practices of teachers and ongoing professional development and growth to better meet the academic needs of students. To be effective instructional leaders, middle school principals need to have the necessary skills to engage teachers in meaningful professional development. Middle school principals need central office leaders to motivate and support them to increase

their capacity to create school environments and build trust with teachers, leading to superior teaching and learning.

As reported by Wahlstrom and Louis (2008), principal instructional leadership supports student achievement. Hence, the authors explored how principal-to-teacher interactions, principal instructional leadership behaviors, teacher-to-teacher relationships, and teachers' sense of efficacy could influence classroom instructional practices. Using a quantitative approach, the researchers surveyed over 4,000 teachers in 138 K–12 schools across 39 school districts in a U.S. Upper Midwest state. In the opinion of Wahlstrom and Louis (2008), principal instructional leadership is instrumental in supporting student achievement. Accordingly, the authors explored how principal-to-teacher interactions, principal instructional leadership behaviors, teacher-to-teacher relationships, and teachers' sense of efficacy could influence teachers' classroom instructional practices. Using a quantitative approach, the researchers surveyed over 4,000 teachers in 138 K–12 schools across 39 school districts in a U.S. Upper Midwest state. Teachers completed the 109-question survey at staff meetings over one calendar year. The findings showed that shared leadership among the principal and teachers increased motivation, trust, and risk-taking. It also created a sense of community and increased efficacy for the participants. The relationships between the adults emerged as the most significant factor impacting teaching and learning. Furthermore, teachers' perceptions of principal leadership came from the trust and sharing of instructional leadership. The collaborative process helped them define school priorities and establish expectations of the professional community and directly impacted teacher work and the quality of instructional practices.

Teachers completed the 109-question survey at staff meetings over one calendar year. The findings demonstrated that shared leadership among principals and teachers increased motivation, efficacy, trust, and risk-taking while creating a sense of community. The relationships between the adults emerged as the most significant factor impacting teaching and learning. Furthermore, teachers' perceptions of principal leadership came from the trust and sharing of instructional leadership. The collaborative process helped them define school priorities and establish expectations of the professional community and directly impacted teacher work and the quality of instructional practices.

One of the limitations of this study was that the survey findings were dependent on teachers' perspectives and reporting of their own and their principal's behaviors; there were no observations or comparisons of principals' perspectives (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Evidence showed the importance of a professional community for improved instruction and student performance, allowing teachers to collaborate to develop group norms that include shared values, instructional practices, and student achievement outcomes. As instructional leaders, secondary principals need to be willing to share leadership responsibilities, leading to teacher efficacy, trust, and, ultimately, student achievement.

Similarly to central office leaders and supervisors, principals face instructional leadership barriers. According to Wallin et al. (2019), expectations for principals regarding instructional leadership set by district and central office leaders were largely considered unattainable and unrealistic. First, in their examination of nearly two dozen studies, the researchers explored the impact of instructional leadership on student

achievement, using the five leadership domains conceptualized by Robinson et al. (2008): establishing goals and expectations; planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum; promoting and participating in teacher learning and development; resourcing strategically; and, ensuring an orderly and supportive environment (Wallin et al., 2019, p. 24). Next, using a qualitative study, they conducted observation at school sites and interviews with 10 principals at elementary and secondary levels in rural schools in rural Canada. All the principals who engaged in the study spent at least 20% of their workday teaching students (Wallin et al., p. 24). Finally, the researchers concluded that the principals felt guilty due to their perception of not meeting the outlined criteria of the five leadership practice dimensions of effective instructional leadership.

Nevertheless, the evaluation data demonstrated that they were meeting all the expectations. The rural setting of this study by Wallin et al. (2019) created a limitation, as the findings could not be generalized. However, the findings presented are essential for understanding the importance of and need for principal support and professional development in instructional leadership and in opportunities for honest dialogue regarding principal expectations in moving student achievement on an upward trajectory. Principals reported feelings of inadequacy and explained how they had not met their expected instructional leadership and leadership milestones. However, per their evaluations, they were perceived as exemplary leaders, illustrating a disconnect between principal perceptions of their instructional leadership and actual performance. Regardless, the perceptions of the instructional leadership expectations exceeded what principals felt were attainable in the small rural schools where the study was conducted. Considering the overwhelming pressure on principals to close the achievement gap, principals need to

receive support and feel confident in their instructional leadership practices (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018).

Gawlik (2018) conducted a case study to explore principal instructional leadership, pedagogy, and learning in charter schools in Florida. The research questions focused on how four principals implemented instructional leadership, obstacles in implementation, and how these school leaders embodied Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) framework of instructional leadership in their daily routines. The researchers conducted multiple interviews and observations, reviewed field notes, and evaluated school improvement plans, which were analyzed using Creswell's constant comparative method (1998) that involved a continual cycle of conceptualization and categorization (Gawlik, 2018). The study elucidated that all participants faced the same instructional leadership barriers and that budgeting and staffing required significant time and distracted principals' attention from teaching and learning. Three categories of instructional leadership practices emerged: developing a school mission, managing curriculum and instruction, and promoting school climate and culture (Gawlik, 2018).

Limitations of the study included small school samples, which prevented generalization and transferability to other independent charter or public schools. Interestingly, all four principals, who had more autonomy than those in traditional settings, were supported by central office leaders, who provided them with administrative assistance, fiscal and facilities advice, personnel screening, and personalized capacity-building for school leadership (Gawlik, 2018). The support with operations and management enabled the principals to devote more time to instructional leadership. Furthermore, the principals indicated that the support they received with fiscal and

staffing decisions was critical, as both areas informed their instructional purposes. This finding demonstrates that principals are more effective as instructional leaders when collaborating with and receiving guidance from central office leaders.

Secondary Principal Instructional Leadership

Initially, I aimed to narrow the study's focus to middle school principals as instructional leaders. However, the paucity of research on this topic necessitated expanding the purview to secondary principals. To be effective instructional leaders, secondary principals need to speak to solid instruction and pedagogy while providing teachers with meaningful feedback on planning and teaching. At its core, leadership is about organizational improvement with a shared mission, goals, direction, and influence (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011). Given the role of secondary principals, they are in an ideal position to lead. Collaboration and trust between principals and teachers were also essential for student achievement, empowering teachers to take risks and focus on student needs and performance (Hallam et al., 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015) and positively affecting school climate through mutual investments in effective instructional practices and student growth (Brookhart & Moss, 2015). Secondary principals lead school improvement through instructional leadership that is multifaceted and focused on teaching and learning.

As instructional leaders, secondary principals prioritize collaboration and ongoing professional development, and they build a positive school climate to improve instruction and student outcomes. Articles in this section presented the secondary principals' roles as instructional leaders in adopting intentional leadership styles and creating environments that foster academically engaging and rigorous environments. Secondary principals also

need to ensure a positive school climate and an educational environment focused on common goals for student achievement, as they support teachers, ensure collective responsibility, and engage teachers in professional learning communities to improve teaching and learning (Dutta & Sahney, 2016; Lee at al., 2012; Lee & Madden, 2019; Oyugi & Gogo, 2019; Park et al., 2019).

Oyugi and Gogo (2019) explored the influence of secondary principals' democratic, autocratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles on students' academic performance. Using a descriptive survey and correlational designs, the researchers conducted a focus group comprising 30 secondary principals, 186 teachers, and 301 students in Awendo, Kenya. Other means of data collection were questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis. Oyugi and Gogo described the democratic leadership style as encouraging group participation and decision-making with the leader. The autocratic leadership style, on the other hand, places the principal at the center of the decision as the one who makes and enforces the rules. In contrast to both styles, secondary principals who implemented the laissez-faire leadership style provided no directives or guidance to the staff, leaving decision-making to the group. The findings showed that secondary principals were most effective as instructional leaders when using a combination of democratic and autocratic styles and avoiding laissez-faire leadership.

Although a weakness of Oyugi and Gogo's (2019) study was the use of only three specific leadership styles, the researchers were clear on which leadership styles secondary principals, as instructional leaders, should avoid, which indirectly improved student achievement. The study contributed to the scholarship on secondary principal leadership by providing information on the characteristics school leaders should consider when

determining the environment most conducive to rigorous instruction, stakeholder engagement, accountability, and teaching and learning. As the researchers noted, when secondary principals lead without a clear vision or directions, teachers lack motivation, causing students' performance to decrease. For secondary principals to implement the various leadership styles and understand how their actions influence teacher behavior, they need support and professional development from central office leaders.

Lee et al. (2012) explored high school principals' instructional leadership practices in academically competitive schools in Hong Kong. The researchers focused on two instructional leadership dimensions, (1) instructional management and (2) direct supervision of instruction, to ascertain how they contribute to teacher practices and student achievement. To create an educational environment with external accountability measures for student achievement, principals need to manage the unique needs of their schools and meet the benchmarks imposed by the assessments. Furthermore, Lee et al. (2012) found that the school environment influenced student learning—specifically, students who felt a sense of belonging in the school community were more likely to engage in learning.

Using a cross-level interaction analysis of hierarchical linear modeling, the researchers investigated the impact of the two dimensions of instructional leadership on student learning—instructional management and direct supervision of instruction—in 42 high schools in Hong Kong. The study included standardized test scores from over 2,000 students and staff perceptions of principals' leadership practices. The staff population, comprised of assistant principals, department heads, and teachers at each school for a minimum of three years, rated their principals using a 6-point Likert scale. The teachers

identified effective instructional principals as those who engaged their teachers in professional development and reflection, encouraged innovation around instructional practices and pedagogical approaches, strategically and intentionally discussed links between teaching and learning, and focused on teacher growth. Also, when principals focused on instructional management, the teachers were viewed positively, a sense of belonging increased among students, and learning outcomes improved.

The participants in Lee at al.'s (2012) study were individuals selected by school principals as having an instrumental role in school leadership. As a result, the staff's relationship with the school leaders could have influenced how the staff rated their principals' leadership practices. The relationship between the principals and the participating staff created a limitation due to possible selection bias, which impacted the generalizability of the findings. Nonetheless, Lee at al.'s (2012) research contributed to the literature on instructional leadership practices by secondary principals in educational environments with significant standardized accountability measures placing performance pressure on staff and students.

To elevate teaching and learning in a high-stakes educational environment, secondary principals need central office leaders' support to manage school leadership's multifaceted and complex work. Dutta and Sahney (2016) sought to determine the impact of principals' instructional and transformational leadership practices on teachers' perceptions of job satisfaction and school climate and, hence, the impact on teaching and learning. The authors defined an instructional principal as the head of the school, leading pedagogy with academic-centered goals; in contrast, a transformational leader encourages bottom-up participation. Effective secondary principals do benefit from engaging in the

two leadership styles simultaneously, as both suggest the importance of focusing on academic mission, vision-building, and goal setting with an emphasis on staff professional development. Further analysis of educational reform in India, where the study took place, led the researchers to conclude that simply increasing school system resources did not improve the quality of education; instead, the quality of school leadership significantly influenced improvement in students' educational outcomes.

One weakness of the study was that Dutta and Sahney (2016) determined teacher job satisfaction and student achievement exclusively through the lens of secondary principals' instructional and transformational leadership behaviors. Consequently, the researchers omitted the possibility of exploring other factors that impact teaching and learning, limiting the breadth of conceptualization to the effects of principal leadership on teacher job satisfaction and student performance. The findings indicated a need for further empirical research on secondary principals' instructional leadership practices that foster an academic environment where teachers feel supported, and students feel engaged and academically challenged. In a society with external and internal accountability measures, secondary principals need support from central office leaders in their instructional leadership endeavors that lead to demonstrable student achievement.

Park et al. (2019) sought to identify the connection between principals' support of teachers through professional learning communities, collective responsibility, and group-level teacher expectations. Park et al. defined professional learning community as a place that encourages "teachers sharing a common view on a school's mission or goals, mutually reflecting on instructional activities, engaging in reflective dialogue, providing each other with feedback on teaching practices, and collectively focusing on student

learning" (pp. 749–750). The researchers used data from a 2009 nationally representative high school longitudinal survey study administered by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. The probability sample included 25,206 ninth graders and 4,578 mathematics teachers representing 767 public schools from 1,889 eligible schools. The findings showed that principals' support positively impacts teachers' professional learning communities and collective responsibility, while group-level math teacher expectations indirectly impact student academic performance in math.

A limitation of Park et al.'s (2019) study was the narrow focus used to explore high school principals' impact on academic achievement through evaluating the students' math performance. The researchers collected data exclusively from math teachers, who accounted for a small percentage of the school staff. Despite these limitations, Park et al. concluded that principal support positively impacted professional learning communities, collective responsibility, and teacher expectations, leading to increased student performance in math. In other words, there is a positive impact on student performance when secondary principals support teachers by creating effective collaborative professional development and strong teacher teams who reflect on their instructional practices and hold each other accountable through high expectations.

Lee and Madden (2019) explored using the Japanese Lesson Study as a vehicle for professional development to improve secondary principals' and teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge through partnership while building the principals' capacity to lead this work. Using qualitative methods, Lee and Madden documented sessions between eight middle school and high school principals and 37 teachers, conducting two interviews; the principals also completed pre- and post-survey questions and kept an

online blog. The researchers determined that the Lesson Study impacted principals as instructional leaders in three ways. First, principals gained insight into teaching and learning that furthered their pedagogical knowledge; second, professional development allowed them to act as coaches, increasing trust and collaboration; and third, it expanded their understanding of meaningful feedback and its delivery. Furthermore, with its focus on ongoing, collaborative, and school-embedded professional development, the Lesson Study environment supported principals as instructional leaders, fostering an environment of trust and openness for new ideas that benefited teaching and learning.

More quantitative research is needed to determine if this is a trend across different types of schools, as the sample size in Lee and Madden's (2019) study was limited. Nonetheless, the study added to the literature by exploring the use of school-based professional development to build secondary principals' capacity for instructional leadership and content knowledge. The researchers also emphasized the importance of "an innovative professional development partnership that invites teacher and administrator voices in collaborative inquiry and understands knowledge to be transitory and mutable, defined by contexts and situations" (p. 52). As instructional leaders, secondary principals should focus on empowering and supporting teachers through professional development tailored to the specific school needs. Principals should also create structures and processes that encourage collaboration, implementation, reflection, and data analysis to help students improve academically.

Secondary principals perform myriad roles as instructional leaders and encounter numerous challenges in managing pedagogy and operations. However, their leadership has the most significant influence on every aspect within the school building, including

climate, teacher development, teaching quality, and, ultimately, student performance (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Consistent within the research is that secondary principals are more effective at instructional leadership and improving student achievement when they work with central office leaders (Gawlik, 2018; Lee & Hallinger, 2012). Above all, as instructional leaders, principals focus their work on effective teaching and learning, as demonstrated by student achievement.

Middle School Principal Instructional Leadership

An abundance of literature exists documenting elementary and secondary principals' leadership and instructional leadership. However, few studies are specific to middle school principals as instructional leaders, most from the early to mid-2000s. The research followed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, which held schools accountable for student performance data and, in turn, required highly skilled teachers and principals.

While middle school principals play a significant role in instructional leadership, they are responsible for meeting the needs of both students and teachers through a collaborative process, creating common goals they collectively work to achieve (Sergiovanni, 1998). As instructional leaders, principals should ensure that teachers have access to meaningful professional development and collaboration and that students receive rigorous, engaging, and age-appropriate instruction. In other words, as instructional leaders, effective middle school principals develop a vision and create a learning environment conducive to effective teaching and learning to increase student achievement (Blase & Blase, 1999; Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010; O'Donnell & White, 2005). Furthermore, in their role as instructional leaders at the middle school level, principals need to be especially aware of the developmental needs of

early adolescent learners, who experience profound physical and developmental changes within a short period, impacting their learning and relationships with teachers (Brown, 2004; O'Donnell & White, 2005). As middle school principals facilitate a climate focused on teaching and learning, they should create school goals using stakeholder input, referencing student achievement data to align standards and protect instructional time. Principals need to provide ongoing opportunities for professional development and professional learning communities, building teachers' capacity to use data in planning and supporting individual students and remaining visible and accessible to students, teachers, and community members (O'Donnell & White, 2005; Shaked & Schechter, 2016).

The lack of research on middle school principals' instructional leadership to improve student achievement indicates a gap in the literature. Only a handful of scholars have explored the unique challenge of leading schools for young adolescents, which requires middle school principal leadership characterized by a unique set of programs, practices, and curricula (Anfara et al., 2006; Gale & Bishop, 2014). As instructional leaders who want to improve student achievement, middle school principals also need to engage in leadership best practices, build supportive and trusting relationships with teachers, engage in behaviors that impact teacher efficacy, and use distributed leadership practices to increase efficacy, trust, job satisfaction, and teacher retention (Angelle, 2010; Gale & Bishop, 2014; Sanzo et al., 2011; Sowell, 2018; Walker & Slear, 2011; Williams et al., 2010).

In a qualitative study, Gale and Bishop (2014) focused on middle school principals' perceptions of effective school leadership unique to adolescent learners. The

researchers sought to identify the skills and leadership dispositions that middle school principals need, specifically those pertaining to developmental responsiveness and relationships. Gale and Bishop conducted interviews, focus groups, and onsite school observations with four middle school principals. The findings showed that developmentally responsive middle school principals focused on creating a teaching and learning environment and emphasized strong stakeholder relationships. Middle school principal participants stressed the importance of understanding and empathizing with their students due to their adolescent needs. Additionally, principals used a relational approach to create trust and a strong, caring, and supportive community.

One of the limitations of Gale and Bishop's (2014) study was the small sample size and geographic area, which prevented generalizing the results to a larger population. Nonetheless, they contributed to the literature by highlighting the importance of middle school principals' intentions to create a developmentally appropriate environment that meets the needs of adolescent learners while emphasizing a strong relationship between school and community members. For middle school principals to be effective instructional leaders, they need to have support and guidance from the central office to ensure a school environment that meets adolescent learners' academic and social-emotional needs.

Sanzo et al. (2011) conducted a qualitative study on middle school principals' effective practices as evidenced by student performance. As instructional leaders, middle school principals need to develop a shared understanding of their organization, focus on and demonstrate student achievement, and facilitate change. Sanzo et al. used the three characteristics to define successful principals: met local accreditation standards, met

federal NCLB accreditation standards, and had been in their roles for at least two years. In the inductive exploratory study, 10 middle school principals in Virginia participated in interviews and shared their perspectives on successful school leadership that facilitates student achievement. The findings showed that successful principals focused on instructional leadership, shared leadership responsibilities, engaged teachers in professional development, and were open and truthful. As instructional leaders, principals stressed the importance of professional development to create strong teams and build teacher capacity in using student data to facilitate planning and teaching. The principals described as effective reiterated the significance of instructional leadership to improve student outcomes. They discussed how they had enhanced the school's instructional environment by focusing on teaching and learning.

Limitations of Sanzo et al.'s (2011) study included the context-bound nature and small sample size. Nonetheless, the research was significant as it brought awareness to effective leadership practices of middle school principals who demonstrated student achievement based on accountability measures. Additionally, the study showed the importance of the central office supporting middle school principals with instructional leadership. This study contributed to the literature by indicating the research gap in central office support of middle school principals' instructional leadership practices to improve teaching and learning.

Williams et al. (2010) explored specific practices and deliberate choices by middle school principals that allowed them to create academic environments where students outperformed youth in similar middle schools on standardized tests. As instructional leaders, middle school principals need to not only manage the unique

developmental needs of adolescent learners but also create academic environments that are safe, engaging, and rigorous. Williams et al. pointed out that students begin falling behind in math during their middle school years; thus, this is a critical time to identify and create processes to support students struggling academically. Furthermore, middle school performance is a significant predictor of high school performance. The participants from 303 middle schools in California, representing various districts and socioeconomic levels, included principals, English Language Arts, and math teachers, and 157 central office leaders from various offices that supported the schools. The findings showed that strategic, coordinated practices between schools and the central office could improve student achievement, irrespective of student circumstances. Moreover, middle school principals who focused their developing instructional leadership, as determined by a student's academic performance, had similar successful outcomes.

One of the limitations of Williams et al.'s (2010) study was the focus on student performance on two state standardized tests. Additionally, although the researchers explored many middle school policies and practices, they did not identify characteristics linked to high-performing middle schools. This study contributed to the literature regarding the importance of instructional leadership centered around creating a strong culture, clear and measurable academic goals for all students, and teacher accountability. Williams et al. also emphasized the importance of helping the stakeholders understand the significance of an academically rigorous academic program that prepares students for high school. If some policies and practices increase students' achievement, further

research is necessary to understand how central office leaders can support middle school principals in carrying out these practices.

Sowell (2018) posited that as instructional leaders, middle school principals play an essential role in ensuring student success. That supportive and trusting relationship with teachers is essential to the school's improvement. To ensure student success, Sowell explored how middle school principals perceived that their relationship with teachers impacted staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions. In a qualitative case study, the researchers used interviews, observations, and other documents collected from five middle school principals in Texas in proximity while being the only middle schools in each district. The five schools differed from each other to create a typical sampling and maximum variation in their work settings, yet all schools met state accountability standards during the previous year. Sowell found six themes about middle school principals' role in positively impacting student achievement by increasing teachers' motivation, commitment, and working conditions: (a) prioritizing classroom visits; (b) helping teachers use data; (c) acknowledging teachers' work; (d) providing for teachers' professional improvement; (e) working collaboratively with teachers; and (f) distributing leadership to teachers.

The primary limitation of Sowell's (2018) study was the small number of participants, restricting the ability to generalize the findings. Additionally, all five middle schools met state goals, which impacted both principals' and teachers' points of view and experiences and would not necessarily align with the experiences of those in schools that did not meet the benchmarks. Principals who engage, support, and professionally develop their teachers as instructional leaders indirectly influence student achievement by

fostering an environment conducive to teaching and learning. As Sowell noted, "The NMSA (2010) claims a successful middle school is an inviting, supportive, and safe place where human relationships are paramount" (p. 33). By improving the teachers' working environment, the principal is also helping create a successful middle school environment for students. This study's findings can guide middle school principals focused on teacher collaboration and instructional leadership for school improvement. To effectively collaborate with their teachers, middle school principals need central office leaders to support them and build their capacity in instructional leadership.

Walker and Slear (2011) explored the behaviors and characteristics of 11 middle school principals that impact teachers' efficacy based on their level of seniority. The researchers defined *teacher efficacy* as the belief that teachers' behavior in the classroom can positively influence their effectiveness and student performance. Using Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (2001) rating of principal characteristics scale, teachers at 11 middle schools across six school districts in a mid-Atlantic U.S. state identified principal behaviors that influenced their efficacy. The most recurring and impactful behavior was modeling instructional expectations, followed by communication. Senior teachers with more than 15 years of experience identified inspiring group purpose as the most significant behavior, as they valued a sense of community with a shared purpose.

Walker and Slear (2011) contributed to the literature by identifying specific middle school principal behaviors that teachers found impactful in shaping their pedagogy. However, the study was limited by a small sample size that prevented generalizing the data among middle school teachers nationally. The implications of this study provided guidance for middle school principals in their role as instructional leaders.

Regardless of their level of experience, teachers valued support with instructional expectations, and they needed a sense of a community with a shared purpose around effective teaching and learning. As middle school principals engage teachers around instructional initiatives and goals to improve student achievement, they need support from the central office to manage and elevate that work based on their professional needs and those unique to their schools.

In a qualitative case study, Angelle (2010) explored distributed leadership as a vehicle for middle school improvement and student achievement, specifically, the school components important for effective distributed leadership. Angelle argued that principals could only manage some leadership complexities alone. Because classroom teachers are directly involved with students and instructional practices, allowing them to participate in decision-making is best. Furthermore, distributed leadership allows principals and teachers to work together to improve teaching and learning. Based on Spillane et al. (2001), Angelle defined distributed leadership as sharing and distributing leadership work among the stakeholders who hold various positions within the school. This study occurred in a single middle school, yet it was part of a much larger study in the southeastern United States. Interviews occurred with the principal and the teachers, with the organizational context and student achievement data examined. The middle school selection was due to its established and effective distributed leadership model. The findings showed that when there is a strong organizational culture and both trust and relationships are intact, distributed leadership (a) improves efficacy; (b) increases trust, job satisfaction, and teacher empowerment; and (c) ensures a sense of community important for adolescent learners. Furthermore, their confidence increased when teachers

had the space to be creative, engaged in collaborative planning, and were encouraged to share their challenges in the classroom.

The single school used in this case study was a limitation, as the data was not generalizable to a larger population. However, Angelle (2010) did contribute to the literature, finding that the benefits of shared leadership, trusting school cultures, and shared goals for student achievement led to a collective sense of responsibility for school improvement and teacher empowerment. The data did not indicate a cause-and-effect link between distributed leadership and increased student achievement. Nonetheless, it was important to note that the annual standardized test scores increased yearly at this school for all subgroups. Future researchers might explore how the central office could support middle school principals in creating an environment that fosters collaboration through trust and relationship-building between administration and staff to improve teaching and learning.

As instructional leaders, middle school principals take schoolwide programing into consideration as they support teachers and build their capacity in improving teaching and learning. In addition to comprehensive programs, middle school principals also need to ensure that students who receive special education services and English language learners are provide with the required and necessary academic support and accommodations. Knowing how to support these programs requires principal training and professional learning.

Instructional Leadership and Special Education Services

As instructional leaders, principals are responsible for implementing federal, state, and district laws and policies by managing and supervising the special education

programs at their schools while also ensuring that students with disabilities can access learning in the least restrictive environment (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). Similarly to instructional leadership, principals rely on the central office to learn how to best support students with special needs within a comprehensive school environment. In 1975, Congress passed the Education of the Handicapped Act (Public Law 94 142), which directed all states to comply with specific laws to continue to receive federal funding. Students with disabilities must have access to free and appropriate public education (FAPE), including learning in the least restrictive environment (LRE). In 1990, this law became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, P.L. 101-476), and in 2004, it became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, P.L. 10-446). Students who receive special education services have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), a legal document that outlines the specialized academic instructions and related services to address goals developed based on present levels and functional performance.

Special education services are delivered through numerous programs depending on student needs, including academic, physical, cognitive, and social-emotional instruction (Bateman & Cline, 2016). As school leaders, principals need to be able to create and monitor special education programs and delivery of services, ensure legal compliance, and understand laws, policies, and regulations to meet the needs of the entire school (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002). Principals also need to have a solid understanding and knowledge of special education as the liaison between the school and the families. They are responsible for bringing awareness, promoting parental engagement, communicating services and parental rights, as well as for the educational performance of

students with disabilities (Cobb et al., 2003; Jansen et al., 2017; Lashley, 2017; Roberts & Guerra, 2017; Templeton, 2017).

Principals need to be supported by central office leaders with all aspects of special education services because, in many states, school leaders are not required to complete special education coursework to earn principal certification, hence limiting their ability to adequately support students, teachers, and parents (Wakeman et al., 2006). However, many leadership programs for principals lack the ability to provide the necessary content and training for principals to lead programs for students with disabilities (Bateman et al., 2017; Rinehart, 2017; Templeton, 2017). When principals have limited special education knowledge, they provide ineffective leadership and negatively impact student services while also opening doors to legal liability for the district (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002). Principals have expressed their frustrations about not having the necessary training, skills, and content knowledge to successfully lead special education (Bateman et al., 2017; Templeton, 2017). As instructional leaders, principals need to also provide special education and general education teachers with ongoing professional learning opportunities. Furthermore, principals are expected to understand the legal aspects of special education; they are responsible for providing special education teachers with resources, support, and feedback and for conducting their evaluations despite their limited training or knowledge of special education (Bateman et al., 2017; Glowacki & Hackmann, 2016).

As instructional leaders, principals need central office support to support programs and students who receive special education services effectively. Through their leadership, principals play an essential role in shaping not only teaching and learning at

the school but also the school climate and student access to programs and resources. However, students are negatively impacted when principals do not fully understand all the components of successfully leading special education programs (Bateman et al., 2017; Rinehart, 2017; Templeton, 2017; Thompson & France, 2015). Consistent and strong school leadership is the lynchpin that allows for continuous improvement in opportunities for students with disabilities (Fixsen & Blase, 2009), and in order to provide effective leadership in special education, principals need to comprehend the fundamental processes and implementation of special education programs and special education laws (Bateman et al., 2017).

Instructional Leadership and English Language Learners

English Language Learners (ELL) are students who have difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding English. This prevents them from learning successfully in classrooms where the primary language of instruction is English or to participate fully in the larger U.S. society (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022, English Language Learner [ELL] definition). From a national point of view, English language learners underperform academically compared to their native-speaking peers, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students, and students from major racial and ethnic groups (Garcia, 2015). School systems across the country were required to improve the English language proficiency of students under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 as a metric under the state's school accountability system (Moreno-Recio et al., 2018). However, to improve students' performance, central office leaders need a greater understanding of the principals' instructional leadership practices that can improve the achievement of English language learners (Garcia, 2015).

Due to a significant increase in the number of English language learners, there is a need for school leaders who are highly qualified to best support teachers and implement quality education programs that ensure the academic development of emergent bilingual students and offer administrative support and instructional leadership (Abdelrahman et al., 2022; Mitchell, 2001). Principals who lack formal education, training, or experience in working with English language learners may need help implementing programs to support them (Padron & Waxman, 2016). Furthermore, some principals do not understand the leadership practices necessary to identify the academic needs of their English language learner population and support students in attaining English proficiency (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2017). Nonetheless, principals are expected to design and implement leadership practices to increase the achievement of ELLs with little training, support, or guidance (Bagwell, 2019).

On the other hand, principals with bilingual education training are equipped to implement research-based guidelines and standards for educating emergent bilingual students and can serve them effectively (Abdelrahman et al., 2022). Principals with this skill set intentionally build a positive and welcoming school environment, validate diverse languages and cultures, and provide their teachers with professional learning on effective emergent bilingual teaching strategies. They also recruit culturally responsive teachers, thus creating programs that capitalize on the linguistic strengths of students, families, and communities (Abdelrahman et al., 2022). Additionally, principals need to thoroughly understand instructional leadership strategies that will help English language learners increase their achievement and thrive (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2020). The achievement of English language learners depends on the leadership practices of

principals who are sensitive to the challenges and needs of English language learners and effective in creating a positive teaching and learning environment for culturally and linguistically diverse students (MacDonald, 2020).

Summary

As instructional leaders, principals influence all aspects of teaching and learning (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007; Hitt & Tucker, 2016), including establishing a safe and positive school climate and building collaborative relationships with teachers founded on mutual trust. Each element enables the principal to effectively influence student achievement, as a positive school climate decreases the student achievement gap (Shindler, 2020). Principals also impact student learning outcomes by influencing teacher motivation and working conditions and establishing a culture where teaching and learning occur (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011). As instructional leaders, principals formally and informally observe instruction, evaluate teachers, and lead professional development to improve student outcomes (DiPaola & Hoy, 2013). Principals need to be intentional in building trusting relationships with their teachers to create a vision, positive school climate, and collaborative school environment. Additionally, effective principals lead their schools by developing shared goals and providing ongoing professional development based on teacher and student needs (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Tran et al., 2018; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Urick & Bowers, 2014; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). The next section explores the role of the central office and how its leaders and supervisors support principals.

Central Office Leaders' Support of Principals as Instructional Leaders

As federal and state education reforms continue to evolve, middle school principals require ongoing professional development and central office support to manage the complexity of the work and ensure effective instructional leadership focused on teaching and learning (Grissom et al., 2019; Honig, 2012; Service & Thornton, 2021; Zepeda & Lanoue, 2017). Between new reforms and the prevailing achievement gap, principals need professional development and support that for their instructional leadership (Grissom et al., 2019) and individual school needs. However, few scholars have explored middle school principals' perceptions regarding the professional learning and support they receive from central office leaders toward improving their instructional leadership to influence student achievement.

This section presents the current literature on central office leaders and their roles in developing and supporting secondary principals as instructional leaders, thus ensuring that principals lead schools effectively. As Hirsh et al. (2018) noted, "Central office personnel in a learning system set expectations, build capacity, provide resources that help schools achieve goals, monitor results, hold educators accountable when outcomes are not met, and meet the challenge of complex work" (p. 62). This section contains subsections that parallel Hirsh et al.'s identified central office leaders' roles in supporting principals for the shared purpose of increasing student achievement. Central office leaders positively influence principal performance and student achievement when the leaders and principals collaborate, engage in professional development, and focus on quality instruction (Baker & Bloom, 2017; Gawlik, 2018; Grissom et al., 2019; Honig, 2012).

The first subsection, *Historical Perspective of Central Office*, provides a brief overview of central office leaders' roles. Specifically, it covers the changes in the bureaucratic norms, central office leaders' practices and expectations, the evolution of the role, and the connection of central office leaders to student achievement in the data-driven, results-oriented U.S. public school system. The second subsection, *Central Office Collaboration with Schools*, focuses on the collaborative partnership and supports central office leaders provide to principals that increase principals' capacity to serve and lead schools as instructional leaders (McKetty, 2016; Psencik & Brown, 2018; Rowland, 2017; Thessin, 2019; Wilkinson et al., 2019). The third subsection, *Principal Supervisors, Supervision, and Collaboration*, examines the support that principal supervisors provide to principals that researchers have proven increasing their capacity as instructional leaders (Honig, 2012; Goldring et al., 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2015; Honig et al., 2017; Saltzman, 2016, 2017; Casserly et al., 2013; Honig, 2008).

Historical Perspective of Central Office

No longer are principals transitioning to the central office awaiting retirement, as central office leadership is vital in creating successful school districts and increasing student achievement (Honig et al., 2010). In the current era of high academic standards, central office personnel need to foster learning environments for school leaders (Honig & Rainey, 2015). Current research suggests that collaboration between schools and central office personnel is essential in ensuring effective teaching and learning. For decades prior, however, the role of the central office revolved around bureaucratic tasks, such as hiring teachers and enrolling students, federal and state funding, and policy implementation.

From the conception of the U.S. public school system, the district central office primarily focused on state and federal law legislation, compliance, and other managerial duties, with district employees rarely considering their work relevant to teaching and learning (Honig & Rainey, 2015). Hence, in the 1990s, when new accountability measures and implementation responsibilities arose for standards-based reform and other initiatives centered on instructional practices, central office leaders found themselves ill-equipped to serve in those capacities. Furthermore, the misalignment of central office resources, data, and other systems inhibited central office employees from supporting teaching and learning effectively. The central office's lack of preparedness to smoothly implement expanded responsibilities hindered the implementation of standards-based reforms at the school level (Mania-Singer, 2017). The expansion of central office roles, types of support available to schools in the 1990s, and engagement in joint work between schools and the central office allowed for some progress in how the central office partnered with and supported schools (Honig & Rainey, 2015).

For principals to be effective, district leaders need to ensure that all central office components are aligned and focused on supporting teaching and learning. Specifically, "District leaders need to increase their actual use of leadership practices to maximize the effectiveness of principals" (Thompson & France, 2015, p. 7). Furthermore, by engaging in learning relationships rooted in concepts of professional partnership, principals consider their practices, engage in new learning, and reflect on their leadership styles (Robertson, 2009). The complexity of the expected support from central office leaders to principals is partly due to the central office shift from bureaucracy and management to instructional leadership and accountability. Rather than defined within a national

landscape, the support varies regionally and often within the local context. These complexities also influence the types of support central office leaders provide to principals, as presented in the following subsection.

Central Office Collaboration with Schools

Principals require direction, support, and knowledge to be successful as school-level leaders. Principals are in a position to rely on the central office for guidance, professional development, and training to improve their leadership capacity and, ultimately, student performance (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Fenton, 2016; Grissom et al., 2019; Honig et al., 2017). School district offices today, therefore, play an essential role in creating structures and processes that support schools by collaborating and engaging principals in professional development and helping them create school cultures based on the belief that students can experience academic success when they have a sense of belonging and are adequately supported (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010, p. 27). Successful school districts operate as learning communities emphasizing the creation of systematic instructional improvement, effective communication, and access to relevant student data (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). Iver et al. (2008) emphasized the importance of central offices providing principals with curriculum and instruction services, offering ongoing professional development, and facilitating and evaluating the implementation of specific reforms to improve instruction and student performance. This section explores the collaboration between the central office and principals through various types of support central office leaders provide to principals to improve their instructional leadership skills, which ultimately influences student achievement (Groff et al., 2014;

McKetty, 2016; Psencik & Brown, 2018; Rowland, 2017; Thessin, 2019; Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Wilkinson et al. (2019) explored the collaborative process between district offices and secondary principals, focusing on instructional leadership practices. There were numerous differences in management and operations between the public and Catholic school systems in Australia, which was also undergoing significant school reform. A notable commonality was the emphasis on the district offices' role in developing principals' instructional leadership capacity, as demonstrated by student achievement (Wilkinson et al., 2019). The methodology approach was based on parallel case studies, which spanned over a year and a half and included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, teaching observations, classroom walkthroughs, and coaching conversations (Wilkinson et al., 2019). While one school district reinforced a top-down approach, the other embraced a more holistic approach to development focused on students' academic performance and social-emotional needs. The district office facilitated instructional leadership practices that engaged with and trusted practitioners' input and professional judgment. The findings revealed that for effective teaching and learning to be embedded and sustained over time, district offices need to collaborate with principals and build professional relationships rooted in open communication and instructional leadership (Wilkinson et al., 2019).

The study's findings are not generalizable due to its narrow scope, rural setting, and Catholic school structures. Nonetheless, the study offers a lens into the complex needs of individual principals who use instructional leadership to improve student outcomes. Additional implications ascertain that district offices will need to use a variety

of practices to support and professionally develop secondary principals based on the identified conditions and needs varying from school to school. To implement meaningful and sustainable instructional practices within schools, Wilkinson et al. (2019) suggested that principals and central office leaders need to collaborate to ensure they are targeting the fluid and evolving conditions that are site-based, developed, and influenced by the larger agencies, such as the district (p. 502).

The research conducted by McKetty (2016) also explored principal professional development in the arena of instructional leadership through the principals' perspective. McKetty's case study examined how district office leaders viewed and supported principals' leadership practices through the lens of distributed leadership. The study was conducted in a Massachusetts school district, using informal interviews with principals, documents from the state's Department of Education, and documents that focused on how district office leaders support principals. The Massachusetts model of educator evaluation allowed McKetty to analyze principals' perspectives of not only the impact of the actual evaluation model but also their view of their leadership styles. Findings revealed that principals benefited from working jointly with both staff and district office leaders to create processes to improve teaching and learning.

While the study was limited by a small sample size of a single school district, it still provided evidence of the importance of professional development for principals that allows them to focus on their instructional leadership goals. This study's findings exhibited how central offices need to provide principals with support, structure, and expectations consistent and aligned with school improvement and goals focused on student achievement. Additional research is also needed to determine middle school

principals' perceptions of the effectiveness of the support they receive from central office leaders.

Psencik and Brown's (2018) article, *The Learning Professional*, emphasized the importance of professional learning opportunities for principals through a collaborative partnership with district leaders. Centering district leaders' and principals' work around collaborative learning focused on specific goals, professional growth, and coaching leads to developing a learning community where principals and central office leaders hold themselves accountable for student achievement. The learning cycle creates ongoing opportunities for central office leaders and principals to engage with each other, share their ideas, work through problems of practice, make data-driven decisions, monitor progress, and adjust their professional learning based on individual needs.

Specific components need to be in place to ensure the principal professional learning community thrives. First, central office leaders need to create environments that foster standard-based principal professional learning that include exemplars of effective leadership, opportunities for collaboration with other principals, and coaching and support. Second, Psencik and Brown (2018) emphasized the importance of having district leaders who effectively engage principals in the continuous improvement cycle as they collaborate and focus on instructional improvement through systemic and systematic professional learning. Third, central office leaders need to structure and lead the professional learning communities because the collaborative process allows them to support principals as they develop relationships and shared responsibility for instructional leadership. Next, central office leaders and principals need to determine the impact of their professional learning on student achievement by using data points and guiding

questions to reflect on their work and make the necessary adjustments (Psencik & Brown, 2018).

Similarly, Groff et al. (2014) discussed the implications of collaboration between central office leaders and principals through effective coaching and feedback. Effective instructional leadership helps improve teaching and student performance. Instructional or learning-centered leadership (LCL) emphasizes how principals can guide teachers and learners. However, principals need to build their capacity and skills in instructional leadership, and they cannot do the work in isolation. Providing principals with feedback is necessary. However, feedback alone cannot elicit changes in the principal's practice and effectively engage in learning-centered leadership (Groff et al., 2014). Teacher feedback and coaching from central office leaders may enhance principals' instructional leadership capacity.

Groff et al. (2014) referenced a study in which school leaders in a large urban school district received a combination of feedback and coaching. The finding revealed that the coaching positively impacted principal development, and the combination of both feedback and targeted coaching allowed the principals to set school-based goals, reflect on their personal leadership learning, and work on specific skills to improve their work. Furthermore, central office leaders, as coaches, played an essential role in helping principals process and act upon teacher feedback. Groff et al. (2014) emphasized the importance of having central office leaders provide principals with consistent district support that includes time for reflection, action plans, and processes to acknowledge implementation and professional growth.

Rowland's (2017) report from The Education Policy Center at American Institutes for Research and the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders concurred with Groff et al. (2014) that principals' continuous improvement and learning through targeted and meaningful professional learning opportunities need to be prioritized. The author emphasized that policymakers and school districts need to be intentional in creating professional learning opportunities for principals that will allow them to manage their roles and effectively lead their schools as instructional leaders. Rowland (2017) stressed that the extensive demands placed on principals result in a high turnover rate, with the average principal leaving their position within the first three years. Studies have proven that principals are likelier to stay in their positions if they receive targeted, meaningful, and ongoing professional development in those initial years.

According to the research, central office leaders are more effective in providing support when they structure their school leadership policy and practice around the PSEL (2015) and ESSA (2015). The standards-based support guides central office leaders in determining what school leaders should know and be able to do to develop and support principals in leadership practices that contribute to improvement in teaching and learning (Rowland, 2017). Researchers (Grissom & Harrington, 2010) pointed out that principals who were mentored and coached increased their capacity in school leadership more than principals who received other types of professional development. The RAND and George W. Bush Institute (2016) reported that principals increase their leadership capacity by engaging in learning communities, internships, and mentoring. They use evaluation results to develop individual goals while coaching and collaborating with central office leaders (Rowland, 2017, p. 9). Additionally, principals benefit from individualized

feedback, continuous opportunities for practice and reflection, and professional research-based learning within a community of other school leaders (Rowland, 2017, p. 9).

Further exploring the collaborative relationship between central office leaders and principals, Thessin (2019) focused her research on effective partnerships between principals and their supervisors and how their relationship served as a vehicle for principals' learning and growth in instructional leadership. First, Thessin's (2019) multiple case studies produced a deeper understanding of the antecedent characteristics that principal supervisors and principals brought to their relationship to encourage a productive partnership. Second, the study explored the contributions of principal supervisors and principals to learning a productive partnership during their collaborative work. The data were derived from 12 partnerships in a large Mid-Atlantic school district, and the qualitative data included observation, interviews, and document reviews. Using data from a more extensive study, the researcher explored the relationships of those principals who made significant changes to their instructional leadership practices due to the joint work with their supervisors.

The findings revealed that a productive, learning-focused partnership resulted from collaborative relationships where the principals approached the work as reflective practitioners engaged and ready to further their work (Thessin, 2019). In this coaching relationship, the supervisors demonstrated that they could do the work and provide the necessary support to principals in a safe environment. Supervisors used goal setting and follow-ups to continue their joint work, communication, interpersonal skills, and collegiality, which earned supervisors' credibility as they engaged in professional learning with principals (Thessin, 2019). Furthermore, "...the coach-coachee relationship

is a prerequisite for coaching effectiveness…[and] a professional partnership also requires trust" (Thessin, 2019, pp. 467-468) as the supervisor, in the role of a coach, earns credibility through expertise and trustworthiness. Ultimately, principals and principal supervisors' relationships were most effective when they engaged in joint work around the same teaching and learning goals.

This study has limited applicability based on its small sample size and single study site. Nonetheless, the study contributed to the literature by exploring the components of the collaborative relationship between principals and their supervisors that led to principal behavior changes in instructional leadership. Rather than focusing on compliance and the evaluative role of the supervisor, the supervisors engaged in a collaborative, learning-focused partnership in which the supervisor assumed the coaching role and contributed to principal learning and growth in instructional leadership (Thessin, 2019, p. 477).

Principal Supervisors, Supervision, and Collaboration

The ever-changing role of the secondary principal is complex due to the multitude of their work-related responsibilities, ranging from students' academic performance to operations (Blaum & Tobin, 2019; De Jong et al., 2017; Nasreen, 2019). Principals struggle with work demands, serving as instructional leaders and managers of large organizations, making support and professional development from central office leaders critical to their success (Service & Thornton, 2021). To effectively lead schools as instructional leaders, principals need to have a sound understanding of pedagogy, as they support and collaborate with their teachers, serve as liaisons between the school and the community, and are accountable for students' academic progress and the climate of the

school (Lee & Hallinger, 2012). Principal supervisors and principals encounter numerous obstacles and challenges as instructional leaders, as their other job duties distract from teaching and learning (Gawlik, 2018; Honig, 2008). As the roles and responsibilities of principal supervisors continue to evolve, Ovando and Huckestein (2003) pointed out that central office leaders themselves need continuous professional development to manage their role in providing principals with the necessary support to encourage instructional excellent and equity in all schools (p. 25). Articles in this section explore the support that principal supervisors provide to principals through professional learning and meaningful engagement to increase their capacity as instructional leaders (Casserly et al., 2013; Goldring et al., 2018; Honig, 2008, 2012; Honig et al., 2017; Honig & Rainey, 2015; Saltzman, 2016, 2017).

Honig (2012) explored the support principal supervisors provided to principals to increase principals' instructional leadership skills and the conditions that engaged principals in those practices. Honig (2012) created a framework to demonstrate how principal supervisors engaged principals by creating opportunities for teaching and learning practices, which allowed for differentiated support based on individual principal needs. When supports were deemed meaningful to principals, they, in turn, engaged in the joint work. Using a case study, Honig (2012) researched central office leaders in three districts in the United States, relying on 282 interviews, 265 observation hours, and approximately 200 documents. The study's conclusions elucidated specific practices principal supervisors implemented to contribute to principals' instructional leadership learning, such as joint work, differentiating, modeling, developing and using tools, maintaining social engagement, and brokering (Honig, 2012).

Specifically, principal supervisors meet individual principal needs through differentiated support. They share and model tools to demonstrate effective instructional leadership and provide strategies principals can use when supporting teachers (Honig, 2012). Additionally, principal supervisors create and sustain social engagement when engaging principals in learning communities that allow for reflection and collaboration with other school leaders. Moreover, through brokering, principal supervisors provided principals with helpful resources and new ideas that increase principals' capacity as instructional leaders (Honig, 2012). As a case study, its limitations pertain to reliability, validity, and generalizability.

As a case study, its limitations pertain to reliability, validity, and generalizability. Nonetheless, Honig (2012) presented effective strategies that principal supervisors could administer to improve principal instructional leadership, positively impacting student achievement. The conclusions emphasized the significance of central office leaders serving as principal developers and aligning central office work to influence principals' instructional leadership skills and advance student achievement. Future researchers may continue to enrich this growing body of literature by examining these findings and testing critical practices in similar districts. The findings can assist central office leaders working with principals to structure learning opportunities to improve achievement levels in underperforming schools and districts in the United States.

As supervisors, central office leaders need to focus on developing and supporting principals. Goldring et al. (2018) posited that central office leaders, as principal supervisors, are critical in improving instructional school programs by building the capacity of principals as instructional leaders. The principal supervisor initiative study,

funded by The Wallace Foundation in 2014, sought to restructure principal supervision in six urban school districts in the U.S. Through an in-depth analysis of a four-year project, Goldring et al. (2018) concluded that districts were most effective in developing principals when the focus shifted from administration and management to continuous professional development and training. The investigators administered surveys, conducted two rounds of 217 semi-structured interviews, and collected documents and artifacts from the districts, including new and updated job descriptions and training materials (Goldring et al., 2018, p. 2). The researchers revealed that all six districts were able to create the necessary changes to the principal supervisor role and job description as deemed necessary by the initiative. In addition, as the participating districts focused on instructional leadership, they decreased the roles and responsibilities of supervisors, reduced the number of schools on their load, and initiated new training programs (Goldring et al., 2018).

One of the limitations of this study was that it did not address how school districts with limited budgets and smaller central office staff would distribute the operations responsibilities previously assigned to principal supervisors. Also, it did not address how school districts would pay for and manage the necessary supervisor training. On the other hand, the principal supervisor initiative emphasized the importance of building the capacity of central office leaders and, specifically, principal supervisors, with training designed for their new role centering around instructional leadership. For school leaders to be effective in their approach to teacher development and support that leads to student achievement, they also need to be trained and supported by central office supervisors.

Traditionally, central office supervisors supported principals with management. However, the national shift has focused on assessment data, resulting in central office supervisors having an integral role in influencing instruction and supporting principals with improving teaching and learning. Honig and Rainey (2015) explored the conditions under which central office staff were able to support principals and grow their capacity as instructional leaders through a mentor-style relationship. In this mentoring role, central office supervisors implemented effective teaching strategies based on individual principal needs and, specifically, what the supervisors needed regarding their training and professional development to successfully carry out that role. Honig and Rainey (2015) reviewed two studies, including 760 hours of observation data, 344 interviews, and numerous documents. Honig and Rainey (2015) found that principal supervisors were most effective when they took charge of their own learning by engaging in professional development with colleagues and allocating time to prioritize instructional leadership.

The small use of data sources and the inability to triangulate findings created a limitation for this study. Nonetheless, this study informs the debate on the critical role of central office leaders in developing principals as instructional leaders and serving as mentors rather than principals relying on outside resources and coaches. Furthermore, the study found that central office leaders need to have an active role as teachers of principals (Honig & Rainey, 2015), which is essential when conducting a study to explore how central office leaders' support principals.

Central office leaders face numerous barriers when supporting principals with instructional leadership, as they need professional development, resources, and time to meet individual principal needs. Honig et al. (2017) explored how central office leaders

support principals by engaging with research and using it to inform practices and generate shifts in those practices. This study involved 23 central office leaders from six districts, 124 interviews, and conducted document reviews over 18 months. The researchers found that principal supervisors acknowledged that their new role expanded to include supporting principals. However, these principal supervisors failed to demonstrate growth while only superficially implementing what the research prescribed. Instead, the principal supervisors reverted to directing principals and overseeing implementation rather than modeling, supporting, and training, which the research recommended.

The inadequate implementation of research-based practices among principal supervisors failed to generate improvements in principal leadership, teaching performance, or student achievement. Participants' implementation of these practices varied. However, the findings documented the lack of consistency among principal supervisors to provide principals with essential support to build their instructional leadership capacity and improve student performance.

One limitation of the study was that the interviews and surveys were the primary sources of data collection, and inconsistencies existed between what principal supervisors reported and what they practiced. Future studies should extend upon the findings of this study by continuing to explore how central office leaders use research to support principals as instructional leaders, how to involve external partners to aid in principal supervisors' support of principals, and how to facilitate a working relationship between the two parties. For principal supervisors to support middle school principals and help them balance their instructional leadership and operations expectations, they need to

provide principals with relevant feedback, serve as coaches, and structure the ongoing adult learning opportunities to meet principals' individual needs.

Furthermore, Saltzman (2016) published a relevant article about central office leader support provision for principals to increase their capacity as instructional leaders. For central office leaders to effectively influence principal support, the districts first needed to understand that central office leaders are overextended in their supervisory capacity. A reduced caseload to properly oversee and support principals was necessary. However, principal supervisors were reluctant and ill-prepared to provide direct support to principals and, as such, received their professional development and training to accomplish the task of supporting principals. Despite the principal supervisors' preparation, they struggled with reconciling their new role of supporting principals while still fulfilling their former role as evaluators. Tulsa and Washington, D.C. districts were exploring how to best support principals using principal supervisors, with support from the Wallace Foundation. It was clear that the principal supervisors needed professional development and training to properly support principals and assist them with establishing the line between supporting and evaluating.

Moreover, in 2015, for the first time in the educational arena, The Council of Chief State School Officers collaborated with The Wallace Foundation and a wide range of educators in creating and publishing standards for principal supervisors. This collaboration outlined "a clear definition of what principal supervisors should know and be able to do, shifting the focus of the job from bureaucratic compliance to helping principals improve instruction" (Saltzman, 2016, p. 6). The principal supervisor standards communicated a strong message regarding the importance of training those who support

and are responsible for professionally developing school leaders. Although most principal supervisors were previously principals, those interviewed agreed that being a successful principal did not mean one had the skill set to become a supervisor intuitively. Instead, they stressed the importance of professional development and training to properly equip them for the new role (Saltzman, 2016, p. 6). Principal supervisors were assigned fewer schools to oversee as part of the restructuring. Next, these principal supervisors received weekly training in leadership development and coaching.

Finally, they engaged in a collaborative monthly school walk-through with focused observation and feedback sessions (Saltzman, 2016). Due to their strategic shifts and focus on teaching and learning, both districts witnessed improvements in student performance. Principal supervisors found their new role challenging, as they were tasked with establishing a balance between supporting principals through trusting relationships and formally evaluating their job performance (Saltzman, 2016). Saltzman (2016) reiterated that for principals to excel in leading schools, they need professional development and trusting relationships with supervisors who will support and evaluate them. If central office leaders are to (a) deliver professional development for adult learners successfully; (b) provide support; and (3) manage individual and group learning, districts need to first provide them with targeted training and professional development.

Being an effective principal does not automatically provide one with the skill set to be an effective principal supervisor; both jobs require training and professional development. In another article, "The Training of Trainers," Saltzman (2017) reported again on a principal supervisor training program in Washington, D.C., and another in Tulsa, Oklahoma. All principal supervisors interviewed for the report expressed a need

for ongoing training, actionable feedback and walkthroughs, and time for meaningful engagement with other supervisors. A critical factor in the national shift of the principal supervisor from a bureaucrat to an instructional leader transpired in the winter of 2015 when the Council of Chief State School Officers published standards for principal supervisors (Saltzman, 2017, p. 55). The standards were developed through collaboration among nationwide educator representatives with support from The Wallace Foundation and define what principal supervisors should know and demonstrate while improving student achievement (Saltzman, 2017, p. 55).

Most of the principal supervisors pointed out that they possessed a strength in pedagogy and instruction as they were all former principals. However, they needed training in coaching, opportunities for collaboration, and support in learning how to balance trust-building with principals while providing honest feedback. Principal supervisors need training on these contradictory roles, as they are responsible for coaching and building relationships with principals to encourage open dialogue while at the same time conducting their evaluations (Saltzman, 2017). For principal supervisors to best support principals with school improvement, they need ongoing training and support in building relationships based on trust and honesty.

Casserly et al. (2013) analyzed the findings from the research conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools, which received funding in 2012 from the Wallace Foundation to explore principal support and evaluations in 41 school districts across the United States. As part of the study, the researchers sought to gain a deeper understanding of the principal supervisors' role and explore how districts can support the essential work performed by principals and their supervisors. Just as there is increased pressure on

principals to improve students' performance outcomes, principal supervisors need to be instructional leaders and professional developers. In their role, they have to effectively lead discussions about performance, data, and pedagogy and provide principles with differentiated support.

The survey was emailed to superintendents, who then forwarded it to those defined as having a *principal supervisor* role in their districts. The survey included questions about the characteristics and roles of principal supervisors, the professional development provided to them, and the perceived effectiveness of their principal evaluation system. Principal supervisors supported anywhere from three to 100 principals, with the average number of principals being 24. The supervisors identified spending most of their time engaging with principals by analyzing student performance data, visiting classrooms, discussing principal and teacher performance, and sporting principals in addressing community needs. Principal supervisors who received professional development around instructional leadership were more comfortable supporting principals with teaching, learning, and evaluating principals. On the other hand, principal supervisors also reported struggling with providing principals with time at school due to all the meetings they were to attend and their poorly defined roles and responsibilities, as well as administrative and compliance issues that took time away from their instructional leadership roles (Casserly et al., 2013).

The single survey used to collect participant data weakened the research and created a limitation for this study. However, many participating districts across the U.S. highlighted frequent and shared struggles and concerns principal supervisors experience due to the accountability measures for student achievement. School districts need to

create organizational structures that will provide support and professional development to principals' supervisors. In turn, they will provide ongoing support to principals. As the research pointed out, principal supervisors who received the necessary professional development in instructional leadership were likelier to visit schools, support principals with teaching and learning, and provide principals with meaningful feedback through the evaluation process (Casserly et al., 2013).

In her article, Honig (2008) emphasized that while ample professional development was available to principals and teachers, central office principal supervisors only had access to procedural workshops and general sessions. The district-wide limited training overlooks the unique roles and responsibilities of those members. If central office supervisors are to support schools and principals with instructional leadership to better student outcomes, they need professional development and training. Additionally, central office leaders' ambiguously defined roles impede their ability to support schools effectively. Honig (2008) explained that central offices operate as learning organizations when members express that they have learned from experience to support high-quality teaching and learning.

While this research did not precisely delineate between various central offices and their direct relationships with schools in improving student achievement, it drew attention to the need for school systems to systematically and intentionally engage in professionally developing central office leaders. Consequently, central office leaders can ensure district-wide improvement and focus on teaching and learning. With a nationwide emphasis on measurable student outcomes and the pressure placed on teachers,

principals, and central office leaders, instructional leaders need to receive support to impact student performance positively.

Summary

This collective overview of the research on the types of support central office leaders provide secondary principals highlights the complexity of the secondary principal role and their ongoing needs as instructional leaders. The research also indicates a need to further investigate what central office instructional leadership supports and learning experiences principals identify as most influential to their practice. Effective collaboration and communication between central office leaders and principals ensure the realization of district initiatives. Also, a meaningful relationship improves the principals' ability to effectively lead schools, directly impacting the quality of teaching at the school level (Finnigan & Daly, 2017).

It takes approximately five years to implement educational reform. This delay is significantly challenging, with employee turnover in district offices directly supporting schools, creating a vacuum of information and knowledge with a social cost that impacts teachers and students (Finnigan & Daly, 2017). Improving principals' instructional leadership skills to influence student achievement requires communication and collaboration with central office leaders. For district office leaders and principals to collaborate meaningfully, they need time to build social networks rooted in trust, open communication, and mutual understanding of district goals and individual school needs.

The Supportive Relationship

Central office leaders can develop principals as instructional leaders by focusing on teaching and learning, ongoing professional development, and aligning resources to a

teaching and learning mission (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011; Louie et al., 2019). Practices that supported those structures began with strong relationships between district and school leaders (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010) and included key components of open communication (Hallinger & Heck, 2009), shared leadership (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011), and collaborative learning (Honig & Rainey, 2015). The hierarchical structure between principals and central office leaders adds to the complexity of their relationship. Central office leaders and principals are intricately connected through accountability measures that require them to demonstrate student achievement while ensuring a positive and safe school climate (Park et al., 2019; Tingle et al., 2019). Furthermore, central office leaders also serve as evaluators and professional development liaisons, while informing principals' practices and providing advice for operations and instructional leadership (Goldring et al., 2018).

Working relationships between principals and central office leaders contribute to district initiatives and system-wide reform (Coplan & Knapp, 2006; Daly & Finnigan, 2010). Hence, the central office could contribute substantially to developing environments conducive to instructional leadership and ongoing professional development to further student achievement (Ikemoto et al., 2014; Leithwood & McCullough, 2016). Through collaboration with principal and central office leader, other principals and teachers can increase their leadership capacity. A critical way for district leaders to impact instructional practices is by supporting and working with principals. As Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson (2010) emphasized, "Principal efficacy provides a crucial link between district initiatives, school conditions, and student learning" (p. 127).

Studies demonstrate how principals and central office leaders can and do partner to support student achievement. The first section concentrated on the literature specific to the significance of trust, collaboration, and communication between secondary principals and central office leaders (Chhuon et al., 2008; Hvidston et al., 2018; Lawson et al., 2017; Paulsen & Hjerto, 2019; Thessin, 2019). There is an exploration of how a relationship built on trust is instrumental in orchestrating and guiding these roles to better teaching and learning. The second section synthesized the literature on how an effective relationship between central office leaders and principals positively impacts principals' instructional leadership and student achievement (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; King Smith et al., 2020; Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Mania-Singer, 2017; Marietta, 2015; McAdamis, 2010; Thompson & France; 2015). These articles present the implications of positive relationships for improving the principal's leadership capacity in instructional leadership and enhancing student achievement.

The Significance of Trust, Collaboration, and Communication

Perceived organizational trust has long been a cornerstone of organizational research (Leithwood et al., 2017). Effective relationships at work and the back-and-forth exchanges between individuals contribute to collaboration and learning, the most significant aspect of which is trust. Jointly, collaboration and trust create the essential components of an educational system open to continuous professional learning and growth (Finnigan & Daly, 2017). As Finnigan and Daly (2017) emphasized,

> Indeed, much has been written about how positive relationships, by their very nature, involve a high level of reciprocal trust developed and earned over time. Trust is based on interpersonal interdependence and involves an individual's or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that that party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open. High levels of trust have been associated with a variety of efforts that require collaboration, learning,

> complex-information sharing, problem solving, shared decision making, and coordinated action—the very types of efforts that occur daily in high functioning organizations. (p. 24)

Both schools and central offices are organizations that engage daily in the mentioned processes. In addition, the work requires trust between principals and teachers and also principals and central office leaders who support schools with the shared goal of improving student outcomes. A trusting relationship between principals and the central office can be an asset when the district implements reforms with accountability for student performance (Chhuon et al., 2008). This section presents how a relationship between principals and central office leaders built on trust is instrumental in orchestrating these roles, guiding the joint work, and increasing principals' instructional leadership capacities (Chhuon et al., 2008; Hvidston et al., 2018; Lawson et al., 2017; Paulsen & Hjerto, 2019; Thessin, 2019).

One noted gap within the literature pertains to the relationship between central office leaders and principals. A few scholars have sought to fill this gap by exploring how central office leaders and principals interact to address the mutual goal of improving instructional leadership and student achievement. Lawson et al. (2017) examined the relationship, rooted in trust and communication, between district office leaders and principals. The researchers explored the factors that led to school improvement and how positive relationships led to improved school performance despite the schools' obstacles. Using mixed methods and a multiple case study, Lawson et al. reviewed data from nine elementary schools; six surpassed performance expectations in state-administered standardized assessments despite being economically impacted. The findings showed that the reciprocal trust between district office leaders and principals improved

communication between the two parties, allowing for innovation and, most significantly, implementing those ideas.

Although Lawson et al.'s (2017) findings lacked generalizability because of the small sample size, the study showed the parallel significance between trust, communication, innovation, implementation, and the positive impact on school performance. Thus, for principals to become instructional leaders and attain positive outcomes for student achievement, they need a working relationship with district office leaders. As part of social networks, this collaborative partnership is essential, as it provides the school leaders with support and professional development that benefits teaching and learning, ultimately increasing student achievement.

Chhuon et al. (2008) sought a deeper understanding of the processes undertaken by one district to develop trust between central office leaders and school principals through the involvement of a district–university partnership. Chhuon et al. cited trust as a key factor when implementing reforms, noting that principals and central office leaders are vulnerable due to high-stakes accountability. Literature shows that principals rely on principal supervisors, perceiving their behaviors as either supportive and helpful or a hindrance to their work, which leads to tension between the individuals. Chhuhon et al. analyzed interviews, surveys, observations, and other documents collected over three years between the central office and primary and secondary principals in a qualitative, exploratory participant-observer case study. One key finding was that principals felt their relationship with their supervisors hindered their ability to lead, as they feared reprisal if they communicated openly, shared their ideas and opinions, or asked for help. Additionally, principals described central office leaders giving directives but no support,

increasing the principals' responsibility for student achievement while reducing office accountability for academic growth and achievement. Principals, principal supervisors, and other central office leaders agreed that more communication was essential to create trusting relationships that facilitate educational reform for student achievement.

The findings from Chhuon et al.'s (2008) study indicated the need for reflective thinking and practices. An outside partnership could help facilitate discussions among principals, principal supervisors, and central office administrators to build relational trust and trust in organizational leaders. Despite the value of these findings, this study took place in a single school district, preventing generalization to other districts. In a study focused on relationships and trust, Chhuon et al. noted how principal supervisors provided directives but rarely offered principals support, leaving a gap in the literature on how central office leaders support principals. Since this was a 2008 study, there was a need to update the research on the relationship between principals and central office leaders and principals' perceptions of the support they receive from their principal supervisors.

Principals benefit from trusting relationships with their direct supervisors and central office leaders in various offices to lead schools while managing their vast responsibilities effectively. Paulsen and Hjerto (2019) examined the importance of a trusting relationship between principals and district office supervisors in a study on principal professional development. The researchers used a hierarchical linear modeling approach to study individual and group effects within the context of 854 school principals divided among 252 municipal school leader teams in Norway. The findings showed that a supportive, collaborative environment in school leader teams is the most significant

predictor of the school leaders' professional development success. Furthermore, trust played an essential role in the principals' learning outcomes. Combined with a well-functioning school system, trust led to principal professional development.

Due to the unique structural settings of the Norwegian school system and processes used to support principals, more quantitative research is needed to determine if Paulsen and Hjerto's (2019) results indicate a trend across different types of schools. On the other hand, the study's findings contribute to the existing literature that reinforces the significance of a trusting relationship between principals and district office leaders and the positive impact on principals' professional development and growth. Paulsen and Hjerto emphasized the significance of a collaborative and supportive partnership, allowing the principals to build their leadership capacity in a safe environment. Finally, the findings showed the complexity of the relationship, which requires a balance of trust, supervision, and honesty that ultimately impacts the principal's instructional leadership.

Hvidston et al. (2018) explored principal perceptions regarding supervision and evaluation by central office leaders. The researchers administered an online tool to 275 elementary and secondary principals in a rural western region of the United States to gather their perceptions of evaluation and supervision. The findings from this qualitative study showed the importance of the value of the relationship—specifically, trust—and communication in the form of ongoing observations and feedback. These results would be valuable to those who support principals and other central office leaders.

More quantitative research is needed to determine if relationship value is a trend across different types of schools, as the study took place in a specific geographical location (Hvidston et al., 2018). Despite the small sample size, principals' perceptions

regarding their supervision and the importance of relationships rooted in trust and effective communication resonated with the needs expressed by principals nationally. In Hvidston et al.'s (2018) study, principals provided numerous examples of trusting relationships through support, advice, feedback involving self-reflection and inquiry, open dialogue, meaningful conversation about school improvement, and clarity of expectations. Principals with effective communication and meaningful relationships with central office leaders found the supervision process more impactful on their professional development and school leadership.

Summary

The analysis of student achievement was formerly through the lens of effective school leadership and the principal's role. However, the responsibility regarding student achievement has grown to include the role of central office leaders in building the principals' capacity related to student outcomes (Cobb et al., 2003; Leithwood, 2010; Wilkinson et al., 2019). Collaboration and effective communication between principals and central office leaders are critical for improving school leaders' instructional leadership.

Specific hierarchical structures prevent collaboration, open communication, and professional development. When there are minimal opportunities for secondary principals to provide feedback to central office leaders, principals cannot make sufficient gains in the academic achievement of students (Mania-Singer, 2017). Effective collaboration and communication between central office leaders and principals ensure the fruition of district initiatives; in turn, a meaningful relationship improves principals' ability to effectively lead schools, directly impacting the quality of teaching at the school level

(Finnigan & Daly, 2017). For district office leaders and principals to collaborate effectively, they need to make time to build social networks rooted in trust and open communication and have a clear understanding of district goals and individual school needs. The following section explores the significance of the partnership between principals and central office leaders and the role of trust, collaboration, and communication in their relationship.

Significance of Principals and Central Office Leader Relationships

Trust, collaboration, and communication create a foundation for effective relationships. Successful reform implementation depends on central office leaders' relationships with principals (Blaik Hourani & Stringer, 2015; Wilkinson et al., 2019). Principals may face unattainable goals and expectations from central office leaders. This possibility may impede their ability to lead schools effectively, and the pressure also strains their relationships with central office leaders (Mania-Singer, 2017; Wallin et al., 2019). Traditionally, bureaucratic district offices may challenge those relationships with hierarchical structures, which can prevent collaboration and honest communication, and further impact working relationships between principals and central office leaders and student achievement (Mania-Singer, 2017).

The changing role of central office leaders means they are accountable for student performance (Honig et al., 2017). Hence, relationships become instrumental, as central office leaders need to listen to principal voice data and provide principals with support and resources (Hvidston et al., 2018; Mania-Singer, 2017; Tingle et al., 2019). These collaborative relationships require honesty, reciprocal trust, and effective communication. When managed successfully, collaboration leads to reflection, experimentation,

innovation, and, ultimately, student achievement (Anderson et al., 2012; Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Grissom et al., 2019; Lawson et al., 2017; Louie et al., 2019; Rowland, 2017; Thompson & France, 2015). When central offices align their work with the schools and focus on instructional leadership and principals' individual needs, teaching and learning improve (Honig et al., 2017; McAdamis, 2010).

Articles reviewed in this section show the significance of positive relationships for expanding the principal's leadership capacity in instructional leadership while improving student outcomes. A trusting and collaborative relationship between principals and central office leaders grounded in two-way communication increases principal efficacy and positively impacts principals' professional development, which can improve their instructional leadership (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; King Smith et al., 2020; Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Mania-Singer, 2017; Marietta, 2015; McAdamis, 2010; Thompson & France; 2015).

Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson (2010) explored the intricate connection among policymakers, district office personnel, school staff, and community members in their efforts to improve teaching and learning. Funded by the Wallace Foundation, this 5-year project examined various roles and initiatives with the shared goal of positively impacting student achievement. Specifically, the researchers focused on instructional leadership development and analysis of related current practices, creating clear targets for improvement, and developing data-informed decisions. These three components impacted leaders' efficacy in the school improvement process. Part 2 of the study focused on school district leadership, exploring how districts develop school leaders' sense of efficacy.

Using qualitative and quantitative methods, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson (2010) collected data from an extensive sample, including nine states, 43 school districts, K–12 school staff, district office employees, and state-level personnel. For Part 2, they engaged in another round of principal and teacher surveys and analyzed interviews from the three cycles of site visits to 18 districts. The researchers determined that principals felt effective when district office leaders provided them with professional development on instructional leadership and student achievement while stressing collaboration within a professional community. The researchers concluded,

> We have already established that instructional leadership by principals has an impact on teachers' classroom practices, which, in turn, affect student learning. This is perhaps our most powerful finding regarding the indirect connection between the choices and priorities set by districts and the classroom experience of students. (pp. 203–204)

Additional quantitative research is needed to determine the relationship between specific district practices and student learning. District leaders would benefit by focusing on formal and informal targeted professional development and collaboration with principals. Furthermore, district leaders should ensure that all central offices work with schools to support joint district goals with a shared understanding of school improvement plans and individual school needs. Finally, district offices need to focus on meeting the needs of secondary schools because secondary principals have more complex demands, ranging from pedagogy and content variety to operations.

McAdamis (2010) documented the transition from an authoritative leadership approach to a collaborative relationship between central office leaders and principals. A natural hierarchical relationship exists between central office leaders and the principals because central office leaders hold authority over principals and perform principal

evaluations (Casserly et al., 2013; Micheaux & Parvin, 2018). However, with the change in central office roles (Honig et al., 2017), the central office leaders in one Missouri district determined that the authoritative leadership approach, implemented based on the hierarchical relationship, was no longer effective at influencing principals' professional development concerning student achievement or principal leadership. The central office leaders transitioned this relationship to one of collaboration through ongoing mutual discussions with principals regarding their needs for professional learning. Principals shared how they felt about professional development and presented effective professional development approaches to influence student achievement and leadership. As a result, central office leaders and principals worked collaboratively to meet individual principals' needs.

McAdamis's (2010) study showed that a collaborative relationship between central office leaders and principals is possible and beneficial in building principal leadership abilities and increasing student achievement. Moreover, the findings indicated a gap in the literature, as McAdamis was one of only a few scholars to explore these facets of professional learning. The findings also suggested the need for a collaborative relationship between central office leaders and principals to improve teaching and learning. However, this study is over a decade old and needs updating based on continual reforms, changes, and role expansion of central office leaders and principals.

Thompson and France (2015) identified the significance of the relationship between central office leaders and principals related to building principal capacity to demonstrate academic gains and success of students. As a result of the NCLB (2001) and Race to the Top statutes, school and district-level leaders became accountable for

measurable student learning and progress. However, neither legislation outlined strategies for either leadership level, leaving the decision-making process to the discretion of individual districts. Thompson and France identified a district leader's key role in implementing educational reform through policies to improve principal leadership by focusing on goal-oriented and data-driven measures based on student achievement. The study occurred in Long Island, New York, and included district leaders from 127 suburban school districts. Participants completed an online survey questionnaire, which the researchers designed based on Honig's (2012) five dimensions of district leadership. However, Thompson and France (2015) found only three dimensions relevant to district leadership: principal partnerships, district stewardships, and district partnerships.

The first dimension, principal partnerships, entailed differentiated assistance, such as modeling instructional leadership, developing tools, brokering external resources, and allowing principals to serve as resources for one another. The second, district stewardship, required district leaders (a) communicate a theory of action; (b) broker resources to assist district leaders in supporting theories of action; and (c) develop and use accountability measures to evaluate theories of action to inform practice and decisions. Finally, district partnership required district leaders to build their leadership capacity, collaborate with other district leaders, and codevelop theories of action.

A limitation of Thompson and France's (2015) study was the lack of research specific to principals' perspectives and experiences regarding the relationship with central office leaders and the type of support provided, as only district leaders participated in the survey. Furthermore, the findings suggested that district size, student poverty levels, and suburban district leaders' practices were sensitive to the local context,

as both participants were from uniform communities sharing the same culture. This study stressed the importance of creating meaningful relationships between central office leaders and principals, as these relationships remain largely unexplored. Specifically, there is a gap in the literature regarding principal perceptions of central office leaders' support and influence on middle school principals' instructional leadership.

District office personnel support schools in closing achievement gaps, as schools need to demonstrate student learning outcomes, especially those impacted by socioeconomic challenges. The partnership between the central office and schools Marietta (2015) explored the relationship between central office leaders and principals to improve student achievement. The researcher used a qualitative inquiry strategy, conducting and analyzing interviews and documents to explore the relationship and interactions between principals and central office leaders in two large school districts in Maryland. The two districts managed the three focus areas of budgeting, staffing, and academic programming differently, with one centralized and the other decentralized. Consequently, principals in each district experienced their interactions with central office leaders differently, specifically pertaining to the relationship between central office leaders and principals. Marietta identified the two significant factors for evaluating the effectiveness of the approaches: principals' ability to lead schools and their perceptions of the central office's capacity to support them.

Although the study had a small sample size, the findings were significant in emphasizing the need to align district policies for school support and principal development with the roles and responsibilities of central office leaders. School leaders need support and training from central office leaders to build their teachers' instructional

capacity and create trusting relationships (Marietta, 2015). Understanding the framework associated with the relationship between central office leaders and principals is imperative to improve student outcomes because the reforms and policies' successful implementation relies on the partnership between these two agencies. It is critical to understand the environment under which reforms focusing on the partnership between central offices and school leaders succeed or fail.

The traditional hierarchical public-school structure creates a disconnect between schools and central office leaders, leaving the groups to work in isolation. The lack of communication and collaboration between central office leaders and principals can negatively impact teaching and learning, with central office leaders posing barriers to the desired strategic outcomes. King Smith et al. (2020) explored how a large urban school district used an action research project to transform into a learning organization centered on professional growth and leadership development. The essential component of the process was for the central office to improve the support it provided to the schools by focusing on a collaborative approach and individual school needs. These significant changes in conducting business and building relationships based on communication "led to power struggles between central office teams and school leaders in the areas of role clarity, accountability, and authority" (King Smith et al., 2020, p. 59).

King Smith et al. (2020) study occurred in one of the largest U.S. school districts undergoing a significant transformation. The district shifted from a top-down model to one that embraced empowerment, autonomy, innovation, and flexibility. In this mixed methods case study, school and district office leaders completed a survey about the school district's ability to eliminate organizational isolation and instead collaborate to

build a sustained culture of learning. The findings demonstrated that for the transformation to be successful and sustainable, the district need to create a safe environment, allowing for collaboration and teamwork and explicitly building trusting relationships between school and central office leadership. Additionally, the district had to center its work around leadership development, innovation, and problem-solving, building a system culture embedded in learning, empowerment, ownership, and shared goals to benefit system goals and student outcomes.

Some of the limitations of King Smith et al.'s (2020) study were the small number of participants, the lack of teacher input, and the absence of student data to determine the impact of changes on student performance. However, to create an effective learning organization, it is critical to engage both principals and central office leaders in a learning process that intentionally removes territorial boundaries and fosters an environment that allows for open communication, collaboration, teamwork, and risk-taking. By implementing a collaborative learning process focused on the adult learner and being honest and reflective on the feedback received, the district office used leader strengths and experiences to design the workshops with cross-functional teams. The office worked to solve actual strategic problems identified by the members as a priority. Conditions supporting relationship-building between principals and district leaders increase collaboration, communication, and trust between the two groups, benefiting teachers and students and positively impacting student learning.

The concern over principal support from central office leaders and the relationship between the two extends beyond the United States and has been a topic of recent interest. Working under the premise that the collaborative nature between central

office leaders and principals allows for support and continuous professional development, Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) investigated the means and perceptions of principal support. This qualitative single case study entailed interviews with 18 principals across five school districts in a province in South Africa. The findings showed that the principals were reliant on district support and the nature of that support. In particular, principals felt the low-level support provided by central office leaders was inadequate due to limited resources, lack of input and transparency regarding the decisions directly impacting their schools, minimal time allocated at school sites, and difficulty with change. Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) argued that principals thrive as effective school leaders based partly on the support from and relationship with the district office.

Despite a small sample size, Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) critically analyzed principals' perceptions of the support and professional development they received from central office leaders on their instructional leadership and, thus, student achievement. The relationship between principals and district office leaders is essential to the principal's role, indicating the need to strengthen that partnership. Additionally, Bantwini and Moorosi stressed that collaboration between principals and district leaders was indispensable to the success of principals and their schools, which, by extension, includes student growth and achievement. Few scholars have expanded on Bantwini and Moorosi's work, although the research topic of central office leaders and principals has gained favor in recent years.

Mania-Singer (2017) sought a deeper understanding of the relationships between principals and central office leaders in best practices, data, decision-making, communication, professional growth, personal issues, and time spent outside of work.

The researcher analyzed the social structure of a U.S. Midwest urban school district using the general systems theory and social network analysis as the theoretical foundation. With a sample of more than 90 participants, Mania-Singer conducted social network analysis surveys, interviews, and observations to understand the relationships between principals and central office leaders. The findings showed the limited relationships centered around one-way, basic professional information communicated through newsletters and emails, with principals given limited opportunity to provide feedback to central office leaders. Mania-Singer revealed sparse connections between the two groups and "a possible lack of trust or a culture in which members do not feel free to share personal information or socially interact with colleagues" (p. 78).

The district's high turnover rate of central office leaders and principals could have impacted the relationship-building process and created a limitation for the study. Nonetheless, the findings showed that relationships between central office leaders and principals are crucial, impacting communication, a sense of connectivity, and the principals' ability to implement initiatives aligned with school-level improvement efforts (Mania-Singer, 2017). Additionally, the study contributed to the body of literature by showing only minimal opportunities for principals to provide feedback to central office leaders. This finding reaffirmed that hierarchical structures prevent open communication, collaboration, and principals' professional development, ultimately hindering schools from making sufficient gains in students' academic achievement.

Summary

Because central office leaders are in positions of authority over principals and perform principal evaluations (Casserly et al., 2013; Micheaux & Parvin, 2018),

secondary school principals and central office leaders have a natural hierarchical relationship. However, with the changing roles of central office leaders (Honig et al., 2017), the authoritative leadership approach is no longer effective at influencing principals' professional learning (McAdamis, 2010). A positive and functioning relationship with focused collaboration and trust between central office leaders and principals creates an environment of honest reflection, dialogue, and action, allowing principals to grow professionally and improve their leadership skills (Tingle et al., 2019). A collaborative relationship between central office leaders and principals also builds principals' instructional leadership skills despite the hierarchical structure and the collaborative process focused on improving student achievement benefits the entire school district (McAdamis, 2010).

Inferences for Forthcoming Study

There is abundant empirical research on principal leadership and the role of central office leaders. However, literature is limited on how middle school principals perceive instructional leadership support from central office leaders and what instructional leadership support they identify as the most influential on their practice. The literature shows the complexities of a principalship due to the job demands and the importance of central office leaders supporting and building the capacity of secondary principals to manage those challenges (Honig et al., 2017). Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) explored school principals' perceptions of whether the support provided by central office leaders helped them to lead schools effectively and ways to improve that support. The findings and limitations of Bantwini and Moorosi's study led to recommendations for future research to address the role of central office leaders, explore issues and challenges

within the districts that promote or hinder support, and identify ways to enhance support that would improve educational outcomes. Because the study occurred in South Africa, similar research is necessary in the U.S. to explore principals' perceptions of central office leaders' support to improve their instructional leadership and students' educational outcomes.

This study sought to further Bantwini and Moorosi's (2018) work and close the research gap. Honig et al. (2017) emphasized the urgency of central office leaders to align their work and priorities around instructional leadership with those of the schools they support to ensure student achievement. Grissom et al. (2019) pointed out that central office leaders need to improve their skill sets in training, developing, and coaching principals, building their capacity to effectively lead schools and increase student achievement. Daly et al. (2015) recommended further research exploring the relationship between principals and principal supervisors following the role expansion of principal supervisors to include supporting principals. However, studies on the supervisor–principal relationship following this change in the roles and expectations remain sparse.

Wright and da Costa (2016) contended that additional research was essential for understanding the professional development needs of principals, which would, in turn, inform principal supervisors' work, enhance the effectiveness of supervisor-provided principal support, and improve educational outcomes. Rowland (2017) and Louie et al. (2019) discussed the significance of identifying specific principal needs and providing ongoing professional development to improve principal effectiveness. For principals to honestly speak to their areas of growth as instructional leaders based on the school context, they need working relationships with central office leaders built on trust and

rooted in collaboration. Lawson et al. (2017) explored the role of mutual trust between principals and district office leaders as a vehicle to improve communication, innovation, and implementation of new ideas that would lead to better student outcomes.

Research is needed to explore middle school principals' perceptions of central office leaders' support to improve their instructional leadership and students' educational outcomes. The research question for this study emerged from the literature gap to determine the instructional leadership supports from the central office that middle school principals identify as most influential on their practice. The study will have a framework of collaborative leadership theory (Chrislip & Larson, 1994) emphasizing support and building capacity and trust in a collaborative relationship in a hierarchy. The researcher will explore the relationship between two groups of individuals with the common goal and responsibility of improving student outcomes. Furthermore, the collaborative leadership theory includes transformational and instructional leadership aspects, which are essential to improving teaching and learning. Collaboration is essential to all aspects of the relationship between secondary principals and central office leaders.

To conclude, collaborative relationships between principals and central office leaders, built on reciprocal trust, lead to improved communication, empowering principals in their roles as instructional and transformational leaders (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Lawson et al., 2017; McAdamis, 2010). There is limited literature about middle school principals' experiences of the effectiveness of instructional leadership support received from central office leaders in positively impacting student achievement. This study of middle school principals' perceptions will reduce the gap in research.

Chapter 3: Methods

This chapter describes the methodology intended for this study and the specific and intentional choices made in the study's design. The focus of this interpretive qualitative study was to identify the instructional leadership support from the central office that middle school principals identify as most influential on their instructional leadership practice as it pertains to influencing student achievement and principal leadership. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with middle school principals who met the study's criteria. I used Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) six-step model for thematic analysis to analyze the data. To fulfill the purpose of this study, the following research questions were investigated:

1. What instructional leadership supports from the central office do middle school principals identify as most influential on their practice?
2. What types of professional learning experiences from the central office do middle school principals describe as most influential on their instructional leadership practice?
3. What other factors pertaining to relationships contribute to middle school principals' abilities to collaborate with or learn from central office?

A qualitative methodology was used to conduct an open inquiry investigation into a phenomenon (Patton, 2014). A qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate for this study due to the significance individuals ascribe to their experiences as middle school principals whom central office leaders' support. Because this inquiry involves middle school principal perceptions, it was critical to consider how the participants described their perceptions based on their personal experiences and within their setting. In this

chapter, I discuss the epistemology, theoretical perspectives, and methodology used, including the participant selection method and data collection and analysis methods. The chapter concludes with a discussion of ethical issues, trustworthiness, and a statement of researcher subjectivity.

Epistemology and Theoretical Perspectives

The term *epistemology* is defined as the nature of knowledge and how it is interpreted within a reality (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2015). Interpretive epistemology assumes that reality is socially constructed based on the interpretation of the individual experience, resulting in several interpretations of an event (Merriam, 2015). In this study, I explored middle school principals' perceptions of the relationship and instructional leadership support received from central office leaders. An interpretive epistemology allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between the two parties, with a focus on the reality people are making of that situation based on the actors in that environment. Realities are multiple and relative (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988), and "individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work…subjective meanings are formed through interactions with other" (Cresswell, 2007, p. 20). Using the interpretive epistemology allowed me to elicit rich data and gain an in-depth understanding of the experience of middle school principals. From this perspective, I sought to understand and interpret the interview data to construct and present the findings (Merriam, 2015).

The collaborative leadership theory explores professional development, learning, and support (Chrislip & Larson, 1994), each essential for successfully exploring central office leaders' and middle school principals' relationships and school leadership. I used

the collaborative leadership theory as the theoretical lens to study the instructional leadership supports from central office leaders that middle school principals identify as most influential on their practice. This theory allowed me to explore factors that pertained to relationships with central office leaders and contributed to middle school principals' abilities to collaborate with or learn from the central office to improve student achievement.

Methodology

Qualitative methods enable an open inquiry investigation into a phenomenon (Patton, 2014). The qualitative methodology was selected because the study's purpose satisfied all the characteristics of qualitative research methods. The basic interpretive qualitative method was selected for this study since it allowed participants to communicate their experiences through real-life contexts, share their perceptions, and make meaning of a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2002; Van Maanen, 1979). This study provided a detailed description and thorough interpretation of middle school principals' experiences and perspectives of instructional leadership support from central office leaders. By examining the phenomenon of instructional leadership support experiences of individual middle school principals, this study attempted to understand the critical aspects of instructional leadership supports that may be useful to district leaders, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, especially given the lack of research on middle school principals perceptions of instructional leadership support from central office leaders.

When conducting qualitative research, researchers "can seek to gain an understanding of the experience of individuals by examining personal and institutional

documents, conducting interviews, making observations, through exploring history, by conducting experimentation, providing questionnaires and surveys to participants, and reviewing of existing literature" (Seidman, 2019, p. 10). To explore the experience of school leaders, interviewing allowed for an appropriate and adequate process of inquiry (Seidman, 2019). A qualitative methodology was determined to be most appropriate to use for this study due to the significance that individuals ascribe to their experiences as middle school principals who are supported by central office leaders. Because this inquiry involves middle school principal perceptions, it was critical to consider how the participants described their perceptions based on their personal experiences and within their setting.

For this basic interpretive qualitative study, I explored how middle school principals perceived support from central office leaders as it pertained to instructional leadership. This phenomenon is contemporary and unfolds within a real-world context. It is through an open inquiry that I was able to fully explore the case and elucidate middle school principals' perceptions of effective instructional leadership supports from central office leaders to develop recommendations to enhance middle school principal professional learning and support. Given the study's purpose, in-depth interviews with middle school principals were the most appropriate for exploring this phenomenon.

Participant Selection

I utilized purposive sampling to recruit only middle school principals who met the criterion for participation in this study. Purposive sampling, per Yin (2014) and Stake (1995), is appropriate to ensure participants can speak to the phenomenon based on their direct experiences with it and are most appropriate and capable of answering the research

questions. Stake (1995) stipulated that the researcher need to only elicit the participation of those most relevant and experienced with the phenomenon. The sample was to include at least 12 middle school principals with an ideal range of 12-20 participants who each had at least two years of experience in the principal role. The intended population included a comparable mixture of genders, races, and years of experience. A basic interpretive qualitative method was the most appropriate way to capture qualitative data regarding individual experiences and perceptions (Yin, 2014). Purposeful sampling was used to select the cases based on the following criteria:

1. The individual was a middle school principal at a public school.
2. The individual had been a middle school principal for at least two years.
3. The individual received support from central office leaders.

Each criteria was carefully established to identify participants who could provide in-depth reflections and perspectives on the support provided to middle school principals by central office leaders. The participants were selected based on their employment status within the selected school district. The educational background of the selected participants varied. However, all principals held at least a master's degree and certification or additional degree in school administration.

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from George Washington University, I submitted an IRB request through the school district, and was granted approval. I considered options beyond the district using social media to recruit principals through professional organizations such as the Montgomery County Association of Administrators and Principals (MCAAP), the George Washington University Educational Leadership and Administration Cohort, Teach for America

(TFA), and Maryland Association of Secondary School Principals (MDMASSP). To recruit participants, I subsequently sent a personal email invitation to all middle school principals, asking them to participate in the study. Middle school principals who met eligibility and were interested in volunteering to participate emailed me directly. I followed up with them to further discuss my research topic and answer any questions. Once the participants agreed to participate in the study, I gave them the informed consent document.

Next, I contacted the participants individually to schedule semi-structured individual interviews. This approach helped build trust and confidence with potential participants. To reach saturation in this qualitative study (Crotty & Crotty, 1998), I solicited the participation of 20 middle school principals from within this school district. If more than 20 middle school principals expressed interest in participating in the study, I would have selected the first 20 who responded to my email.

Data Collection

I conducted multiple semi-structured interviews, asking open-ended questions in a semi-structured format with an option for pliability in wording and order (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The less structured format speaks to the interpretive epistemology, which argues that individuals experience reality in varying ways (Creswell, 2014). Probing questions allowed me to elicit further depth and richness. All interviews were conducted via Zoom.

Interviews were scheduled around the participants' availability and at their preferred meeting location, date, and time. Participants had the option between in-person or virtual interviews over Zoom. I encouraged participants to select a meeting location

that would not compromise their confidentiality. Those who opted to interview via Zoom received an email with the scheduled date, time, and private access link unique to them, including a password that provided an added layer of security to the interviewing process. I selected to use a Zoom waiting room to control participant entry into the Zoom room, and with their permission, I used Zoom's integrated recording feature to record their interview. The recorded interviews were transcribed using Google Doc's Voice Typing feature in a Chrome browser to ensure transcript accuracy, allowing participants to conduct member checking by verifying their transcripts' accuracy and making corrections.

The interview protocol consisted of predominantly structured and open-ended questions for the researcher to explore a deeper understanding of the instructional leadership support from the central office that middle school principals identified as most influential on their practice (see Appendix A). Participants were reminded that the interview would be 60-90 minutes, structured around the research questions, and meant to explore (1) their experiences with the support received from central office leaders; (2) their perspectives on the supports they found effective on their instructional leadership practice; and (3) the role of the relationship between them and central office leaders. Participants were notified that the interview would be audio-recorded with a transcription provided to them to ensure the accuracy and validity of their responses. Conducting interviews of at least 60 minutes increases the likelihood of reaching data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Also, had I determined data saturation was not met, I would have conducted follow-up interviews to elicit additional data or held additional semi-structured individual interviews with other qualifying principals.

During the interviews, I recorded notes to document my observations and rationale for asking follow-up questions. The participants were provided with 15 days to review the interview transcript. During this member-checking process, participants reviewed their transcriptions to ensure they were accurately recorded. Additionally, at this time, they could add, clarify, expand upon, or alter the transcription to better articulate their responses.

Participants were assigned a pseudonym to conceal their identity and prevent their recognition to safeguard their confidentiality. Before each interview, I sent participants a Google form, which ensured confidentiality, as each participant was linked to a secured Google account that collected their demographic information, including gender identity, race, ethnicity, and years as a middle school principal. One pilot interview with a middle school principal was conducted prior to data collection so I could practice using the interview protocol and ensure that the questions appropriately addressed my specific research topic. Based on the result of the pilot study, I improved the interview protocols, familiarized myself with the recording devices and the transcription application, and refined the coding processes. The dissertation study does not include the pilot interview.

Study Site and Context

The research was conducted in a large school district on the East Coast, with over 150 schools. The district served a diverse range of students. Hispanic students comprised the largest portion of the population, White and African American students comprised approximately a quarter, and Asian students accounted for the smallest subgroup. The district also had a high graduation and attendance rate, boasting rigorous academic programs focused on college and career readiness. Furthermore, districtwide, over one-

third of its students received free and reduced-price meals (FARMS), over 15% were identified as English language learners, and over 10% received special education services.

According to the district's website, novice and veteran principals receive professional growth training and support along with cyclical evaluations based on 10 leadership standards and performance criteria as part of the Administrative and Supervisory Professional Growth System. Additionally, all principals have completed training on effectively observing instructional practices and providing teachers with constructive feedback based on the Teacher Evaluation Performance Standards. Four pertained to instruction, one to professional development, and the last to professionalism.

The two courses consist of 12 sessions, totaling 75 hours of training. The first course targets instructional leadership development, emphasizing using the knowledge base on teaching to observe and evaluate teaching, improve written communication, analyze data, and strive to meet the standards and expectations for teaching and learning. The second course delved into supervisory and managerial skills to educate and empower school leaders to intervene in challenging situations, make informed decisions, and promote effective teaching. Finally, the district provides all novice principals with a Consulting Principal whose role is mentoring, supporting, and coaching administrators.

I selected this specific school district as the site because of its large pool of middle schools, focus on teachers' professional learning, and robust professional growth system for administrators, teachers, and support staff. I also worked in this district. Therefore, I had access to middle school principals, allowing for convenient access to potential participants. Furthermore, this district is data-driven, closely monitors student

performance, and holds principals accountable for student achievement and school climate. As a result, principals face tremendous pressure to meet school, district, and state goals while also managing the school climate, which consists of students, staff, and parent voice data. Given all these demands, I was interested in learning about the types of instructional leadership supports from the central office that middle school principals identified as most effective. I was also interested in learning about the factors pertaining to relationships that contribute to middle school principals' abilities to collaborate with or learn from central office leaders.

Middle school principals are uniquely situated as they only have their students for three years. In that short time, they have helped close the achievement gaps from elementary school and prepare students for high school. The financial and personnel resources of such a large school district allowed it to support its principals. This study explored which instructional leadership supports middle school principals find most influential. The findings from this study could be critical in helping smaller districts that either do not have these resources or do not support their middle school principals with instructional leadership. Employing strategies recommended by this study may help them improve teaching, learning, and student achievement. The findings could also provide invaluable information to both principal training programs and universities and policymakers who do not have direct access to middle school principals.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was done thematically, with inductive open coding of the transcripts. I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) six-step thematic analysis model to analyze the data. Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013) contended that these steps are

recursive rather than linear, and multiple iterations of coding occur throughout the analysis process. This inductive approach allowed flexibility in interpreting the data and determining the themes.

During step one, I familiarized myself with the data, which included a review of the interview transcripts, listening to the audio recording, and reviewing the notes I took during and throughout the data collection process. Second, I performed open-hand coding of the transcripts by generating the initial inductive codes and engaging in axial coding to merge and compress like items into *final* codes. The third step involved observing, identifying patterns, and generating themes based on the final codes I created. The fourth step included reviewing themes to ensure that the emerging themes represent the data and to make the necessary upgrades based on further analysis. The fifth step included defining and naming the themes by constructing them to help interpret the data according to the research focus and ensuring each theme was unique and distinct from the others. The sixth step included writing up the analysis of the data, as well as present
Raw data underwent multiple levels of coding within Step 2 of Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) thematic analysis model.

The second level of coding was open coding, which allowed me to compare and examine data to consider and create the initial categories for data sorting (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and then pair it with codes that aligned with elements of Chrislip and Larson's (1994) collaborative leadership theory. The next level of coding was thematic coding, which allowed me to conduct my data analysis at a deeper level by identifying the quotes within the text or data that pointed to a theme (Bernard, 2017). Axial coding was the final form of coding, which reduced the number of codes by eliminating

redundant codes, merging like-items, identifying anomalies and outliers, and distinguishing the defining aspects of each code to ensure the uniqueness of codes. After identifying final codes from performing axial coding, I evaluated the relationships of codes to overarching concepts in order to identify candidate themes using participant demographic statistics and the thematic analysis process.

The initial candidate themes led to the identification of overarching themes, allowing for coherence with the conceptual framework of this study while maintaining the participant's voice. Codes were derived from participant transcripts, and emphasis was placed on ensuring contextual meaning was observed throughout the analysis process. As I engaged in the data analysis process, I was cognizant of my biases and intentionally ensured that the participants' experiences and perceptions were reported and constructed as fully and accurately as possible. Finally, I used reflective memos to document my reflections and questions throughout the data collection and analysis process.

The collaborative leadership theory created a framework that allowed for an analysis of the collaborative relationship between middle school principals and central office leaders by focusing on building the team members' capacity, creating a shared purpose and goals, and emphasizing the significance of building trusting relationships (Chrislip & Larson, 1994). The data analysis allowed me to explore (1) what instructional leadership strategies middle school principals found most effective; (2) topics of learning from the central office that middle school principals described as most influential on their practice; and (3) other factors pertaining to relationships that contributed to middle school

principals' abilities to collaborate with or learn from central office leaders. Sufficient data existed to present the results of the study and answer the two research questions.

Trustworthiness

Considering the purpose of this proposed study, I concluded that a basic interpretive qualitative study was the most appropriate research design to explore middle school principals' perspectives. I relied on data from semi-structured individual interviews consisting of predominantly open-ended questions. Since validity depends on one's conclusions concerning reality, validity is relative and is a property of inferences rather than methods; it can never be proved or taken for granted based on the methods used (Maxwell, 2013). On the other hand, trustworthiness is an attitude throughout the research (Yin, 2016). Hence, as a researcher, I needed to intentionally integrate several validity procedures into the study to strengthen its trustworthiness (Creswell, 2014).

Triangulation is a process of collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, and the process of using a variety of methods will allow me to determine the consistency of findings (Maxwell, 2013; Yin, 2014). While triangulation of data methods is a strategy used to increase the validity of a study, I also needed to use triangulation of trustworthiness techniques to address validity threats because this study consisted of semi-structured interviews as the data source (Maxwell, 2013). To conduct methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1979) and corroborate findings across and within the population (Yin, 2018), I accomplished this through member checking, rich thick descriptions, analytic reflection memos, and peer debriefing (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, methodological triangulation techniques increase the validity of a study because each method has different strengths and weaknesses. Using methodological

triangulation allowed me to gather more comprehensive data and a greater insight into my research topic.

Subjectivity Statement

As the researcher, I needed to be aware of my subjectivity when conducting qualitative research and my relationship to what and whom I was studying (Preissle, 2008). There are challenges inherent to qualitative research because individuals see the world through their lens, and their inherited biases impact their perceptions of their environment. Acknowledging these subjectivities and how they situated me within the study was imperative. This was especially important in this study because I work for the same school district in which I conducted the study, and the subjects, middle school principals, are my colleagues. As a result, I needed to continuously examine and be aware of how I was influencing the study (Dowling, 2008). Personal biases also needed to be addressed. I am a stakeholder in the improvement process and have had personal experiences within the district as an employee for over 20 years.

I started my career in education with *Teach for America* as a way to give back, with the intent of only spending two years in the classroom. Twenty-six years later, I am still an educator and continue to be inspired by my students. I find my work rewarding and humbling. My experiences include public and charter schools in urban and suburban environments and middle and high school levels. I have spent 18 years at the middle school level as a teacher and an administrator. For 11 years I served as a middle school principal in the district where I conducted my study. My vast experiences gave me a unique perspective on the educational systems and needs.

I am particularly interested in middle school leadership because of the critical age of adolescent learners and the need to help students transition from the elementary school environment and prepare them for high school. The middle school structure also encourages collaboration, teamwork, and an emphasis on relationships, which make it possible to create an academic and emotional environment for students. I believe middle school is the ideal place to help students discover their academic identity and explore new interests that will help shape their high school experiences.

As a middle school principal, I was aware of the demands and the challenges of the work, and just as teachers benefit from meaningful professional development and support, I believe that middle school principals need ongoing support from central office leaders to lead their schools as instructional leaders effectively. The work needs to be collaborative, as the stakes of not having a school environment conducive to meaningful teaching and learning jeopardize student outcomes. Hence, I am driven by my commitment to bringing awareness of the instructional leadership supports that middle school principals identify as most influential in their practice to improve student achievement. I hope that this research will inform my work as a practitioner and help central office leaders improve their processes for supporting middle school principals, and in turn, improve outcomes for students.

Due to my professional experience in the field, I approached this study as a reflective practitioner with an open mind by bracketing my experiences throughout the research process. Hence, I recognized my preconceptions, biases, and subjectivity to ensure a separation from data collection and analysis (Yin, 2016). To further limit my influence on the study, I ensured the research topic, method, and design of the study

emerged from within the literature. Specifically, I explored instructional leadership and the roles of middle school principals and central office leaders, and the gap present in current literature emphasized the need for ongoing exploration on this topic. Moreover, I protected against imposing my biases on the data by ensuring that the interview questions were derived from the literature. Furthermore, I did not engage in discussions or ask questions that extended beyond the scope of this study. Member-checking was done to ensure participant responses were an accurate reflection of what they wished to share, and participants were allowed to add, clarify, or remove answers from the transcriptions.

Ethical Considerations

All necessary permissions and authorizations were obtained in advance of recruitment and data collection. First, I obtained IRB approval from the university and then the school district. I recruited participants through the targeted district as well as professional organizations. Finally, I drafted a memo informing potential participants of the purpose of the study, data collection procedures, and eligibility for participation. Participants were assigned a pseudonym to conceal their identity. Once the interviews were completed, they were removed from the recording device and uploaded onto a USB drive. The USB drive was exclusively used to store data from the questionnaire as part of this study.

Summary

The approach used for this study centered around a basic interpretive qualitative study that allowed me to explore the instructional leadership supports from central office leaders that middle school principals identify as most influential on their instructional leadership practice. A qualitative methodology permitted me to gain a deeper

understanding of the significance individuals ascribe to their experiences as middle school principals who receive support from central office leaders. The epistemology and the theoretical perspectives, methodology, participant selection, and data collection and analysis methods enabled me to conceptualize the processes in the study design.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the instructional leadership supports from central office leaders that middle school principals identified as most influential on their practice. This study also investigated the factors pertaining to the relationship between middle school principals and the central office that contributed to middle school principals' abilities to collaborate with or learn from the central office. The focus of this chapter will be the presentation of the significant findings and themes from the participant interview data. I will begin with the general description of this study's middle school principal participants. Next, I will present the findings of the overarching questions, as well as the major themes and findings that emerged from this study. The major findings and themes answer the following three research questions (RQs):

1. What instructional leadership supports from the central office do middle school principals identify as most influential on their practice?
2. What types of professional learning experiences from the central office do middle school principals describe as most influential on their instructional leadership practice?
3. What other factors pertaining to relationships contribute to middle school principals' abilities to collaborate with or learn from central office?

In response to the first research question, one finding emerged pertaining to instructional leadership supports from central office that middle school principals identified as most influential on their practice. The finding pertained to process supports, specifically, strategies through which support was provided to middle school principals. Within process supports, three themes emerged: (1) providing coaching strategies; (2)

using data for improvement planning; and (3) conducting walkthroughs and informal observations.

In response to the second research question, three findings emerged related to professional learning experiences from central office that middle school principals described as most influential. The first finding centered around the benefits of differentiated professional learning experiences led by central office and based on individual principal needs and school context. Differentiated professional learning experiences supported middle school principals in building their capacity in instructional leadership practices based on their schools' needs. The second finding identified a need for additional district-led collective professional learning focused on district initiatives and priorities to ensure school cohesion. The third finding identified the benefits of the existing Middle School Professional Learning Community (MS PLC) orchestrated by middle school principals in the district and fills the void created by a lack of central office-led professional learning opportunities.

In response to the third research question, two findings emerged. The first finding revealed that the development of collegial partnerships positively impacted collaboration between middle school principals and central office leaders. Middle school principals shared that they were more likely to collaborate with and learn from central office leaders when the partnership was collegial. The four themes that emerged emphasized the importance of central office leaders: (1) establishing trust; (2) listening; (3) being transparent; and (4) being encouraging. The second finding revealed that middle school principals need central office leaders to provide them with consistent support. The two themes revealed that middle school principals needed central office leaders to provide

them with consistent support by (1) being accessible and reliable and (2) engaging them as thought partners. In the next section, I describe the participants in this study.

Description of Participants and Context

The research sample included 12 middle school principals from the East Coast employed by one school system. All the participants were middle school principals for at least three years and led schools with grades six, seven, and eight. Participants self-identified their race, age range, gender, years in current position, years in administration, and overall years in education. The sample included eight women and four men, each with three to 18 years of middle school leadership. Furthermore, their years in administration ranged from seven to 23 years, and their overall years in education varied from 15 to 35 years. Out of the 12 participants, five identified as African American, two as Asian, and five as White (see Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Pseudonym	Race	Age Range	Gender	Years in Admin
Bella Ellington	African American	51-50	Female	10 plus
Kayla Simone	African American	41-50	Female	10 plus
Kristina Parker	White	41-50	Female	10 plus
Sofie Holiday	White	51-60	Female	10 plus
Sean Cole	Asian	31-40	Male	Under 10
Laura Vaughn	Asian	51-60	Female	10 plus
Paul Gillespie	White	41-50	Male	10 plus
Mary Fitzgerald	White	61-70	Female	10 plus
David Coltrane	African American	51-60	Male	10 plus
Michael Armstrong	African American	51-60	Male	10 plus
Margaret Monk	White	51-60	Female	10 plus
Yasmine Davis	African American	41-50	Female	10 plus

All participants served as principals in the same school district; however, some led middle schools with under 400 students, while others served schools with over 1,200 students. The schools also varied in socio-economic make-up, based on the free and reduced-price meals data, as well as the English language learner data and the racial composition of students. The district is one of the 50 largest school systems in the U.S., and it covers a large geographic area, with some middle schools identified as rural and others identified as urban. Regardless of the school size, geographic location, and the students' socio-economic status, the same central office leaders supported all middle school principals, evaluating each principal in the district using the same methods.

Throughout the interviews, middle school principals referred to "directors" as specific central office leaders. Within this district's structure, directors mentioned by the participants directly support and supervise principals. The director's responsibility is to support principals with all aspects of academics and operations, as well as stakeholder and community engagement. Other central office leaders, for example, support principals with curricular and human resource needs. On the other hand, the directors are unique because they supervise principals by conducting their cyclical evaluations and are responsible for supporting them with all aspects of school leadership.

Principals in this district engage most frequently and regularly with their directors. In order to help the reader make a personal connection with the participants and ensure participants' confidentiality (Yin, 2016), I assigned each participant in this study a pseudonym for both their personal name and the school's name (see Table 1). I also included the participants' characteristics, such as their self-identified age range, gender, years in current position, years in administration, and years in education (see Table 1).

The Global Pandemic

It is imperative to note that the development of this study occurred before and during the COVID-19 global pandemic, which resulted in the physical shutdown of schools in this district between March 2020 and March 2021. Data collection began after students and staff returned to in-person instruction. Schools partially reopened in March of 2021, although the disruptions carried over into the 2021-2022 school year.

These unprecedented times required new processes for all aspects of schooling. Middle school principals had to create and instate virtual operations processes, implement new instructional practices for the virtual classroom, and support students, teachers, and

parents with accessing and managing new technology and abiding by ever-shifting quarantine guidelines. For example, Bella Ellington explained that everyone was in "...this very deep operational mode during COVID…" Sean Cole explained, "There is a level of tone deafness as a whole [around instructional leadership], but that is more particular to COVID," and Yasmine Davis emphasized, "I think it's fair to say that during COVID there really was a focus on management and operations, because it was a crazy year." Many middle school principals discussed the negative impact of the school closure and the change from in-person to virtual teaching and learning on students and teachers. Margaret Monk said, "This year admin was kind of on its own [because of COVID]…this year has just been so disjointed." Sofie Holiday shared a similar experience about the district's lack of emphasis on instructional leadership due to the crisis mode brought on by the pandemic:

> I would say honestly during the last two years, there has been virtually no [instructional leadership support from central office leaders], except for the fact that our system has some online meetings for all principals once a week or once every couple of weeks, where they give overviews of new initiatives or provide an opportunity for Q and A. So it's less about instructional leadership and more about operational things and adaptations. However, we do get curriculum updates through our middle school professional learning community, we get instructional updates from the curriculum office by email, and that can be helpful...

All the principals in this study were middle school leaders before the pandemic and knew how the district operated in a non-crisis mode. Even though extensive operational demands were placed on them, middle school principals understood the importance of effective teaching and learning. Despite the circumstances, they still prioritized instructional leadership whenever possible during those tumultuous times.

Instructional Leadership Within the Middle School Context

At the beginning of each interview, middle school principals had the opportunity to share their definitions of instructional leadership. Because the study explored instructional leadership supports from central office that middle school principals identified as most influential on their practice, it was imperative to determine principals' understanding and framing of instructional leadership. Middle school principals also stressed the need for the district to prioritize instructional leadership as a practice and clearly communicate that vision to school leaders. Finally, they spoke about the unique structure of middle school and adolescent learners. They explained that central office leaders who support them needed some exposure to or experience with the secondary level to guide and advise them appropriately.

Middle School Principals' Definition of Instructional Leadership

Middle school principals explained how critical it is for school leaders to have a clear instructional vision and mission for their schools. They also emphasized the need to communicate expectations, priorities, and measurable school goals to impact student achievement positively. Laura Vaugh stressed the significance of having processes and structures to ensure well-run operations and a master schedule that prioritizes students and their needs. Bella Ellington explained that an instructional leader should "Change academic outcomes for students, through working with your staff to improve their ability to use the most effective pedagogy to teach students. I think that's the most important role of a principal of a school." Kayla Simone, a veteran educator of 26 years, had been at her school for over five years, explained:

> The role of an instructional leader is to provide a supportive, nurturing, encouraging but challenging and rigorous educational program for students…and

> a culturally relevant one, and because there are so many factors that impact students learning, it's more than just the curriculum… I'm really empowering teacher leaders, so my moto with them is always *one sound one band*…so that when they go into a classroom, or I go in to observe instruction and student engagement or to observe a professional learning community planning time, it's seamless.

While participants have yet to receive an explicit definition of instructional leadership from the district, each offered their own definition within the construct of their work, anchored to teaching and learning.

Need for a Districtwide Vision of Effective Instructional Leadership

Middle school principals also stressed the importance of consistently prioritizing and defining instructional leadership by central office. For example, Laura Vaughn wanted to know the priorities around instructional leadership for the district, and other middle school principals wanted instructional leadership elevated as a priority at the district level. Sean Cole also emphasized the importance of measuring and identifying specific goals and being clear about the data points used to determine student progress and success. Other middle school principals spoke about the strengths or shortcomings of the individual central office leaders who supported them. Bella Ellington pointed out, "In terms of instructional focus [my director is] very good. [They have] a clear vision around how to use data to improve the school… [They have] thoughtful questions, and [they] link me to different school improvement resources." Mary Fitzgerald shared her frustrations with her perception of the district's lack of prioritizing instructional leadership and being pulled in various directions instead. She described focusing on ensuring that instructional leadership was prioritized at her school:

> I believe that if central office said that instruction is our number one priority, then the principals would feel like instruction is the number one priority. I really couldn't tell you right now what the priority is for [my district] and quite frankly,

> I would say for the past several years, and even pre-COVID…I don't know what they want...I can only tell you what the priority is for my school, and that is good teaching and learning…

All middle school principals reiterated the central office's important role in defining and supporting instructional leadership at the school level and the inconsistency in how it gets accomplished.

Instructional Leadership and the Middle School Structure

The middle school structure within the selected district consisted of three levels. The elementary school level encompasses kindergarten through fifth grade. Middle school, on the other hand, includes grades six, seven, and eight. Finally, the high school serves grades 9-12. The middle school structure requires leaders and teachers to be willing to support students during a time when they are experiencing extensive changes. Middle school principals need to be knowledgeable and understand adolescents' unique intellectual and social development (Petzko et al., 2002). During the interviews, several principals explained that it is essential that central office leaders supporting their work have personal and operational experience with middle school leadership and its structure. Principals stressed that they needed central office leaders who understood the complexities of adolescent learners and the teaching and learning that best meets the needs of that specific age group. As Mary Fitzgerald explained:

> I will say that middle school is very different from elementary or high school…I feel connected to someone…at the middle school level, I think they have to have had that experience, even if it's just for a year. There's nothing like going through those three years that are so impactful in people's lives and having somebody that's my supervisor understanding the uniqueness of middle school…Yes, you have to be a middle school practitioner to understand middle school.

In Yasmin Davis's interview, she elaborated on the collaborative partnership between middle school principals and central office leaders around instructional

leadership, describing it as "more impactful when all the middle school principals were working together; we had specific needs that really only focused on middle school and adolescent learning, and so the professional learning for the leaders was very specific to that regard." Others echoed Yasmin's sentiment in their interview, stressing the importance of having central office leaders who could provide them with instructional leadership support based on their thorough understanding of the complexity of the work as it pertained to building the master schedule, planning for and teaching the adolescent learners, and providing teachers with the necessary support.

Paul Gillespie, who has been a middle school leader for five years, said, "...in a perfect situation, I would love some of the secondary [directors] to understand the seven periods of the day, and then different teachers and co-teaching and all that sort of thing because elementary and secondary are a different animal." In order to collaborate with central office leaders around instructional leadership and engage in professional learning, middle school principals expressed the need for central office leaders to be knowledgeable of the work required for their roles. Furthermore, central office leaders need to communicate their understanding of the middle school structure to have a collaborative partnership that allows for an exchange of ideas and reflection. Yasmine Davis, a principal in her sixth year, reiterated, "…middle school is its own special bird, and it needs a delicate touch because there are so many nuances to a middle school student …you don't have that lens unless you're engrossed in middle school…" Middle school principals communicated that the support with instructional leadership needed to come from central office leaders familiar with the adolescent learner's developmental

needs. The next section focuses on the findings and themes that emerged from the research.

Findings

This study explored instructional leadership supports and professional learning experiences from central office leaders that middle school principals identified as most influential on their practice, as well as other factors pertaining to relationships that contribute to middle school principals' abilities to collaborate with or learn from central office. The data significant to the first research question led to one finding related to instructional leadership supports viewed as most influential on middle school principals' practice. Three themes emerged around process supports that middle school principals identified as impactful. Specifically, they found it helpful when central office leaders were (1) providing coaching strategies; (2) using data for improvement planning; and (3) conducting walkthroughs and informal observations.

Three findings emerged in response to the second research question and the most influential professional learning experiences from central office. The first finding pertained to professional learning based on individual principal needs and school context. The second finding pertained to a need for district-led collective professional learning, and the third finding addressed the benefits of the existing Middle School Professional Learning Community (MS PLC) that principals created due to a lack of central office-led professional learning. In response to the third research question, two findings emerged around the factors on relationships and collaboration. The first finding revealed that the development of collegial partnerships positively impacted collaboration between middle school principals and central office leaders, and the four themes emphasized the

importance of (1) trust; (2) listening; (3) transparency; and (4) encouragement while the second finding elucidated a need for consistent central office support, within two themes: (1) accessibility and reliability and (2) engagement as thought partners.

Instructional Leadership Supports

Process Supports

When discussing instructional leadership supports from central office, one finding about the benefits of process supports emerged as most influential on middle school principals' practice. Additionally, the three themes around process supports included providing coaching strategies, using data for improvement planning, and conducting walkthroughs and informal observations. The subsequent sections address the process supports through the three specific themes.

Providing Coaching Strategies

The middle school principals in this study did not explicitly define coaching. However, they described central office leaders who served in a coaching capacity by helping them reach their school goals. By partnering with principals to improve the quality of teaching and learning, a coach serves an important role in helping improve student outcomes and the school culture, as the coaching process requires the participants to engage in "critical questioning, active listening, giving feedback, and facilitating reflection" (Thessin, 2019, p. 478-479). Middle school principals reiterated that when directors were familiar with the school context and the dialogue was honest, it built trust and allowed principals to speak to their needs as they pertained to instructional leadership and professional learning needs.

For example, David Coltrane explained the impact of having a central office leader who supports him through coaching. They described their situation as unique because of their director, stating, "I've been in administration a very long time, and I have worked with…countless directors. To be honest with you, I don't recall getting this high level of coaching and collaboration that I'm receiving now in years past." David emphasized the importance of having a central office leader who is able to come in and offer him targeted support based on his individual school needs and his own professional needs. He further elaborated on the significance of that collegial partnership and the impact it is not only having on his professional growth as an instructional leader but also on students. He said:

> …the coaching [by the director] was contextual about a specific problem that might have gone on or a problem of practice within my current building…I have been able to collaborate effectively with my director…To come to an understanding of different professional learning opportunities for myself to grow in the area that I wanted to support more effectively within my building, so for the last two years I've really been trying to grow in my coaching of curriculum and instruction for ESOL students, and so this year is the first year that I feel like I've gotten really good professional learning from someone in central office.

Another middle school principal, Kristina Parker, elaborated on the coaching provided to her by her director. She explained the benefits of receiving support in an area where she identified a need for professional growth. Coaching allowed for focused professional learning tailored to each principal's needs. Kristina Parker shared, "I would say I've received [professional learning] about coaching that's probably been most valuable. Like data manipulation and data analysis [and] information about observing and providing [teachers with] feedback." Kristina Parker has been working with her director, who has been building her capacity in coaching through what she referred to as their one-on-one coaching sessions.

Laura Vaugh stressed the importance of the collaborative process and the time for reflection based on the context, "The director worked in partnership with me…he helped us with our cluster focus on instruction and school improvement, he has been part of that initial conversation, giving us directions with that." While this particular example occurred pre-pandemic, she spoke to the importance of having central office support with instructional leadership strategies.

Bella Ellington discussed the benefits of having a central office leader who helped her grow professionally through targeted coaching. About her experience with coaching from a central office leader, she said, "…[coaching] was [their] happy place, [they] probably could have kept coaching from [their] bedroom [due to COVID] for the rest of [their] life… because structurally, operationally, this was [their] wheelhouse." In speaking to the instructional leadership support Bella received from this specific director, she and other principals emphasized that not every central office leader, and specifically not every central office director, had the capacity to support them through coaching.

Middle school principals articulated their desire for coaching from directors. However, they described receiving targeted, meaningful coaching as an anomaly, not a norm. Based on the analysis of the interview data, only a few central office leaders could engage principals in coaching. Other principals expressed a need for coaching and shared their frustrations about not getting any from central office. Mary Fitzgerald describing feeling alone, explaining "because of the educational experience that I have…I feel I have more competence in knowing what good instruction is, how to coach my teachers in pedagogy, than some of the supervisors that I have worked for." Sean Cole said, "…after the first couple of years you don't see [central office leaders] again…you are good, cool,

let me sign you off and focus on the people who are struggling." Kayla Simone also shared their sentiment by pointing out, "I just don't see right now or in the last couple of years what anyone [from central office] could have provided to the team that I'm not getting from my own bubble."

The frustration shared by all three principals echoed among their colleagues as all the participants spoke about the breadth of work asked of them as school leaders and the difficulty of doing it all successfully without adequate central office support. Moreover, principals emphasized that coaching is not a process in which the district invests time or resources to build the capacity of all directors in this effective strategy. In further elaborating on the needed instructional leadership support, middle school principals stressed a need for support with using data to drive instruction and improve student outcomes.

Using Data for Improving Planning

Several principals in the study stressed a need for support in analyzing student data to improve instruction and use the data to collaborate on developing and implementing school improvement and action plans. While some principals described accessing and analyzing data independently, they did not acquire these skills through professional learning opportunities in the district. Instead, central office expected principals to learn to do this on their own, at their own expense. Various data platforms that principals have access to have made it easier for them to pull student performance data independently or delegate that task to someone on their leadership teams. However, middle school principals stressed that they needed help using student performance data to

improve the quality of teaching and learning and, ultimately, students' academic performance.

Middle school principals in this study emphasized that accessing student data was the first step in the process. The second step was using the data to improve instruction and build professional learning opportunities for teachers. Using data to drive instruction requires support from central office leaders who can serve as thought partners and coaches for middle school principals. Paul Gillespie explained, "I'm a huge data person. I am able to drill down to student by student. I'm a huge advocate that data is a face and a name, not just a number, and that's been my driving force." Hence, while some principals might have the capacity to pull data and have it tell a story about student performance, creating learning progressions for teachers requires a different skill set.

Other middle school principals spoke to the importance of using specific data points to directly align with instructional practices in their classrooms. They found discussing and creating action steps with the central office support helpful. Sean Cole explained, "I think analyzing data…in terms of instructional leadership [is important]…And then going over the instruction, like what are we doing in terms of our English classes, ESOL push-in model, math… breaking it down…" Others explained that they had to do the work alone at their schools without external support, "I will do data analysis with my teacher leaders to make sure that we all are able to lead and understand the data and determine next steps," said Kayla Simone.

Middle school principals stated that they needed support from central office in first using data to tell the story of student performance, then creating measurable outcomes that held teachers accountable for student growth, and finally, directing

professional learning opportunities for teachers. Specifically, David Coltrane explained, "I would ask for the person that supported me [with instructional leadership] to understand the work … [and] to be able to help me analyze specific key data points and measures that are definitely opportunities for improvement for my students." The concern David experienced was that it was not enough when central office leaders merely shared data points measuring student success with him. He wanted support with analyzing and using those data points for instructional leadership improvement, which was absent. Therefore, while data were shared for analyzing and improving instructional leadership and student outcomes, the necessary data analysis and interpretation training was never provided to David by central office leaders.

Another principal, Yasmine Davis, explained how large amounts of student data are available to school leaders, yet what was missing, in Yasmine's opinion, was the support middle school principals needed in drilling down the performance data to create an action plan to improve instructional practices, "[Central office leaders are] helping me with specific situations, like… data points or I'm trying to identify specific indicators to help me figure out what instructional moves have to be made." Yasmine's experience when reflecting on instructional leadership and analyzing student data points was similar, as she explained her struggles with managing large amounts of student data and figuring out how to drill it down to create an action plan that would allow her to improve student outcomes.

Furthermore, middle school principals discussed how they used school improvement plans and student data to create the instructional focus for the year and received support from central office leaders who could help them with that work.

Additionally, middle school principals found it helpful when they were able to collaborate with central office leaders around the school improvement plan and action plans, as both plans were data-driven and centered around measurable student performance outcomes. The collaborative process of middle school principals working together around the improvement efforts allowed them to examine their instructional leadership practices and align their school goals around those of the district. Sean Cole explained, "I am fortunate to have a good relationship with my direct supervisor with whom I'm able to share and brainstorm…and we will sit down to look at the school improvement plan and have a very healthy conversation." Laura Vaught emphasized, "[The instructional specialists] have been really responsive…, so I have to say when I think about our school improvement, our vision and mission, that's where I experience the most support from central office…"

Michael Armstrong spoke to the implications of working jointly with central office leaders around school improvement and explained seeking instructional leadership "support with our school improvement plan…to get another set of eyes… on the work that we were doing… and then to give us some ideas as to what some other schools might be doing…" In this role, central office leaders could speak to strategies and initiatives that other middle schools were implementing successfully or offer guidance to principals based on student data being evaluated. When asked how central office leaders could help with the school improvement and action plan, David Coltrane explained what he would like to see:

> Really kind of walking an action plan, from start to finish, to help me become or lead more effectively the school improvement efforts in a building, knowing that there are so many other distractions and obstacles and barriers that might come up…I would expect [the central office leaders] to help create an action plan that

> we could monitor over the course of the year using do-study-act models, to really see if I'm making good growth in the goals that I might have set for myself as the principal, in terms of the school improvement efforts that we want.

David emphasized the need for additional support from central office that would enable him to monitor the entire goal setting and monitoring process around student achievement and hold him and his teachers accountable for student outcomes. While middle school principals spoke to the benefits of having support with student performance data as it pertained to monitoring student progress and teacher learning progressions, they also addressed the benefits of receiving support from central office leaders on observing instructional practices in the classroom.

Conducting Walkthroughs and Informal Observations

In addition to receiving coaching and data support, middle school principals described conducting walkthroughs and informal observations with central office leaders as an effective instructional leadership support provided by central office leaders. Margaret Monk spoke about the collaborative partnership between her and her director that allowed them to observe instruction together. Accompanied by leadership team members, they analyzed their observations as it pertained to instructional leadership, "Typically, we use a lot of informal walkthroughs and then discuss [what we observed]..." The joint work allowed them to have focused conversations around teaching and learning.

Another experienced middle school leader, Kristina Parker, shared her experiences of conducting classroom observations with central office leaders. She asserted the benefits of having central office leaders engage with her leadership team beyond the surface level of just going in and out of the classrooms. She needed them to

help her break down and discuss what they saw regarding instructional practices. She emphasized that as a school leader, it was her responsibility to:

> Provide a steady stream of feedback [to her teachers and paraeducators and] to validate excellence and redirect mediocrity and under performance. To review qualitative, primarily voice data, and quantitative [data], primarily standardized formative and summative tests. Instructional leaders stay up to date with pedagogy and technology, assessment, social emotional learning, all the things that ultimately contribute to the academic growth or lack thereof.

Kristina affirmed that knowing what was happening in the classrooms was critical, as was providing her teachers with meaningful feedback that would allow them to improve the quality of instruction, which would improve student outcomes. She also discussed how effective it was when the district created opportunities for middle school principals to shadow each other. She explained, "…the strongest our instruction program has ever been was when we were able to regularly do instructional rounds or walkthroughs… and we had multiple people with eyes on a teacher and …I think it helped validate good teaching, it also helped us see different perspectives on what good teaching is..." Walkthroughs at her and other middle schools enabled Kristina to gain a deeper understanding of effective instruction and how to engage her teachers in a dialogue and reflection about their teaching practices.

Similar to collaborative walkthroughs, another helpful strategy used by central office leaders was conducting joint informal observations with middle school principals. Sofie Holiday has served as both a middle school principal and an assistant principal in numerous schools throughout the district. She described her development as an instructional leader and the various development programs she completed over the years. Sofie said that she found it most helpful when she had the opportunity to collaborate with a [central office] team through walkthroughs. She explained that the process helped her

increase her capacity as an instructional leader. Sofie further spoke of the value of "Paired walkthrough of classrooms and debriefing, being a thought partner…" and the value of having the partnership. She continued, "And I would rather they come in and say how can we support you and getting to your goals and your school improvement plan and we are here to be extra eyes and ears…" She elaborated:

> I feel like you need that extra support because you are one person and often times when you are giving feedback that is not glowing to someone, if they don't hear it from more than one person and they haven't received it in previous settings, they find it difficult to receive and take it seriously. So, I would seek out instructional leadership support from a central office person who would partner with me and really be side by side, and I feel like that is key, if really truly the system is wanting us to have excellent leaders.

Sofie discussed the impact of walkthroughs and follow-up discussions in building her capacity as an instructional leader, especially when it comes to providing constructive feedback and helping others improve.

Michael Armstrong spoke extensively about the power of walkthroughs with the leadership team and central office leaders. He explained the importance of finding time to regularly visit classrooms and prioritizing the walkthroughs with his leadership team members. He stressed that as an instructional leader, he had to keep a pulse on what was happening inside the classrooms. He emphasized the significance of having central office leaders join him in the collaborative process of informally observing instructional practices in the classroom through the lens of the instructional focus alongside his leadership team members. He explained:

> …when I've tried to be inclusive with the district office leaders to come and conduct [informal observations] with us, alongside us, they have been great and responding. They have been great in terms of being committed to it and …it looks good to have a mini army of people going out into the field. We've got our folks, we got our clipboards, we got our laptops. Whatever it is, we're capturing information…

The collaborative process of conducting informal observations with central office leaders was described as an effective strategy by the principals who experienced the process. Those who had not experienced it also explained that the process would benefit them. For example, when asked what type of support would be helpful in terms of instructional leadership, Mary Fitzgerald responded by stating:

> I think if they had the time to come with me [into the classrooms], and conduct informal observations using the tool that my school has created and we've tweaked over the years, and then compare our notes, and really have a rich discussion about what we saw, and how I could coach the teacher to go to the next level up…It's very easy to put instruction at the bottom of your to-do list every day. But I don't do that, instruction is always at the top of my list. I get into classrooms every day. I think having time with the director or going to professional learning [is about] time, and we have so many other things on our plate…

Mary also explained that she worked with numerous directors, but no one had her skill level in recognizing good instructional practices. In order to ensure that central office leaders were not just checking off items on a checklist, Mary explained that she needed a central office leader skilled as an instructional leader to engage with her around school improvement genuinely. Mary said, "...I think if you ask my staff what my priorities are, they would say, Mary wants us to plan and execute good lessons for our students, great lessons." As a strong instructional leader who regularly conducted informal observations, she thought it essential to have a partner who could join her in that work and elevate the school's teaching and learning quality.

Laura Vaughn explained that when principals and central office leaders conducted joint informal observations, they discussed the lesson and provided teachers with constructive feedback. That type of partnership benefited the middle school principal and the teacher. Middle school principals have expressed that they appreciated having central

office leaders who could join them in the instructional leadership work beyond the theoretical level by actually spending time with them in the classrooms, observing instruction, and then determining how to improve instructions and academic outcomes for students. As Michael noted, he had to request central office leaders to join him in the walkthroughs, as central office leaders were not initiating support and collaboration. Some principals, like Michael, were comfortable asking for that collaboration, whereas others were uncomfortable asking for support or did not even know it was available to them. While participants described receiving instructional leadership supports through coaching strategies, data use, walkthroughs, and informal observations as essential, middle school principals also discussed the need for ongoing professional learning experiences from central office.

Professional Learning Experiences

This section focuses on three findings related to middle school principals' professional learning experiences from central office and their influence on their instructional leadership practice. Middle school principals described and stressed a necessity for both micro and macro professional learning as one met their unique school needs. At the same time, the other ensured that they could implement the district's vision and priorities around the strategic plan. The first finding centered around the benefits of differentiated professional learning experiences led by central office and based on individual principals' needs and school context. The differentiated professional learning supported middle school principals in building their capacity in instructional leadership practices based on their schools' needs. The second finding identified a need for additional district-led collective professional learning focused on district initiatives and

priorities to ensure school cohesion. The third finding identified the benefits of the existing middle school professional learning community that filled the void created by insufficient central office-led professional learning opportunities. This is especially relevant because central office leaders are responsible for increasing principal capacity in instructional leadership and helping them as partners and supervisors in the work (Honig & Rainey, 2015).

Benefits of Differentiated Professional Learning

The initial finding emerged from analyzing the types of professional learning that middle school principals found beneficial. Middle school principals stressed that professional learning needs to occur within the school context and individual principal needs. Hence, middle school principals reiterated the importance of central office leaders being familiar with the unique aspects of the schools they supported and helping build the capacity of middle school principals leading those schools. Furthermore, for middle school principals to engage in a collaborative partnership around their professional learning needs, they needed to have trusted partnerships with central office leaders.

Before engaging in a conversation about meaningful professional learning experiences from central office leaders, middle school principals clarified that central office leaders needed to know their individual school needs. Middle school principals pointed out that generic, all-encompassing professional learning was not always applicable to them. They said that central office leaders needed to take the time to determine the school's needs through an open dialogue with principals. Sean Cole explained:

> Having a [central office leader] who can say, I know what this school did and what that school did, if you need help with that, and connecting it all and

> facilitating a conversation…that [central office] person needs to have a broader experience…just getting to know the school would be huge, just to know the ins and outs, the interscholastic.

He further emphasized, "I don't want advice from anybody about instructional leadership of my school if you don't know my building… if [they] don't know it, [their] leadership may not be applicable to me and my particular school."

Middle school principals also spoke to the variance of their professional learning needs based on their school performance data, the number of emergent language learners, their schools' unique programs or initiatives, and the level of teacher experiences within their buildings. Mary Fitzgerald explained, "...knowing the school [is imperative]…I have a very seasoned staff myself, so working with adults, [they] would have to know best practices for adults and how to move them forward." Furthermore, David Coltrane emphasized this point explaining how when a central office leader says:

> … we're going to do this, this is what some other schools have done from a research-based perspective, and then you say, well, those schools have nothing in common with my school, why would I do that. So it has to be relevant and aligned specifically to the needs of the school.

Sean Cole also spoke about his professional learning experiences and how his director supported him as a thought partner. He elaborated on central office providing principals with ongoing meaningful professional learning and how he was in a unique situation with a director who engaged him based on the director's individual capacity to support him. Sean said:

> I think it's the luck of the draw [having a director who can provide you with effective] professional learning, there's nothing systematic about it. It's just either we develop on our own through the PLC, or you're seeking it out on your own, along with a small cohort of people you trust, or you can just do it on your own, going to conferences, or going online and yeah that's it.

While middle school principals' professional learning experiences varied from director to director, they agreed they needed professional learning to maximize their impact on teaching and learning and serve as effective instructional leaders.

David Coltrane identified his areas of growth and created a plan with his director's support for his professional learning. David discussed the benefits of the professional learning he experienced when working collaboratively with his director, "I have been able to collaborate effectively with my director…To come to an understanding of different professional learning opportunities for myself, to grow in the area that I wanted to support more effectively within my building…" David further explained how his professional learning was aligned with his school improvement plan and a focus student group that needed academic support, "I've really been trying to grow in my coaching of curriculum and instruction for ESOL students, and so this year is the first year that I feel like I've gotten really good professional learning from someone in central office." Based on the professional learning he received from his director, he felt he had the skills to support his teachers and provide them with feedback on their instructional practices.

Other examples of differentiated professional learning experiences that middle school principals found beneficial also surfaced. For example, Paul Gillespie spoke of a helpful instructional leadership strategy centered around questioning techniques during peer observations used as a vehicle for teacher learning and reflection. He received literature that accompanied those techniques.

Paul found these strategies so helpful that he reached out to central office and asked for summer professional learning opportunities for his leadership team so that they,

too, could learn the questioning process. He spoke to his frustration of often being provided with theories for school improvement that are abstract and not practical for him or his teachers. He explained, "There is a level alike [professional learning] that could be systematic to help us out…to make it, over time, and not just a one-time, good-luck-next-year kind of thing." He explained that he needed central office leaders to provide him with more ongoing professional learning, such as questioning techniques, that are directly aligned with student needs so that he could improve student outcomes.

Another middle school principal, Kayla Simone, described the impact of central office leaders meeting with her leadership team and furthering their professional learning around supporting and managing underperforming teachers. Central office leaders discussed the data types that needed to be collected and helped build their overall skills around instructional leadership. Kayla explained:

> Another time central office leaders came in to help build collaboration with the team so that we could hear each other, trust each other, because trust and rapport is big and understanding who we are, the characteristics that each of us brings [though] strength-based leadership…to identify what our strengths are and how that creates this well-formed uniform team, and what we might have been missing in the team.

Having that partnership with central office helped Kayla increase the capacity of her entire instructional leadership team as they collaborated and built trust with one another.

Kristina Parker described professional learning opportunities as important because they allow middle school principals to shadow other principals by visiting their schools. She spoke about its benefits on her learning:

> It's the just-in-time factor. I see [an assessment] progress bulletin board and I asked them about it, and then it gets us into a conversation, of how and why they do that…so I think it's the situation at the moment, like immediately relevant and potentially…adaptable to me.

Kristina also explained another professional learning experience that increased her capacity as an instructional leader. She said that a central office leader would coordinate a time for middle school principals to meet, and one principal would come prepared to discuss a problem of practice. All the middle school principals were trained on the process, and the environment fostered trust so principals could speak honestly and freely share their ideas. She said, "…the protocol case study discussions, where we all share… someone is sharing their situation, and we unpack it together…I find those to be helpful because they're real and for the same reasons, they're timely, they're practical." Moreover, she explained how those discussions represented "the best learning for me."

Finally, Michael Armstrong discussed a series of professional learning opportunities led by central office leaders, also designed around a problem of practice and delivered over time. These sessions were structured so that every two-hour session allowed for problem-solving, collaboration, and reflection on school improvement and instructional leadership from a district perspective. However, the sessions ended with the pandemic and were never reinstated. He shared:

> [Cohort professional learning sessions with the superintendent] ended because of COVID. But I thought that was incredibly, incredibly useful. Bringing speakers…every time we met we had little projects we had to complete and present, and having that access, it is just too bad that it ended when COVID came, because for me, that was one of the best [instructional development trainings] in years.

Laura Vaughn, on the other hand, pointed out, "[Professional learning] needs to be from a direction of the system; we shouldn't have to do that on our own; it should be something that the system really invests the time and money in." Laura spoke about meaningful professional learning she received from central office at a cluster meeting. The training was provided to a group of principals who matriculated into the same high

school. As a result, principals were able to apply their learning, further collaborate based on their common goals, and continue the learning well beyond the professional learning session(s).

Middle school principals in this study spoke at length about the importance of having central office-led differentiated professional learning opportunities based on their individual and school needs. When central office professional learning around instructional leadership was based on school needs, principals could provide support to their leadership team members and teachers, who worked directly with students. According to middle school principals in this study, when central office-provided professional learning supports were (1) strategic, (2) intentional, and (3) provided targeted resources, students thrived.

A Need for Additional District-Led Professional Learning

While middle school principals in the study shared the benefits of differentiated professional learning opportunities based on their unique school profiles and instructional leadership capacity, they also shared the need for ongoing collective district-led learning. As school leaders in a large school district, they emphasized the importance of being a unified front in terms of both the district vision and state expectations around student performance. Hence, a theme that emerged was middle school principals' desire for additional professional learning experiences from central office leaders based on what was not being provided. Middle school principals indicated that in order for them to increase their capacity in instructional leadership, they needed ongoing, cohesive, centrally coordinated, data-driven professional learning. Their frustrations with the lack of those opportunities were evident. For example, Bella Ellington explained:

> Our district's professional development is designed for all, and it's not designed to specifically meet the needs of principals…And I think so much of our professional learning [in our district] is about compliance… this is important, check off this box. The problem that we're facing now in our district is that [it] hasn't really [been] made clear what they want, so everybody is kind of trying to figure it out, it's very vague, it doesn't have any rigor.

Bella said no when asked if she could think of a significant collective professional learning experience around instructional leadership. She went on to explain how their "current setup of professional learning is that somebody woke up in the morning, wrote a training plan, and went to bed, and then we all have to sit through it… this is insulting, this is not okay." Other principals expressed similar concerns. Paul Gillespie said, "A lot of the meetings that we have are information sharing, not professional learning." When asked where other middle school principals receive professional learning from central office, he said, "[We don't get it], not really." Sofie Holiday also spoke to the importance of having professional learning opportunities that were planned for and led by the district:

> ...there was a time…when there was much more aligned and coordinated professional learning, through our leadership development program, through our professional learning communities, and through our central office meetings. And they were higher quality and more coordinated in such a way that you could then use installments to train the trainer model, and that was beneficial, because then you could take that and adapt it to your school …

Moreover, Sofie shared about a time when there was structured collective professional learning for both principals and their leadership teams. Sofie explained that having principals engage in professional learning with their leadership teams enabled them to apply the learning at their school and support each other through the process. Principals and their teams could structure the learning around their school data, implement the strategies, reflect on the outcomes, and adjust the process as needed. She said:

> Middle School Reform training [in our district was a particularly meaningful instructional leadership training]. It was excellent, … it was a train-the-trainer model and the entire leadership team experienced the same high-quality training at a central location. We were given plentiful resources and then, in turn, adapted them and trained our teachers. [Resources were] aligned with things that are particularly important to me as a middle school principal, which is the adolescent learner, equity, feedback and rigor. and you learned about how the brain works… for adolescents.

Middle school principals also discussed their frustrations with central office leaders' lack of vision around professional learning opportunities based on principals' needs and student performance data. As a result, the available professional learning sessions felt disjointed and made the principals feel that they were working in silos, unsure of district priorities and initiatives. Laura Vaughn explained, "The hit and run information and sessions, I found most of them are not helpful. I could have gotten that information via email or some communication, my time would have been better spent." Another principal, Margaret Monk said, "That stop and start [professional learning was not effective] and every time we stopped and started, I felt like we went all the way back to the beginning." Bella Ellington shared, "My frustration…is, I'm not sure our central office understands what quality professional learning is, I don't think they have a definition, I think they haven't thought about it."

Other principals spoke of taking the initiative of professional learning into their own hands and creating opportunities for themselves in both the district and through other means, including universities and conferences. David Coltrane pointed out, "A lot of the learning that I've done over my career has come from suggestions, conversations with colleagues and peers, and extensive reading in terms of books that might have been shared with me that can help me in certain areas, so I don't recall pre-COVID professional learning that got to the root of being an instructional leader." Mary

Fitzgerald echoed David's sentiment and frustration with the lack of a systemwide collective professional learning plan for principals. She said:

> Even [peer mentoring] was colleague-to-colleague, that was again us creating that net of support that didn't come from central office. It was really us looking out for each other, and us really helping each other, because it's a heavy lift, the work that we do and it sounds like there's been a void, and it's not just due to COVID, it has been there for a long time there has been a void in effective instructional leadership support.

Bella Ellington shared how critical collective professional learning is for school leaders, especially those just beginning that journey. She explained that, as a new principal, one needs as much support as possible with instructional leadership and school operations. The position can be isolating, hence making it even more important for principals to have central office support to keep the focus on teaching and learning. Bell said, "I felt very inadequate [when I became a middle school principal], like I was struggling. I was not sure what my role was, and so I started to look for conferences and professional learning outside the district. I could not find what I needed in the district…" She emphasized, "I had to figure this out, I didn't have anybody telling me what to do…" Consequently, Bella enrolled in a summer program for new principals at a prestigious university through an online program that stretched over four summers and focused on leading the school. The modules in the program were designed around school improvement efforts. Bella described the structured professional learning as helpful, mainly because it emphasized case studies on her instructional leadership. She said:

> ...it was great…they would model a successful principal, [and explain what they did] to create whatever change, [implement] new programs and it was really helpful for me to see what other principals who lead in this particular area did…I thought it was very helpful professional development for me. [It has] nothing to do with our district. Our district didn't even know about it…I feel like… principals need to see case studies, they need to see a principal working through a problem of practice, and then having results.

With all the responsibilities middle school principals face and the isolating nature of their roles, they shared a need for collective, district-led, coordinated professional learning that allowed for continuous learning that had systemwide alignment to district initiatives. Bella Ellington emphasized, "I want our professional learning to run like I have to run my school…[we need] coherence from our central office around professional learning." They emphasized that access to ongoing, collective, meaningful professional learning planned by central office would help them improve student achievement and ensure districtwide alignment.

Benefits of the Existing Middle School Professional Learning Community

Overall, middle school principals struggled to describe professional learning experiences provided by central office that were most influential on their instructional leadership practice. Due to so few relevant professional learning experiences provided by central office, principals organized their own union-supported professional learning communities. Hence, the third finding on the instructional leadership benefits of the middle school professional learning community (PLC) emerged out of necessity and positively influenced middle school principals' professional learning experiences. The PLC is coordinated by middle school principal leads, who are voted into their positions, and the meetings are an all-day event that takes place monthly. The middle school principals have a cabinet soliciting participant feedback, which they use to structure their agenda. The middle school principals invite central office leaders and either conduct their professional learning sessions or have central office leaders, as guests, who come in and provide professional learning opportunities. The meetings occur in their administrative

union building, which allows for privacy, and central office leaders only attend when invited.

As a result of the PLC structure that allows for privacy, middle school principals have shared that they can be honest, transparent, and openly speak to their professional learning needs. Bella Ellington explained, "I find our PLC to be a good place where I get professional learning and conversation…" Also, middle school principals could engage in discussions with their colleagues to learn how they were managing similar issues.

Laura Vaughn discussed the benefits of the professional learning community for her as an instructional leader. She pointed out, "One of the most useful experiences that I had as an administrator is when I had the opportunity to talk to other principals about what they are doing in their buildings." Laura also shared, "The only place we really, truly have professional learning for principals is in our middle school PLC, or us making that time and making it happen." Laura explained:

> I haven't had any of that [professional learning] and I think it's a huge hole, and if it wasn't for us [middle school principals] doing our own learning, if we weren't taking our local learning at the helm, I don't think we would be getting anything…but I think if it wasn't for the fact that we take initiative on our own [for professional learning], independently or as a PLC, we don't have that [from the district], so we need some direction and communication about that.

Laura reiterated that while middle school principals were doing their best to manage their professional learning as a group, it would be helpful to have ongoing collective professional learning from central office leaders whose role is to support schools and who need to prioritize resources and time around instructional leadership. Additionally, when describing a meaningful professional learning experience that impacted teaching and learning, Kristina Parker spoke to the rich training led by other middle school principals during their PLC:

> … when I think about my most effective training, I would say it has been the self-selected equity training that I've done… there is a commitment from the group [PLC], the conversations are so deep…through the work of trying to change the school's culture, that is going to have a positive impact on kids experiences of classroom, so those [trainings] of late have been the most powerful.

Kristina's reflection highlighted the need for middle school principals to engage with each other through meaningful discussion around instructional leadership that goes beyond the classroom and is inclusive of the curriculum, pedagogy, the needs of the adolescent learner, and the overall classroom environment.

Similarly, Paul Gillespie emphasized, "There are certain times when you enter the PLC, for example, [middle school principals] say stuff that they do that never crossed my mind…I would ask other principal colleagues [for instructional leadership support] before I would ask central office." He added, "I think the collaboration is encouraged [by central office]…we have our PLC, middle school collaboration that we just naturally do, because we know what we need to support each other to do the job." Paul spoke about the professional learning opportunities that happened organically at the PLC based on principal needs. Due to the trust established among the members, the honest conversations, reflections, and discussions allowed for meaningful professional learning that Paul and his colleagues described as effective and helpful.

Kayla Simone and Michael Armstrong reiterated the PLC's significant role in their professional learning. Kayla found the learning she received through the PLC to be very impactful in increasing her capacity as an instructional leader. She said, "I just don't see right now or in the last couple of years what anyone could have provided to the team that I'm not getting from my own [PLC] bubble."

Michael Armstrong shared how they use their middle school PLC for support, stating "I think that's where I can get a look at a lot of different things that are being brought to the to the group, and decide from there maybe something I want to follow up on." Both Kayla and Michael have come to expect their meaningful professional learning experiences to come from the PLC rather than the district. The principals in the PLC provided ideas and recommendations from those who were immersed in similar work and were facing similar challenges. They could hear creative ideas on overcoming barriers and asking questions without the fear of being judged.

On the other hand, David Coltrane and Sean Cole expressed frustration with the district's lack of centrally led professional learning opportunities to support their ongoing learning. David shared the contrast between the district's lack of professional learning made available to middle school principals and that of the PLC. He stated, "I can't recall any professional learning outside of the learning with my colleagues at a professional learning community meeting that I actually gained some knowledge [from] or something to help me build my capacity in an area." Because they did not receive it, and to fill the void, they organized their own PLC to fill the gap.

Sean Cole expanded on that idea: "...in terms of professional learning, there's nothing systematic about it, either we develop it on our own through the PLC, or you're seeking it out on your own, along with a small cohort of people you trust, or you can just do it on your own, by going to conferences, or going online." David and Sean acknowledged the significant role that the PLC plays in supporting them as instructional leaders, as well as other school leader responsibilities, and the need for it to be self-directed, either through the group or independently.

While the middle school professional learning community played an essential role in providing principals with ongoing professional learning, it only occurs once a month and is participant-structured and led. Middle school principals pointed out a need for professional learning that happened more frequently and was coordinated and led by central office. The findings revealed that middle school principals need differentiated and centrally led professional learning and supports based on their individual schools' needs and the school district's priorities and initiatives for student achievement. While exploring the professional learning opportunities, principals spoke to the importance of working collaboratively with central office. It is pertinent to point out that the relationship between middle school principals and central office leaders is an essential component of the collaborative partnership.

The Role of Relationships

Finally, middle school principals emphasized that support around instructional leadership and professional learning was dependent upon meaningful collegial partnerships and consistent support from central office leaders, which, in turn, positively impacted collaboration between middle school principals and central office leaders. Several factors of relationships contributed to middle school principals' abilities to collaborate with or learn from central office. An effective collegial partnership between principals and central office leaders is essential in creating an environment for a strong relationship that allows for open communication and trust (Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Honig & Rainey, 2015; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011). Furthermore, to build relationships and trust, principals need central office leaders

to comprehend their unique needs, the needs of the schools, and their context (Goldring et al., 2018).

Two key findings emerged. The first finding revealed that the development of collegial partnerships positively impacted collaboration between middle school principals and central office leaders. The four emerging themes focused on: (1) establishing trust; (2) listening; (3) being transparent; and (4) being encouraging. The second finding revealed that middle school principals need central office leaders to provide consistent support, which participants described as positively impacting the quality of their relationships. The two themes emphasized the importance of central office leaders being (1) accessible and reliable and (2) engaging as thought partners.

Collegial Partnership's Impact on Collaboration

The quality of time principals and central office leaders spent together, and the nature of their interactions increased their collaborative focus on instructional leadership (Thessin, 2019). Laura Vaughn, a middle school principal, emphasized, "Time, respect, honesty, and collaboration [are essential components of an effective relationship]." The first finding revealed that middle school principals were more likely to collaborate with and learn from central office leaders when they engaged in collegial partnerships with middle school principals. For the partnerships to be effective, middle school principals needed central office leaders to (1) establish trust, (2) listen, (3) be transparent, and (4) be encouraging.

Establishing Trust

Trust was discussed by all 12 principals in this study as a key factor related to collegial partnerships. Bella Ellington reiterated the importance of trust in the collegial

partnership that leads to collaboration, "I trust my director…[they are] an instructional leader, [they] know their data, [as a] coach, [they have] good questions…[they are always] thinking about how do we move the school." Sean Cole explained that it takes time to build trust. He explained, "…with my specific [director] now, I feel I can ask anything because…the person knows my work, and I feel like I've built that trust, and what I'm asking is not because I'm unable or incapable." Another principal, Mary Fitzgerald, elaborated on the significance of trust in her willingness to be honest about the support she needs around instructional leadership:

> … it's all about relationships and trust… if we don't trust our directors or the people above us… if we don't have that trust to say, hey I need some help here, without feeling like it's gonna get blasted all over [the district] or it's gonna be written in an observation or an evaluation of a principal. It's not going to work and it doesn't matter who it is. If they don't build that trust with the principals it's not going to work.

Sean Cole further stressed the importance of trust and how it leads to honest conversations that ultimately improve teaching and learning by stating, "I am fortunate to have a good relationship with my direct supervisor with whom I'm able to share, brainstorm, or [they] will ask me where I'm at, and we will sit down and look at the school improvement plan, and have a very healthy conversation." Another principal, Laura Vaughn, explained that if there is trust and a working collegial partnership, principals are more likely to be honest, allowing them to collaborate with and learn from central office leaders. Laura said, "I appreciate [my director's] honesty, and I literally tell [them] what I screwed up on, what is going well. And in both they are very supportive."

Paul Gillespie discussed how follow-through leads to trust in the collegial partnership. He also spoke about the significance of central office leaders demonstrating that they care and are invested in the relationship. Rather than giving directives, he

thought it was vital for them to always begin any conversation by asking how the principal was doing and how they could provide support or help. The follow-through leads to trust, so Paul felt he could be honest with his challenges. Paul said:

> [I have built trust with my director] because [they] follow through. If something goes on [at the school], the first questions should be, "Are you Okay," and "How can I help you?" Which is something that I have not had in a while. [They are] available to me and if [they are] not available, [they] let me know when [they will be]…and the follow through has helped build trust.

Paul further explained that investing the time to build trusting relationships takes time and intentionality in efforts from central office leaders to become familiar with the school and the individual needs of the principal:

> [In order to build a trusting relationship] it was finding out who I was first. In the past, other directors share everything they're going through, how busy they are, and I get it, they are busy, but I don't want to hear how busy they are when I have something going on with me. I need their attention on me, not on them. [They need to be asking] how are you, how can I help, what do you need, what are you working on…

Margaret Monk echoed that sentiment and discussed when she needed to build trusting relationships with central office leaders, especially those who worked directly with her school. She provided an example of when she worked with a director who initially approached the partnership by providing Margaret with random resources and artifacts and giving her directives on how to do the work in her school. As a result, Margaret did not trust the central office leader and could not have an honest conversation with them. Margaret had to take the initiative to explain the work at her school and help her director understand Margaret's unique needs. With time, as the director started learning about Margaret's school, they started having more honest conversations, eventually leading to a trusting collegial partnership. Margaret explained:

> At first, [the director] came in and we had to feel them out. Because just giving us stuff…we didn't feel trusted...so we just started sharing artifacts…talking about the process…telling them where we were, inviting them to come in…it just helped to build up the trust…because I felt like things were getting thrown at us [by central office]…but I think through conversations and them actually being involved more and more with the school, they could see the work that was being done.

Margaret also pointed out that building that trust took a significant amount of time and a willingness from both of them to engage in the partnership. However, the district changed the support structure provided to schools, and as a result, the directors who support principals were given approximately twice as many schools to manage. Margaret directly felt the negative impact of the reassignment, as she explained:

> [Building trust] took a while, and with everything going on [the director] is not here as much, they [the director] went from [supporting] 13 schools to 26 schools and so that's just been a shame, [the director] connects with me but it's not like it used to be.

As an experienced principal with an established relationship with the director who supported her school, Margaret still felt frustrated with the loss of consistency and the time needed to collaborate. Furthermore, novice principals who did not have a trusting relationship with their directors had even less chance to build that partnership with the new district structure.

Sophie Holiday discussed the implications of relationships with central office leaders that lacked trust. When discussing instructional leadership, she stressed the importance of trust in the partnership between principals and central office leaders. She emphasized that the work remained at the surface level without trust because principals could feel anxious to share their needs and ideas honestly. She spoke to the ramifications of a relationship that lacked trust, as it both stalled collaboration and limited learning opportunities:

> [If there is no relationship and a lack of trust]... you feel anxious, or you feel insecure or unsure of your steps. And you don't feel supported and you live in a little state of clenched teeth…not knowing when the shoe is going to drop… I'm managing [a thousand] students and however many parents and 120 teachers and all of their needs and wants and I just feel like I need some support and guidance and leadership from above, in order to do this hard work every day…

Sophie's emphasis on trust highlighted the significance of the partnership between school leaders and central office leaders in the collaborative process of school improvement. Students benefit when principals and central office leaders can converse honestly about instructional practices. Kayla Simone, who has been a principal for seven years, explained that she understood how stretched-thin central office leaders are who support schools. When speaking about the importance of trust in her partnership with central office leaders, she said:

> Huge, trust is a very key factor, if you think about how we operate our buildings…we have to operate in the realm of trust and transparency right…if this is what we do in our individual communities, I think it's equally important that we have that with those who are supposed to support us…trust is so important…there is absence of trust, which I think has trickled down from the top…And that's a hard thing, because I feel like I don't know if I want to ask for help sometimes with certain things because I'm not sure I'm going to get it, or I'm going to be judged for it.

Kayla went on to explain that the feeling of the lack of trust started before the global pandemic. She felt central office leaders needed to be held accountable to schools for engaging in relationship-building, as principals were responsible for ensuring open, transparent communication with community members.

Listening

Middle school principals also emphasized the implications of central office leaders taking the time to listen and learn about individual leaders, their professional needs, and the unique structures of their schools. Sofie Holiday connected trust to

listening because when central office leaders took the time to get to know the principals they support, they did so by listening:

> [Central office leaders build trust by] listening and knowing you and knowing your history…they take the time to really sit down and talk to me for about an hour about my life, my kids, where I went to school, what I studied, and what I like to do for fun. They really should want to know me as a person…[when I had a director who did that] it was one of my best years of being on an admin team because that person took the time to build a relationship with me…

Kayla Simone also emphasized listening, sharing "[Central office leaders need to] listen. They really need to listen, and they need to observe and be a part of what's happening in the day-to-day [of running my school], it is not coming for an hour." She said she felt frustrated when central office leaders came by her school as part of a checklist and thus limited the opportunity for collaboration around instructional leadership. She also pointed out that it was important for central official leaders to demonstrate, through actions and partnerships, that they were listening to principal, "...They need to listen because I feel like they can say, we listen to principals, but I don't think they do. I think sometimes it goes in one ear and goes out the other because they think that they know what's best."

Paul Gillespie also spoke to the significance and characteristics of effective communication between central office leaders and middle school principals. In addition to accessibility, whether through a call or a text, he needed central office leaders who "listen to understand." As he pointed out, for central office leaders to support him with instructional leadership, they need to understand his school context. Paul explained that central office leaders should not assume that they have all the answers, "[Central office leaders] may not get it right away…they listen to try to understand before just telling us what they think." Paul emphasized the importance of listening as a form of engagement.

Taking the time to listen, learn, and understand the school context allows central office leaders to build trust with middle school principals. In return, middle school principals were more likely to honestly share their barriers and engage in a collaborative partnership with central office leaders.

Being Transparent

The significance of transparency was a recurring theme with middle school principals. They spoke about transparency concerning their partnership with central office leaders, specifically how transparency led to trust and ensured clarity. One principal spoke specifically about how the two groups' partnership is negatively impacted when transparency is missing. David Coltrane, for example, described transparency as the foundation for the relationship between principals and central office leaders and how transparency leads to honest conversations about the instructional leadership work needed. Without transparency and honesty, there would not be trust, and without trust, principals would be reluctant to discuss their school needs:

> The transparency of the entire process has to be on the table, so people can know what we are talking about, what are we working from, material to do that, then you start out really looking at what are the assets that this individual brings to the table in the role of the principalship, then you're going to have an easier time building the relationship and moving forward.

David further emphasized the importance of transparency in the collaborative partnership between middle school principals and central office, who need to collaborate in order to improve the academic outcomes for students:

> I feel like in order to do this very well, we have to once again look at the strength of the workforce and go to those people and have honest and open conversations with them about the work…without having a transparent, honest conversation about the work, trust barriers can go up, and now everything that we're working on together isn't going to be as impactful because there is no trust there.

Kayla Simone emphasized, "We…have to operate in the realm of trust and transparency…" when discussing the importance of trust and honesty between middle school principals and central office leaders. She further elaborated on instructional leadership support and professional learning opportunities:

> Huge, trust is a very key factor, if you think about how we operate our buildings…we have to operate in the realm of trust and transparency…So, if this is what we do in our individual communities, I think it's equally important that we have that with those who are supposed to support us, and that's a hard thing, because now you feel like well, I feel like I don't know if I want to ask for help sometimes with certain things because I'm not sure I'm going to get it, or I'm going to be judged for it…

She also explained that just as principals are responsible for building trusting relationships with their teachers and the communities, central office leaders should be held to the same standard when supporting principals. Another principal, Sean Cole, also spoke to the importance of transparency and open, honest communication between principals and central office leaders:

> I also want to know the wider level constraints…I think it is important to share those constraints [with middle school principals], because that would affect the level of communication and it would be very helpful…[Central office leaders need to] give us information so that it doesn't feel like we have to extract information from them.

Clarity, as it pertains to transparency and open communication, was also discussed by middle school principals. Sofie Holiday explained, "It's very important that [central office leaders are] clear, that they make sure that they've received the correct information before they share it with us…And consistency and accuracy [are important]," and David Coltrane echoed that sentiment, "[Central office leaders] have to clearly communicate with [principals about] what it is that [principals] want to work on."

Being Encouraging

Another antecedent characteristic that middle school principals described as significant to the development of collegial partnerships with central office leaders was the use of encouragement and recognition of their efforts in improving student achievement. Bella Ellington explained, "…our central office leadership should reflect what we want our best students to reflect, which is curiosity, intellectualism, appreciation for rigor, and appreciation for what people do." Laura Vaugh, a veteran middle school principal, spoke about her positive relationship with her director, who both supported and encouraged her, "I think, for the most part, [they do] a lot of positive messaging, a lot of cheerleading, a lot of recognition of my work…" The collaboration led to further trust and honesty between the two, so much so that Laura felt comfortable when she made a mistake and was forthcoming with needed support.

Sofie Holiday discussed the components of a successful collaborative partnership, clear communication, and access to central office leaders when needed. She also stressed how meaningful and encouraging it was to her when she was recognized for her work, "[They] seemed to really appreciate the work that I was doing…it is nice when somebody [tells you that you are doing a good job] because it validates and affirms you…" Receiving encouragement and support from central office leaders positively impacted the relationship and led to a more honest and collaborative partnership.

David Coltrane stressed the importance of recognizing school leaders' strengths when engaging in collegial partnerships and building foundational trust, the importance of being transparent and gaining a thorough understanding of individual school needs and principals' strengths in leading the work:

> [In order to build trust], you have to be able to recognize and start off from an asset-based perspective, looking at what someone's doing, not looking at the

> negatives, but looking at the positives…[When there is effective collaboration, central office leaders] recognize the skill sets that I have, and they recognize the experience that I have…what are the assets that this individual brings to the table in the role of the principalship, then you're going to have an easier time building the relationship and moving forward.

David shared the significance of the supportive feedback from central office leaders and its positive impact on him as a school leader.

Middle school principals also spoke to their responsibilities as school leaders and the complexity of their work. In having to manage both pedagogy and operations, as well as all the stakeholders, they explained how it was important to them, especially when it comes to their collaborative partnership with central office leaders, to be recognized for their efforts in going above and beyond to ensure a safe and academically rigorous environment for their students.

Significance of Consistent Support

An additional finding emerged about the relationship between middle school principals and central office leaders and middle school principals' abilities to collaborate with and learn from central office. The second finding revealed two themes: middle school principals needed central office leaders to provide consistent support by being (1) accessible and reliable and (2) engaging as a thought partner. Middle school principals shared that they needed central office leaders to engage them as partners in the collaborative process of school leadership. In order to effectively lead their schools as instructional leaders, they could not do the work in isolation. Middle school principals said that they needed partners to help them and the support to be delivered promptly and consistently.

Accessibility and Reliability

Furthermore, middle school principals identified the importance of having access to and time with central office leaders as critical factors that allowed them to collaborate with or learn from them. Paul Gillespie explained:

> Accessibility is huge…knowing that I am able to call or to text or whatever...I know how and when they can be reached...[saying] hey, can I call you back or give me 10 minutes and then actually call you back in 10 or 15 minutes. This accessibility is huge, which I think, then, in turn, builds trust.

Kristina Parker also spoke about access to central office leaders, specifically her director. Kristina explained, "I need text communication. I need after-hours phone conversations," and Sofie Holiday stressed the importance of that one-on-one time that allows for dialogue, "I think they need to be present in buildings more, they need to come out, but in a way that's helpful…" Sofie Holiday explained the benefits she has experienced from her collegial partnership with central office leaders:

> [What] allowed the collaboration to be successful, was [when a central office leader] shared standards of what they thought was appropriate…they carried out all the steps that needed to be carried out… and then they were also very available, accessible, and seemed to really appreciate the work that I was doing…

Sean Cole also addressed the importance of having the time to engage in a collaborative partnership with central office leaders, "A critical component [of engaging in meaningful professional learning], I think is time…" He further emphasized:

> Why would I invest in you if I won't see you again…Effective collaboration is about time, right, so we have to be able to sit and talk…we need another structure [in terms of central office] where we are not feeling like we are stealing our director's time, or instructional specialists' time, because we're trying to fit ourselves in on their schedule, as opposed to somebody who is available with instructional support to us.

Another middle school principal, Mary Fitzgerald, reiterated the importance of engaging in school improvement with central office leaders. She emphasized how collaboration through a partnership, especially when it comes to instructional leadership

and ongoing professional learning opportunities, needed to be structured around school leaders' unique needs:

> I think time is a big factor…I think having time with the director or going to professional learning [is about] time, and we have so many other things on our plate....So I would say, time is a big factor…It would also help if first [central office leaders] showed that they cared about me…They want to invest time in me…because you can't help me unless you really know who I am first.

David Coltrane also stressed the importance of having access to central office leaders when he described the components of an effective collaborative partnership between middle school principals and central office leaders. Collaboration leads to trust and honest conversations about principal needs and how to improve instructional leadership. He explained that a solid foundation in collegial partnerships needs to exist between the two parties:

> The collaboration has to be first steeped in respect for the work that the individual is doing and then really specific to data that can be pointed to in order to make sure that the initial stages of the collaboration are effective, so you're starting out on really good, solid footing and you're able to then start working together…And then taking the time to talk with that person, coach that person, provide feedback to that person. Those things have to be there.

Laura Vaughn elaborated on her relationship with her director and explained that it was beneficial to her as a middle school principal to have access, as needed, to her director. Laura said, "[The director] and I text each other on a very informal basis." She also pointed out that while the district's new structure has decreased her access to them due to the increased number of schools directors support, she said that the director was still available to her whenever she needed them, "...They have so many schools and so long as they acknowledge that, but if there is something urgent or important that I need them for, I know that they will come."

Kayla Simone discussed the limited time that central office leaders have available to support principals, "I think sometimes it's hard [to find time to collaborate] because I know some of them are stretched so thin." However, she reiterated the importance of having that time and how it not only improves communion and leads to trust but also leads to central office leaders having a better understanding of what it takes to run a school, "I think they need to spend time [at the school], maybe spend two days back to back in a building and see what it takes to run a building, what it takes to have systems in place, what it takes to create a climate for effective teaching and learning."

Michael Armstrong further elaborated on the significance of a collaborative partnership between middle school principals and central office leaders that includes allocated time for instructional leadership. The opportunity for central office leaders to engage, reflect, and support middle school principals with actions was important. As Michael emphasized, "[Central office leaders] need to build those partnerships, those collaborative partnerships when you are trying to improve teaching and learning and instructional leadership. So I think [we need] more regular contact..." He also stressed the importance of quality time:

> [Central office leaders] need to be available…just kind of getting away from the checkboxes, which is where I think we are a lot of times with central office leaders and directors. We're only engaging with them at the local level when they are checking off something. And so there really needs to be a relationship, a partnership. Some one-on-one time…And I have not had that in a while.

He again emphasized how important it is to him to have access to the director so they can engage in joint work:

> [Central office leaders] need to be accessible. Knowledgeable and accessible. And I would need to be able to have that kind of time with them… where we're really talking about instruction and talking about instructional leadership and things that they've done and how it might apply to me in my school…

The middle school principals in this study reiterated the importance of having access to and time with central office leaders to support them with all aspects of instructional leadership.

Reliability was another important characteristic in building a trusting, collegial partnership that allowed middle school principals to learn from central office leaders. Michael Armstrong explained, "[Effective communication is based on] consistency, consistent communication. Effective communication centers around follow-through. Follow up when we've talked about an idea, concept, or plan, being able to follow up with the principal on the matter…" Paul Gillespie spoke at length about the significance of having reliable central office leaders who prioritized principal needs and were able to support them in a timely manner. He explained:

> [I have built trust with my director] because [they] follow through. If something goes on [at the school], the first questions should be, "Are you Okay," and "How can I help you?" Which is something that I have not had in a while. [They are] available to me and if [they are] not available, [they] let me know when [they will be]…and the follow through has helped build trust.

Sean Cole stressed that without having that partnership in which he knows that he can count on central office leaders to be there to support him, he cannot trust them to engage in the school improvement work and trust that they will be able to help him. He said, "Dependable and consistent support and relationships [are most important]...It all goes back to…having a consistent relationship… …if they're not consistent, and then that's the problem."

Engaging as a Thought Partner

Middle school principals also expressed needing more time to collaborate and engage with central office leaders through meaningful conversations to help improve

student outcomes. Middle school principals identified strategies they needed central office leaders to employ when engaging them in dialogue around student achievement as thought partners. Eight of the 12 middle school principals spoke to the importance of having a central office leader as a thought partner who could engage them in honest, reflective dialogue about teaching and learning.

Laura Vaugh shared her positive relationship with her director and how she was able to have rich conversations that helped her think about her work as an instructional leader. She explained, "Our communication is two way and it's very free flowing," and, "I have reflective conversations with the director…" As a school leader who has spent over 15 years in administration, she was honest about where the support was needed. She also spoke to the complexity of the work in building the capacity of her teachers and her leadership and administrative teams. Laura explained that effective, engaging instruction was everyone's responsibility, and to manage large teams of adults and be intentional about both student and adult learning, she needed the support of a central office leader with whom she could have candid conversations about the work ahead. She shared:

> I think that one of the fortunate experiences of working with [two directors], both of them were very collaborative. I think one of the things that I appreciated about them was that they recognized my experience and respected it, and so a lot of our conversation was reflective…the conversation helps with the focus on what's most important, what's most salient and how it impacts my students. So anything else, I will manage. Those are places where I asked for more support or more follow up conversations…My reflective conversation with the directors has always been about what matters, what's most important…anything to do with moving the needle along in terms of our students' achievement.

Michael Armstrong, another experienced administrator with over 15 years of experience in school leadership, echoed Laura's point. When asked what made collaboration successful, he stressed the importance of having a central office leader who

is a thought partner around school improvement. He said, "We could assess whether or not something would be effective because of [their] knowledge of working with another school, in [their] experience of working with other people," and went on to explain how the central office leader "was probably the one I could think of that has been that. And I haven't had anything close to that since."

Other middle school principals had similar examples. Bella Ellington listed supports that she had received from central office and found helpful in her role as an instructional leader. She described receiving information regarding observations and feedback, information on how to "shape a strategic vision for moving students, academics through the use of data and through the use of coaching… and having a thought partner" as how she "used central office the most." Furthermore, Mary Fitzgerald discussed essential components of collaborative partnerships that principals need, based on her experience and unique needs, "[To improve my effectiveness] it's about having that relationship, and how the trust in having consistency and somebody can come out and be a thought partner, and somebody who knows your school."

Sean Cole shared the importance of having a central office leader who could engage in the deeper level work with him and help him improve instructional practices at his school, stating:

> …one of the most beneficial things I get as a principal is a thought processor. I am fortunate to have a good relationship with my direct supervisor with whom I'm able to share, brainstorm, or [they] will ask me where I'm at, and we will sit down and look at the school improvement plan and have a very healthy conversation.

Sofie Holiday also spoke to the importance of having a positive relationship with central office leaders and how having trust impacted her willingness to talk to them about instructional leadership or to take risks and ask for that support:

> [It] made me much more comfortable and when I didn't know how to do something or didn't know what to do, I felt like in a nonjudgmental manner, I could engage as a thought partner or seek advice and not feel like I wasn't doing the work.

Kristina Parker, a veteran middle school principal, spoke at length about her definition of meaningful instructional leadership support from central office leaders. When asked to describe an effective partnership, she spoke about an ideal director who was able to effectively support her with instructional leadership and resources that she and her teachers could use:

> …it is a thought partner, it's a person that you know, [a person who] sends some of the questions back to me, but also answers some of the questions. I don't just want someone to direct it back to me to solve because I'm calling them for a reason… it's someone who can help me access resources that I may not know all the offices we are reaching out to, so it's someone that has that networking ability...I want [central office leaders] to have done their homework. I want there to be an exchange [of ideas]… if I'm bringing something to the table, they're bringing something to the table. I want them to be curious and ask a lot of questions, I want them to presume best intentions.

Having a thought partner who can help middle school principals process the complex demands of school leadership benefits the principals and the teachers, who, in turn, improve the quality of instruction.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this chapter was to present and analyze findings from this study on the instructional leadership supports and collaboration with central office leaders that middle school principals identified as most influential on their practice. The 12 middle school principals who participated in the informal interviews spoke extensively about the

instructional leadership supports received from central office, their professional learning needs, and their need for additional, coordinated, meaningful professional learning opportunities from the district. Finally, they spoke to the critical aspects of the collegial partnership needed for the relationship to be effective.

The first research question of this study sought to explore the instructional leadership supports from central office that middle school principals identified as most influential on their practice. One finding emerged pertaining to instructional leadership supports from central office that middle school principals identified as most influential on their practice. The finding related to process supports, specifically strategies through which support was provided to middle school principals. Three themes emerged: (1) providing coaching strategies; (2) using data for improvement planning; and (3) conducting walkthroughs and informal observations.

The second research question addressed the types of professional learning experiences that middle school principals described as most influential on their instructional leadership practice. Three findings emerged related to professional learning experiences from central office that middle school principals described as most influential. The first finding centered around the benefits of differentiated professional learning experiences led by central office and based on individual principal needs and school context. The second finding identified a need for collective district-led professional learning focused on district initiatives and priorities to ensure school cohesion. The third finding identified the benefits of the existing middle school professional learning community (MS PLC) that filled the void of missing central office-led professional learning opportunities.

The third research question explored factors pertaining to the relationship between middle school principals and central office leaders and how the relationship between middle school principals and central office leaders contributed to middle school principals' willingness to collaborate with or learn from central office leaders. The initial finding revealed that the development of collegial partnerships positively impacted collaboration between middle school principals and central office leaders. The second finding revealed that middle school principals needed central office leaders to provide consistent support. First, middle school principals shared that they were more likely to collaborate with and learn from central office leaders when the partnership was collegial. Middle school principals needed central office leaders to (1) establish trust; (2) listen; (3) be transparent; and (4) be encouraging. The second finding revealed that middle school principals needed central office leaders to provide consistent support by (1) being accessible and reliable and (2) engaging as thought partners.

It is also important to point out that during the interviews, the protocol questions did not lead the participants to engage in a discussion around instructional leadership for special populations. Middle school principals, as well as teachers, need training and professional learning to meet the academic needs of students who receive special education services, as well as English language learners. Only one participant in the study spoke to the benefits of having a director who helped him build his capacity in meeting the needs of English language learners. It is important to acknowledge the prominent absence of principals' discussions of instructional leadership supports pertaining to these two groups that academically underperform in comparison to their peers.

The final chapter of this dissertation interprets and draws conclusions from these findings and includes a discussion of the major findings and the implications for the stakeholders. The chapter concludes with recommendations for the field that can improve the instructional leadership supports central office leaders provide middle school principals.

Chapter 5: Interpretations, Conclusions, and Recommendations

As instructional leaders, principals are essential in developing organizational culture and positively impacting student achievement (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020). Principals are responsible for creating a positive school climate, handling operations, professionally developing teachers, and, most importantly, they are accountable for student performance (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Fenton, 2016; Honig et al., 2017; Park et al., 2019; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). In order to positively impact teaching and learning, principals need to prioritize their professional learning and support their teachers by setting high expectations for teaching and learning (Goss, 2015; Nasreen & Odhiambo, 2018; Zepeda et al., 2014).

Secondary principals need coaching and professional learning opportunities from central office leaders (Honig et al., 2017) to improve students' academic outcomes. At the same time, central office leaders are not only responsible for supervising principals but also, in their new role that has emerged over the past decade, building productive supervisory partnerships, and increasing principals' instructional leadership skills (Honig, 2012; Thessin, 2019; Wise & Cavazos, 2017). Though there is existing research on instructional leadership, there is a lack of research on middle school principals' perceptions of the effectiveness of support central office provides as they seek to grow their instructional leadership practice. Furthermore, there is limited research on the middle school principals' perspective of instructional leadership support from central office. In response to the gaps in the literature, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What instructional leadership supports from central office do middle school principals identify as most influential on their practice?
2. What types of professional learning experiences from central office do middle school principals describe as most influential?
3. What other factors pertaining to relationships contribute to middle school principals' abilities to collaborate with or learn from central office?

By analyzing data gathered through qualitative semi-structured individual interviews with 12 middle school principals on the East Coast, numerous findings and themes were identified that address the three research questions. The findings emphasize the importance of the instructional leadership supports that middle school principals identified as being influential on their practice, as well as their own professional learning needs, and specifically, a need for coordinated, meaningful micro and macro professional learning opportunities led by central office. Middle school principals also spoke to the critical aspects of the collegial partnership that is needed between them and central office leaders for the relationship to serve as a means for collaboration and learning.

It is important to note that this study occurred immediately after the global COVID-19 pandemic that caused the physical closure of schools for one year. School closures led to virtual instruction, requiring the creation and implementation of a new process for teaching and learning. To continue teaching, students and educators had to learn teleconferencing and virtual instructional technology. The impact on middle school principals was significant as they had to navigate running a virtual school, distribute instructional materials and technology, manage meals, and support the wellbeing of students, teachers, and staff members. Furthermore, middle school principals were also

responsible for virtually transitioning elementary students to middle school and supporting 8th grade students in their transition to high school. Middle school principals in this study shared that their initial emphasis was on setting up a virtual school, communicating processes and procedures, and meeting the needs of staff and students struggling with technology, new learning platforms, isolation, and health issues related to the pandemic. Once schools partially reopened, middle school principals shared that they were able to begin focusing on their instructional practices, as they were concerned about the pandemic's impact on learning loss.

This chapter interprets and concludes the study's findings while considering the context of the related scholarly literature. First, the significant findings are reviewed and contextualized within the existing framework of scholarly literature. Second, I present a revised conceptual framework. Finally, I provide recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and educational researchers. This section considers the six findings of this study within the current field of middle school principal instructional leadership research and practice.

Discussion of Findings

This chapter provides a framework and meaning to the study's significant findings in response to the research questions. The following discussion draws connections between the current research in the field and the six findings reported by the participants.

In response to the first research question, the finding addressed the importance of process supports, specifically strategies through which central office provides instructional leadership support to middle school principals. Within process supports,

three themes emerged: (1) providing coaching strategies, (2) using data for improvement planning, and (3) conducting walkthroughs and informal observations.

In response to the second research question, three findings emerged. The first finding addressed the benefits of differentiated professional learning experiences based on individual principal needs and school context. In contrast, the second finding addressed the importance of collective professional learning focusing on district initiatives and priorities. The third finding explored the benefits of the existing middle school principal-led professional learning community that filled the void created by the lack of central office-led professional learning opportunities.

In response to the third research question, two findings emerged and addressed the significance of collegial partnerships between middle school principals and central office leaders and how consistent partnerships lead to collaboration and learning. Specifically, the first finding revealed that the development of collegial partnerships positively impacted collaboration between middle school principals and central office leaders. The four themes that emerged emphasized the importance of central office leaders: (1) establishing trust; (2) listening; (3) being transparent; and (4) being encouraging. The second finding revealed that middle school principals needed central office leaders to provide consistent support. The two themes revealed that middle school principals needed central office leaders to provide them with consistent support by (1) being accessible and reliable and (2) engaging them as thought partners.

It is also important to note that during the interviews, middle school principals did not elaborate on their roles as instructional leaders for students who are receiving special education services and English Language Learners. Specifically, special education

services require programming based on students' academic, physical, cognitive, and social emotional needs (Bateman & Cline, 2016). Similarly, English language development services require principals to train teachers in implementing academic programs designed for culturally and linguistically diverse students (MacDonald, 2020). In order to improve academic outcomes of student in special population groups, middle school principals need ongoing professional learning and support from central office leaders.

This section explores the findings from this study, based on the middle school principals' perspectives, around instructional leadership process supports, professional learning experiences, the significance of collegial partnerships, and consistent support in relation to existing literature.

Instructional Leadership Process Supports

As instructional leaders, principals play an essential role in the school's focus on instruction, as they inspire innovative teaching behaviors, lead teacher professional learning, and collaborate with teachers to improve instruction and increase student achievement (Thessin, 2019). Furthermore, successful principals need to motivate teachers and provide them with one-on-one support and continuous learning; they also need a strong foundation in instruction and curriculum (Lee & Li, 2015). Too often, the expansive responsibilities of principals encroach on their role as instructional leaders (Gawlik, 2018). Hence, central office leaders are instrumental in improving school instructional programs by collaborating with principals and building their capacity as instructional leaders (Goldring et al., 2018). Adolescent learners thrive when middle school principals effectively engage their teachers as instructional leaders and provide

them with support and professional learning opportunities (Clark & Clark, 2004). In this study, participants discussed process supports, specifically strategies through which central office provided supports that middle school principals found impactful on their instructional leadership. The three supports included coaching strategies, using data for improvement planning, and conducting walkthroughs and informal observations.

Helpful Coaching Strategies

Central office leaders build principals' instructional leadership capacity by coaching, providing principals with feedback, and cultivating adult learning through ongoing professional learning opportunities (Micheaux & Parvin, 2018). When supporting principals with instructional leadership, it is also crucial for central office leaders to take a teaching-and-learning approach and encourage principal self-reflection on their practices (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Lochmiller, 2018). Specifically, central office leaders use coaching and targeted support to increase principal effectiveness and influence student achievement (Baker & Bloom, 2017; Grissom et al., 2019).

The current study highlights coaching as a central office process support strategy that positively impacted middle school principals' instructional leadership practice. As one middle school principal explained, coaching was most impactful for him when it addressed his personal and school needs. He shared,

> …the coaching [by the director] was contextual about a specific problem that might have gone on or a problem of practice within my current building… opportunities for myself to grow in the area that I wanted to support more effectively within my building.

Another middle school principal shared that the targeted support in the area where she needed professional learning has been most valuable for her instructional leadership, specifically regarding using data to improve student outcomes. Confirming the literature,

participants in this study viewed coaching as a strategy used by central office to provide targeted support, based on individual needs to increase principal effectiveness and positively impact teaching and learning.

Additionally, the literature revealed that when central office leaders could not differentiate and effectively support principals using coaching strategies, principals were deprived of meaningful professional learning and support, hindering their abilities to implement reforms designed to improve student outcomes (Lochmiller, 2018). Principals within this study discussed the need for coaching support and its benefits on their instructional leadership. However, they shared that meaningful coaching was provided to them inconsistently by central office leaders. One participant expressed her need for coaching and her frustration for not being provided that support. She said, "I feel like I'm left on my own." Another shared, "…after the first couple of years you don't see them [central office leaders] again…" Participants shared that coaching was not a process that the district invested in, despite the principals' need for individual support with instructional leadership. This study adds to the literature that coaching is a vital support strategy used by central office that allows middle school principals to focus on teaching and learning through their professional reflection and growth.

Using Data for Improvement Planning

Next, middle school principals identified the use of data for improvement planning as another essential process support provided to them by central office leaders. The scholarly literature asserts that central office leaders can engage principals when reviewing student performance data by creating a common language around teaching and learning to support student achievement (Deane-Williams et al., 2015). Access to

classroom data, both formal and informal, allows principals to provide teachers with constructive feedback. It also allows principals to plan for and create professional learning opportunities, improving teachers' instructional strategies and student learning (Jones, 2018).

Central office leaders can also engage principals by supporting them in accessing student data, analyzing it, and creating action items based on their analysis (Grissom et al., 2019). Hence, using data creates an opportunity for professional learning, access to a source of expertise, engagement with new structures or tools, and building a data-use culture (Grissom et al., 2019). The existing literature confirms this study's findings. More specifically, the current study ascertains a need for central office leaders to support middle school principals with data analysis and data-driven decision-making in schools. One principal shared the importance of using student performance data to drive teaching and learning. He said, "...analyzing data…in terms of instructional leadership [is important]…and then going over the instruction, like what are we doing in terms of our English classes, ESOL push-in model, math… breaking it down…" Several principals in the study stressed a need for support in analyzing student data to both improve instruction and use the data to collaborate on developing and implementing school improvement and action plans.

Furthermore, secondary principals struggle to influence student achievement due to insufficient training on how to effectively utilize data to inform student performance and support teaching and learning to improve achievement (Bartholomew & De Jong, 2017). Confirming the literature, participants in this study expressed that, too often, central office leaders were not supporting them with data analysis to improve instruction.

Instead, they were left to figure it out independently. One principal shared her frustrations with having to do the data analysis on her own and use the data with her teacher to improve instruction without external support. Another principal pointed out that simply sharing his students' performance data with him was not enough; rather, he needed support in using those data points for instructional leadership improvement.

On the other hand, the literature also revealed that principals in high support systems, where central office leaders use specific coaching strategies in their support role that include encouraging and assisting with principal data utilization, experience fewer barriers to data use (Grissom et al., 2019). Nonetheless, even principals in high-support systems need additional training and more intensive assistance (Grissom et al., 2019). Within this research study, multiple participants shared that they needed support in using data to guide student performance analysis, help them create measurable outcomes, and plan for professional learning opportunities for teachers. As one middle school principal explained, "I would ask [central office]…to help me analyze specific key data points and measures that are definitely opportunities for improvement for my students." Another principal stressed that the availability of student performance data was not missing, but rather, the support of in-depth data analysis to help create action plans to improve instructional practices and student outcomes. Middle school principals described using data to improve instruction and build professional learning opportunities for teachers.

The literature and this study confirm the importance of central office leaders supporting middle school principals around data use through ongoing professional learning and coaching. Central office leaders can support principals by using data to drive instruction, increasing principal instructional leadership effectiveness and positively

influencing student learning outcomes. While middle school principals shared barriers to maximizing data use to improve teaching and learning, central office leaders are essential in building principal capacity to make data-informed decisions.

Conducting Walkthroughs and Informal Observations

Instructional walkthroughs aim to improve teacher feedback, instruction, and students' academic achievement (Vogel, 2018). The literature revealed that school leaders can positively influence student performance by focusing on their instructional leadership and observing teaching and learning by engaging in instructional walkthroughs (Gillespie, 2016; Stout et al., 2013). A participant in this study explained that conducting classroom observation with central office leaders and having them engage with her leadership team beyond the surface level was very helpful. She explained that she needed central office leaders to help her break down and discuss what she and her leadership team members saw regarding instructional practices. Confirming the literature, central office leaders build principal capacity in instructional leadership when they engage them in walkthroughs as a process support to help middle school principals enhance their instructional leadership skills and elevate the quality of teaching and learning in the school.

Furthermore, central office can build principal capacity in instructional leadership through one-on-one professional learning opportunities, such as half-day school visits that include classroom observations centered around targeted observable practices outlined by the district (Zepeda & Lanoue, 2017). When debriefing conversations follow joint observations, there is an opportunity for lesson analysis and the principal's improved understanding of teaching and learning (Zepeda & Lanoue, 2017).

Additionally, information gained from walkthroughs provides middle school principals with a snapshot of teaching and learning, which can be used to improve the overall academics in middle schools by focusing on effective classroom instruction and the necessary professional learning opportunities for teachers (Cherkowski, 2016; Stevenson, 2016; Taylor Backor & Gordon, 2015). The existing literature confirms this study's findings. A principal in this study expressed the benefits of having a central office leader discuss with her observed instructional practices. The joint observation analysis helped the principal provide her teachers with meaningful feedback and engage them in a dialogue and reflection about their teaching practices. Another principal shared that walkthroughs and follow-up discussions helped build her capacity as an instructional leader, especially when providing constructive feedback and helping others improve.

Professional Learning Experiences

Principals manage responsibilities related to instruction and operations, so central office leaders need to support them through coaching and ongoing professional learning (Honig et al., 2017). Due to the complexity of school leadership, teaching and learning improve when principals are supported, and central office leaders collaborate with them around instructional leadership (Honig et al., 2017; McAdamis, 2010). By engaging with principals in a partnership, central office leaders can ensure that joint work is centered around instructional leadership and ongoing professional learning to further student achievement. Principals thrive as effective school leaders based partly on the relationship and support from central office leaders (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018).

First, middle school principals in this study stressed the benefits of differentiated professional learning experiences led by central office and based on individual principal

needs and school context. Next, they also spoke to a need for collective professional learning focused on district-wide initiatives and priorities to ensure school cohesion. Finally, while both types of professional learning were critical to their work as instructional leaders, middle school principals shared that they were not provided with a sufficient amount of ongoing professional learning led by central office and, as a result, had to rely on the principal led professional learning community for the needed support.

Professional Learning Experiences Based on Individual Needs

Central office leaders are instrumental in their role as teachers of principals (Honig & Rainey, 2015). Furthermore, principals are reliant upon central office support, guidance, and professional learning, and the collaboration between the principals and district leaders is indispensable to the success of principals (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Fuller et al., 2015; Hvidston et al., 2018). Participants in this study discussed the significance of central office leaders providing them with differentiated professional learning experiences and targeted resources based on their needs and school context. A participant shared that individually tailored, strategic, and intentional professional learning helped her increase her instructional leadership capacity and her entire leadership team.

As expressed in the literature and this study, one way that central office leaders can engage principals in meaningful professional learning around instructional leadership is by participating in a dialogue that values practitioners' input and professional judgment based on school context and by keeping the principals' needs at the forefront (Cardno & Youngs, 2013; Houle, 2006; Wilkinson et al., 2019). A participant in this study expressed the need for central office leaders to take the time to determine the school's needs

through an open dialogue with principals. He emphasized that he did not want to engage in professional learning with a central office leader unfamiliar with his school's unique aspects. However, he was instead giving the principal advice and recommendations based on other school's initiatives, which often had no relevance to the participant's unique situation.

Specifically, ongoing professional learning and support need to be tailored to the needs of principals, derived from principal input and perspective, based on school context, and guided by those who are directly responsible for effective teaching and learning (Honig et al., 2017; Lochmiller, 2018; Wright and da Costa's, 2016; Zepeda et al., 2014). Principals within this study discussed the need for central office leaders to provide them with additional ongoing professional learning while implementing strategies that directly align with student needs and are practical and applicable. Participants also shared that they preferred professional learning to include problem-solving for it to be collaborative and directly applicable to school improvement initiatives. Confirming the literature, participants in this study expressed a need for targeted and individualized ongoing professional learning to improve their effectiveness, as well as to improve outcomes for students (Louie et al., 2019; Rowland, 2017).

Professional Learning Experiences Based on District Initiatives

Participants in this study also expressed a need for central office-led collective professional learning that focused on district-wide initiatives and priorities to ensure cohesion between schools. As principal supervisors, central office leaders play an essential role in improving school instructional programs by developing principals as instructional leaders and shifting the focus from administration and management to

continuous professional learning and training (Goldring et al., 2018). In this study, participants shared a need for coordinated professional learning that allows for continuous learning centered around systemwide initiatives and student performance outcomes. One participant addressed the significance of collective professional learning and its positive impact on instructional leadership as it allows for collaboration and discussion around school data, learning strategies, and an opportunity for reflection on students' outcomes. While scholarly literature emphasizes the importance of professional learning experiences for school leaders, this study adds to the literature in that participants shared that in order for them to increase their instructional leadership, they needed ongoing, cohesive, and centrally coordinated, data-driven professional learning that central office leaders lead.

However, multiple participants shared their frustrations with the lack of professional learning opportunities around district priorities and initiatives within this research study. One participant explained, "A lot of the meetings that we have are information sharing, not professional learning," and another shared, "The hit and run information sessions…are not helpful. I could have gotten that information via email…" Principals in this study expressed that the available professional learning sessions felt disjointed, created silos, and did not clarify the district's priorities for teaching and learning.

Furthermore, one participant stressed the importance of collective professional learning for novice principals around instructional leadership. She explained that the position can be isolating, making it even more significant for principals to have central office support to focus on teaching, learning, and, ultimately, student achievement. She

discussed her experience when she became a middle school principal. She said, "I was struggling; I was not sure what my role was, and so I started to look for conferences and professional learning outside the district. I could not find what I needed in the district…" She emphasized, "I want our professional learning to run like I have to run my school…[we need] coherence from our central office around professional learning." The literature and this study confirm the significance of central office-led professional learning for principals that is collective, ongoing, coordinated, and strategically planned around instructional leadership and district initiatives to ensure systemwide alignment and improve student achievement.

Professional Learning Community Led by Middle School Principals

Within this study, participants shared their frustrations with the district's lack of centrally led professional learning opportunities to support their ongoing instructional leadership learning. In order to fill the void, middle school principals created their professional learning community (PLC) that provided them with access to meaningful ongoing professional learning. On the other hand, they expressed the benefits of the existing middle school professional learning community orchestrated and led by middle school principals. For example, one middle school principal shared:

> ...either we develop it on our own through the PLC, or you're seeking it out on you own, along with a small cohort of people you trust, or you can just do it on your own, by going to conferences, or going online.

Another participant explained, "I can't recall any professional learning outside of the learning with my colleagues at our professional learning community meeting that I actually gained some knowledge [from] or something to help me build my capacity in an area."

Confirming the literature, participants in this study emphasized that access to ongoing professional learning opportunities would increase their capacity as instructional leaders. The PLC structure allowed for privacy, honesty, and transparency, as principals could discuss their professional learning needs. One participant shared, "I find our PLC to be a good place where I get professional learning and conversation…" Another principal explained, "One of the most useful experiences that I had… is…the opportunity to talk to other principals about what they are doing in their buildings," she added, "The only place we really, truly have professional learning for principals is in our middle school PLC, or us making that time and making it happen."

Another principal pointed out, "I just don't see right now or in the last couple of years what anyone could have provided to the team that I'm not getting from my own [PLC] bubble." While the participants in this study spoke extensively about the benefits of the PLC, one principal stressed that middle school principals were doing their best to manage their own professional learning. They did so individually, through independent research and professional associations, and as a group through the PLC. Participants emphasized that it would be beneficial to access ongoing collective professional learning from central office leaders whose role is to support schools and build principal capacity in instructional leadership.

The scholarly literature claims that principals need central office support for implementing effective instructional leadership (Gawlik, 2018; Hallinger & Lee, 2013) to positively influence student achievement (Bartholomew & De Jong, 2017) and maximize their influence on school improvement and effectiveness principals need ongoing professional learning (Nasreen & Odhiambo, 2018). The findings in this study confirm

that middle school principals need both differentiated and centrally led professional learning and supports based on their schools' needs, as well as the school district's priorities and initiatives. Exploring professional learning opportunities, principals described the importance of working collaboratively with central office. An essential component of the collaborative partnership is the relationship between middle school principals and central office leaders.

Collaborative Relationships

Across the literature, studies explored collaborative relationships based on trust, honesty, vulnerability, and their positive impact on student achievement (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). In this study, two key findings emerged about collaborative relationships. The first finding revealed that the development of collegial partnerships positively impacted collaboration between middle school principals and central office leaders, specifically when central office leaders established trust, listened, were transparent, and were encouraging. The second finding revealed that middle school principals needed central office leaders to provide consistent support, as it would positively impact the quality of their relationships. Middle school principals shared that central office leaders demonstrated consistent support when they were accessible and reliable and when they engaged them as thought partners.

Collegial Partnership's Impact on Collaboration

The quality of time principals and central office leaders spend together, and the nature of their interactions increased their collaborative focus on instructional leadership (Thessin, 2019). Participants in this study emphasized that support around instructional leadership and professional learning depended on meaningful collegial partnerships and

consistent support from central office leaders. Trust, collaboration, and communication create the foundation of effective relationships and depend on central office leaders' relationship with principals (Blaik Hourani & Stringer, 2015; Wilkinson et al., 2019). Collaboration between principals and district leaders is indispensable to the success of school leaders and the impact that principals, in turn, have on teaching and learning (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018). The existing literature confirms this study's findings. One middle school principal shared, "Time, respect, honesty, and collaboration [are essential components of an effective relationship]."

Furthermore, within this study, participants shared that the development of collegial partnerships positively impacted collaboration between middle school principals and central office leaders. Specifically, middle school principals emphasized that they were more likely to collaborate with and learn from central office leaders when the partnership was collegial, as demonstrated through established trust and central office willingness to listen, be transparent, and encouraging.

Establishing Trust

Trust also plays a significant role in the principals' learning outcomes because trust, combined with well-functioning district support, leads to increased professional learning of principals and, ultimately, positively impacts student achievement (Paulsen & Hjerto, 2019). Furthermore, the reciprocal trust between central office leaders and principals, combined with a collaborative learning process, improves communication between the two agencies, allowing for innovation and successful implementation of initiatives to improve student outcomes (Lawson et al., 2017). The scholarly literature and this dissertation study confirmed that the relationship between central office and

middle school principals requires a balance of honesty and trust, which allows principals to build their leadership capacity in a safe environment.

One participant pointed out that it takes time to build trust; however, once trust exists, he explained that he was more likely to be vulnerable and ask for support without fearing repercussions. He said, "I feel I can ask anything." Another principal shared that due to the established trust, she, too, was willing to be honest about the support she needed. She emphasized:

> ...if we don't have that trust to say, hey I need some help here, without feeling like it's gonna get blasted all over [the district] or it's gonna be written in an observation or an evaluation of a principal. It's not going to work.

Another participant discussed trust from the aspect of school improvement and instructional leadership, emphasizing that without trust, the work remained at the surface level because principals could feel anxious to share their needs and ideas honestly.

Listening

Participants in this study shared that listening was an essential component of a collaborative relationship that helped build trust. Middle school principals discussed the implications of engaging central office leaders, where they take the time to listen and learn about their leadership styles, professional needs, and unique school structures to help them improve student outcomes. One participant explained that listening is a critical component of trust because when central office leaders take the time to get to know the principals they support, they do so by listening. The literature revealed that time devoted to ongoing meetings, sharing stories, confidential listening, and learning from one another established trust and helped build collaborative partnerships (Goldring et al., 2018; Farver & Holt, 2015; Thessin, 2019). As expressed in the literature and this study,

central office leaders build trust with principals by listening, learning, and understanding their school's context. By giving principals time, they demonstrate their commitment to supporting principals.

For trust to develop, relational trust is essential, as demonstrated through respect, integrity, personal regard for others, and competence. Furthermore, trust is developed by honoring an individual's thoughts and paying close attention to what an individual has to offer (Bryk, 2010; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Participants in this study emphasized that it was important for central official leaders to demonstrate, through actions and partnerships, that they were listening to principals. Several participants echoed that sentiment and explained that they needed central office leaders to use listening as a vehicle for engagement and, through effective communication, to "listen to understand" individual needs and school context. One participant shared, "[Central office leaders need to] listen. They really need to listen and they need to observe and be a part of what's happening in the day-to-day [of running my school], it is not coming for an hour."

Another participant explained that it was important for central official leaders to demonstrate, through actions and partnerships, that they were listening to the principal while building their capacity as instructional leaders to improve student achievement. Given the findings from the literature and this study, middle school principals are more likely to collaborate with and learn from central office leaders when they have a collegial partnership, as demonstrated through trust. Central office leaders need to be willing to engage middle school principals by listening to them and learning about their needs and school context.

Being Transparent

In addition to listening, participants in this study shared that transparency was another important characteristic of a collaborative relationship built on trust. Middle school principals explained that they were more likely to discuss their instructional leadership needs and make themselves vulnerable when they received honest feedback about their work. The scholarly literature presented the use of transparency, confidential listening, and accountability, aided in building trust and setting parameters for a collaborative environment poised for continuous learning and problem-solving (Olivier & Huffman, 2016; Weathers & White, 2015). Confirming the literature, the significance of transparency was a recurring theme with participants in this study. Middle school principals spoke about transparency concerning their partnership with central office leaders and how transparency led to trust and ensured clarity.

One participant emphasized, "We…have to operate in the realm of trust and transparency…" Additionally, the participants in this study spoke to transparency and trust regarding instructional leadership support and professional learning opportunities that they received from central office. One principal compared their own accountability for being transparent with their community, and as a result, she expected central office leaders to be held to the same standard. She shared, "...huge, trust is a very key factor if you think about how we operate our buildings…we have to operate in the realm of trust and transparency… I'm going to be judged for it…" The scholarly literature and this dissertation study confirm the significant role that transparency and open, honest communication between principals and central office leaders play in helping ensure collaborative partnerships. As one principal emphasized, without transparency and honesty, there would not be trust, and without trust, principals would be reluctant to

discuss their school needs. Participants in this study shared that transparency is the foundation for an effective relationship between principals and central office leaders and how transparency leads to honest conversations about the necessary instructional leadership work to improve student outcomes.

Being Encouraging

Scholarly literature claims that supervisor feedback positively affects subordinates' innovative behavior (Su & Zhang, 2022). Additionally, school leaders changed their practice based on the feedback they had received from their supervisors (Goldring et al., 2018; Wise & Cavazos, 2017) and when leaders approach their teams from a strengths-based perspective by focusing on strengths and the best in people, their entire team grows (Gray, 2018). One participant in this study shared that the use of encouragement and recognition of their efforts in improving student achievement helped them develop collegial partnerships with central office leaders. Another pointed out that her directors supported and encouraged her. She said, "I think, for the most part, he does a lot of positive messaging, a lot of cheerleading, a lot of recognition of my work…" She emphasized that the positive aspects of their relationship led to further trust and honesty between the two, and as a result, the participant was comfortable asking for help and even sharing her leadership mistakes.

Furthermore, participants in this study shared that receiving words of encouragement and support from central office leaders positively impacted the relationship between the two and led to a more honest and collaborative partnership. One participant explained how meaningful and encouraging it was to her when she was recognized for her work. She said, "[They] seemed to really appreciate the work that I

was doing…it is nice when somebody [tells you that you are doing a good job] because it validates and affirms you…" Another principal described how significant it is for central office leaders to recognize the school leaders' strengths when engaging in collegial partnerships and building foundational trust. He emphasized the importance of being transparent and gaining a thorough understanding of individual school needs and principals' strengths in leading the work, adding, "[In order to build trust], you have to be able to recognize and start off from an asset-based perspective."

Findings that confirm the literature are how positive supervisor feedback increases trust and furthers the collaborative partnership between middle school principals and central office leaders while also increasing school leaders' commitment to their work. Other factors in this study that contributed to middle school principals' abilities to collaborate with or learn from the central office included consistent support, as demonstrated by central office being accessible, reliable, and engaging as thought partners.

Significance of Consistent Support

Participants in this study emphasized that support around instructional leadership and professional learning depended on meaningful collegial partnerships and consistent support from central office leaders. The relationship between central office and principals is most impactful when based on trust, honesty, and open reflection, which creates an environment that prioritizes instructional leadership and ongoing professional learning to further student achievement (Ikemoto et al., 2014; Leithwood & McCullough, 2016; Saltzman, 2017). An effective relationship between principals and central office leaders is the lynchpin that holds together district initiatives and systemwide reform (Coplan &

Knapp, 2006; Daly & Finnigan, 2010). The findings in this study also revealed that middle school principals needed central office leaders to provide them with consistent support by being accessible and reliable and also by engaging them as thought partners.

Accessibility and Reliability

Studies within the scholarly literature explored how principals further their trust and strengthen relationships with supervisors and central office when principals have adequate access and time to collaborate with them (Goldring et al., 2018). Furthermore, while trust and collaboration are reciprocal and take time to develop, trust also sets the foundation for effective collaboration (Meier, 2002; Price, 2012; Tschannen-Moran, 2001). School leadership is a collaborative process, and trust is an essential component; hence, effective school leadership cannot happen in isolation; it requires a team (Tingle et al., 2019). Participants in this study explained that when central office leaders make themselves available by devoting time to supporting them and following through, these actions demonstrate their concern and investment in them. As a result, the relationship becomes stronger. Middle school principals emphasized that central office leaders build trust by being accessible and reliable. Participants explained that when there is trust and a working collegial partnership, they are more likely to engage in honest conversations about the work, allowing them to collaborate with and learn from central office leaders.

Participants also explained that accessibility builds trust through one-on-one quality time to engage in instructional leadership through coaching, observations, and reflections that allow central office leaders to gain a deeper understanding of school context and individual principal needs. One principal stressed, "[Central office leaders] need to be present in buildings more; they need to come out, but in a way that's

helpful…" Another participant shared, "Why would I invest in you if I won't see you again…Effective collaboration is about time, right, so we have to be able to sit and talk…"

Another participant added, "I think time is a big factor…I think having time with the director or going to professional learning [is about] time…They want to invest time in me…because you can't help me unless you really know who I am first." Middle school principals in this study also emphasized the importance of having access to central office leaders through texts and calls, both during the school day and after hours. Given the findings from the literature and from this study, accessibility, as demonstrated through time spent collaborating during school hours as well as after school, and the opportunity for central office leaders to engage, reflect, and support middle school principals with all aspects of instructional leadership, led to more robust, trusting collaborative relationships.

Participants in this study also discussed the importance of reliability, as characterized by follow-through, and how that furthered middle school principals' trust and collaboration with central office. One of the responsibilities of central office is to support school leaders by offering them time to meet, resources, and data analysis to improve student outcomes (Hord & Hirsh, 2009; Sutcher et al., 2017). One way that both trust and collaboration intersected in this study is through reliability. Middle school principals emphasized the need for a central office to deliver consistent support. One participant shared that effective communication is about follow-through. At the same time, another discussed the importance of having reliable central office leaders who prioritized principal needs and were able to support them in a timely manner.

Similarly, another participant explained that without having that partnership in which he knows that he could count on central office leaders to be there to support him, he could not trust them to engage in the school improvement work and trust that central office would be able to support him. He said, "Dependable and consistent support and relationships [are most important]...It all goes back to…having a consistent relationship… …if they're not consistent and then that's the problem." Another added, "[I have built trust with my director] because [they] follow through."

This study adds to the literature in that middle school principals shared the significance of central office reliability in developing trusting collaborative relationships with central office. While accessibility and reliability were essential characteristics in building trusting, collegial partnerships between middle school principals and central office leaders, principals in this study also emphasized the need for central office leaders to engage them as thought partners.

Engaging as a Thought Partner

This study's participants identified additional strategies to help them build trusting relationships with central office leaders. They emphasized that they needed central office to engage them in honest, reflective dialogue about teaching and learning as thought partners. One participant discussed the benefits of rich and candid conversations that helped her think about her work as an instructional leader. She explained, "Our communication is two-way, and it's very free flowing," and, "I have reflective conversations with the director…" Another participant shared, "…My reflective conversation with the directors has always been about what matters, what's most

important…anything to do with moving the needle along in terms of our students' achievement."

Another participant also reiterated the importance of having a central office leader who is a thought partner for school improvement. Another pointed out, "...having a thought partner is probably where I've used central office the most." Confirming the literature, participants in this study shared that when school and district leaders engage in joint work around teaching and learning, they build a collaborative partnership and increase the instructional leadership capacity of principals (Honig, 2008; Thessin, 2019).

Furthermore, participants again emphasized that they were likelier to be honest and vulnerable in their discussions when there was a trusting relationship. Effective collaboration takes time to develop and requires vulnerability (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Reciprocal vulnerability in a relationship provides safety to share and learn and leads to trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). One middle school principal shared the need to engage in instructional leadership work beyond a surface level. He explained, "…one of the most beneficial things I get as a principal is a thought processor…with whom I'm able to share, brainstorm…and we will sit down and look at the school improvement plan and have a very healthy conversation." Another principal added, "…it is a thought partner... I want there to be an exchange [of ideas]…I want them to be curious and ask a lot of questions, I want them to presume best intentions." The existing literature confirms this study's findings. Having a thought partner who can help middle school principals process the complex demands of school leadership benefits the principals and the teachers, who, in turn, improve the quality of instruction and, ultimately, student achievement.

Revised Conceptual Framework

Given the findings of this study, I revised the conceptual framework that encompassed this study. I presented the literature in Chapter 2 on which I based the conceptual framework for this dissertation study. The original conceptual framework focused on collaboration between stakeholders, specifically middle school principals and central office. The research questions emerged from the gap in the literature. They centered around how middle school principals conceptualized the effectiveness of support and professional learning they received from central office leaders in influencing their instructional leadership practices.

In both models, I placed central office leaders at the top of the circle and middle school principals at the bottom due to the hierarchy in the structure of the district. While not all central office leaders supervise middle school principals, the directors who specifically support schools are also the ones who evaluate principals. The participants in this study emphasized the complexity of the collaborative relationship with directors who both support and supervise them, making trust an important balancing factor.

In the revised model also placed collaboration, relationships, and trust at the center of the reciprocal relationship between central office leaders and middle school principals. Based on this study's findings, however, it is evident that collaborative relationships need to be built on trust. Trust can be demonstrated through benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). Furthermore, a trusting and collaborative relationship, grounded in two-way communication, between principals and central office leaders increases principal efficacy and positively impacts principals' leadership growth (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; King

Smith et al., 2020; Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Mania-Singer, 2017; Marietta, 2015; McAdamis, 2010; Thompson & France; 2015).

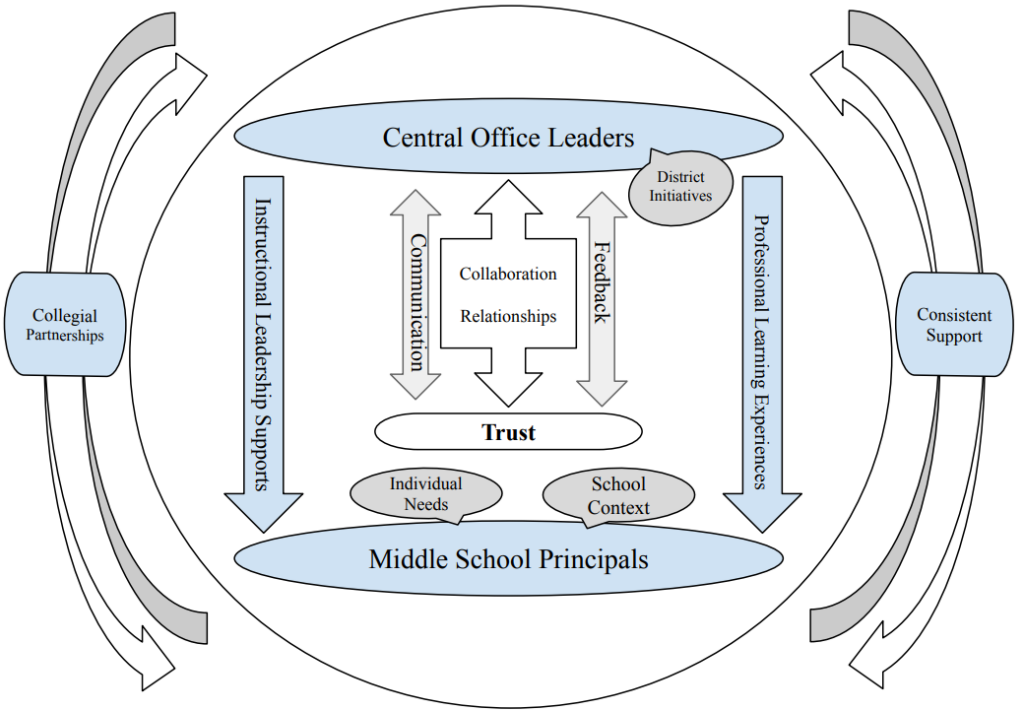
The relationship and importance of communication and feedback differ in the revised framework. In the revised model, communication and feedback are reciprocal and include individual needs, school context, and district initiatives. Hence, in the diagram, the arrows point in both directions. Participants stressed that they needed ongoing communication and support from central office leaders. In contrast, central office leaders need feedback from principals to improve the principals' professional learning experiences and instructional leadership supports. Central office leaders and supervisors build principal capacity in instructional leadership by creating trust and transparency (Farver & Holt, 2015), providing principals with feedback (Goldring et al., 2018), and encouraging reflection (Farver & Holt, 2015).

The significance of the shared collaborative relationship highlights the joint work between middle school principals and central office leaders that is required to build trust. As a result, the arrow at the center of the diagram encompasses collaboration and relationships. The arrow flows in both directions emphasizing fluidity and reciprocity. Trust is at the base because it is the lynchpin of the partnership. Due to the significance of trust, as the foundation that then leads to building of relationships and collaboration, it is emphasized on its own in the framework. When relationships between principals and central office leaders are collaborative and built on reciprocal trust, communication improves, and principals are empowered as instructional leaders (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Lawson et al., 2017; McAdamis, 2010). The new model also demonstrates that collegial partnerships and consistent support allow middle school principals to engage in

collaborative relationships that foster trust. Hence, the arrows run in both directions, as the process is collaborative. Consistent support further enables communication and feedback, while also enabling effective instructional leadership support and meaningful professional learning experiences for middle school principals.

Figure 2

Revised Conceptual Framework



Implications and Recommendations

As central office leaders support schools to improve student outcomes, they need to align their work and priorities around instructional leadership (Honig et al., 2017). Central office leaders need to also increase their capacity to effectively support school leaders (Grissom et al., 2019). Furthermore, school improvement and the emphasis on instructional leadership needs consideration within the context of the COVID-19

pandemic that has had a devastating impact on student's academic performance, as both 4th and 8th grade students fell behind in reading and had the most significant decline in math ever (Irwin at al., 2021). Given the situation, there is an utmost urgency to prioritize instructional leadership and to support school leaders with teaching and learning. School leaders play a crucial role in impacting student learning and ensuring organizational effectiveness (Grissom et al., 2021).

Based on the study's findings pertaining to instructional leadership supports, professional learning opportunities, and the importance of collaborative partnerships between middle school principals and central office leaders, I developed recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and further research. The next section considers those recommendations to improve instructional leadership support provided to middle school principals by central office leaders.

Recommendations for Practitioners

These recommendations are specifically for central office leaders who support principals and school districts that employ central office leaders. Based on the findings, the central office should strategically support principals with instructional leadership through ongoing professional learning tailored to the individual principal needs, school context, and district initiatives. Additionally, districts should adopt practices that enable central office leaders to collaborate with principals, which can be done by reducing the number of schools they support and focus on building trust with the principals they oversee. Finally, districts should intentionally build the instructional leadership capacity of central office leaders who support schools.

First, based on the findings in this study, middle school principals need support with instructional leadership strategies. The recommended process supports included coaching strategies, using data for improvement planning, and conducting walkthroughs and informal observations. To build principals' instructional leadership capacity, central office leaders need to possess the necessary skills to model the expectations and jointly engage with principals and school-based leadership teams. Like middle school principals, central office leaders should not work in isolation or depend on individually sought-after professional learning. Participants described how they became better school leaders when they collaborated with central office leaders and received the skills to support them with those process supports. Hence, school districts should intentionally build central office leaders' capacity through ongoing professional learning and modeling in the identified areas and not assume, as some participants pointed out, that central office leaders inherently possess those skills.

Second, central office leaders need to structure professional learning opportunities for middle school principals based on individual needs, school context, and district initiatives. In order to design meaningful professional learning, they need to spend time with middle school principals at their schools. Central office leaders should collaborate with principals over an extended period by limiting changes in assignments and ensuring that the partnerships are structured to begin before the start of the school year (Thessin, 2019). As participants shared, once trust exists, they are more likely to share their instructional leadership needs, and central office leaders can understand school needs by spending time at the school, observing lessons, and working alongside middle school principals. Hence, school districts should ensure that central office leaders who support

schools have a manageable and consistent caseload that allows them to build trusting relationships.

Third, participants in this study stressed the need to provide central office leaders with feedback on the support they receive. In turn, central office leaders need to have the capacity to adjust their support approach to meet individual principal needs. In turn, school districts need to provide central office leaders with training on instructional leadership. Middle school principals in this study shared that the support depended on individual central office leaders' skill sets that they had developed independently. Districts need to ensure consistency in the support principals receive by providing central office leaders with training and deepening their comprehensive understanding of effective school leadership.

Lastly, participants explained that trust was essential to effective relationships that allow for collaboration and professional learning. Middle school principals in this study emphasized communication, honest feedback, transparency, and vulnerability as important elements in building trust and relationships. Central office leaders could create these environments by providing middle school principals with consistent support that would, in turn, build trust and lead to collegial partnerships that would allow them to collaborate and improve student achievement.

Recommendations for Policymakers

Principals are essential in impacting student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2020). In recent years, the responsibilities of central office leaders who support them in that work have expanded to include building principal capacity in instructional leadership (Honig, 2012; Marsh et al., 2005; Thessin, 2019; Wise & Cavazos, 2017).

The Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) in the Department of Education supports teachers, principals, school leaders, and other educators through various initiatives, development programs, and professional learning experiences as they reinvent and improve instructional practices to better student outcomes. Additionally, as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government passed the CARES Act to ensure the safe and speedy reopening of schools and to mitigate learning loss. The $13.2 billion in relief funds went to K-12 public education nationwide through the new program called the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER). Furthermore, Title II, Part A of Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015 (ESSA) authorizes funds to build the capacity of school leaders and principal supervisors through professional learning to increase teacher preparation and support to increase teacher effectiveness and retention (Thessin, 2021). These funds can also be used to build the instructional leadership capacity of district and school leaders through recruitment initiatives, professional learning, and residency programs for teachers and principals. Whether through federal or local initiatives, policymakers should continue to monitor and expand initiatives to professionally develop those responsible for building the leadership capacity of principals who directly supervise teaching and learning in their schools. While the expectations for principals are articulated in performance standards embedded in evaluations, there needs to be further development of the role of central office leaders and those directly supporting and supervising principals to ensure that their work targets principals' instructional leadership growth (Goldring et al., 2018; Grissom et al., 2021; Thessin, 2021).

Moreover, policymakers should also support state and local funding that allows districts to define the role of central office leaders clearly. Once the role is defined, districts could then train central office leaders on how to effectively support schools based on individual principal needs and district priorities. The additional funding would also allow districts to mitigate caseload issues by creating structures that limit the number of schools that central office leaders support. In turn, by limiting the number of schools, central office leaders would be able to build trust and collaborative relationships with middle school principals and increase their capacity as instructional leaders.

Recommendations for Future Research

First, it is critical to acknowledge that this study was conducted immediately following the COVID-19 global pandemic. The participants in this study spoke to stressors related to virtual instruction and how the pandemic affected not only schooling and principals' experiences with leadership, but it also likely contributed to the study findings. Furthermore, according to the participants, when students returned to school in the fall of 2021, they needed to readjust to in person instruction. Due to the disruptive nature of the pandemic to teaching and learning, as well as school leadership, this study needs to be repeated in a time that is not heavily influenced by a global pandemic.

Based on the current study's findings, future research should explore instructional leadership supports middle school principals identified as most influential on their practice. Specifically, more studies need to be conducted that explore specific coaching strategies that school leaders find helpful in building their capacity as instructional leaders. Further research should also explore how data is used for improvement planning in order to improve teaching and learning. While principals in this study identified

walkthroughs and informal observations conducted with central office administrators as influential instructional leadership supports, there is a need to explore their impact more fully, when conducted in partnership with central office, on teaching and learning, and ultimately, student outcomes.

Studies should also determine how the ongoing professional learning opportunities are adjusted based on individual principal needs, district initiatives, and feedback provided directly by middle school principals. Furthermore, the role of the collaborative partnership as a vehicle for principal learning should also be explored. Without a relationship rooted in trust, middle school principals are less likely to engage in honest conversations about their work and professional learning needs.

While this study filled a gap by providing the perspective of middle school principals on the instructional leadership supports they receive from central office leaders, there is a need for additional qualitative studies that explore how the supports are provided by central office, and, more specifically, how the district is building the capacity of central office leaders as instructional leaders themselves. Additional research is needed to further our understanding of the professional learning needs of principals, which would, in turn, guide central office work and lead to superior support (Wright & da Costa, 2016).

Furthermore, since middle school principals in this study did not speak to their roles as instructional leaders of special populations specifically, such as for students with special needs and English language learners, future researchers should explore these aspects of instructional leadership in middle schools. Future studies should also explore how central office leaders are supporting middle school principals in improving the

achievement of both students receiving special education services and English language learners.

Middle school principals in this study expressed the significance of having collegial relationships with central office leaders that allow principals to be honest and transparent about their needs and barriers. It would be beneficial to explore further relationship building between middle school principals and central office leaders when they can collaborate in person (as opposed to over Zoom) and when principals are not under tremendous stress and are focused on operations and implementation of new schoolwide operations.

Lastly, this study had a limited sample pool and relied exclusively on interviews of middle school principals. In order to expand on this study and validate its findings, I recommend that future studies include a sample pool of more than 12 principals and the voices of both principals and central office leaders. Furthermore, additional studies need to be conducted in other school districts and states to examine structures in districts that either support or hinder adequate instructional leadership supports to school leaders. An effective collaborative relationship needs to be built over time and sustained by two parties. Conjointly, future studies could explore institutional barriers to instructional leadership support from school leaders' perspectives.

Conclusion

The findings from this study centered around middle school principals' perceptions of the effectiveness of instructional leadership support provided to them by central office. The study found that middle school principals identified specific process supports as influential on their instructional leadership practice. As it pertained to

influential professional learning experiences from central office, middle school principals spoke to the benefits of differentiated professional learning experiences led by central office and based on individual principal needs and school context. Furthermore, support with these strategies led to a focus on teaching and learning and an emphasis on professional reflection and growth. Middle school principals in this study also emphasized a need for additional central office-led collective professional learning focused on district initiatives and priorities. Furthermore, the study found that the development of collegial partnerships positively impacted collaboration between middle school principals and central office leaders and a need for consistent support.

The findings demonstrated the need for central office to provide middle school principals with more meaningful instructional leadership supports to help improve principal leadership and student achievement. In their joint pursuit of improved student performance, central office leaders should intentionally build relationships with middle school principals rooted in collaboration and effective communication. Given the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic that resulted in both school closures and interrupted teaching and learning for two academic years, students need effective instruction that will help them mitigate the loss of instructional time. Middle schools, therefore, need strong instructional leaders who can support teachers, focus on the academic needs of students, and create safe and welcoming environments that will meet the needs of adolescent learners. In order to positively impact student outcomes, middle school principals need central office leaders to partner with them and provide them with ongoing context-specific instructional leadership supports.

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Appendix A.

Interview Protocol

Opening to be read at the interview:

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. I am a doctoral candidate at George Washington University in Washington, DC, and I am conducting research on the instructional leadership supports from central office leaders that middle school principals identify as most influential on their practice. In our interview today, I would like to discuss several topics, pertaining mostly to your most recent experiences with instructional leadership support from central office leaders, if any, that have influenced your instructional leadership practice as it pertains to student achievement and principal leadership.

The interview should last about 60-90 minutes. Your name, location, and school will be kept confidential and will not be associated with any specific comments or conclusions expressed in the study. Pseudonyms will be used for your name, your location, and your school. Additionally, the sample includes several participants holding the same position as you which further protects and shields your identity.

With your consent, I will be recording our interview today for purposes of transcription. Your recording will not be used in any publication or presentation. The files containing the recording will be de-identified as soon as possible. The document that links the pseudonyms to names, locations, and schools will be kept in a password-protected file on a password-protected computer. At any point during the interview, you can refuse to answer a question or stop the interview at any time. Please let me know if

you would like for me to define any of the terms or if you have any questions before I proceed with the interview.

Interview Questions:

1. Tell me why you became a principal.
2. How would you define the role of a middle school principal?
3. How do you support teaching and learning?
4. What instructional leadership characteristics do you employ as a middle school principal and why?
5. What instructional leadership supports have you received from central office leaders in the past school year?
    a. How did these supports influence your practices as a middle school principal?
    b. What did you find most impactful on your practice and why?
6. What instructional leadership supports, if any, have you sought from central office leaders and why?
    a. What was the outcome?
7. What types of supports do you need with instructional leadership?
8. Please describe an influential instructional leadership practice, training, or professional learning session you participated in and explain why this was influential.
9. Please describe a practice, instructional leadership training, or session that was not influential and explain why.

10. How would you describe the approach central office leaders use to engage you in professional learning?
    a. Please describe this process providing an example.
    b. Who is involved in this process?
    c. What outcomes have you experienced?
11. How did COVID restrictions impact your professional learning experiences? Please provide an example.
12. In your experience, what types of professional learning from central office leaders do you find influential on your practice as an instructional leader and why?
    a. What type would you describe as most influential and why?
13. What components of professional learning do you feel are essential for improving your knowledge/skills in instructional leadership and why?
14. How would you describe your relationship with central office leaders?
15. What factors do you believe are essential for establishing collaborative relationships between you and central office leaders? and why?
16. What factors influence your relationship with central office leaders?
17. What can central office leaders do to foster collaboration and build a collaborative relationship with you?
18. What factors of collaborative relationships you shared are present in your relationship with central office leaders?
    a. What factors are missing?
19. How does your relationship with central office leaders influence your instructional leadership practices as a middle school principal?

a. What about factors that influence your ability to learn from central office leaders?

20. What advice do you have for central office leaders who support middle school principals with instructional leadership?
21. Taking into consideration the responsibilities and complexities of school leadership, what aspects of instructional leadership have we failed to discuss?
22. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B.

Interview Questions by Research Questions

Interview Questions by Research Questions	Questions
RQ1: What instructional leadership supports from central office do middle school principals identify as most influential on their practice?	4-9
RQ2: What types of professional learning from central office do middle school principals describe as most influential?	10-13
RQ3: What other factors pertaining to relationships contribute to middle school principals' abilities to collaborate with or learn from central office?	14-19
Level 1 questions: General introduction and closure questions	1-3; 20-22

Appendix C.

Informed Consent for Interview

Title of Study: Instructional Leadership Supports and Collaboration with Central Office Leaders: Middle School Principals' Perspective

IRB#:

Researcher: Irina LaGrange, M. Ed.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Rebecca Thessin, Ph.D.

You are invited to participate in a research study under the direction of Dr. Rebecca Thessin of the Graduate School of Education and Human Development, George Washington University (GWU). Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary. Further information regarding this study may be obtained by contacting Irina LaGrange, a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Administration Program at George Washington University, conducting this research as her dissertation study. She may be reached by telephone at XXX-XXX-XXXX or by email at ilagrange@gwu.edu.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the instructional leadership supports from central office that middle school principals identify as most influential on their practice. This study will also investigate the factors pertaining to the relationship between middle school principals and central office that contribute to middle school principals' abilities to collaborate with or learn from central office. Through interviews we will improve knowledge of the important work of instructional leadership supports for middle school principals.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in one interview. The interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes and will occur via virtual

platform or in person and will be recorded. Participants will be asked to discuss their perceptions of their experiences with instructional leadership supports from central office leaders and what instructional leadership practices, if any, that they identify as most influential on their practice. This perception is subjective and specific to the individual participant. In addition to the interview, and right before the interview begins, participants will be asked demographic information as well as basic information about the school that they lead. Once the interview has ended, the recording will be transcribed. This transcription will be emailed to you for your review. At that time, you may offer any corrections and/or additions as needed. The total amount of time you will spend in connection with this study is approximately 60-120 minutes. You may refuse to answer any of the questions and you may stop your participation in this study at any time.

What are the reasons you might choose to volunteer for this study? You will not benefit directly from your participation in this study; however, the benefits to science and humankind that might result from this study include supplementing the current body of literature instructional leadership supports to middle school principals and possible impact on the way central office leaders provide instructional leadership support that middle school principals find helpful in their efforts to improve students' outcomes.

What are the reasons you might not choose to volunteer for this study? You may have a concern regarding loss of confidentiality, or you may have time limitations. Minimal risks to the participants are anticipated by participating in this study; however, if a participant becomes uncomfortable at any time the participant may stop the interview. As a participant in this study, you may withdraw at any time.

Every effort will be made to keep your information confidential, however, this cannot be guaranteed. All identifying information, including names, location, and name of school will be removed from the transcription and pseudonyms will be used in their places. There may be minimal risk to confidentiality in emailing you the transcription for your review. Prior to emailing your transcription all identifying information will have been removed and your transcription will only be emailed directly to you. The interview recordings will be destroyed immediately after transcription. All personal information will be kept confidential and safe at all times. If the results of this research study are reported in journals or at scientific meetings, the people who participated in this study will not be named or identified.

If you choose to take part in this study, you will agree to have our interviews recorded. Total amount of time you will spend in connection with this study is 60-120 minutes. You may refuse to answer any of the questions, and you may stop participation in this study at any time. Breaks can be provided during the interview as needed. The Office of Human Research of George Washington University, at telephone number (202) 994-2715, can provide further information about your rights as a research participant.

To ensure anonymity your signature is not required. Your willingness to participate in this research study is implied if you proceed.

*Please keep a copy of this document in case you want to read it again.

Appendix D.

Recruitment Email

Dear xxxxx,

I am reaching out to you because I am conducting a study for my dissertation project and am seeking participants. My study seeks to explore the instructional leadership supports from central office that middle school principals identify as most influential on their practice. The study will consist of one 60-90 minute virtual or in person interview about participants' experiences with instructional leadership supports from central office leaders.

For the purposes of my study, **instructional leadership** is defined as a model of school leadership that focuses on defining the school mission (setting and communicating goals), managing the instructional program (evaluating instruction, coordinating curriculum and monitoring student progress), creating a positive school climate (protecting instructional time, promoting professional learning , and maintaining visibility), and improving and redesigning the organization (Hallinger & Murphy; 1985; Leithwood et al., 2006; Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011). **Professional learning** is defined as interactive, collaborative, job-embedded, and continuous learning, and is aligned with school goals, specific content and standards, as well as assessments. Professional learning encourages teachers to take responsibility for their own learning and to practice what they are learning in their own teaching contexts (Scherff, 2018). **Central office leader** is defined as personnel in a school system that foster a culture of learning, set expectations, build principals' capacity through professional learning, provide resources that help schools achieve goals, monitor results, hold educators

accountable when outcomes are not met, and meet the challenge of the complex school leadership work (Hirsh et al., 2018, p. 62, Psencik & Brown, 2018).

This study will also investigate the factors pertaining to the relationship between middle school principals and central office that contribute to middle school principals' abilities to collaborate with or learn from central office. This study is only interested in instructional leadership support perceptions of middle school principals.

Potential participants will need to meet the following criteria:

- The individual is a middle school principal at a public school that serves students in the 6-8 grade range.
- The individual has been a middle school principal for at least two years.
- The individual receives support from central office leaders.

If you believe that you meet these criteria and are interested in participating in this study, please contact Irina LaGrange at ilagrange@gwu.edu or at 240-XXX-XXXX.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Irina LaGrange

Doctoral Candidate

George Washington University

Appendix E.

Demographic Information Collection Form

Please provide the following demographic information. This information will not be connected to your name, location, or school. You may choose not to answer any or all questions on this form.

Race	Age	Gender
Unspecified	20-30	Female
American Indian/Alaska Native	31-40	Male
Asian	41-50	Other
Black/African American/Not of Hispanic Origin	51-60	Not Specified
Hispanic	61-70	
White/Not of Hispanic Origin	>70	
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander		
Other		

Please identify the following:

1. Current Position Title:
2. Years of Experience in Current Position:
3. Years of Experience in Education:

Appendix F.

Participant Demographic Characteristics

Pseudonym	Race	Age Range	Gender	Years in Admin
Bella Ellington	African American	51-50	Female	10 plus
Kayla Simone	African American	41-50	Female	10 plus
Kristina Parker	White	41-50	Female	10 plus
Sofie Holiday	White	51-60	Female	10 plus
Sean Cole	Asian	31-40	Male	Under 10
Laura Vaughn	Asian	51-60	Female	10 plus
Paul Gillespie	White	41-50	Male	10 plus
Mary Fitzgerald	White	61-70	Female	10 plus
David Coltrane	African American	51-60	Male	10 plus
Michael Armstrong	African American	51-60	Male	10 plus
Margaret Monk	White	51-60	Female	10 plus
Yasmine Davis	African American	41-50	Female	10 plus