INCREASING THE CAPACITY OF PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS

by

KEITH L. SIMMONS

(Under the Direction of Jami Royal Berry)

ABSTRACT

Quality instructional practices, high expectations for student learning, teacher agency, and collaborative learning culture are elements that fuel school and district improvement efforts. All of these components are considered outputs of instructional leadership. However, researchers have suggested that many school leaders, particularly in impoverished, urban settings, lack the time or capacity for instructional leadership (Boyce & Bowers, 2018). Over the past two decades, district central offices have wrestled with the mismatch of new school reform mandates and traditional district office functions. This research study investigated the impact of principal coaching and supervision on principals' instructional leadership in high-needs schools in one urban school district. The study explored four themes: instructional leadership in persistently low-performing schools, principal supervision, professional development, and the structure of central office practices to support and improve teaching and learning.

INDEX WORDS: Instructional leadership, Organizational learning, Principal supervisor

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. To my beautiful wife, Donna, thank you for yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Your love and support over the years have inspired me and kept me grounded. I love you. To my sons, Donovan and Dawson, I get to be your father, and for that, I am grateful. I'll always strive to make you proud to call me your dad.

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my late mother and maternal grandparents – I miss you dearly, and I'll always cherish the lessons of love and leadership that you have given me. To my dad, we did it, Pop! I kept pushing, and I kept the faith. To my extended family – Don, Carroll, Rugina, and Jay – thank you for the love and encouragement.

In addition to my family, I wish to dedicate this dissertation to my friends and colleagues. There are too many to name in this space, but I want you to know my heartfelt appreciation. You make me better!

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To my fellow cohort members, you have been there since day one! From the day we met on our interviews, we committed to seeing each other through this journey, and I cannot be more proud or honored to have traveled this journey with you. I hope that future cohorts have the chance to experience the friendship and collegiality that our cohort had and will always have. Thank you—I pray that you remain in His favor.

To my AR team members and the staff of HPSD – thank you for agreeing to participate in this action research study. Your leadership and commitment to serving students and adults speak for themselves.

To my family, my loving wife and sons, thank you for everything that you have sacrificed during this journey – I love you more! To my parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews – it's because of you that I am. I hope that I've made you proud throughout this journey.

Lord, you have given me more than I deserve, and I owe more than I'm worth. Even before I accepted you as my savior, you covered me with grace and mercy. You are a faithful and loving God. Thank you for every person, experience, and expression

associated with this journey. I acknowledge you, and I honor you with this accomplishment. You have guided my steps to this point of my life – I look forward to what and where the future takes me. Wherever that may be, know that I will gladly serve you! Amen.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Excellent schools require excellent leaders. According to Leithwood et al. (2019), exceptional leaders set direction, build relationships, motivate people, develop the organization to support desired practices, and improve the instructional program. Educational research reinforces that principals' leadership is critical to improving teachers' practice and improving student learning outcomes (Honig & Rainey, 2020; Thessin et al., 2020). Despite the competing interests of operational efficiency, human resources, and stakeholder engagement activities, educational professionals believe a principal's best use of time is when they serve as instructional leaders (Zepeda et al., 2015).

The effective schools movement of the 1960s and 1970s first highlighted the influence of school leadership on the school's overall performance. Chief characteristics of the effective schools movement included: administrative leadership in support of instruction, task-oriented instruction, evidence of routing student monitoring, emphasis on math instruction, high teacher satisfaction, experiential learning opportunities, and high levels of central office support/services). Ron Edmonds (1979) noted that strong administrative leadership is the most significant element of effective schools among these characteristics. For the past half-century, the research community has continued to refine the pillars of leadership for effective schools. In 2010, the Wallace Foundation released a multi-year study that identified four categories of leadership functions and more than 15

leadership practices that significantly influenced student learning. A decade later, the Wallace Foundation released another report, *How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research*. This report highlighted new research on effective principals' impact on teaching and learning outcomes. Within the report, Grissom et al. (2021) explained, “the impact of an effective principal has likely been understated, with impacts being both greater and broader than previously believed (para. 5).” Subsequently, national and international education agencies have shifted their resources to support principals as leaders and learners.

Background

What do successful districts do to foster effective, sustainable improvement in their schools? On average, a student is likely to encounter upwards of 100 teachers over his schooling years (Marshall, 2017). Given that the teacher is the most influential in-school factor that affects student learning (Leithwood et al. 2020), school leaders need to mitigate the inherent variability in pedagogical practices that students are likely to experience because of the number of teachers with whom they interact throughout their school tenure. Research has consistently pointed to principals’ influence on teacher development and retention (Leithwood et al., 2010; Murphy et al., 2007; Zepeda, 2014; Zepeda & Ponticell, 2018). Unfortunately, due to many obstacles, schools do not have stable leadership. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the average tenure for school principals is approximately 4 years. Moreover, principals who lead schools that serve low-income families tend to resign on a more rapid scale (Boyce & Bowers, 2018).

This action research was conducted in Heartland Public School District (pseudonyms were conducted for the district and all participant names in this study). The Heartland Public School District (HPSD) is an urban school district that provides academic instruction, rigor, and support to more than 25,000 students in kindergarten through 12t^{h} grade during each school day in 36 schools. All the district's schools were Title I schools due to the student's socioeconomic status. A Title I school has high numbers or percentages of children from low-income families (USDOE). Specifically, HPSD students' socioeconomic status indicated that 25% were low poverty, 31% were medium poverty, and 44% were high. An analysis of students' demographics showed an even split of male and female students. Similarly, HPSD does not boast racial or ethnic diversity. The racial makeup of the district's students was 77% African American, 15% White, 5% Hispanic, and 3% multi-race students.

During this study, HPSD observed a steady decline in student enrollment. With an instructional staff of nearly 1,400, HPSD saw continuous teacher recruitment and retention trends. While there was a large contingency of teachers with ten or more years of experience, there was a gradual increase in novice or inexperienced teachers. (HPSD, REAA). However, HPSD experienced pockets of success over the last 5 years, including one National Blue-Ribbon School. Additionally, the school district saw a 10-point increase in the graduation rate, and the 3rd-grade reading proficiency improved by more than 25 points within the same 5-year span. Improvement and success had occurred rapidly in some facets within HPSD, and in other aspects, it occurred more slowly or not at all.

Like many school districts, HPSD had previously sought to improve leader (and teacher) performance by assigning principals a coach/supervisor. In HPSD, these central office leaders were called associate superintendents. Their primary goal was to liaison between the principals and the district central office. However, school improvement efforts remained stagnant. In 2015, the Institute for Performance Improvement (TIFPI) researched HPSD with a concern for the supervision of its principals. TIFPI administered an online survey to garner the principals' perspectives regarding the frequency and nature of principal and supervisor interactions, the level of support provided by the supervisor, and the level of confidence principals held regarding the supervisor's ability and intent. Findings from this research indicated HPSD principals desired more face-to-face interactions with their supervisors, more support in developing teachers, and more frequency and autonomy with their professional development (TIFPI, 2015).

The Problem

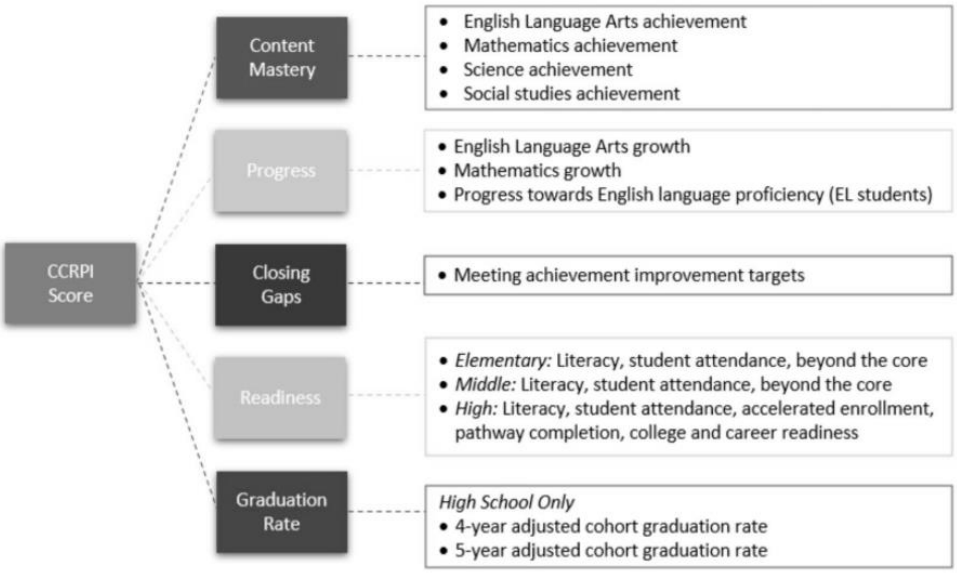
The problem of practice in HPSD is the need for rigorous, high-quality teaching and learning practices that enable students to demonstrate mastery of standards on local and state assessments. At the start of the 2020 school year, more than 20% of the HPSD teaching force had less than 3 years of experience. Moreover, nearly 5% of these teachers were still pursuing their teaching credentials. Like the growing population of novice and inexperienced teachers, almost one-third of the district's principals had less than 3 years of experience at the start of the 2020 school year.

Student performance for Heartland Public School District was closely examined within the context of its state accountability measure, the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI). The CCRPI offers districts a 3-year look across the

elementary, middle, and high school levels. Students' performance on several critical indicators, such as standardized assessments, graduation rates, attendance, and Lexile levels were reviewed. The CCRPI overall score comprises five components: content mastery, progress, closing achievement gaps, readiness, and, for high schools, graduation rate. Figure 1 provides an illustrative depiction of the domains and strands of the CCRPI.

Figure 1

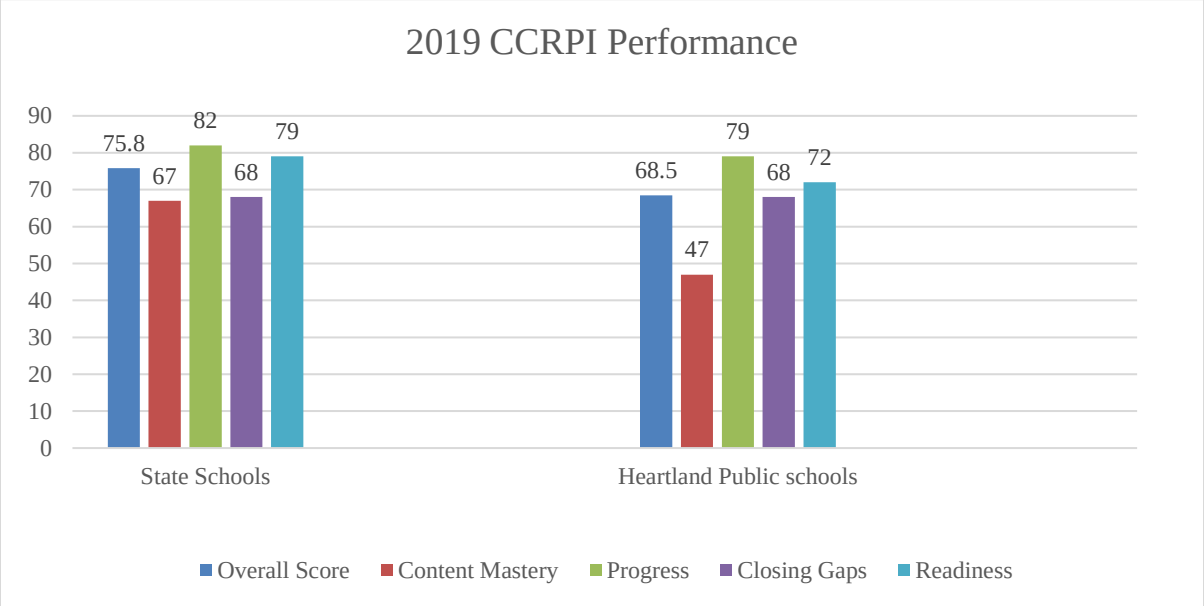
CCRPI Domains and Strands



In 2018, the CCRPI score for HPSD was 68.5. By comparison, the average score for all school systems in the state was 78.8 that same year. As shown in Figure 2, an analysis of CCRPI performance revealed that content mastery was the domain in which district schools demonstrated the lowest performance.

Figure 2

Heartland Public CCRPI Performance



While some HPSD schools were showing progress, other schools stagnated or regressed. In 2018, the state department of education identified more than one-third of HPSD schools as persistently low-performing. Depending on the level of performance and the student population, persistently low performing schools fell into one of three categories: Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI), Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI), or CSI Promise. According to the state department of education, a CSI school is a Title I school ranked in the 5th percentile of all Title I schools based on a 3-year average CCRPI score. A TSI school has at least one subgroup performing in the lowest 5% of all schools in at least 50% of CCRPI components. Finally, a CSI Promise school is a Title I school among the lowest-performing schools, representing greater than 5% to 10% of all Title I schools when ranked according to their 3-year CCRPI average. Since 2018, HPSD has had several schools identified as CSI, TSI, and CSI Promise.

Table 1 shows a breakdown of the number of CSI, TSI, and CSI-Promise schools in HPSD during 2018-2020.

Table 1

HPSD Identified Schools 2018–2020

	CSI			TSI			Promise			Total Identified Schools		
Year	2018	2019	2020	2018	2019	2020	2018	2019	2020	2018	2019	2020
# of schools	6	8	8	1	1	1	5	4	4	12	13	13

Due to low student achievement, high rates of principal turnover, and more rigorous school accountability measures, there is a need to investigate the practices employed by urban school districts to build principals' instructional leadership capacity.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this action research study was to explore how principal supervisors coached and supported principals to help them grow as instructional leaders. The study focused on the actions of principals, principal supervisors, and the district central office that improve leadership for teaching and learning in an urban school district. The action research team sought to understand the transformative relationship between principals and principal supervisors. The goal was for school-level and district central office participants to identify, understand, and implement the tenants of instructional leadership, leading to improved teaching and learning outcomes in schools.

Research Questions

The following research questions guiding this investigation were as follows:

RQ1: What are the key actions of principal supervisors that effectively support principals as instructional leaders?

RQ2: How do principals perceive the impact of instructional leadership support on their efforts to improve instructional practices?

RQ3: How do design and implementation team members describe the influence of the action research process on their instructional leadership capacity?

Definition of Terms

For this action research, the following key terms are defined:

Instructional leadership: The leadership behaviors of principals who practice instructional leadership include setting a widely shared vision for learning, developing a school's culture and instructional program, and managing the school to ensure a safe and effective learning environment for every student (Honig & Rainey, 2020).

Organizational learning theory: Researchers have applied many definitions of organizational learning over the years. For the sake of this study, organizational learning refers to an organization's process of creating, attaining, and transferring knowledge to change its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insight (Fauske & Raybould, 2005; Honig, 2012).

Principal supervisor: The principal supervisor works with principals on instructional leadership actions such as data analysis, instructional supervision, and setting high expectations for student learning (Honig & Rainey, 2014). For this study, the

work of the principal supervisor is considered an output of the district central office in the effort to support school improvement.

Theoretical Framework

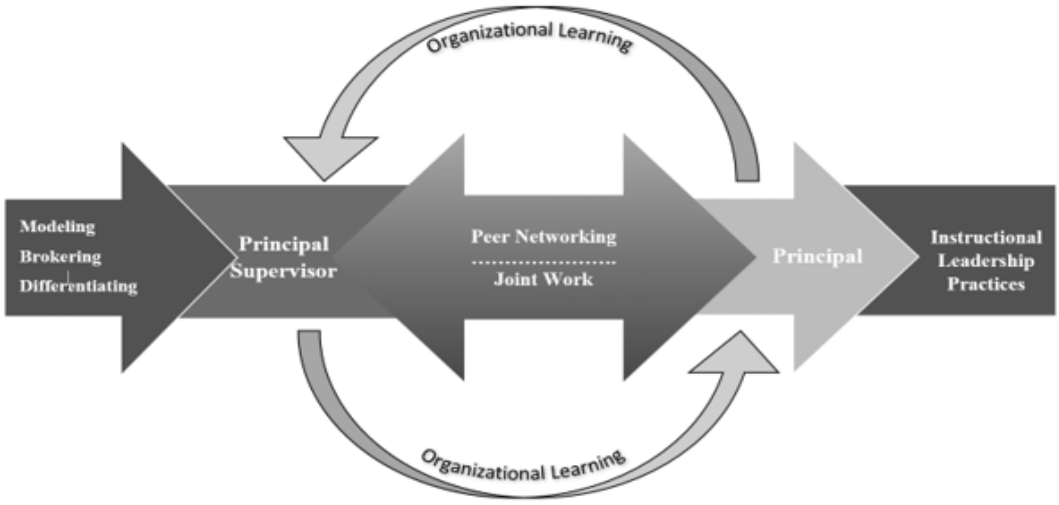
This action research (AR) study was grounded by a synthesis of organizational learning theory and Honig et al.'s (2010) instructional leadership model, which posits that the work of principal supervisors should be to support principals by engaging in the instructional leadership tenets with coherent support from the district central office.

In 2010, Honig et al. conducted a national study involving three urban school districts to learn what leaders did to improve district-wide instruction and learning outcomes. Honig et al.'s (2010) research suggested that improvement was possible but would require what Honig paralleled to district central office transformation. Not to be confused with the mundane discussion of restructuring the organizational hierarchy, district central office transformation involves "building the capacity of school principals to lead for instructional improvement within their schools" (Honig et al., 2010, p. v).

Figure 3 illustrates how the organization learning theory is based, in part, on the learning-focused partnerships between the district central office and school principals "to deepen principals' instructional leadership practice" (Honig et al., 2010, p. vi).

Figure 3

Instructional Leadership & Organizational Learning Theoretical Framework



Acknowledging the struggle for school leaders to keep pace with the surmounting pressures of achievement gaps, inequities, and accountability, Honig et al.'s (2010) research sought to understand "how leaders in urban school district central offices fundamentally transformed their work and relationships with schools to support district-wide teaching and learning improvement" (p. iii). This understanding supports the organizational learning model. Accordingly, data regarding the day-to-day work of the central office that promoted improved teaching and learning outcomes were collected and grouped into five dimensions: learning-focused partnerships; assistance relationships; reorganizing and reculturing; stewardship; and use of evidence.

For this research, organizational learning is viewed as a fundamentally strategic process. More specifically, organizational learning involves changing theories of action, either by refining them or by questioning shared assumptions and norms to reach new theories in use (Collinson et al., 2006; Knapp, 2008). Notably, Honig (2008) argued,

"organizational learning theory highlights how central office administrators might use evidence from various experiences, including their school assistance relationships, to inform district operations" (p. 631). In addition, some researchers have suggested that central offices operate as learning organizations after their members reported they learned from an experience (Honig, 2008; Honig et al., 2017). Still, this description did not clarify what counted as learning from experience – yielding inconsistent interpretations within the literature.

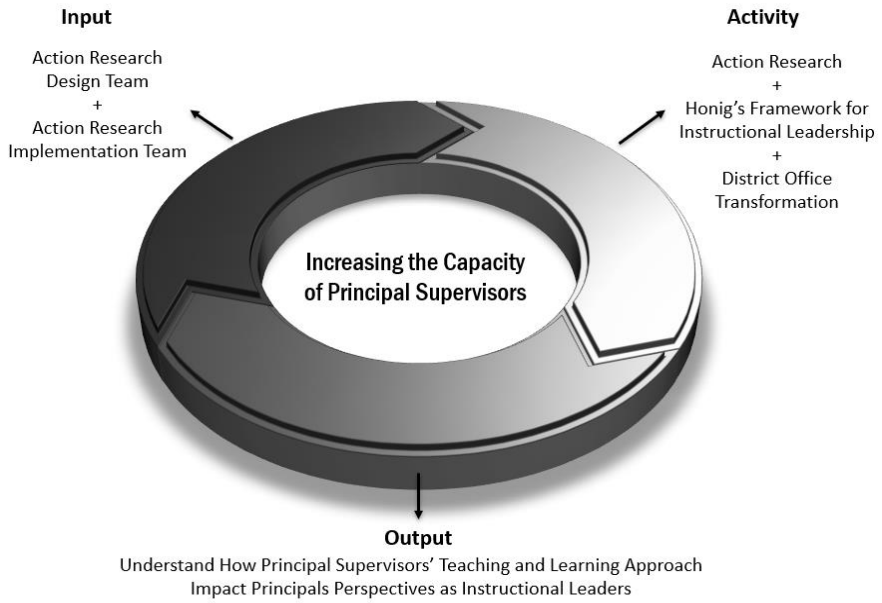
With its origin rooted in the business community, organizational learning has garnered more interest from education researchers over the last two decades. According to Austin and Harkins (2008), "Notions of organizational learning have been posed by academics and practitioners as…a means for achieving success in turbulent times" (p. 105). In addition, research findings from Austin and Harkins (2008) suggested that organizational learning is improved when the processes of knowledge acquisition, distribution, interpretation, and organizational memory are considered when included in prescribed interventions.

Conceptual Framework

Researchers Baxter and Jack (2008) argued, "The conceptual framework serves as an anchor for the study and is referred at the stage of data interpretation" (p. 553). The researcher used a logic model to illustrate the study's conceptual framework. Furthermore, the researcher identified the essential aspects of the study by applying the logic model's input – activity – output design (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Logic Model as Conceptual Framework for Action Research



The application of the logic model design explored the elements of the input phase: the action research design team and the action research implementation team. The elements of the activity phase included executing the action research process, conducting professional learning on the tenets of Honig et al.'s (2010) instructional leadership model, and observing principal supervisors' coaching and support moves as instructional leaders. Finally, the output phase of the logic model included the demonstrated improvements related to principal supervisors' instructional leadership and the impact it had on principals' perceptions as instructional leaders.

Overview of the Methodology

Qualitative action research was used as the methodological design for this research study. For this study, the researcher used a qualitative methodology. Multiple forms of qualitative data collection were used, including interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations. In addition, the researcher conducted quantitative data collection via survey questionnaires. The collected data were reviewed and analyzed. This research study consisted of a design team and an implementation team. The implementation team participated in data collection methods, observations, focus groups, and interviews. Afterward, codes were used to derive central themes from the research findings. The relationship between the literature review and identified theoretical framework was used to inform the basis of the study design.

Intervention

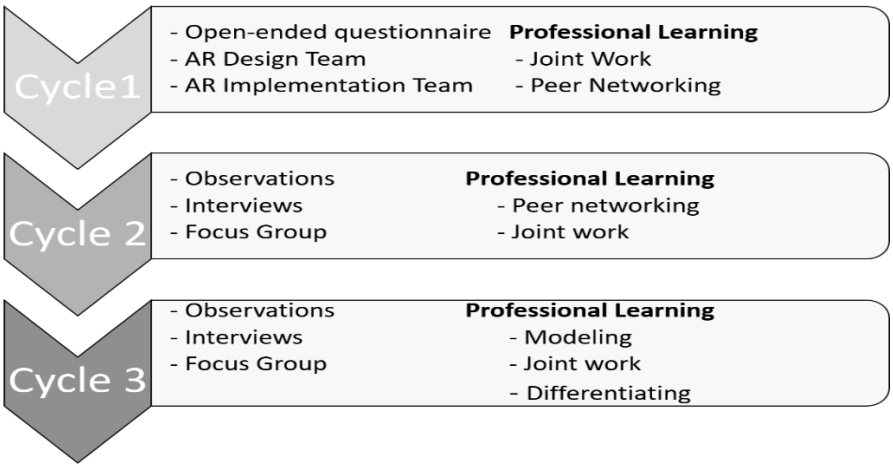
The research study included several interventions designed to inform the action research process. Most of the interventions involved data collection for evaluation purposes. The study participants were required to participate in professional learning relative to instructional leadership practices for improving teaching and learning. Participants completed surveys designed to capture reflections of their performance related to the professional learning activities they performed.

Additional interventions consisted of field observations and individual interviews. The observations took place at participants' work sites during the usual operating hours and included but were not limited to feedback and coaching sessions. Interviews were conducted before and after observations to calibrate observation data. A logic model (see

Figure 5) was used to depict the theory of action relative to the interventions within this study.

Figure 5

Illustration of Intervention Plan



Significance

The study's findings have implications for increasing the capacity of the principal supervisor position to be more than a middle-level compliance officer in school districts. More specifically, the results from this study provide evidence of principal supervisors' impact on principals' performance and perception of instructional leadership. This study is significant because the researcher provided new insight into how district central offices can support school-level and district-wide improvement in urban settings. The researcher gained this insight by investigating school leaders' perceptions of the instructional leadership support the principal supervisors provided them.

Another area of significance related to this study pertained to the impact that professional learning had on the principal supervisors' performance as instructional leaders. Findings from the study indicated that school districts should consider implementing a codified professional learning system that affords principal supervisors a

similar caliber and quantity of professional learning activities that teachers and principals have access to participate.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1 gives an overview of the study of this dissertation. It situates the research study by providing both a local and larger context surrounding the problem of practice. In HPSD, the problem of practice is the need for rigorous, high-quality teaching and learning practices that enable students to demonstrate mastery of standards on local and state assessments. Chapter 1 also lays out the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that shaped the study. Chapter 2 reviews the related literature for the research and discusses the evolution of the principal's role, principal coaching and supervision, and central office structures. Chapter 3 describes the research design and methodology involved in this action research and the qualitative methods related to this study. This chapter also serves to amplify the context in which the research was conducted. Chapter 4 examines the findings from the research case. Chapter 5 details the conclusions of the research study. This chapter also describes and analyzes the interventions implemented by the researcher and the action research team. Finally, Chapter 6 summarizes the research and discusses the findings from the research questions while offering implications for practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and further research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Today's school leaders face unprecedented teaching, leading, and learning challenges related to diverse student needs, reform, and accountability. Ensuring school leaders receive ongoing and pervasive support is essential to the success of their staff and students. As such, education agencies throughout the United States and globally are giving critical attention to how and who provides support to school leaders (Zepeda et al., 2016). Subsequently, district central offices are shifting their core functions to pursue coherent structures that will provide leaders the skills to thrive in an arena steeped in diverse student needs, reform, and accountability. These significant shifts in the educational landscape catalyze the renewed emphasis on principal supervision.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the structures and practices that principal supervisors used in their efforts to help principals grow as instructional leaders. In addition, the study focused on the roles of principals, principal supervisors, and the district central office as agents of influence in the challenge to improve teaching and learning outcomes. In the Heartland Public School District, the problem of practice is the need for rigorous, high-quality teaching and learning practices that enable students to demonstrate mastery of standards on local and state assessments. The study's purpose addressed this problem by ensuring alignment between the purpose, the problem of practice, and the research questions.

The study's theoretical framework was constructed on Honig et al.'s (2010) instructional leadership model and organizational learning theory synthesis. The framework highlighted key practices related to improving the principal-principal supervisor partnership and leveraging organizational learning to synergize the efforts of all school and district processes to improve teaching and learning outcomes. In addition, the analysis of data collection could develop findings that have implications for future research related to leveraging the principal supervisor as an instructional leader for school improvement.

Research Questions

The following research questions that guided this investigation are as follows:

RQ1: What are the key actions of principal supervisors that effectively support principals as instructional leaders?

RQ2: How do principals perceive the impact of instructional leadership support on their efforts to improve instructional practices?

RQ3: How do design and implementation team members describe the influence of the action research process on their instructional leadership capacity?

To examine the research questions, the researcher worked with an action research team to explore how principal supervisors improved the instructional leadership practices of principals. The researcher used questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, observations, and field notes to gather the data - perspectives about the support of instructional leaders. A literature review was constructed into three sections to support the study's objectives. The first section provides a historical overview of the school principal and identifies three distinct dimensions of the principalship: school leader, instructional leader, and social

justice leader. The second section explores the complexity of understanding effective principal supervision due to varied roles, methods, and objectives from school district to school district. The final section underscores the role of the district central office as a structure that helped to increase principal supervisor capacity.

Evolution of the School Principal

The type of principals needed in schools today calls for a new school leadership approach. New demands for today's principal beckon attention to organizational culture, increased parental engagement, ensuring achievement for all students, closing achievement gaps, and improving teachers' instructional practices. Today's school leaders are shifting from managing prolific school operations to creating an environment where students and teachers can continually learn and grow. Zepeda et al. (2015) argued that today's principals are expected to be instructional leaders who understand effective instruction, analyze student learning data, collaborate with staff on growth strategies, and share the vision of supporting students with parents and the community.

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders

Historically, federal intervention in education has been limited. The most significant influence came in the confluence of the Civil Rights movement and President Johnson's War on Poverty in the 1960s. As a result, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed in 1965 to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for economically disadvantaged students. Title I, Part A - Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Education Agencies, is the most extensive section of this legislation. Title I, Part A provides funding assistance to school districts with high percentages of students from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet

rigorous academic standards. Principals committed to ensuring that all students have access to highly effective instruction and supportive classrooms must also commit to their efficacy as leaders.

According to the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA), the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) published the first set of national standards for education leaders, known as the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards in 1996. At the time, the ISLLC standards were touted as "the most important actions required of education leaders to improve instruction and student achievement" (CCSSO, 2015, p.6). As a result, district and state education leaders received a description of the skills that principals needed for improving teaching and learning. However, in confluence with the reauthorization of ESEA and the need for leader standards reflective of the changing education landscape, the NPBEA replaced the ISLLC standards with the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (NPBEA, 2015).

Principal as School Leader

To say that principals have a difficult job is an understatement. Zepeda et al. (2017) cited Creighton's claim that "Never in the history of our educational enterprise has the school leader been faced with such complex responsibilities, and so many change forces" (p. 296). In addition to creating conditions for improved teaching and learning outcomes, principals must also balance their time with other competing interests, such as discipline issues, parental concerns, required reports and paperwork, and management of the day-to-day school facility. To help students and teachers succeed, principals have to function as instructional leaders, managers, and mentors (Saltzman, 2016). Historically,

the principal's primary focus was more akin to the management of bleachers, boilers, and buses (Casserly et al., 2013; Lowenhaupt, 2021). Today, the principal is responsible for creating the vision for instructional leadership that undergirds the interaction of teaching and learning in each classroom.

The demand for increased performance and accountability in the classroom allowed the principal to function as an instructional leader. Still, schools and districts struggled to meet high achievement goals or ensure equitable learning outcomes for all student groups. Although principals have functioned as the CEO of their local schools, the principal position has not been viewed as a CEO. In short, many within their respective community do not understand the role or work of the principal.

The past three decades brought about significant changes in expectations for the principals (Leithwood et al., 2010). Aside from performing the day-to-day operations and logistical activities, principals are expected to promote teachers' continuous learning and development. In doing so, they strive to establish a culture of learning, not only for students but also for adults. This shift in leadership expectations has led to a heightened awareness of, and focus on, principals' need for professional development. As a result, today's principal is asked to operate as an instructional leader, not a building manager whose time is spent monitoring bus arrivals and handling discipline issues.

Principal as Instructional Leader

There is an extensive body of research on instructional leadership (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2019; Zepeda, 2016). However, finding consensus around whether instructional leadership is a framework or a concept is daunting. Hallinger and Murphy (1985) proposed an instructional leadership known as the Principal

Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) that put the tenants of instructional leadership into three dimensions: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school climate. This early model had a lasting influence on theory, research, policy, and practice in the ensuing decades.

The Murphy Model of instructional leadership was developed shortly afterward. Influenced by his previous work on the Hallinger and Murphy model, Murphy (1990) used the tenants of effective schools and organizational change to create four dimensions of instructional leadership: developing a mission and goals; promoting quality instruction and monitoring student learning; creating an academic learning environment; and developing a supportive work environment. Based on his stance relative to the critical work of improving, Patterson's (1993) instructional leadership model provided a vision for improving teaching and learning outcomes, empowering others, supporting instruction, monitoring instruction, and fostering student achievement.

Weber (1996) offered a couple of different perspectives with his model. First, the Weber Model was influenced by organizational structure – anyone could lead for instructional improvement. The Weber Model was developed with the following tenants: defining the school's mission, managing curriculum and instruction, promoting a positive learning climate, observing and improving teaching, and assessing the instructional program

Though nearly 50 years have passed since instructional leadership was first introduced, researchers have only recently begun crystalizing its meaning. As a result, an instructional leader has become more of a slogan than a practice without a concrete

definition. In other words, it has become more of a title, lacking the techniques needed to improve classroom practices (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) caused a shift in the principal's role and immediate actions. The Department of Education (DOE, 2017) provided a construct for instructional leadership focusing on factors that promote and support teaching and learning for the success of all students. The DOE cemented this stance:

> Instructional leaders strive to improve student learning when they create a shared vision for the school community, allow stakeholders to participate in the decision-making process, provide professional learning from identified needs, and possess an awareness of instructional practices in the school building. (DOE, 2017, p.1)

The instructional leadership emphasis in the ESSA placed significant scrutiny on education leaders, from the state to the local level. Thus, this scrutiny has led to greater interest in instructional leadership and its impact on student achievement (Rowland, 2017).

School leaders must develop revolutionary strategies for rethinking schooling to meet the diverse needs of their students and communities. In order to meet the needs of the education community, education has provided a context for addressing issues of difference, belonging, and identity (Lowenhaupt, 2021). With the shift in expectations, accountability, and role function, the number of school leader vacancies is greater than the number of quality candidates available to fill them (Rowland, 2017). Due to a persistently growing shortage of teachers, local and national policymakers have tried to leverage legislation to improve the leadership landscape in schools.

Principal as Social Justice Leader

Principals have the enormous responsibility of setting the vision of a school and its impact on social justice. Due to inequities spotlighted by the coronavirus pandemic, coupled with growing demands to confront and abolish the practices of systemic racism, sexism, and police brutality, school leaders have been thrust to the forefront of a call for the establishment of an equitable and socially just society (Clayton et al., 2020; Khalifa et al., 2016). Research has indicated that when led by an effective leader, schools have the power to transform their communities (Grissom et al., 2021). Due to the exacerbation of inequities spotlighted by the social unrest in school communities, school leaders are currently embracing the concept of diversity in today's schools.

Since their inception in the mid-1800s, public schools were designed to provide their students the opportunities to learn our nation's dominant cultural and political narratives. Over time the demographic shift from predominantly white students to students of color has been a formidable shift that has impacted all aspects of public schooling. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the percentage of students of color in public schools has continued to outpace that of white students. To this end, the principal's moral capacity to lead for social justice is paramount. Educational leaders, especially those leading high-needs schools, are called on to use their platforms for delivering tangible outcomes relative to equity and social justice for all students (Murakami & Kearney, 2019).

On any given day, principals contend with critical decisions. Given the multiple accountabilities and demands of leading schools toward equitable outcomes, a primary focus for principals is to keep fairness and social justice at the center of their leadership.

Easley et al. (2021) argued, “without an internal belief system that centers anti-racist, student first ideologies, it is easy to create a basis for decision-making rooted in the logic that blames marginalized students and their families for the lack of positive outcomes in school” (p. 166). Effective school leaders understand the importance of establishing alignment in the school staff's beliefs and attitudes relative to the needs and perspectives of the school community. The principal is the catalyst to ensure the school staff sees its students and families not as liabilities but as assets. For example, Easley et al. (2021) studied the impact of negative deficit beliefs on social justice leadership. Their results revealed that “deficit perspectives constrict the growth potential of the learning environment and perpetuate policies and practices steeped in racially biased beliefs that undermine the opportunities of youth” (p.167). Therefore, principals must identify and eliminate economic and social injustices to succeed as social justice leaders.

The principal is constantly striving to enable and encourage young people to apply the knowledge and skills they are developing to serve the common good. This means assisting students in understanding their social responsibility, which requires intention and attention from the leader. However, research findings have asserted that principals cannot do this work alone. Leading for social justice by itself is rigorous and daunting. Adding the ever-present pressures of school accountability makes for a nearly impossible feat. Easley et al. (2021) argued, “In order for principals to lead systems of change of schooling toward an ecology of equity and social justice, their moral capacity must be encouraged, nurtured, and protected” (p. 170). To this end, leaders need to consider tools and strategies such as principal coaching and supervision to deconstruct and eradicate deficit perspectives with the communities they serve.

Principal Coaching and Supervision

Various central office leaders who filled the role of the principal supervisor most often had additional responsibilities. Whether they were called regional superintendents, executive directors, executive officers, instructional leadership supervisors, or some other title, school districts typically employed a leadership hierarchy whereby principals reported to and were managed by principal supervisors (Zepeda & Ponticell, 2018). A review of the existing research found that principal supervisors were usually former principals who likely viewed their new role as similar to their former role (Saltzman, 2016).

Historically, principal supervision was more akin to bureaucratic compliance, especially in large, urban districts (Corcoran, 2013). As expectations of the principal as instructional leader increased, district leaders began to shift fiscal and human resources to support principals' growth in this area. With the complex needs of schools today, principals need support that will assist them with effectively demonstrating the behaviors that will improve instruction and student outcomes. Surprisingly, with the increased demand for improved teacher quality and student achievement, principal supervision remains a happenstance and not a top priority (Hvidston et al., 2016).

The ESSA emphasized that school leaders needed to drive improvement efforts. Thus, ESSA legislation provided states and local school districts with a renewed emphasis on school leadership that acknowledged the principal's role in school improvement and quality instruction. Herman et al.'s (2017) research found that activities designed to improve school leadership also "demonstrate a positive impact on student,

teacher, and principal outcomes, based on research that is consistent with ESSA evidence tiers" (2017, p. 1).

The principal evaluation process did not receive the same focus as school improvement initiatives in school districts (Herman et al., 2017). With the ever-increasing accountability that school leaders faced, the emphasis tended to be placed on the summative evaluation results rather than the formative coaching process. Consequently, amid the pressures of high-stakes assessments, teacher morale and instructional supervision often succumbed to snapshots in time and year-end test scores. In alignment with the core tenets of instructional supervision, Tyagi (2010) articulated the state of professional development for teachers:

> Over time, academic supervision by district education officers has deteriorated. Reservations are expressed about the academic supervision or feedback given by educational authorities to the schools and their heads. There is an apparent gap in providing guidance, help, and support for improving the teaching and learning process and the professional development of teachers. (p.112)

For principal supervisors to help principals effectively, there needs to be a balance between coaching and evaluating. In many cases, the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee is the most critical component.

Principal Evaluation

Motivated to understand the tensions derived from high-accountability teaching and learning practices, Zepeda et al. (2014) conducted a study of how one superintendent assessed the instructional leadership practices of principals based on an evaluation system

tied to school improvement targets at the school level. Driven, in part, by the objective of establishing a viable leader evaluation instrument, the research involved one participant in a case study methodology that spanned 8 months in a single urban school district. During this time, the superintendent was 'shadowed' while being the only person conducting evaluations of 20 of the district's 21 principals.

An analysis of observations, documents, and debriefing sessions led to the discovery of seven tensions by the superintendent. The tensions were (1) discrepancies between principal performance when compared to performance data, (2) length of time in the principalship compared to results of the performance, (3) finding the right balance between student achievement data and other indicators of principal performance, (4) the types of achievement data and when these data were made available, (5) attention paid to complaints about structural changes implemented by the principal, (6) balancing the principal self-evaluation rating scores with the final evaluator scores, and (7) accounting for personal factors such as relationship to principals and knowledge about principal capabilities.

Zepeda et al. (2014) noted, "A majority of the tensions can be traced to discrepancies…many tensions are inter-connected…and the nature of school improvement, accountability, and data as a foundational aspect of principal evaluation does not paint a complete picture of the principal's performance" (p. 338). However, additional findings suggested that the tensions, albeit challenging to navigate, created opportunities to develop leaders by making the most of their competencies and attempting to set principal supervisor standards.

McMahon et al. (2014) conducted a study that examined the relationship between principal evaluations and student achievement in reading and math. Using a mixed-method design, the researchers collected data from a convenience sample of 41 principals from 27 districts in Texas. The study's purpose was to measure the principals' perceptions concerning the evaluation process in increasing student learning, professional growth, and accountability. The study's findings indicated no correlation between principal evaluations and student achievement. According to McMahon et al., the survey results suggested "that evaluation processes within the district are perceived as merely a checklist for complying with district policy and have little impact on professional growth or student achievement" (p. 34). In addition, the researchers noted that findings from their study lacked rigor and fidelity.

Unlike Zepeda et al.'s (2014) research findings that suggested the principal evaluation process was mired by tensions that convoluted the intended outputs of the evaluations, the findings from McMahon et al.'s (2014) study indicated that the evaluation instrument lacked the necessary rigor to promote or change those principal behaviors that impact student learning. Findings from these studies suggested that principal evaluation systems warrant the consideration of rigorous implementation practices and instrument design to create fidelity (McMahon et al., 2014; Zepeda et al., 2014).

Principal Supervisor Standards

The principal supervisor position has lacked consistency from district to district. However, a common thread was the prerequisite work of principals. Whether the principal supervisor was also the superintendent or an executive-level central office

administrator, most principal supervisors were also principals at some point in their careers. In 2015, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) published the Model Principal Supervisor Standards. In a review of the standards, Superville (2016) posited the CCSSO earmarked eight criteria to "enable states and districts to elevate the role of supervisors so they can focus on helping principals improve instruction, learning, and ultimately, student achievement" (para. 8).

Relative to the district central office, the principal supervisor standards underscored the need for a holistic approach to improving schools. Historically viewed as the "fiscal or administrative pass-throughs for federal and state initiatives" (Honig, 2008, p. 627), district central offices must now expand their scope and become critical influencers of processes and structures to improve teaching and learning practices in all schools. The national standards were meant to serve as a roadmap for this transformation. Traditionally, principal supervision was akin to ensuring compliance and administrative oversight (Honig, 2012; Lochmiller, 2018; Thessin, 2019). However, recent reform mandates have highlighted the need for more intentionality from principal supervisors.

Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards

In December 2015, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) released new standards that provided a clear definition of the supervisor of school principals' role in the organization. The standards identified vital components of the position by delineating the purpose of principal supervisors to improve the effectiveness of principals, connect central offices and school sites, and build capacity as a district leader. The focus of the work has primarily been on developing outstanding school principals who can improve teaching and learning.

The Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards (MPSPS) are grounded in school leaders' actions and their dispositions to their work (CCSSO, 2015; Superville, 2016). Intended to provide a comprehensive structure for supporting principals, the Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards are broken down into three categories: educational leadership, effective functioning of the district, and capacity and efficacy of the principal supervisor.

Redefining the Principal Supervisor's Role

In 2018, the Wallace Foundation launched a 4-year research campaign, called the Principal Supervisor Initiative (PSI), to investigate principal supervision efforts in urban school districts. The PSI includes five core components regarding the role of the principal supervisor: job description, a span of control, capacity and training, succession planning, and central office structures in support of the principal supervisor. This study highlighted three of the PSI components: the principal supervisor as an instructional leader, developing the capacity of the principal supervisor, and central systems and structures in support of the principal supervisor.

Shifting the focus of the principal supervisor's work to one of instructional leadership warranted changes in the central office structure. The PSI research suggested that school districts struggled with making the shifts, which perpetuated the operational and compliant mindset associated with the role of the principal supervisor. The PSI research data analysis indicated that progress was made in the need to support and develop principal supervisors as instructional leaders.

School districts attempted to address this need by including principal supervisors in professional learning activities planned for principals, suggesting the supervisors

understand better what was expected from principals and when (Goldring et al., 2018). Additional findings from the study indicated principal supervisors' capacity remained stagnant. The researchers attributed the stagnation to the professional learning activities not being designed to promote growth in the principal supervisors' role, rather ensuring clarity of expectation related to school and district initiatives.

The PSI research noted the value of coordinated efforts to support schools and principals for improved teaching and learning. Specifically, the researchers identified central offices practices that show evidence of this nature: reallocating non-instructional duties of principal supervisors, collaboration and coordination across departments, and improved systems of communication among central office, principal supervisors, and schools. Goldring et al. (2018) noted, "Principal supervisors reported that steps taken to reorganize the central office to absorb noninstructional responsibilities helped their work" (p. 52). The findings from the PSI related to the three components included in this study were used to inform the research activities the design team planned and the data analysis process used to discover the findings in this study.

Principal Supervisors as Partners

In 2013 the Council of Great City Schools released a report titled *Rethinking Leadership: The Changing Role of the Principal Supervisor*. The report was the latest in a two-part study of the ways principal supervisors were selected, supported, and evaluated. Research findings in this report documented shifts in the principal supervisors' role that were likely to improve principals' instructional leadership. The study involved six school districts that participated in the Wallace Foundation's initial principal supervisor initiative research.

Findings from the research indicated evidence that supported principal supervisors who create partnerships that complement their support of principals increased the principal's leadership capacity for improving instruction in their school. However, researchers added that participating districts varied in how partnerships were established. For example, some participating districts created supportive partnerships between principal supervisors and district office personnel. In comparison, other districts directly created partnerships between supervisors and their principals. Even still, the research indicated that other districts did not create partnerships at all; they merely removed structural or operational barriers that suggested the need for such partnerships (Corcoran, 2013). Over time, the related literature on this research indicated progress in this effort.

Rainey and Honig (2015) studied the lessons of 11 school systems from across the nation as they implemented practices to transform their principal supervisor positions to support improved teaching and learning. Using qualitative data collection and analysis, the researchers found that several trends had emerged in the school systems, some similar and others varying. Rainey and Honig's (2015) research identified one particular theme that was highlighted in this action research study: principal supervisors sharing ownership of the principal's instructional leadership capacity. According to Rainey and Honig (2015), when principal supervisors viewed themselves as partners to their principals, "they made intentional moves to help principals think and act in ways that built their capacity for instructional leadership" (p. 21). Findings from the study indicated that districts used varied approaches for positioning principal supervisors as partners to their principals. In addition, Rainey and Honig (2015) noted that some districts in the study struggled to implement such a stance with their principal supervisors. The

researchers cited reasons due to deficit skills and the staff's preference to maintain the traditional hierarchal structure where principal supervisors spent more time on managerial and non-instructional matters related to supervising principals.

Thessin (2019) sought to understand the nature of the relationship between the principal and principal supervisor that contributed to a conducive partnership leading to principals' improvement in instructional leadership practices. Drawing from principal coaching and executive leadership coaching research, Thessin (2019) used a multiple case study methodology to "understand the partnership between the principal supervisor and the principal as a bounded system" (p. 470). The research project included five principal supervisors and 12 principals. Findings from the research study highlighted the characteristics of skillfulness and credibility demonstrated by the principal supervisor and the principal's quality as a self-regulated learner.

Thessin (2019) noted when the principal and principal supervisor exhibited these qualities in the confluence of each other and when the principal supervisor provided support and encouragement of principal practices, the two were engaged in joint work, leading to "robust changes in principals' instructional leadership practices" (p. 473). Additional findings from Thessin's (2019) research indicated that the once managerial executive coaching style required of principal supervisors became obsolete in today's learning-focused relationship between the principal and principal supervisor.

Principal Supervisors as Coaches

Current research highlights the potential of leadership coaching as a promising practice to strengthen principal reflection and professional growth (Corcoran, 2013; Honig & Rainey, 2014). This idea is further supported by the recently developed Model

Principal Supervisor Professional Standards. The standards state, “Principal supervisors coach and support individual principals and engage in effective professional learning strategies to help principals grow as instructional leaders” (CCSSO, 2015, p.16). According to Rainey and Honig (2015), as cited in Lochmiller (2018), shifting the principal supervisor’s practice from one that is direct and hierarchal to that of coaching involves “intentional moves to help principals think and act in new ways” (p. 78).

To understand better how principal supervisors can take up coaching behaviors within the context of their supervisory role, Lochmiller (2018) conducted a case study of 20 principal supervisors from two urban school districts. Each of the study participants received training in leadership coaching from a private university as a part of the research study. Findings from Lochmiller’s research suggested that supervisors “had difficulty addressing the prescriptive nature of their supervisory role and found the expectations placed on them by their district binding and often a significant barrier to embedding coaching behaviors within their practice” (2018, p. 83). Deeper analysis of the research findings also claimed, “the adoption of coaching strategies by principal supervisors may be less straightforward than it seems (Lochmiller, p.88). The study spotlighted the natural conflict within principal supervisors’ roles as they attempted to employ supervisory and coaching behaviors.

Principal Supervisors’ Professional Development

If effective principals make excellent teaching possible across an entire school, what makes effective principals across the entire school district? A growing body of research points to the principal supervisor as an impetus for creating effective principals at scale (Goldring et al., 2020; Honig & Rainey, 2014). The path to the principal

supervisor role is laden with former principals. Paul Bambrick-Santoyo, author of *Leverage Leadership 2.0,* noted, "For most of us who have risen to the role of principal manager, we got there by being a good principal" (2018, p.3). However, being a good principal does not beget being a supervisor of principals (Thessin & Louis, 2019). As the role of the principal supervisor continues to evolve, Honig and Rainey (2014) shared that those in the position need ongoing professional learning opportunities that provide them "with the understandings, skills, and dispositions needed to respond to the ever-changing school environments and to promote excellence and equity in all schools" (p. 25).

Like the role of the principal and principal supervisor that has experienced change, so has the focus of professional learning for these critical roles. Whereas professional development activities for principal supervisors have been historically affixed to managerial practices and strategies, these activities have been replaced with those more focused on coaching, collaboration, and mentoring (Lochmiller, 2018; Thessin & Louis, 2019). In addition, extant literature has suggested that principal supervisors' professional development is often, contrary to belief, conducted on their own (Honig & Rainey, 2019; Thessin, 2019).

Research has suggested a positive correlation between job-embedded professional learning and improved adult practices. Zepeda (2016) argued that "coherence is built between instructional leadership…and professional development when learning for adults is embedded within the workday over a sustained period of time" (p. 32). Until recently, identifying the conditions and antecedents that support principals and their supervisors in creating the coherence needed to improve teaching and learning has remained elusive. Findings from Honig and Rainey's 2019 study claimed to have identified the conditions

that support the principal supervisor's efforts to work collaboratively with principals to improve teaching and learning outcomes in their schools.

Using learning theory as the theoretical framework, Honig and Rainey (2019) sought to examine the conditions under which principal supervisors could influence their principals' instructional leadership competence. By examining two districtwide studies that included nine school districts, the review of hundreds of documents, more than 750 observation hours, and more than 300 interviews of principals and principal supervisors, the researchers found that certain conditions supported principal supervisor efforts to improve instructional leadership. Notably, but not surprisingly, was the antecedent of prior knowledge. "Learners with prior knowledge relevant to the new practices already have a developing mental model of the practices to guide their learning and require less outside help over time" (Honig & Rainey, 2019, p. 448). Additional supportive conditions included the following elements:

Assistance relationship: The principal supervisor works alongside the learner in real-time to grow together, reinforcing that the learner's growth is a shared responsibility

Modeling: The principal supervisor helps the principal (the learner) conceptualize the target task before engaging in it while providing structures to make sense of feedback, making the learner's thinking visible.

Challenging talk: The principal supervisor supports the learner's progress from novice to expert by challenging each other's understandings, increasing individual and collective knowledge

Brokering: The principal supervisory relationship brings new ideas, understandings, and other resources into the relationship to advance learning.

Honig and Rainey's research (2019) found that principal supervisors "actively led their own learning and learned from their supervisors" (p.438). This finding matched results from another study conducted during the same period.

In 2019, Rebecca Thessin conducted a study exploring what the principals and principal supervisors each brought to their collaborative work to support principals' development as instructional leaders. Thessin (2019) employed a multiple case study methodology to gather data from 12 principal/principal supervisor partnerships over 16 months. Data collection included nearly 30 interviews and more than 85 observations totaling almost 150 hours of observations of principals and their supervisors. Thessin (2019) found that "principals who made robust changes in their instructional leadership practice…were motivated to lead the work of improvement" (p. 473). Additional findings from Thessin's research noted that principal supervisors who made significant improvements in their principal partnerships brought antecedents such as joint work (known as assistance relationships in Honig and Rainey's (2019) research) and skillfulness and credibility (viewed as prior knowledge in Honig and Rainey's research).

ESSA's Role

With the passing of ESSA, the duties and responsibilities of the principal supervisor have shifted in theory and practice. Acknowledging the clarion call for principal supervision, Thessin (2019) argued, "If the role of the principal is changing, then so too must the role of those who support and supervise principals" (p. 465). Whereas the principal supervisor position was formerly seen as a formality, the position is now seen as an agent for improving schools. Non-regulatory guidance for Title II, Part A of ESSA provides for the following consideration:

> The ESEA [Elementary Secondary Education Act] considers those LEA [Local Education Agency] staff, such as the principals' supervisors who actively mentor and support principals… "responsible for the school's daily instructional leadership and managerial operations, "…We encourage SEAs [state education agencies] and LEAs to extend Title II, Part A-funded services to these principal supervisors to the extent that those individuals actively and frequently take responsibility for helping principals with instructional leadership and the school's managerial operations. (ESEA, p. 17)

Under ESSA, states have unprecedented flexibility and funding to support principal preparation and principal development. Haller et al. (2016) highlighted that policymakers continue to overlook principals' needs relative to growth and development: "Policymakers give much more attention to teachers and teacher-related issues than principals" (p. 2). Given the expectation that principals impact teaching and learning through school funding for leadership development is often coupled with teacher development, teacher support, or some other broader topic (Haller et al., 2016).

DeVoto and Reedy (2019) reviewed 52 state plans to see how these states intended to use funding and flexibility under the guidance of ESSA. Their research indicated that states were using Title II funding more broadly. However, the data also showed high variance concerning how states intended to prioritize principal growth and development for school improvement. According to DeVoto and Reedy,

> Thirty-three states describe how they want to increase the number of principals who are effective in improving student achievement. On the contrary, 30 states plan to develop school leaders' skills in identifying students with specific learning

> needs and providing instruction based on those needs. However, we only find 13 states linking such activities to their School Quality or Student Success indicator. Consequently, states show limited engagement in linking these activities with actual school improvement. As states implement their plans, this finding will be important to follow. (p. 12)

Having access to dedicated professional development is central to the capacity-building needed to enhance school instructional leadership.

Despite a growing body of research regarding the critical role that principal supervisors played in improving the instructional leadership competence of principals (Corcoran, 2013; Goldring et al., 2018; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Thessin, 2019), there is little extant research on the role that district central offices played in developing principal supervisors. Without dispute, district offices leverage the principal supervisor as a significant player in the school and district improvement process (Goldring et al., 2020; Grissom et al., 2017). Yet, the current implication is that principal supervisors, especially those tasked to improve instructional practices for teachers and principals, can only be promoted from the rank of principal.

Central Office Structures

Decades of research have suggested that improvement efforts have failed to penetrate the majority of schools in a district without substantial and coherent district office support (Honig & Copland, 2008; Honig et al., 2017; Leithwood et al., 2019). For central offices that do not have a systematic leadership development process, selecting former principals to supervise principals may present several challenges. For instance, a study conducted by The Council of Great City Schools (CGCS) found that principal

supervisors in six large urban districts had more experience as principals than as principal supervisors (Corcoran, 2013).

These findings suggested that the learning curve for the supervisors is trending upward. Casserly et al. (2013) also found that typical duties of the principal supervisor included visiting assigned schools, discussing instructional issues with principals, coaching principals, conducting professional development with principals, and evaluating principals. Honig and Rainey (2019) argued, “supervisors of principal supervisors have important roles to play, especially when they take a teaching and learning approach when supporting principal supervisors” (p.457). Traditionally, professional development efforts have focused on teachers rather than leaders. However, given school leaders' impact on student achievement, access to high-quality, job-embedded professional development is essential.

Research has suggested that principal supervisors are critical in developing the instructional leadership practices that principals are expected to exhibit (Saltzman, 2016). Honig and Rainey argued, “supervisors of principal supervisors have important roles to play, especially when they take a teaching and learning approach to supporting principal supervisors” (2019, p.457).

Central Office Transformation

District central offices can positively influence student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2019). However, this is relatively new work. Central offices have not historically been designed to function as a teaching and learning support hub. Honig (2013) argued, “Central offices were set up at the turn of the 20th century not to address teaching and learning, but mainly to bring administrative order…especially in growing metropolitan

areas" (p.2). Extant research has highlighted new, emerging roles for principal supervisors that central offices should consider, including revising the principal supervisor job description and reducing the number of principals in the principal supervisor's span of control (Goldring et al., 2018).

The clarion call continues for policymakers and district leaders to address the mismatch between the school performance demands of today and the district office's antiquated structures of yesterday (Honig & Rainey, 2020). Scholarly research abound, yet efforts to create sustainable transformation in the district central office appear limited and mainly unsuccessful (Grissom et al., 2017; Leithwood et al., 2010; Leithwood et al., 2019). Rather than tinkering at the margins of the central office, Honig (2013) argued, "leaders must be willing to fundamentally rethink and remake their central offices, so they perform in ways that support schools in realizing instructional improvement goals" (p. 4).

Central Office Role in School Improvement

Historically, the school is viewed as the sole subject of reform efforts. Primarily influenced by the effective schools research – which espoused that district offices often lacked the technical and relational inputs to crystalize improvement – district offices played a secondary role in improving school performance (Trujillo, 2013). However, the last decade has seen a resurgence in scholarly research relative to the district office's role in teaching and learning outcomes (Grissom et al., 2017; Lochmiller, 2018). Often referred to as district effectiveness studies, a growing body of research has focused on what districts have done to exceed student learning expectations (Leithwood et al., 2019; Thessin et al., 2020). In 2019, Leithwood et al. conducted one such study.

Situated in the province of Ontario, Canada, Leithwood et al.'s (2019) study sought to explore district characteristics and the role district leaders played in improving student achievement. Unlike previous studies with a similar purpose, this study used a mixed-methods approach to collect more than 2,300 responses from school and district leaders from 45 districts. However, findings from this study suggested that district offices had significant effects on the school-related concepts of mission, vision, and goals; coherent instructional programming; and district alignment. However, findings also suggested insignificant effects on school leadership on student learning.

The principal supervisor position is a function of the central office. Whether in concert or as an intermediary player, the work of the principal supervisor and how the position was leveraged reflected how the central office viewed its role in supporting school improvement. This action research study sought to show both aspects of the principal supervisor position – as a function of the larger structure and as an intermediary.

Chapter Summary

School leaders are faced with a daunting task. The process of principal supervision has changed tremendously over the past decade (Thessin & Louis, 2019). Undergirded by a growing body of research and recently developed principal supervisor standards, more school districts are leveraging the position of the principal supervisor to drive instructional leadership behaviors at the school level (CCSSO, 2015; Goldring et al., 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2019). Surprisingly, very few districts have made the principal supervisor position a priority practice for improving school leadership performance (Honig, 2013). This literature review identified the need for clarity in

defining instructional leadership and the behaviors and practices that constitute instructional leadership. District central office leaders continue to wrestle with identifying and committing to structures that support principal/principal supervisor capacity as instructional leaders (Honig & Rainey, 2019).

ESSA has created a pathway for state and local education agencies to have more autonomy over school accountability (Haller et al., 2016). A potential and unintended consequence of this increased autonomy could be using the Model Principal Supervisor Standards voluntarily at the state and local levels. Neither states nor local districts are required to use the model standards – nor is it required that alternative principal supervisor standards be developed. Until there is consistency around the use of the standards, there is a need for clarity.

Chapter 3 describes the research design and methodology involved in this action research and the qualitative methods related to this study. This chapter also serves to amplify the context in which the research was conducted. The next chapter also describes in detail the interventions of this study.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Education researchers have long argued that effective school leadership is needed to establish a strong school climate that supports ambitious instruction and high levels of student learning (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Corcoran, 2013; Leithwood et al.,2010). One such way of doing this is to provide principals with relevant and effective coaching and support. Consequently, many school districts leverage an intermediary administrator to support and supervise principals as they navigate a persistent tide of education reforms. The role of the principal supervisor, albeit still relatively new, is changing as school districts attempt to keep up with the diverse needs of schools and their leaders (Goldring et al., 2018, 2020).

The purpose of this study was to examine the structures and practices that support principal supervisors in their efforts to help principals grow as instructional leaders. The study focused on the roles of principals, principal supervisors, and the district central office as agents of influence in the effort to improve teaching and learning outcomes. The following research questions guided this investigation:

RQ1: What are the key actions of principal supervisors that effectively support principals as instructional leaders?

RQ2: How do principals perceive the impact of instructional leadership support on their efforts to improve instructional practices?

RQ3: How do design and implementation team members describe the influence of the action research process on their instructional leadership capacity?

Chapter 3 describes the methodology used for this study. It includes a rationale for using the action research design, how the action research team members were selected, and an explanation of the data collection methods. The chapter also highlights the process for strengthening the credibility of the research, approaches for data analysis, the study's limitations, and the researcher's positionality in the study.

The Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research explores how people understand and experience their world at a particular point in time and in a particular context (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). I chose a qualitative methodology for this research study to highlight the lived experiences of principal supervisors who supported the instructional leadership development of principals. How to develop principals' instructional leadership skills is a complex issue, and the qualitative research paradigm helped explore specific aspects of the problem in greater detail. A qualitative method helps explore a particular topic with a group of people when variables have not been defined (Creswell, 2007). The essence of qualitative research is characterized by searching for meaning and understanding. Merriam and Grenier (2019) described qualitative research as an "inductive investigative strategy and a richly descriptive end product" (p. 6) that allows the researcher to function as the primary data collection instrument and analysis.

From the onset of this research project, I was most interested in discovering principal supervisors' perspectives regarding their experiences supporting principals as instructional leaders. I also sought to understand how principals perceived the impact of

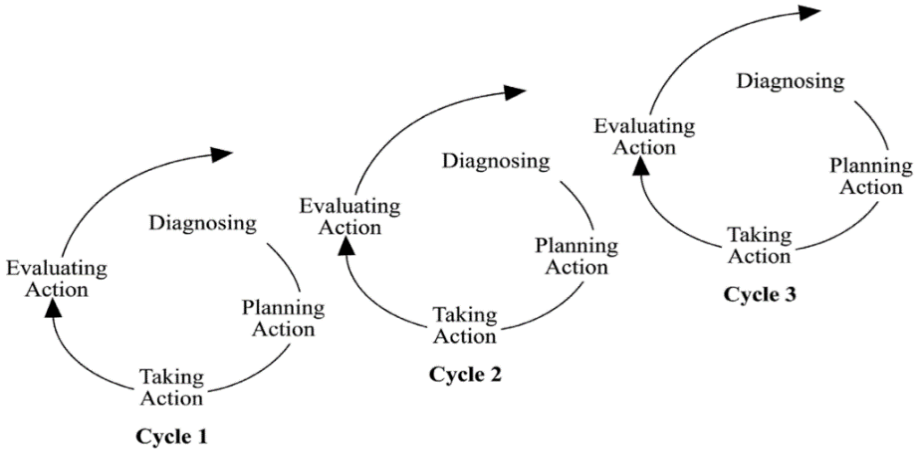
principal supervisors' efforts on their performance as instructional leaders. To ensure that the essence of the lived experiences was analyzed and understood, I determined that a qualitative methodology was most suitable to address the research questions that guided this study.

Overview of Action Research Methods

In its simplest form, action research involves participants in designing and conducting the study. A more widely accepted definition of action research espouses that action research "brings together action and reflection, as well as theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern" (Bradbury, 2015, p. 1). Action research has a rich history in the education arena (Hatch, 2002; Given, 2008; Merriam, 2002) and is considered a viable problem-solving strategy for improving the overall school organization, or discrete aspects such as professional development design (Glanz, 2014). Historically, action research is characterized by a cyclical process (illustrated in Figure 6) that includes diagnosing a problem, planning, gathering data, taking action, and lastly, a fact-finding about the results of that action to plan and take further action (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Given, 2008; Glanz, 2014).

Figure 6

Action Research Cycle



An action research strategy enables the researcher to draw on the context from within. Said differently, action research is a way of reviewing your practice and assessing whether it is as you feel it should be. Action research was best suited for this project because the study sought to understand how principal supervisors' practices supported principals' growth and practice as instructional leaders. This research method was selected because of its practicality and application within the work setting and the inherent components of individual reflection, collaborative teamwork, and emphasis on school improvement (Land, 2000).

The Case Study

Merriam described the qualitative case study as an "intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual, group, institution, or community" (2002, p. 8). A case study design was selected due to the uniqueness of what could be explored and uncovered about the phenomenon, which may not be accessible in other types of research. Also, a case study provides a holistic description and analysis of

the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). The case study design provided the richest data for understanding the principal supervisors' views and perspectives on how they best supported and developed principals and how principals perceived how the principal supervisor influenced their instructional leadership performance.

I applied an interpretive approach as part of the design of this case study. "An interpretive approach assumes that reality is socially constructed; that is, there is no single, observable reality; rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event" (Merriam, 2009, p. 8). The interpretive approach was intended to describe, understand, and interpret the principal supervisor for this study. Furthermore, the interpretive approach provided an opportunity to understand the principal supervisors' perspectives of their roles.

Action Research Design Team

The researcher strategically selected three educators who served in various school and district leadership roles t3o form this study's action research design team. The AR design team members were identified and selected based on their working experience in a school or district-level leadership role. The objective of the AR design team was to co-create an action research plan that would address the essential questions of the study.

Action Research Implementation Team

All principals and principal supervisors within HPSD were eligible and invited to participate in this study. The researcher sent an email that outlined the study objectives and requisite commitments of potential participants. In addition, the email expressed the voluntary nature of participation and that selected candidates could choose to discontinue participation at any time. The action research team was identified and selected based on

experiences in leading high-need schools and principal supervisor roles. The AR team included three principal supervisors and ten principals. Each AR team member provided voluntary consent to participate in the action research. The primary objective of forming the AR team was to incorporate an expansive range of experiences and perspectives relative to educational and instructional leadership for school improvement.

Table 2

Action Research Team Demographics

Name (Pseudonym)	Current position	Experience in administration	Role in the study
The Researcher	Superintendent	26	Researcher/Design Team
Ms. Gagel	Principal	9	Implementation Team
Mr. Rhodes	Principal Supervisor	20	Design/Implementation Team
Ms. Ross	Principal	5	Implementation Team
Ms. Peterson	Principal	3	Implementation Team
Ms. Shaw	Principal Supervisor	24	Design/Implementation Team
Mr. Madison	Principal	7	Implementation Team
Ms. Laney	Principal	7	Implementation Team
Mr. Kennedy	Principal Supervisor	19	Design/Implementation Team
Ms. Brooks	Principal	4	Implementation Team
Ms. Erickson	Principal	6	Implementation Team
Ms. Hooper	Principal	8	Implementation Team
Ms. Cooper	Principal	6	Implementation Team
Mr. Bossidy	Principal	5	Implementation Team

Intervention Plan and Timeline

The action research design team officially began the study by meeting and reviewing its purpose and the action research process. Using a visual to help explain the upcoming steps in the study, I shared Coghlan and Brannick's (2014) action research cycle diagram with the team members. I presented the research questions that framed the action research study and worked with the design team to establish a timeline to complete the research cycles. The design team developed a series of interventions that were initiated during the action research process. The interventions were scheduled over three research cycles.

The action research cycle illustrates the combination of action and theory (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). After each cycle, the interventions were evaluated on implementation and participant engagement; this information provided critical data regarding whether subsequent interventions warranted adjustment or revision. Each intervention was intended to contribute to the growth and professional development of the study participants. The interventions involved job-embedded professional learning activities that support a teaching and learning approach to principal supervision.

The research study was grounded by synthesizing organizational learning theory and Honig et al.'s (2010) instructional leadership model. Honig's model posits principal supervisors should work to support principals by engaging in learning-focused partnerships, practicing with varied supports, identifying and aligning external resources, purposefully interacting with other practitioners, and executing behaviors and decisions synonymous with instructional leadership. The action research design team selected interventions that aligned with the tenets of the theoretical framework. The selection of

these interventions was also influenced by the desire to triangulate data sources. The AR design team established a cadence for recurring meetings aligned to the action research cycle. Table 3 shows the timeline for the project.

Table 3

Action Research Timeline

Action research phase	Activity	Timeline
	Research Cycle 1: June 2021 – July 2021	
Diagnosing	The researcher created and administered a PL needs-assessment survey for Principal Supervisors	May 2021
Planning action	The design team planned PL for Principal Supervisors based on needs assessment results	June 2021
Taking action	The researcher conducted a focus group researcher facilitated pl activities for principal supervisors. pl conducted by an external consultant	July 2021
Evaluating action	The researcher compiled and analyzed feedback from principal supervisor PL activities	July 2021
	Research Cycle 2: August 2021 – October 2021	
Diagnosing	AR team identified principal PL needs based on school performance indicators (content)	July 2021
Planning action	AR design team designed principal PL sessions using a cycle of inquiry related to student learning outcomes	July 2021
Taking action	The researcher conducted a focus group and semi-structured interviews Principal supervisors facilitated PL sessions and individual coaching sessions Principals completed interviews and questionnaire	August 2021
Evaluating action	The researcher compiled and coded focus group and individual interviews	September 2021
	Research Cycle 3: November 2021 – December 2021	
Diagnosing	The researcher presented data to the AR team Intervention activities	October 2021
Planning action	AR Team planned additional intervention implementation	October 2021
Taking action	The researcher conducted the final round of focus group Principal supervisors conducted PL and coaching sessions	October 2021 – December 2021
Evaluating action	The researcher compiled and coded focus group and individual interviews	December 2021

Contextual Setting

This action research occurred in the Heartland Public School District. HPSD is a high-poverty school system located in the Southeastern United States, with more than 25,000 students in grades kindergarten through 12th in 36 schools and programs. The district has a high poverty rate with a direct certification applying to more than 80% of the overall student enrollment. In addition, as a participant in the Community Eligibility Provision, 100% of HPSD's students are eligible for schools at no charge. Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a program that allows eligible schools to offer a non-pricing meal service to all students at no cost for lunch and breakfast meals.

Data Sources

Participants

The participants in the study included three principal supervisors and ten school principals employed in one medium-size urban school district in a southeastern state. Four participants were male, and the remaining participants were female. All participants had 5 years of experience in an administrative role and 10 years of experience in a school setting. Each of the selected principals was supervised by one of the three principal supervisors. Six principals led high-needs, state-identified schools (i.e., CSI, TSI, or CSI-Promise). Three principals led high schools, three principals led middle schools, and the remaining four led elementary schools.

Selection Criteria

Merriam (2002), as cited in Polkinghorne (2005), offered this advice regarding the distinction between random and purposeful sampling:

> To begin with, since you are not interested in 'how much' or 'how often,' random sampling makes little sense. Instead, since qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants, it is important to select a sample from which most can be learned. This is called a purposive or purposeful sample. (p. 140)

Purposeful sampling is nearly synonymous with qualitative research (Given, 2008; Patton, 2002). This research study included a purposive sampling selection. Maxwell argued that purposive sampling is "a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices" (2009, p. 235). The participants for this study were selected because the researcher believed that they were best suited to describe how principal supervisors coached and supported principals as instructional leaders through their own experiences. This was an intentional effort conducted to select an information-rich case for study. Patton (2002) argued that "studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations" (p. 273).

A different but equally beneficial set of perspectives regarding purposive sampling is that the selection fosters better matching of the sample to the research goals, enhanced objectivity of the study, and trustworthiness of the data and results (Patton, 2002). Given (2008) offered the following rationale behind qualitative inquiry:

> Qualitative researchers are less often interested in asking about the central tendency in a larger group, and much more interested in case study analysis - why particular people (or groups) feel particular ways, the processes by which these

attitudes are constructed, and the role they play in dynamic processes within the organization or group. (p.697).

The following criteria were considered to select participants: supervised at least three principals within the school district; served in their current position supervising principals for at least two years; supervised both new and veteran principals as part of their existing responsibilities and served in current position as elementary grades or secondary grades principal.

Data Collection Methods

Rigorous data collection procedures were used for this qualitative action research study to understand the capacity of principal supervisors regarding their efforts to coach and support principals as instructional leaders. The process included one-on-one semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observations, and questionnaires. In addition, the data collected included recorded conversations with participants and artifacts related to their supervision of principals when they were discussed during the data collection interview (Creswell, 2007). Spending adequate time in the field, collecting interview data, and providing robust summarizations of data highlighted the data collection efforts of this study.

Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews with each participant were conducted with open-ended questions using a semi-structured interview guide. The use of an interview protocol enabled the researcher to align the interview questions with the aim of answering the research questions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Interview questions were developed from concepts found in reviewing the literature. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

All electronic files were stored on computers on passwords-protected accounts to maintain the confidentiality of the data collected. Participants were contacted by phone or email using publicly available information from school district websites for their workplace contact information.

Responses to the open-ended interview questions yielded insight into the research questions. Table 4 shows the alignment of interview questions and research questions. Each research question is listed below with its corresponding identifier.

Research Question 1:

What are the key actions of principal supervisors that effectively support principals as instructional leaders?

Research Question 2:

How do principal supervisors create a differentiated and targeted support system to develop principals' growth as instructional leaders?

Research Question 3:

How do design and implementation team members describe the influence of the action research process on their instructional leadership capacity?

Table 4

Alignment of Semi-structured Interview Questions to Research Questions

Question number	Interview question	Research question alignment
1	What does instructional leadership look like to you?	RQ1
2	How do principal supervisors determine the needs of each principal?	RQ1, RQ2
3	What do you feel is the primary role of the principal supervisor?	RQ3
4	What evidence is used to determine effectiveness as an instructional leader?	RQ1, RQ2
5	What instructional leadership skills do you see as having the most significant impact on improving teacher practices?	RQ1, RQ3
6	Describe the joint work of the principal and principal supervisor relative to building instructional leadership capacity?	RQ2
7	What instructional leadership practices do you believe best support principals as instructional leaders?	RQ1, RQ2
8	What skills are needed in the role of principal supervisor?	RQ1
9	What training or other supports have helped you most as an instructional leader?	RQ1, RQ2
10	How has the principal supervisor supported your development as an instructional leader?	RQ1, RQ2,
11	What additional support or training would you like to improve principal effectiveness and accelerate your development as a principal supervisor?	RQ1, RQ2

Positionality

Creswell argued that the qualitative researcher "reflects on who he or she is in the inquiry and is sensitive to their personal biography and how it shapes the study" (2007, p. 182). I am an African American first-generation college graduate who has spent my entire professional career in K-12 public education. I began my professional career in the same space where I concluded my K-12 academic journey, a special education classroom.

Like many first-generation minority college attendees, my struggles were not centered solely on financial hardships. After I arrived at college, I quickly realized the level of instruction that I received in high school was sufficient to meet high school graduation requirements but not adequate to bypass remedial undergraduate coursework.

I firmly believe that the actions of the school leader propel school performance. I understand that the leader is not omnipresent, but the leader's presence matters profoundly. Going back to my K-12 school experience as the basis, my theory of inquiry is that students' learning problems are the outputs of teachers' problems of practice. As such, the teacher's problem of practice is an output of the principal's problem of practice. Therefore, to address the learning problem in the classroom, the principal's support structure must address the teacher's practice. To this end, the principal's supervisor needs a system to support this effort.

I am also aware of the leader's influence related to students' school performance. The principal serves as the instructional leader, establishing and cascading the vision for teaching and learning. This entails, among other things, that the principal supports the continuous improvement of teacher practices that lead to high levels of learning by each student. Thus, if it stands to reason that the principal is the primary arm of support for improving teaching practices, what structure is there for principals as they strive to improve instructional leadership practices? The role of the principal supervisor entails more than systems for operational compliance and managerial administration. Due to my previous experiences working as a principal and principal supervisor, I understand that I bring certain biases to this research study. Although I have strived to make every effort to ensure objectivity, my previous experiences may have shaped how I interpreted the data

I collected. I can recall my experiences in either of the roles trying to balance time and energy between the sundry managerial tasks of leading a high-needs school and observing and evaluating instructional practices. I can recall leading the growth and development of leaders while not having a codified process for ensuring my growth and development as a principal supervisor. I can remember navigating the uneven territory of middle management in a large urban school district. I offer these descriptions because they serve as the impetus of my inquiry. At the same time, I understand the implications of my experiences and my role as a qualitative researcher.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Qualitative research is considered most beneficial when seeking to understand a specific phenomenon or the study participant's lived experiences (Durkin et al., 2020). This newly acquired insight eventually becomes a story shaped by the context of the research site, the participant's lens, and the storyteller's intentions. Merriam (2009) asserted that trustworthiness is developed when a researcher "carefully designs the study and applies well-developed standards that are accepted by the scientific community" (p. 210). I used three strategies to ensure trustworthiness and credibility for this study.

First, I used methodological triangulation to study intervention responses. Methodological triangulation involves using multiple qualitative data methods in a research project. For example, having collected data from individual interviews, observations, open-ended questionnaires, and focus groups, I sought to establish the validity of the findings by cross-checking all the methods to see if the same conclusions were derived (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012).

The second strategy I used to strengthen the project's validity was member checking. Member checking involves "soliciting feedback on emerging findings from the people being interviewed" (Merriam, 2009, p. 217). Third, after typing the transcriptions and notes, I shared emerging themes with the principal supervisors and principals to check accuracy. When needed, additional time was allotted to adapt and refine themes. Lastly, to support the trustworthiness and credibility of the analysis, peer examination was used throughout the analysis process to review the data and assess whether the findings were credible.

Merriam (2009) argued that the design of a case study enhances the trustworthiness of the findings. A strategy known as maximum variation was used in the principal supervisor selection to allow for "greater range of application by potential readers, thus increasing the possibility of transferability" (Merriam, 2009, p. 227). Maximum variation is when the researcher selects a small number of units to maximize diversity relative to addressing the research question. Although in a statistical sense, generalization, in a statistical sense, cannot occur for qualitative studies, there is potential for transferability because the reader can apply the results of the study to other settings (Merriam, 2009, p. 224). To enhance the trustworthiness and credibility further, the presentation of a rich and extensive set of details was performed to improve the potential for transferability. A rich, thick description was created by collecting a detailed description of the study's setting, participants, and findings. Details also included quotes from the interviews and field notes.

Limitations of Study

The findings of this research study included data collected from one urban school district in the southeast region of the United States. Therefore, this data may not transfer to other school districts in the state or school districts throughout the United States. The purposeful selection of 13 participants included three principal supervisors and ten principals. Each of the participating principals reported to at least one of the participating principal supervisors. A larger sample may have provided more data to increase the transferability of the research findings.

Chapter Summary

This research was designed as a qualitative case study using an interpretive approach. Using interviews, focus observations, and questionnaires, I explored how principal supervisors' structures, processes, and practices supported principals as instructional leaders and how principals perceived the impact of instructional leadership support on their efforts to improve instructional practices.

CHAPTER 4

THE CASE

The purpose of this study was to examine the structures and practices that support principal supervisors in their efforts to help principals grow as instructional leaders. The study focused on the roles of principals, principal supervisors, and the district central office as agents of influence in the quest to improve teaching and learning outcomes. The following research questions guided this investigation:

RQ1: What are the key actions of principal supervisors that effectively support principals as instructional leaders?

RQ2: How do principals perceive the impact of instructional leadership support on their efforts to improve instructional practices?

RQ3: How do design and implementation team members describe the influence of the action research process on their instructional leadership capacity?

Problem Framing in the Context

The context of this action research study was the Heartland Public School District. At the time, HPSD was the seventeenth-largest district in a state within the southeastern region of the United States. The school district consisted of thirty-seven schools and programs and served students in grades K-12. The district has more than 25,000 students and nearly 1,400 instructional staff members. An analysis of students' demographics indicated an even split of male and female students. The racial makeup of the students was 73% African American, 17% White, 5% Hispanic, and 3% multi-race

students. Students' socioeconomic status indicated that 25% were in low poverty, 31% were in medium poverty, and 44% were high. HPSD had experienced a steady decline in enrollment of 1% to 2% annually.

Similarly, the district had experienced a persistent struggle with getting students to exhibit good attendance patterns. The district's 2019 College and Career Readiness Index (CCRPI) score was 68.5; the average CCRPI score for all school systems was 78.8. Encompassing measures that correlate to academic and non-academic performance, stakeholders often perceive the CCRPI score to be parallel to a numerical grade. Similarly, as the primary accountability indicator for schools, the CCRPI often serves as an impetus for leaders to implement or amend school improvement strategies.

HPSD’s teacher population was diverse in most aspects. For example, approximately 70% of the instructional staff possessed either a bachelor’s degree or a master’s degree. Similarly, more than 40% of the instructional staff held more than ten years of experience in the district. In contrast, teacher certification level was nearly identical across gender and racial/ethnic subgroups. Also, male teachers represented less than 10% of the entire instructional staff.

In 2015 a new superintendent was appointed to lead HPSD. At that time, principal supervision was divided evenly among the district’s six assistant superintendents. In 2017, HPSD created two new positions, Executive Officer of Elementary Schools and Executive Officer of Secondary Schools to serve as the primary supervisor of school leaders. The executive officers were responsible for coaching and supporting only principals.

Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic introduced a new set of challenges to education leaders. Pivoting from the traditional brick and mortar operations to virtual schools in a matter of days and compounded by civic unrest due to social injustice, education leaders added the roles of activists and public health officials to their expansive list of fortes (Netolicky, 2020; Pollack, 2020). With limited experience in leading virtual learning environments, coupled with the persistent threat of the spread of coronavirus, school leaders found themselves stressed and overwhelmed (NASSP, 2020). Even before COVID-19, the principal was at the center of it all within the school building. When the coronavirus arrived, our nation's teachers and leaders faced the unprecedented challenge of moving from in-person to virtual learning environments in a matter of days. A primary emphasis was on delivery, or continuity, of services. Districts did all they could to deliver core services, particularly meals and instructional materials. As school districts have shifted their focus from school closure to reopening efforts, they also went from centralized decision-making to decentralized decision-making, thus leveraging the school principal's skills more acutely (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Honig and Rainey (2020) highlighted, "At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many central offices pivoted resources away from supporting principals and toward the distribution of lunches and laptops, plans for moving adults and students through school buildings, and other operational matters" (p.2). This perspective was built on the expanding consensus that school principals needed additional, more comprehensive support to lead our schools out during this crisis. The virus had similar impacts on school leaders all over the world. For example, in Australia, principals were tasked with

balancing “strategic and operational leadership…and simultaneously making decisions with a view of the dance floor as well as the balcony” (Netolicky, 2020, p. 1). In other words, principals had to see more differently and do more with less time and fewer resources.

Maintaining academic leadership in times of uncertainty requires agility. With the coronavirus’s onset, the principal’s work became even more nuanced (Mette, 2020). Before the pandemic, schools and district central offices focused on three main functions of instructional leadership: defining and communicating shared goals, monitoring and providing feedback on teaching and learning, and promoting school-wide professional development (Honig & Rainey, 2020). However, the constant chaos of the pandemic has created competing barriers for instructional leaders. Along with the need and expectation for principals to keep students and staff’s safety and well-being paramount, principals realize the necessity to expand their instructional leadership practices beyond the classroom.

Pollack (2020) conducted a study of the impacts of COVID-19 on a group of Canadian principals. According to Pollack, study participants indicated their “work had pivoted: the priority list had altered and, in terms of time allocation, what they spend their time on has shifted” (2020, p. 39). The study also found that principals saw their work shifting, in phases, from instructional leaders to digital leaders, and now digital instructional leaders. As schools closed, principals saw their work and learning immersed in becoming digital leaders—from teaching grade books to learning management systems. As schools reopened, principals applied an increasingly more comfortable digital lens to their work as instructional leaders.

The coronavirus pandemic had complicated the efforts of improving instruction. Almost immediately after schools were closed, instructional leadership's tenets took on a different perspective (Mette, 2020). As education leaders considered why so many students were not engaging in virtual instruction during the pandemic, they also had to acknowledge the non-instructional factors that were at play. Although worthy and justified, the considerations drew educators' attention away from the possibility that pedagogical practices, particularly in the new virtual environment, may have been the culprit for some students' disengagement. COVID-19 had highlighted a formidable tension between students' and staff's social and emotional needs, pedagogy, and academic rigor. In a recent report, Netolicky argued, "We should foreground health, safety, well-being and belonging first, before curriculum, pedagogy and assessment" (2020, p. 3). Either way, schools, and districts were persistently challenged to supply basic needs coupled with academic needs to maximize the outputs of their systems.

The pandemic introduced a new set of challenges for the principal supervisor. Due to coronavirus, principals were "leading from their laptop…they are now remote leaders, distanced and disconnected from those they lead, estranged from the learners who used to fill their schools" (Harris, 2020, p. 3). Still, principal supervisors strove to provide coaching and support for principals to enhance their instructional leadership skills. As social distancing became the norm, principal supervisors also shifted their work to a virtual platform.

Forced into a new virtual world, principal supervisors had to consider how to develop school leaders using a digital perspective. For the principal supervisor, it was exhausting and ongoing work. The supervisor modeled, coached, and supported the

principal in executing practices to improve teaching and learning outcomes. At the same time, the principal supervisor observed and competed with many non-academic nuances that school leaders dealt with during the pandemic. With both efforts undergirded by a digital emphasis because of the pandemic, principal supervisors had only a small margin to prevent missed opportunities. Said differently, challenges of the principal supervisor's role that were daunting before the pandemic were exacerbated during the pandemic. In-person coaching and support were already perplexing in a pre-pandemic environment. The work was more perplexing for many principal supervisors under those circumstances.

The coronavirus pandemic left a significant impact on principal supervision efforts in HPSD. Similar to the findings from the literature review, principal supervisors in HPSD came to quickly understand the value and influence of digital learning and leadership. Like many school districts, Heartland Public School District was not adequately prepared to make the immediate shift from in-person learning to virtual learning. As a result, much of the planning and execution of the district's transition plan involved its principal supervisors. District leaders quickly learned that instructional supervision practices required a level of intentionality and coherence that did not previously exist in the HPSD.

While the need for coherence and intentionality regarding instructional supervision had increased, the pandemic forced principal supervisors into spaces that did not align with the district's commitment to supporting principals as instructional leaders. For example, principal supervisors spoke of increased percentages of their time spent on facilities and operations management to support social distancing requirements. Yet even

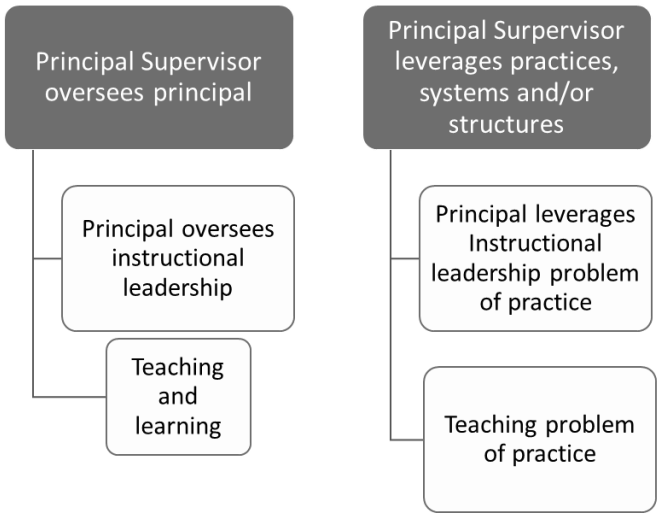
though those efforts were in unity with the principal's effort to ensure conducive learning conditions, improving teaching and learning practices was overshadowed by the need to address facilities and operational needs within the school.

Problem Framing Based on the Site

The problem of practice in HPSD was the need for rigorous, high-quality teaching and learning that enabled students to demonstrate mastery of standards on local and state assessments. Through deeper investigation, the need for high-quality teaching and learning practices also revealed a problem of practice related to instructional leadership. In other words, the teaching and learning problem of practice stemmed from the absence of clearly defined instructional leadership skills exhibited by the principals to support the improvement of teaching practices and, subsequently, student learning. Therefore, this action research study sought to understand how the principal supervisors addressed the problems of practice and how the principals perceived the impact of these efforts on their instructional leadership (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

The Relationship Between Teaching, Learning, and Instructional Leadership



HPSD leaders were responsive to the need for more rigor in their classrooms. An analysis of teacher evaluation data indicated a correlation between student learning outcomes and teacher performance on the state's evaluation instrument. HPSD's teacher evaluation instrument consisted of four different ratings relative to teacher performance.

Level I: Represented non-existing occurrence or insufficient level of performance.

Level II: Represented inconsistent occurrence of an appropriate level of performance.

Level III: Was the expected level of performance, with performance occurring at regular intervals (i.e., every week).

Level IV: Was the highest level of performance, having occurred appropriately, with high frequency over time (i.e., every day, every class). Figure 6 illustrates a breakdown of HPSD teachers' performance based on the teacher evaluation instrument.

At the start of the 2020 school year, more than 20 percent of the HPSD teaching force had less than three years of experience. Moreover, nearly 5% of this group were still pursuing their teaching credentials. Like the growing population of novice and inexperienced teachers, almost one-third of the district's principals had less than three years of experience at the start of the 2020 school year. Figure 8 illustrates a breakdown of HPSD's principal retention and experience rates for 2017–2019.

Figure 8

HPSD Principal Retention and Experience

School Leader Retention and Experience						
	% Leader Retained			% Leader Inexperienced (less than 4 years)		
	2017	2018	2019	2017	2018	2019
Heartland	76	77	89	54	46	48
State	88	88	87	37	37	37

Research has shown that teacher influence is the number one school-related factor in a student's trajectory for success (Louis et al., 2010). An effective school leader understands the importance of supporting teacher practices and their professional growth. Subsequently, this is why the school leader has the second most influence on a student's success. In HPSD, both of these barriers are at play, and they have had detrimental impacts on student and school performance

Figure 9

HPSD Teacher Retention and Experience

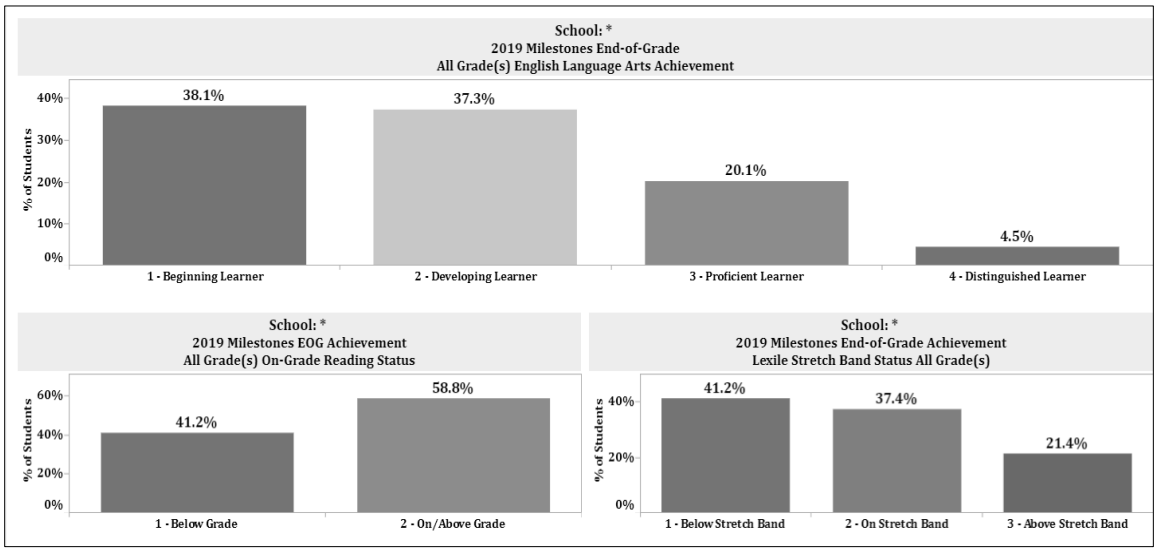
Teacher Retention and Experience									
	% Teacher Retained			% Teacher Inexperienced (less than 4 years)			% Teacher with Provisional/ Emergency Certificates		
	2017	2018	2019	2017	2018	2019	2017	2018	2019
Heartland	80	79	80	42	46	49	12	9	9
State	86	87	86	36	36	29	8	8	8

As indicated in Figure 9, there were two significant barriers that impacted performance in HPSD. The relatively low level of expertise in the teaching staff coupled with a similarly low level of expertise and experience of the principal had a detrimental impact on student and school performance.

District leaders closely examined HPSD's performance relative to student performance within its state accountability system, the College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI). The CCRPI offers districts a three-year look across the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Students' performance on several critical indicators, such as standardized assessments, graduation rates, attendance, and Lexiles levels were included. The CCRPI overall score comprised five components: content mastery, progress, closing achievement gaps, readiness, and, for high schools, graduation rate. In 2019 the CCRPI score for HPSD was 68.5. By comparison, the average score for all school systems in the state was 78.8 that same year. In addition, less than 25% of HPSD scored at or above proficiency on the English Language Arts (ELA) End-of-Grade Milestones Assessments in that same year. Figure 10 illustrates HPSD performance on the 2019 milestones assessment.

Figure 10

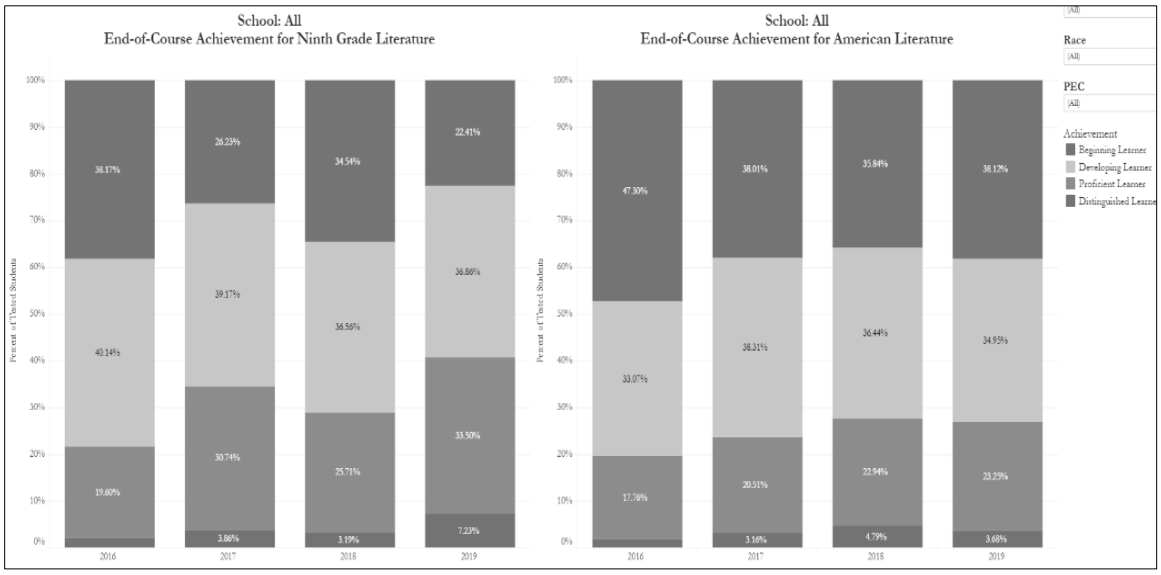
2019 HPSD ELA End-of-Grade Performance



More concerning than the ELA EOG performance was the persistently low performance of secondary students on the ELA milestones. From 2016 through 2019, HPSD student performance on the 9th Grade literature milestones assessment or the 11th Grade Literature milestones assessment was never greater than 40% proficiency (see Figure 11).

Figure 11

2016-2019 HPSD ELA End-of-Course Performance



This level of student performance spotlighted an urgent need to address instructional practices in HPSD classrooms and the need for principals to double down on instructional leadership practices in their schools. Using an inquiry-cycle protocol to highlight instructional problems of practice, principals and principal supervisors worked collaboratively to identify problems of practice related to the instructional leader. These practices, systems, or structures were leveraged to guide the action research team in creating strategies to support principals' shifts in instructional leadership strategies.

The Story and Outcomes

This action research aimed to understand the impact that principal supervisors had on the instructional leadership practices of principals. Principal supervision in the Heartland Public School District was focused on coaching and supporting principals to improve teaching and learning outcomes in their schools. Principals received coaching and support from their supervisors, known as Executive Officers in HPSD, along with district central office administrators, such as curriculum coordinators and instructional coaches. In addition, principals attended monthly professional learning activities planned and facilitated by the AR design team.

After receiving IRB approval from the research institution, the recruitment of the study's design team and implementation team began. An initial introductory email was sent to all HPSD principals and principal supervisors to gauge interest in participating in the research study. Approximately two weeks later, the researcher sent a second email to the group reminding them of the opportunity to participate in the study. After hearing from several respondents, the researcher established the study's design and implementation teams. Collectively, participants in the study included ten principals and three principal supervisors. Four of the ten principals worked in elementary schools, three in middle schools, and three in high schools. Four of the ten schools had no state designation (e.g., CSI, TSI, or Promise), three schools were designated as CSI, two were designated as Promise, and one was designated as TSI. The design team included the researcher, one principal, and one principal supervisor. The implementation team included all the research participants.

The Action Research Design Team

For this participatory action research study, the action research team included all the principal supervisors in the Heartland Public School District. The researcher asked all of the principal supervisors to participate in the study to garner their unique experiences. The first team member, Mr. Rhodes, had twenty years of school leadership experience to his credit. In addition to his service at the local level, Mr. Rhodes was serving as the president of the state's education leadership organization. Widely regarded as a coach among his peers, Mr. Rhodes had been a principal supervisor for three years in HPSD at the time of this study.

The next team member, Ms. Shaw, brought nearly 25 years of school leadership experience with her. With six years of experience in the role, Ms. Shaw was also the longest-tenured principal supervisor in HPSD. Ms. Shaw had spent the vast majority of her career in elementary schools, and she possessed an uncanny knack for the continuous improvement process. The third member of the research team was Mr. Kennedy. Mr. Kennedy was the newest member of the principal supervisor cohort in HPSD. He was considered a 'turnaround' principal by his peers locally and regionally. Mr. Kennedy successfully led school transformations at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Like Mr. Rhodes, Mr. Kennedy also had nearly 20 years of experience as an educator. The final member of the design team was the researcher. At one time, the researcher worked in HPSD as a central office senior administrator and supervisor of the principal supervisors (not the same group of principal supervisors on the design team). At the time of this study, the researcher possessed more than twenty-five years of experience as an educator and more than twenty years of experience in various leadership roles. At the

time of the study, the researcher served as a superintendent of a medium-sized school district located in the same state as HPSD. The design team researched, planned, and implemented the interventions within each research cycle.

The Action Research Implementation Team

The implementation team comprised three principal supervisors, ten principals, and the researcher for this action research study. The ten principals were selected to participate in the study due to their years of experience during the research study. Each principal participant was considered induction-phase, meaning they had no more than three years of experience in their current role. The action research interventions were designed and implemented as constructs for the principal supervisors. However, the researcher used qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to glean the principals' perspectives relative to the interventions' impact on their supervisors during their work together. Only the principal supervisors participated in the prescribed interventions for this study, whereas all implementation team members participated in the various data collection methods within each research cycle.

Designing the Interventions

In preparation for the first research action cycle, principal supervisors were given a needs assessment to glean the professional learning (PL) needs of HPSD's principals. The needs assessment was conducted against the backdrop of three looming district-wide initiatives: 1) increasing the district CCRPI score, 2) improving the performance of state-designated schools, and 3) addressing the loss of learning opportunities due to COVID-19 school closure. The needs assessment was administered electronically via Microsoft Forms and consisted of thirteen items. In addition, responses from the survey were

disaggregated with the intent to identify potential alignment or commonalities relative to what principals and their supervisors expressed as needs, based on the previously mentioned initiatives.

In addition to providing some demographic data, survey participants could select up to three PL topics, along with their preferences relative to delivery format, location, and time. Aside from the PL topics and preferences, the rest of the survey was open-ended. The researcher exercised this option to create a broader range for credible, high-quality participant feedback.

In preparation for the study's research cycles, the design team members analyzed the survey findings and aligned those data with the district's three initiatives. We identified three findings that framed the impending interventions and activities within the research cycles. One finding revealed that principal supervisors lacked a codified structure for working with principals as a community of practice, particularly from an instructional leadership perspective. Historically, HPSD's monthly executive administration meeting included central office members other than principals, creating a perspective that did not exclusively focus on the work of the instructional leader. A second finding from the needs assessment revealed the principal supervisors' need for additional professional learning relative to working directly with principals to improve and support the work as instructional leaders. The third and final finding used to frame the activities within the research cycles was the need for principal supervisors to coordinate support from the district central office to help remove barriers and challenges that hindered the principal in expanding their capacity in instructional leadership.

Armed with three critical findings from the needs assessment, the design team identified and agreed upon a series of interventions that would be planned and implemented during the research study. When designing the interventions, the design team considered the study's research questions, as the interventions would need to enable the principal supervisors to identify the causal relationship between the interventions and the potential effects. In addition, the interventions were planned and designed bearing the length of time for conducting the action research in mind. Realizing that the study would span no more than 6-7 months, it was critical to provide the researcher enough time to effectively conduct, analyze, and write the research within that time.

Ultimately, the design team was able to identify and agree upon the three core interventions for this study. One intervention consisted of researching and creating a codified meeting structure that would support principals as a community of practice around instructional leadership. A second intervention consisted of a series of professional learning activities designed to assist the principal supervisors in working more effectively with principals. Finally, the third intervention was principal supervisors' participation in a community of practice focused on creating cohesive systems of support on behalf of principals within the district central office. After identifying the interventions, the design team established a cadence for implementation based on the order of importance/priority and the amount of time allocated for each research cycle.

Action Research Cycles

For this study, the action research design team was responsible for leading three different research cycles. Coghlan and Brannick (2014) advocated for the various cycles of research and explained,

> Action research is both a sequence of events and an approach to change and to problem-solving. As a sequence of events, it comprises iterative cycles of gathering data collaboratively, jointly analyzing the data, jointly planning action, taking action and evaluating jointly, leading to further joint data-gathering, and so on. (p. 9)

Within each cycle are interventions that the action research (AR) team members will engage. Coghlan and Brannick (2014) stated that the intervention serves as the construct from which data is gathered, analyzed, and evaluated to the impact relative to the desired change or problem of practice. Therefore, the research cycles in this study were as follows: Research Cycle 1: June – July 2021; Research Cycle 2: August – October 2021; Cycle 3: November – December 2021 (see Table 5).

Table 5

Timeline of Interventions: Research Cycle 1

Date	AR design and AR implementation team activities	Data collection
June 2021	ARD team meeting; alignment of actions to support RQs and study purpose participated in PL; community of practice (COP) and professional learning planning	Observation Document review
June 2021	AR design team established structured COP meetings for principals and planned PL; AR implementation team participated in PL on joint work	Observations Interviews
July 2021	AR participants participated in COP	Observations Focus group Survey

Research Cycle 1. Table 8 summarizes the timeline of interventions in Research Cycle 1. The first research cycle began in June 2021 and spanned through July 2021. The design team convened three meetings during this research cycle in conjunction with the prescribed interventions. Team members held two meetings in June, and a subsequent meeting took place in July. Out of an abundance of caution, the first meeting with the design team was held virtually; all team members were present. The purpose of the initial meeting was to establish a meeting structure that supported principals in a community of practice as instructional leaders and ensure alignment of research team activities to support the study's research questions and purpose. In the meeting, AR team members reviewed the four phases of the action research cycle. The researcher noted that team members demonstrated a clear understanding of the phases of action research by their questions related to the scope and sequence of the planned research activities based on the posed questions.

The anticipated outcomes of the initial meeting included a cadence for the principal meetings, well-planned AR team interventions, and alignment between the research questions, study purpose, and the planned interventions for the principal supervisors to participate. As was the case with each research cycle, the researcher used numerous qualitative data methods to conduct the various phases of the study. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and surveys.

The AR design team held its second meeting virtually via Google Meet. In the second meeting, the AR design team planned professional learning to improve the collaborative work between principals and principal supervisors using an instructional

leadership perspective. The group considered the premise of the PL session timely, considering the impacts of school closure related to the coronavirus pandemic and a persistent and pervasive narrative of accelerating student learning outcomes in high-need schools in HPSD. During the discussions related to the PL activities, the researcher observed one particular AR team member reflecting on the impact of new learning on his work early in the school year. Mr. Kennedy shared the following perspective:

> *In the past, we were talking [to principals] like administrators, but people don't respond to administrators. They respond when their peers are coming to see them…when their peers are coming to share in the work. We have to be their peer if we want them to respond.*

The researcher's observation and subsequent inquiry from other AR team members led to a deeper dialogue about the impact of the new learning on their work. Intended outcomes for the second AR team meeting included participants creating structured time for AR to apply their learning in a relevant context and demonstrating how to share ownership of new learning. As such, AR team members practiced how to shift from their role as a learning resource to that of a learner. The overarching theme of Research Cycle 1was to diagnose needs and plan professional learning as an intervention to address those needs.

In July, the AR team met in a virtual format and continued planning and participating in professional learning. The researcher used Research Cycle 1 to address the purposes of diagnosing the PL needs of the principal supervisors and planning impactful activities such as codifying a meeting structure conducive for principals' work in a community of practice. The purpose of Research Cycle 1 was to diagnose the problem of practice for HPSD principal supervisors so that the principal supervisors

would learn the skills they needed to support the growth of the principals' instructional leadership skills. The anticipated outcome for Research Cycle 1 included the planning and delivery of the intervention, which was the professional learning activities that would be embedded into the collaborative work between the principal supervisors and their principals.

Table 6

Timeline of Interventions: Research Cycle 2

Date	Action research team activities	Data collection
August 2021	Monthly AR team/community of practice (COP) meeting; continue PL with supervisors on joint work and	Interviews Survey
September 2021	Monthly AR team/community of practice meeting; PL with supervisors on joint work and modeling; supervisors facilitate monthly COP meetings for principals	Observations Survey
October 2021	Monthly AR team/community of practice meeting; PL with supervisors on joint work and modeling; supervisors facilitate monthly COP meetings for principals	Observations Interviews Survey

Research Cycle 2. Table 6 summarizes the timeline of interventions in Research Cycle 2**.** The second research cycle emphasized the action-taking phase of action research. Spanning the most prolonged time of the three research cycles, Research Cycle 2 spanned from August 2021 through October 2021. In one of the early meetings during Research Cycle 1, the AR design team identified a need for principals to have a structured meeting cadence where attendees could engage in PL relative to a specific

need regarding their instructional leadership. The meetings were coined as *The Principals' PLC*. This meeting structure and format came together as the AR design team collaborated as a community of practice, where they shared exemplary practices of principals amongst themselves.

During Research Cycle 2, AR design team members facilitated professional learning during structured monthly meetings with principals. It should be noted that HPSD officials canceled the monthly meeting in September due to a surge in COVID-19 activity within the HPSD community. To mitigate the spread of the coronavirus in the school district, HPSD closed all schools for in-person learning for one week. Since the principals' monthly meeting had been previously scheduled during that same week, it was rescheduled for later. Instead of the scheduled monthly meeting with principals, the AR design team held a virtual meeting to discuss the impact of the school closure on the planned interventions. Team members decided the impact would be minimal due to a short closure period.

Similarly, AR implementation team members participated in PL activities that emphasized effective collaborative working practices between the principal and the principal supervisor. For example, Honig and Rainey (2020) noted joint work to be those moves "that help learners embrace new challenging work," such as "principal supervisors dedicating their own time to principals' growth and learning alongside them in the process" (p. 24). One principal supervisor, Ms. Shaw, echoed her alignment with the premise of joint work when she offered the following:

> *I think, especially in the beginning, you just have to go in and observe, watch, and listen… Do some walkthroughs with them [principals], sit in on some leadership*

meetings, some faculty meetings… I think you have to create some time and just do some very intensive observations.

The PL session began with AR team members sharing fictional case-study accounts of principal instructional leadership tasks. Next, each team member was asked to identify potential root causes (problems of practice) and subsequently map out a plan of support that included coaching moves. Then members had to share what data were used to create their plans. Afterward, the participants shared which data were assumptive and factual and whether these factors would impact their plan. Finally, team members explained their actions concerning the principals' actions and how they would improve performance on behalf of the principal and the supervisor. This example illustrates Honig and Rainey's (2020) concept mentioned above of joint work.

Using a feedback strategy known as the tuning protocol, AR team members completed several rounds of presenting while offering and receiving feedback on their plans. After the PL activity, AR team members created plans for working more directly with principals on problems of practice related to their instructional leadership. After the PL activity, the AR team members revised their initial plans to outline the custom support for principals based on their particular instructional leadership needs.

The researcher conducted various data collection methods during the Research Cycle 2 phase of the study. For example, participants took a perception survey after each monthly principals meeting. The survey administration aligned with the purpose of the research question: How do principals perceive the impact of instructional leadership support on their efforts to improve instructional practices? The data were collected quantitatively and were used to synthesize other qualitative data collected. The researcher

also used other high-frequency data methods in Research Cycle 2, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observations notes. The purpose of Research Cycle 2 included administering prescribed interventions aligned to the research questions and addressing the study's overall objective.

Table 7

Timeline of Interventions: Research Cycle 3

Date	Action research team activities	Data collection
November 2021	Monthly AR Team/Community of Practice meeting; conduct PL with supervisors on differentiating support; supervisors facilitate monthly COP meetings for principals	Observations Interviews
December 2021	Monthly AR Team/Community of Practice meeting; continue PL with supervisors on differentiating support; supervisors facilitate monthly COP meetings for principals	Observations Focus groups

Research Cycle 3. Table 7 illustrates the timeline of interventions in Research Cycle 3. In November 2021, the AR design team gathered for its first in-person meeting, and all members of the group were present. In the third cycle, design team members set out to address the varying needs of instructional leaders in HPSD. With this perspective in mind, members planned PL to promote differentiating the support for school leaders. While observing design team members work through this iteration of planning, Mr. Rhodes offered the following:

> *We still have to recognize that the skill holding one principal back might be the very skill that allows another principal to move forward. So how do we make sure*

that they [principals] get what they need when they need it, especially when it might be an isolated circumstance.

In conjunction with an analysis of the feedback and perception data from Research Cycles 1 and 2, the AR design team members decided to administer an intervention plan for Research Cycle 3 that included an emphasis on differentiated support for instructional leaders. Research team members engaged in two structured PL activities: the recurring community of practice meetings, where the focus was identified problems of practice related to teaching and learning, and monthly professional learning that demonstrated/modeled joint working scenarios. The intended outcomes of the intervention in Research Cycle 3 included shifting AR participants' perspectives from mere supervision to relevant support leaders' competencies and deficiencies in instructional leadership. After the professional learning series concluded, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews and a focus group to garner insight into how the professional learning activities impacted their effort to improve their instructional leadership competence.

Interviews

Of all the data collections used in this research study, the interview was used most often. The researcher conducted nine interviews throughout the three research cycles in this project. The qualitative interview method is considered an essential component of the qualitative research process. Alshenqeeti (2014) championed the interview method "because it builds a holistic snapshot, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants… but also because it enables interviewees to speak in their own voice and express their own thoughts and feelings" (p. 39). The researcher used semi-structured

interviews with the AR design and AR implementation team members to garner perspectives about their experiences in the action research process and the professional learning impacts on their work.

The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions when applicable. Interviews were scheduled with team members during each cycle of the project. An interview guide was used to ensure appropriate format and structure. According to the interview guide, all interview questions were open-ended and used in a standard format. As interviewees, research team members were allowed to schedule the interviews conveniently for each individual. Due to social distancing requirements related to the COVID-19 pandemic and out of an abundance of caution, all interviews were conducted virtually via Google Meet. The researcher used a third-party software called Otter.ai to transcribe the interviews.

Focus Groups

The researcher conducted a series of focus group meetings for this action research project. Focus group meetings were intended to garner the perspectives of AR design and AR implementation team members regarding the impact of the planned interventions and their experiences participating in the action research. Two focus group meetings were conducted as a part of this research project. The allotted time for each focus group meeting ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. The AR design team focus group occurred in October 2021, toward the end of the second research cycle.

The second focus group involved principal participants. This second session was initially scheduled to occur in December 2021 but had to be rescheduled for January 2022. On the day the focus group was to occur, two principal participants were unable to

participate in the activity. The researcher used a focus group interview guide to ensure appropriate format and structure. Similar to the interview questions, the focus group questions were also open-ended and used per the interview guide. The focus group sessions were conducted virtually via Google due to social distancing requirements related to the COVID-19 pandemic and out of an abundance of caution. As with the interviews, the researcher used a third-party software called Otter.ai to transcribe the focus group sessions.

Researcher Notes of Participant Observations

Throughout the study, the researcher kept a written journal of participant observations. Annink (2017) described the research journal as "a critical analysis of the (political) context in which actions unfold, the researchers' knowledge, skills, expertise, values, assumptions, and the emotions evoked by the research" (p. 1). To this end, the journal included steps taken by the researcher to collect data such as the participant's name (pseudonyms), email address, date of the activity, meeting or interview, role in the research study, etc. The purpose of the researcher's journal was to capture and reflect on any issues or insights that may have arisen during the data collection period. The researcher's notes served as a supplementary data source.

Observations were captured and noted during AR design team meetings, interviews and focus group sessions, PL activities, or other formal and informal activities involving research participants. The researcher observed AR team members leading professional learning community (PLC) and leadership team meetings. The observations also included individual coaching sessions between the principal and principal supervisor. Observations occurred from July through December during the study's

beginning, mid-point, and end. The purpose of the observations was to collect data connected to leadership development meetings and formal and informal discussions between the principal and principal supervisor. Participant observations complemented information about the relationships between the principal and principal supervisor. The researcher's observation notes from AR members' interactions or various PL throughout the study provided substantive information regarding whether planned interventions led to practical application.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 outlines a foundation for the research project. An overview of the context and an explanation of the problem of practice were also discussed. This chapter also included how the coronavirus impacted the research focus and the story and outcomes related to the study site. Chapter 4 also discusses the elements of the three research cycles and how AR design team members and AR implementation team members engaged in the planning and execution of prescribed interventions aligned to the study's purpose and research questions. Additionally, the researcher provides a timeline of those interventions and activities. Chapter 4 also explains the additional data collection methods used in this project, including interviews, focus groups, and documentation (notes) of the researcher's participant observations. The following Chapter 5 discusses the actual findings of this research project.

CHAPTER 5

THE FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to understand the structures and practices that support principal supervisors in their efforts to help principals grow as instructional leaders. In addition, the study focused on principals, principal supervisors, and the district central office as agents of influence to improve teaching and learning outcomes in one urban school district in the southeast region of the United States. Accordingly, the study was guided by three research questions:

RQ1: What are the key actions of principal supervisors that effectively support principals as instructional leaders?

RQ2: How do principals perceive the impact of instructional leadership support on their efforts to improve instructional practices?

RQ3: How do design and implementation team members describe the influence of the action research process on their instructional leadership capacity?

This chapter includes data collected from multiple sources to establish findings for each research question. The quantitative data was derived from survey questionnaires administered after professional learning sessions during research cycle two. These data provided evidence that addressed research question two, which pertained to principals' perceptions of the impact of their instructional leadership support. More details about this data method are discussed later in this chapter.

The qualitative data were garnered using semi-structured interviews of the AR design team and implementation teams, focus group discussions with both AR teams and the researcher's observation notes. A thematic coding process was used to establish themes to support the study's purpose and research questions. The researcher used a transcription software called Otter.ai to transcribe each interview and focus group. After the qualitative data were transcribed, a coding software called NVivo was used to analyze and code the data. As described by Saldaña (2016), a code is "most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p.4).

During the data analysis process, the researcher used a combined technique of inductive and deductive coding. Deductive coding comes into play when a pre-established coding scheme is based on themes that emerged during the literature review (Saldaña, 2016). For this study, deductive coding was used to identify patterns and themes to address the first research question. Inductive coding occurs when codes emerge or are generated naturally during the data analysis. The researcher used inductive coding to address research questions two and three. Participant responses from six semi-structured interviews and three focus group discussions were summarized into themes that highlighted the study's major findings.

After a thorough analysis of the data, six themes emerged from this action research study:

1. modeling expectations
2. a sense of collaboration
3. responding to varying needs of principals
4. trusting relationships

5. development through coaching and feedback
6. professional learning for principal supervisors

The findings of this study address the purpose of this research study, which was to explore how principal supervisors took a teaching and learning approach to help principals grow as instructional leaders. The study focused on principals, principal supervisors, and the district central office as agents of influence in the attempt to improve leadership for teaching and learning in an urban school district. The findings of this study also addressed the research problem, which was the need to leverage the school principal as an instructional leader in improving student performance by improving teaching and learning practices in one urban district in the southeastern region of the U.S. The first three findings addressed RQ1: What are the key actions of principal supervisors that effectively support principals as instructional leaders? The fourth and fifth findings addressed RQ2: How do principals perceive the impact of instructional leadership support on their efforts to improve instructional practices? The sixth and final finding addressed RQ3: How do design and implementation team members describe the influence of the action research process on their instructional leadership capacity? Table 8 displays the themes that emerged for each research question.

Table 8

Summary of Research Findings Through Thematic Analysis

Research Question	Theme
RQ1: What are the key actions of principal supervisors that effectively support principals as instructional leaders?	Theme 1: Modeling expectations Theme 2: Sense of collaboration Theme 3: Responding to varying needs
RQ2: How do principals perceive the impact of instructional leadership support on their efforts to improve instructional practices?	Theme 1: Trusting relationships Theme 2: Development through coaching
RQ3: How do design and implementation team members describe the influence of the action research process on their instructional leadership capacity?	Theme 1: Professional learning needs of principal supervisors

Data Collection Connected to the Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are the key actions of principal supervisors that effectively support principals as instructional leaders?

To determine the key actions of principal supervisors, the researcher used qualitative analysis of various data sources. All of the AR design and implementation members participated in semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Interviews were conducted in all three research cycles, whereas focus groups discussions were convened in cycles one and three, respectively. In addition to the interviews and focus groups, the study used participant observation notes to identify textual evidence for

research question one. Three themes emerged from this qualitative data analysis: a) modeling expectations, b) sense of collaboration, and c) responding to varying needs (of principals).

Theme 1: Modeling Expectations

A breakdown of the code indicated that research participants overwhelmingly indicated modeling expected practices of instructional leadership for principals as a strategy that promoted improved instructional leadership in principals. Words or phrases pertaining to modeling appeared in six different data files (transcriptions) with a frequency of 18 references. One AR design team member referenced the impact of modeling expectations during a planning meeting in Research Cycle 2:

> *A lot of the best things I learned was when you actually modeled different lessons that you modeled for us. When you modeled the practices for us as principal, we knew that you were coming in expecting us to be at a certain level, and you were not just throwing ideas at us, you were actually modeling and showing us how to do it.*

During a focus group session, a participant spoke of how the principal supervisor modeled a coaching strategy that impacted how the principal would conduct similar meetings with her staff:

> *When he came into the meeting, he said, You wouldn't be here if you weren't a level three. He said, So we're gonna start at level three. And I was just looking, like… what? Let's go! That approach was so encouraging because when he said level three, I was like, okay. So I'm striving for, or I'm starting at a three, but it was more or less it was a roll. It was coaching… Most of the time, I didn't see it*

when you think evaluative, you think of it...it has a negative connotation. But the way he... that meeting rolled out, he was promoting my growth, seeing my strengths, and seeing the ability I have to do my job and building my confidence from the start. It just made me strive and work even harder.

In another example, a principal supervisor, Mr. Rhodes opened a PL meeting about principal leadership of school improvement planning by having a fishbowl conversation with a group of principals. He started by saying that schools often have so many goals and action steps in their plans that they become nearly impossible to execute all of them. Through the fishbowl conversation, Mr. Rhodes demonstrated how he and the principal could work together to practice leading the school team to create a narrower focus using a particular questioning strategy. Mr. Rhodes went on to have the principal take notes of key questioning strategies and asked the principal to pose the questions to him as if he were one of the school's leadership team members. The fishbowl conversation concluded with Mr. Rhodes instructing the principal to envision himself asking those questions to various staff members scheduling a date and time to return, and observe the principal conduct the meeting with the school staff.

Theme 2: Sense of Collaboration

During the second research cycle, the AR team continued its focus on collaborating with principals to identify practices that support principals as instructional leaders. During this cycle, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each member of the AR implementation team. An analysis of interview transcripts and observation notes collected during cycles one and two indicated that principal supervisors sought to build collaborative relationships with their principals. To that end, words or phrases about

a sense of collaboration were found in eight different data files with a frequency of 31 references. For example, one principal reflected on the sense of collaboration with her supervisor as follows:

> *Anything that I need her to do, she is more than willing to be hands-on with it. There were times when I was overwhelmed and frustrated, and she literally jumped in and offered assistance just like anyone else would. It's supportive, but it's also very equitable. I don't feel this top-down pressure. I don't feel that.*

Another principal shared a similar sentiment. In a focus group discussion, Ms. Ross shared the following perspective:

> *It's not so much bringing the hammer down all the time, but we really need district personnel support. Because I go back to this again, and I'm going to say it again- I love having that relationship with my supervisor because I truly believe that they're that middle…they're like a coach. So to be an instructional leader, the principal and the supervisor have to have that relationship where we feel like we can go to them and not be dinged for the things that we're saying*.

During an AR design team meeting, one team member shared a perspective about the sense of collaboration and how it supports his work:

> *By collaborating with principals, the principal supervisor ensures there's an aligned curriculum and instruction plan in place at the school, which would fall under improving the quality of instruction. Also, making sure that continuous professional development supports a strong student engagement and rigorous instruction. In terms of the strong culture, what processes are in place to make sure that there's voice and input from teachers and the leaders on the campus and*

> *the external community. Everyone supports the vision and the mission of the school*.

Through the above analysis of the qualitative data collected in the interviews, the AR team members identified practices that would support how principal supervisors sought to build collaborative relationships with their principals and promote a sense of collaboration. Collaborative relationships were significant in helping principal supervisors respond to the carrying needs of their principals.

Theme 3: Responding to Varying Needs

An analysis of the data established the third finding relative to the principal supervisors' actions to support the principals' practices in supporting instructional leadership. The investigation into this code centered on the principal supervisors' aim to respond to the varying needs of principals. The researcher gathered these data via semi-structured interviews with the AR design team, a focus group discussion with members of the implementation team, and field notes from participant observations. Two-thirds of the AR team methods identified this theme in their responses. Principal supervisors provide differentiated support to principals as they work to improve their instructional leadership capacity. An implementation team member commented on principal supervisors' efforts to support the varying needs of principals:

> *I look for simple ways to support them. Through just the observation of the principal and his or her practice, through conversation and questioning of that individual so that they themselves can declare their known areas of need or growth.*

Another implementation team member commented on how the principal supervisor learned about the principal and school needs through regular visits and persistent communication. Since she was a fairly new principal, these actions made her feel supported. The implementation team member described Mr. Kennedy's ability to see her potential in the following manner:

> *Mr. Kennedy knows where I need to grow. He knows what I need to grow in, the area, and so she's been able to ...Although I like support, I'm not that person. Even though I can be touchy-feely, I don't want somebody to be touchy-feely with me. So, I want you to just tell me, 'You are all over the place. Bring it back.' Bring it back - because that's where my area is, and I get excited, and I'll go off to here, and I just ... For him to say, 'Reel it in,' is what I need.*

Each principal supervisor has their unique approach for supporting principals. A different implementation team member shared the process of balancing the frustration and appreciation that is often felt between the principal and the principal supervisor. The implementation team member described it in this manner:

> *Well, she's been trying to help me with giving feedback to the teachers. For effective feedback and coaching, she's been trying to coach around that ... So the most recent was last week. It had me looking at guided reading, going to classrooms, and providing feedback to those teachers - which I hadn't really done as much. And it was clear that the teachers enjoyed that. And even appreciated it ... Like one of them said it was good having feedback. So I just know ... It just makes me think I know I need to get out there more often and actually provide them with the papers or emails or ... So that did have an*

effect. Just getting out there, it's so hard sometimes.

In conclusion, the qualitative data demonstrated evidence for the findings (themes) that addressed RQ1. Three themes addressed RQ1: What are the key actions of principal supervisors that effectively support principals as instructional leaders? The themes were modeling expectations, a sense of collaboration, and responding to varying needs. The next section will lay out the findings that addressed RQ2 and RQ3.

Research Question 2: How do principals perceive the impact of instructional leadership support on their efforts to improve instructional practices?

To determine principals' perceptions of their supervisors' instructional leadership coaching and support, the researcher used quantitative and qualitative analysis of various data sources. Quantitative data were collected throughout cycle two after each month's PL session. During the pre-research cycle of this study, design team members self-administered a needs assessment to plan the initial interventions. In addition to addressing the needs of the principal supervisors, the interventions were planned and designed to improve principals' work as instructional leaders. AR implementation members conducted and facilitated PL activities with principals throughout cycles two and three to address HPSD's district initiatives. There were three PL sessions during cycle two. After each PL activity, principal participants were given a survey questionnaire to assess the impact the PL session had on their instructional leadership.

The survey asked participants to respond to a series of items using a 5- point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). Items were designed to discover principals' assessment of whether the PL activity supported their growth as instructional leaders. Sample survey items included:

- The work we did helped me value my growth as an instructional leader.
- The PL activity supplemented my own learning plan as an instructional leader.
- The majority of the time focused on helping principals grow as instructional leaders.

Survey responses were recorded and analyzed via a Google Sheet. Afterward, the researcher calculated the mean score for each survey item. An analysis of the survey data indicated an overall positive response to the interventions during Research Cycle 2. It also indicated an overall positive perception of the PL impact on principals' instructional leadership. The mean scores for "growth as an instructional leader," "time focused on instructional leadership skills," and "supporting my own learning plan" are illustrated in Table 9.

Table 9

Mean Scores for Growth, Time and Support related to Instructional Leadership

Perception survey items	Mean score	*N* = Responses
The professional learning activity was organized to support my growth and development as an instructional leader.	4.8	30
The professional learning activity supplemented my own learning plan for instructional leadership.	4.0	30
The majority of our time focused on relevant, job-embedded instructional leadership practices.	4.6	30
The majority of the time focused on helping principals grow as instructional leaders.	4.6	30
The professional learning activity enabled me to work with other instructional leaders while helping me grow as an instructional leader.	3.5	30

Each AR design and implementation member participated in semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Interviews were conducted in all three research cycles, whereas the focus group discussion convened in cycles one and three, respectively. In addition to the interviews and focus group discussions, the researcher used field notes in the data collection. Two key findings emerged from analyzing the interviews, focus group discussions, and field notes: a) trusting relationships and b) development through coaching and feedback.

Theme 1: Trusting Relationships

Essential to the principal supervisor's coaching efforts is the development of strong relationships grounded in trust and mutual accountability (CCSSO, 2015). An analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts, and the field observation notes collected during cycles one and two, indicated that principal supervisors sought to build collaborative relationships with their principals. Specifically, words or phrases about trusting relationships were found in four different transcription files with a frequency of 18 references. One implementation team member described the importance of building relationships:

> *I think that takes a lot of effort and intentionality on the [principal supervisor's] part. I know, I personally spent a lot of time building relationships and understanding the principals' strengths and weaknesses and the schools' strengths and weaknesses before I started giving specific coaching and direct feedback. I think the relationship plays a huge part in coaching because they have to realize that you're a team.*

When asked about the benefit of establishing trusting relationships, one implementation team member offered an interpretation as to how trust is built within the confines of the work:

> *One of my big contributions during the learning walks that I lead. I am being very purposeful on the front end when I pull that team together. And on the back end with the same message, which is this is not evaluative in any way, shape, or form. This same process [learning walk] will be happening, whether I am here at your school or not. This is meant to gather data to give to you to use it to your advantage at the school. So the expectation is the data that we're generating from the walkthroughs that you will take it and use it. And that's where I'm going to come in and support you.*

One AR team member highlighted the need for establishing trusting relationships to build principals' instructional leadership in the midst of a hyperactive operational or managerial environment due to the coronavirus pandemic:

> *I've got a first-year principal at HPHS. You know, when we were gonna close schools, I was very concerned about how to support that leader in particular. And then, you know, one of the questions that I asked was, you know, what's our plan to provide virtual instruction, and how we monitor virtual learning. And so, fortunately, you know, we created a plan. But, you know, it's already difficult enough to take a new principal and establish relationships and begin the coaching phases. When you add to that, all of these logistics, all of this management, all of this operational stuff, you know, it becomes hard to keep that person focused on being the instructional leader.*

During a focus group, a team member expressed how communication supported the relationship-building process:

> *I think communication should always be open and risk-free. Obviously, there has to be a certain level of trust and respect among both parties. But I think, also, what goes a long way, is principals have to be receptive to feedback in order to be successful and progress, so I think we [principal supervisors] have to do the same. They need to model that. Meaning, just request feedback or have opportunities for feedback, as well.*

Highlighting the relational aspect between principals and principal supervisors was a critical takeaway for the research team. The textual evidence asserted the relationship between principals and principal supervisors played a significant role in increasing the clarity of the principals' perceptions of their supervisors' instructional leadership coaching and support.

Theme 2: Development Through Coaching and Feedback

An analysis of interview transcripts and observation notes collected during cycles one and two indicated that principal supervisors valued the symbiotic practice of coaching and feedback to impact principals' development as instructional leaders. A breakdown of this code indicated that research participants overwhelmingly indicated coaching and feedback played a significant part in their quest to increase principals' instructional leadership. Principal supervisors are uniquely postured to develop principals' instructional leadership competence. To this end, principal supervisors strive to develop principals' abilities to improve teaching and learning outcomes through

coaching. One AR team member offered a perspective as to why coaching was impactful for principals' performance:

> *Through coaching principals, the principal supervisor makes sure that there's an aligned curriculum and instruction plan in place at the school, which would fall under improving the quality of instruction. Also, making sure that there's continuous professional development that supports rigorous instruction and student engagement.*

Another aspect of developing principals through coaching and feedback is knowing when and how to challenge their thinking. This practice is an output of the trust that supports a strong principal-principal supervisor relationship. In an individual interview, one AR team member added,

> *Coaching involves growing principals to the next level. Making sure that their voice is heard, but also using that voice to strengthen them and then put them in positions to be vulnerable where they can take the next risk to reach their full potential. Recently two of our principals presented at a principals meeting to showcase the work they're doing, but in the process of doing so, they're growing as instructional leaders, and they're building the capacity of their colleagues.*

Although the desire is for every principal to discern the authenticity of the principal supervisor's quest to develop their instructional leadership competence, there are instances when a pivot from coaching to evaluating is necessary. One AR team member explained when should shifts must occur and how feedback is used for redirection:

> *I tell my principals that when you move to this level, you are already competent. You were given this position because you were competent enough to get into this role. So we already know that you should come in, and at the end of the year, be at a level three – proficient. As a principal supervisor, I'm still wearing two hats - the same way I did as a principal. I wear an administrative hat and a coaching hat. I administratively work with you when there's a will issue. And I coach you when there's a skill issue. So we're all coming in with a proficient level of competence. And we're just looking to get coached up. When there's a point that you willfully aren't doing something, then that's when my role becomes more administrative. But I also have the ability to give you administrative responses when I notice there's a will issue, but other than that, my preference is to coach you.*

The qualitative data demonstrated evidence for the findings (themes) that addressed research question two. The next section will lay out the findings that addressed research question three.

Research Question 3: How do design and implementation team members describe the influence of the action research process on their instructional leadership capacity?

To determine how the AR process influenced the AR team's instructional leadership, the researcher relied on a qualitative analysis of textual evidence. Members of the AR team participated in semi-structured interviews during the research cycles and the focus group discussions that were conducted during cycles one and three. Additionally, the researcher used AR team meeting notes to discover textual evidence for research

question three. In reviewing these data sources, triangulation of the data was used to gather evidence to support the research question. One theme emerged from the textual data sources: addressing the professional learning needs of principal supervisors.

Theme 1: Address the Professional Learning Needs of Principal Supervisors

The purpose of this action research study was to explore how principal supervisors take a teaching and learning approach to help principals grow as instructional leaders. To that end, AR team members spent a significant amount of time planning and designing professional learning to support the instructional leadership needs of principals. In doing so, AR team members spotlighted opportunity gaps in their PL due to the continuous actions toward improvement during this study. One team member noted,

> *This AR process is causing me to realize the lack of access to the PL that I need in order to keep up with the continuous improvement efforts that my principals are engaged in. I don't have time to wait until the end of the semester or the end of the year to look for PL opportunities. With this process, I've got principals who need me to provide it or at least facilitate it consistently.*

Another AR team member highlighted the need for specific PL structures that complement the principal supervisors' work to strengthen instructional leadership. During a focus group discussion, the team member explained,

> *Identifying the gaps in student learning is relatively easier than the other piece, which is identifying the principal gaps absence of a cycle of inquiry instrument of some kind. Because as we discussed many times, the principals' self-assessment and the whole evaluation process serves its purpose. It's super-duper broad, and it's not really prescriptive or descriptive on the level that it needs to be for us to*

get in there and identify principal gaps. So, for now, that's an area of need for me.

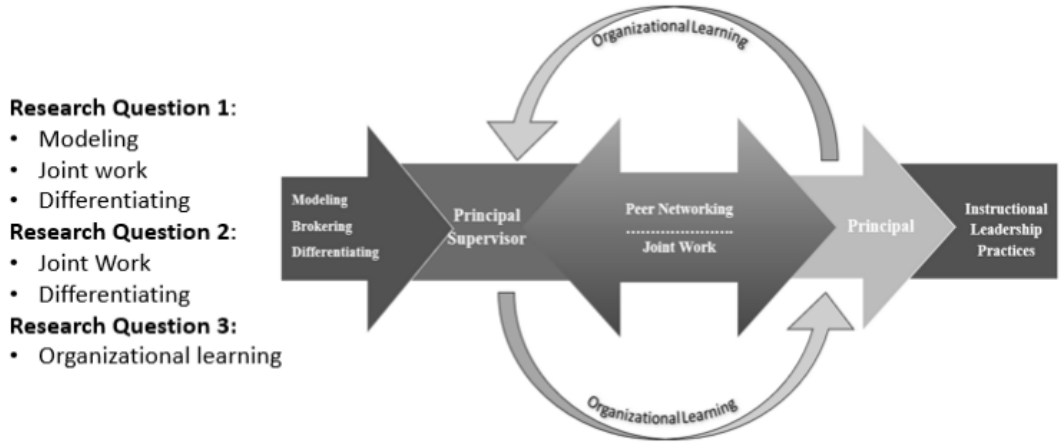
It was evident that AR team members viewed their participation in this action research study positively. In addition, team members expressed interest in applying the AR process to investigate other areas of practice within the school district, especially the need for principal supervisors to grow their instructional leadership skillset so that they can continually support the growth of principals.

Alignment of Research Questions, Findings, and Theoretical Framework

Figure 12 illustrates the alignment between the theoretical framework and the research questions. This action research (AR) study was grounded in a synthesis of organizational learning theory and Honig et al.'s (2010) instructional leadership model. The context of this action research investigated how principal supervisors coach and support principals to improve teaching and learning outcomes in their schools. This synthesis served as the theoretical framework that undergirded this project. The findings from the data analysis demonstrated alignment between the research questions and the theoretical framework.

Figure 12

Theoretical Framework and Research Question Alignment



This theoretical framework for this study includes the components of modeling, brokering, differentiating, peer networking, and joint work. Concerning answering research question one, which focused on the actions principal supervisors take to coach and support principals as instructional leaders, the aspects of modeling, differentiating, and joint work addressed this question. Regarding research question two, which focused on how principals perceived the impact of instructional leadership support they received, the aspects of differentiating and joint work addressed this question. Lastly, the theory of organizational learning, which is based on the concept that learning occurs through detecting and correcting problems in practice, addressed the research question that pertains to participating in the action research process.

Chapter Summary

This action research study sought to explore how principal supervisors take a teaching and learning approach to help principals grow as instructional leaders and whether that approach positively impacted principals' perception of their instructional leadership. Three research questions guided the research study, and various data sources

provided evidence to address each question. Three themes emerged from qualitative data in response to the first research question. The themes included modeling expectations, sense of collaboration, and responding to varying needs of principals. The data offered positive support for principal supervisors' key actions to support principals as instructional leaders.

The second research question investigated how principals perceived the impact of instructional leadership support they received from principal supervisors. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data was taken, and the themes of trusting relationships and development through coaching and feedback emerged from the data sources.

The final research question examined how the action research process impacted team members' instructional leadership. The researcher relied on a qualitative analysis of textual evidence to address this research question. After triangulating the data, one theme emerged from the qualitative data analysis: addressing the professional learning needs of principal supervisors.

The following Chapter 6 discusses this action research study's major findings related to the literature review, the major findings related to the research questions, the study's limitations, and the study's implications and recommendations for practitioners, practitioners, and policymakers.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Today, K-12 leaders are called upon to serve as instructional leaders who understand effective instruction, analyze student learning outcomes, co-construct growth and development strategies with staff members, and share their vision of supporting students with parents and the community (Zepeda et al., 2015). There is a need for school leaders to have the coaching and support conducive for building their instructional leadership. This action research study aimed to investigate how principal supervisors in a large urban school district in the southeastern region of the United States coached and supported principals to improve teaching and learning outcomes by developing their instructional leadership skills in concert with their principal supervisors. This research study also explored whether these actions positively impacted principals' perception of their instructional leadership. Three research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the key actions of principal supervisors that effectively support principals as instructional leaders?

RQ2: How do principals perceive the impact of instructional leadership support on their efforts to improve instructional practices?

RQ3: How do design and implementation team members describe the influence of the action research process on their instructional leadership capacity?

This chapter will conclude the study by summarizing the key findings regarding the study's purpose and research questions while also discussing the study's value and

contributions to the field. In this chapter, there will also be a review of the study's limitations and proposed opportunities for future research.

Summary of the Findings

The researcher used qualitative (interviews, focus groups, and observation notes) and quantitative (survey) data collection methods to gather insights and significant findings. Bu analyzing the collected data, the researcher found that several themes emerged in response to the overarching question: How do principal supervisors coach and support principals to increase their instructional leadership capacity?

Principal supervisors developed partnerships with principals through building collaborative relationships, fostering trust, and building relationships with others in the school community. Principal supervisors supported their principals and the development of their instructional leadership skills by improving instructional pedagogy, increasing the frequency and efficacy of instructional observations, and providing relevant coaching and feedback. In addition, principal supervisors coached their principals via contextual inquiry, feedback, and self-reflection.

Major Findings Related to the Literature Review

The findings of the action research were related to the reviewed literature. In the qualitative analysis, multiple themes emerged consistent with the research found in the literature review. According to Grissom et al. (2021), "School districts aim to transform the principal supervisor position from a role that traditionally focused on managerial tasks to one dedicated to developing and supporting principals to be effective instructional leaders" (2020, p. ix). As districts continue to increase the capacity of the

principal supervisor role, strong consideration should be given to the premise that effective leadership makes a difference in improving teaching and learning.

Finding 1: Instructional leadership capacity increases when principal supervisors build a sense of collaboration with principals

As instructional leaders, principals strive to collaborate more closely with teachers to produce improved teaching and learning outcomes (Honig, 2012; Thessin, 2019). As such, the principal's supervisor also strives to collaborate more closely with the principal to improve the instructional leadership practices in the school. Additionally, Honig and Rainey (2020) explained,

> The instructional leadership work is shared among administrators and other supervisory authority within the school. When their mentors [principal supervisors] are learning alongside them in a reciprocal manner, learners [principals] increase their motivation to learn and also build trust with their mentors through repeated interactions and their mentors opening up their own practice for growth. (p. 24)

As principal supervisors participated in this research study, data indicated that principals' perceptions of their instructional leadership had improved. Principal supervisors need to ensure the continuing support of principals' instructional leadership development and the implementation of a systemic process for sustained collaboration between principals and principal supervisors, both of which may increase the likelihood of improved teaching and learning practices.

Finding 2: Instructional leadership capacity increases when principal supervisors actively participate in instructional observations

As part of the redesign of the principal supervisor's role, more emphasis is placed on principals and principal supervisors consistently conducting classroom observations together. Creating structures that enable principal supervisors to participate in instructional observations actively fosters a sense of mutual accountability between the principal and the principal supervisor. In their follow-up report, *Principal Supervisor Initiative*, which was funded by the Wallace Foundation, Cochran et al. (2020) noted that districts had made progress in the effort to focus more of the principal supervisor's time on matters of teaching and learning. Zepeda and Lanoue (2017) argued that principals need multiple opportunities for coaching and modeling to develop the skills to lead for instructional improvement. In this study, research participants routinely referenced classroom observations as an essential practice of the instructional leader. These classroom observation skills were continually supported through the collaboration and coaching of the principal supervisor.

Finding 3: Instructional leadership capacity increases when principal supervisors receive support and professional development

Being an effective principal does not necessarily make one an effective principal supervisor. Before the release of the Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards (CCSSO, 2015), it was challenging to align and gauge the instructional leadership of principal supervisors (Saltzman, 2016). Despite the advent of the principal supervisor standards, districts often overlooked the principal supervisor's professional development needs. Goldring et al. (2018) noted that professional development "sought to ensure that

supervisors were well versed in what their principals were asked to do, rather than developing supervisors' capacity to develop and support principals' instructional leadership" (p.23). The data analysis in this study provided evidence supporting principal supervisors' professional development as a catalyst for modeling and developing the instructional leadership of school leaders.

Major Findings Related to the Research Questions

This action research study aimed to investigate how principal supervisors in a large urban school district in the southeastern region of the United States coached and supported principals toward improving teaching and learning outcomes and whether these actions positively impacted principals' perception of their instructional leadership. Three research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the key actions of principal supervisors that effectively support principals as instructional leaders?

RQ2: How do principals perceive the impact of instructional leadership support on their efforts to improve instructional practices?

RQ3: How do design and implementation team members describe the influence of the action research process on their instructional leadership capacity?

Finding 1: Instructional leadership capacity increases when principal supervisors model expectations for performance

Interview and focus group data indicated that the theme of modeling positively impacted study participants' instructional leadership. Modeling is considered a powerful learning resource. Honig (2012) suggested that by "observing models in action, learners may develop a conceptual model of the target task prior to attempting to execute it"

(p.739). Every principal supervisor participant indicated the use of modeling as a coaching tool. Having new strategies modeled (as a learner) or using modeling (as a mentor) to explain the "what" and "why" of instructional leadership contributed to participants' positive perceptions.

Finding 2: Instructional leadership capacity increases when principal supervisors provide effective coaching and feedback

Effective coaching and feedback make people better at what they are expected to do (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018). This study's findings expressed the provision of coaching and feedback to principals as an essential practice of principal supervisors. Findings from this study offered evidence of principal supervisors' ability to impact teaching and learning outcomes through coaching and feedback. To this end, principal supervisors strived to develop principals' abilities to improve teaching and learning outcomes by coaching specific skills and performance criteria. Principal supervisors used coaching, feedback, and reflection to support principals' instructional leadership.

Finding 3: Instructional leadership capacity increases when principals provide differentiated support to principals

The data analysis indicated that principal supervisors differentiated their support for principal learning via collaborative partnerships and principals' contextual needs. Principal supervisors used a contextual approach to differentiate principals' support. Honig and Rainey (2020) noted that differentiation that supports growth comes from a strength-based approach. This approach "deepens learners' engagement in their growth areas as a strategy to support their development in weaker areas" (p. 27). Therefore, using a strengths-based approach, principals current level of leadership skills met learners

where they were may have contributed to this study's positive perception of instructional leadership.

Limitations of the Current Study

The findings from this study represent data collected from one urban district in the southeastern region of the United States and may not transfer to other districts in that state or the nation. However, HPSD's unique characteristics offered a viable contribution to the research literature. Additionally, the sample size consisting of three principal supervisors was small. Each of the ten principals who completed perception surveys in Research Cycle 2 reported directly to one of the principal supervisors. A larger sample size may have given the researcher more data, thereby potentially increasing the study's reliability and transferability of the findings.

Implications and Recommendations for Practitioners

This study expands on the existing knowledge base regarding the significance of the principal supervisor in increasing the instructional leadership capacity of the principal. Principal coaching and supervision research is not new. However, the research literature on how principal supervisors may improve principals' instructional leadership is relatively new. This research study on how principal supervisors' efforts to improve principals' instructional leadership could be useful in creating structures for principal coaching and supervision structures that potentially impact teaching and learning outcomes in a positive way.

Implications and Recommendations for Researchers

A critical implication for future researchers was the study's limitations of conducting this research during a pandemic. Focusing on instructional leadership was

difficult due to school closures, social distancing efforts, and competition with non-academic nuances. During this investigation, constraints posed on the researcher limited opportunities to engage fully in some facets of the research site due to unforeseen circumstances surrounding the pandemic. Future research not conducted during a pandemic would likely benefit from the full array of persistent, in-person interactions.

Also, future studies could replicate this action research with a larger and broader sample size. The researcher could consider including teachers in the participant group and garner a third perspective relative to the impact of instructional leadership on improving teacher practice. Future studies may produce findings that expand this research towards informing school districts on how to support the changing role of the principal supervisor more effectively.

Implications and Recommendations for Policymakers

ESSA legislation provided states and local school districts with a renewed emphasis on school leadership that acknowledges the principal supervisor's role in school improvement and quality instruction. The findings of this study have policy implications at the local, state, and national levels. Identifying effective approaches for coaching and supporting principals' instructional leadership can increase the impact and value of the principal supervisor's role within school districts across the nation.

Additionally, the significance of modeling how the instructional leadership capacity is developed within school and district leaders could be helpful to aspiring K-12 educational leaders. As academic achievement gaps persist, particularly in urban settings, policymakers may be postured to understand better how districts can systematically provide ongoing coaching and support to principals and ensure that these processes are

scaled and replicated within and across state boundary lines. Policymakers have the opportunity to enhance the endeavor of assisting principals and principal supervisors who desire optimal performance as instructional leaders.

Chapter Summary and Final Thoughts

The purpose of this study was to examine the structures and practices that supported principal supervisors in their efforts to help principals grow as instructional leaders. The following research questions guided this action research study:

RQ1: What are the key actions of principal supervisors that effectively support principals as instructional leaders?

RQ2: How do principals perceive the impact of instructional leadership support on their efforts to improve instructional practices?

RQ3: How do design and implementation team members describe the influence of the action research process on their instructional leadership capacity?

This chapter reviewed the study's findings and how they related to the literature review and the research questions. Findings from the data collected described the experiences of the action research team and actions of principal supervisors in a large urban district. Although not conclusive, I believe this study is a catalyst for supporting the improvement of the instructional leadership capacity of school principals and a starting point for district leaders who desire to leverage the principal supervisor as a catalyst for instructional leadership.

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APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Tucker Hall, Room 212
310 E. Campus Rd.
Athens, Georgia 30602
TEL 706-542-3199 | FAX 706-542-5638
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Human Research Protection Program

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

February 26, 2021

Dear Jami Berry:

On 2/26/2021, the Human Subjects Office reviewed the following submission:

Title of Study:	Increasing the Capacity of Principal Supervisors
Investigator:	Jami Berry
Co-Investigator:	Keith Simmons
IRB ID:	PROJECT00002934
Review Category:	Exempt Flex 7

We have determined that the proposed research is Exempt. The research activities may begin 2/26/2021.

Since this study was determined to be exempt, please be aware that not all future modifications will require review by the IRB. For more information please see Appendix C of the Exempt Research Policy (https://research.uga.edu/docs/policies/compliance/hso/IRB-Exempt-Review.pdf). As noted in Section C.2., you can simply notify us of modifications that will not require review via the "Add Public Comment" activity.

A progress report will be requested prior to 2/26/2026. Before or within 30 days of the progress report due date, please submit a progress report or study closure request. Submit a progress report by navigating to the active study and selecting Progress Report. The study may be closed by selecting Create Version and choosing Close Study as the submission purpose.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

Jennifer Freeman, IRB Analyst
Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia

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APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear Colleague,

My name is Keith Simmons, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Georgia in the Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy. I am writing to invite your participation in an action research study about supporting principal supervisors (i.e., principal supervisors' process of harnessing their strengths and addressing areas of growth). As a part of the cadre of educational leaders in your district, your participation in this study could help me understand the practices, structures, and systems that support principal supervisors' efforts to grow principals as instructional leaders.

The study will examine how principal supervisors use their time and resources to support principals as instructional leaders. The duration of participation for this research study is approximately 12 hours. A breakdown of the research activities and associated times are below:

- Two perception survey administrations (pre and post) administered remotely (2 hour)
- Participation in a professional learning community (PLC). The PLC will meet via Zoom once per month in August, September, October, and November for one hour each meeting (four hours in total).
- Two virtual focus group sessions are scheduled for one hour each (2 hour).
- Two individual interview via Zoom is scheduled for one hour (2 hours).

Your position as an education leader makes your thoughts and contributions invaluable. I hope you will be willing to participate in this research study to contribute to the field of education. As compensation for your time, you will receive a $25 Amazon gift card to thank you for your thoughts and input.

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may decline to participate at any time. If you decide to participate and then change your mind, you may withdraw at any time without penalty. Using the insight from education leaders such as yourself might help us better understand what practices principal supervisors employ to develop instructional leaders. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Keith Simmons, at keith.simmons@uga.edu or [redacted]

I look forward to your reply and thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Keith Simmons

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CONSENT FORM

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researcher(s) below if anything is not clear or needs more information.

Principal Investigator:
Dr. Jami Berry
Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy jami.berry@uga.edu

Co-Investigator:
Mr. Keith Simmons
Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy
Keith.simmons@uga.edu

We are studying district central office structures and practices that support principal supervisors to thrive as instructional leaders. The following research questions are intended to guide the purpose of this study:

1. How do principal supervisors describe their participation in implementing practices designed to enhance principals' instructional leadership skills?
2. How do principals perceive the impact of instructional leadership support practices on their own practices?

You are invited to participate in this research study because of your role as an instructional leader in a K-12 setting. Your participation in this study could help us better understand the needs and structures conducive to supporting instructional leaders in our schools.

If you agree to participate in this study, we will collect information about an instructional leader's core job functions (i.e., principal, principal supervisor, etc.). We will ask you to participate in a virtual interview; the interview will be conducted by me and will not take more than 60 minutes. Anticipate this video being recorded. However, we would not record the interview without your expressed permission. You can let me know if you do not want to record the interview and withdraw at any time. You may also change your mind after the interview begins. Your responses will be confidential. We will follow up in two months by telephone.

Participation is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty. If you decided to participate and then change your mind, you may withdraw at any time without penalty. During the interview, some questions may make you uncomfortable. You can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them. Using information from educators who operate from an instructional leadership lens, your responses may help us understand how to create district central office structures that maximize principal supervisors' capacity.

We will take steps to protect your privacy, but there is a small risk that someone not connected to the research could discover your information. To reduce this risk, we will use pseudonyms to identify participants. I will be the only person in possession of the key. No other information will be kept that could otherwise identify you as a participant in this study.

Results from this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications, but your name will not be used. We will also share a copy of your interview transcript after recording it if you wish to change or clarify any comments before the study is completed.

Although the study team will attempt to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection during your participation, there is still a risk that you may become ill with this infection. This could lead to severe respiratory or other organ failures and death. The complications would be more likely if you have one of the higher-risk health conditions. Please review your health history with a study team member to see if you have one of these conditions.

Please feel free to ask questions about this research at any time. You can contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Jami Berry, at 404-668-5106 or by email at JamiBerry@uga.edu. If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the IRB at 706-542-3199 or by email at IRB@uga.edu.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

Keith L. Simmons		
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.

APPENDIX D

Participant Observation Protocol

Observation Template for Supervisor-Principal Interactions

Honig's et al.'s (2010) Instructional Leadership Practices
• Modeling – model or demonstrate target tasks • Differentiating – use principal's strengths to establish growth area(s); differs support and target tasks accordingly • Brokering – strategic partnerships and buffers principal's time from noninstructional influences • Joint work – use of supervisor's time to help embrace new challenging work • Peer networking – establish assistance relationships; collaborative learning with and from peer group

Observations: Community of Practice meetings and Coaching and Feedback Meetings

What is the principal supervisor doing and saying?	What is the principal doing and saying

APPENDIX E

Research Question and Interview Question Alignment

Research Questions	Individual Interview Question (Supervisor)
RQ1: What are the key actions of principal supervisors that effectively support principals as instructional leaders?	1. Please describe your role related to supporting principals as instructional leaders?
	2. What does your work with a principal look like on a typical day?
	3. What principal supervisor practices had the greatest impact on you as an instructional leader?
	4. What actions have you taken to support your principals as instructional leaders?
RQ2: How do principal supervisors ensure differentiated and targeted support for principals as instructional leaders?	1. How do principal supervisors determine the needs of each principal?
	2. Describe an effective PL activity that you engaged with principals to support their work as instructional leaders?
	3. What evidence do principal supervisors use to determine principals' needs?
RQ3: How do design and implementation team members describe the influence of action research on their instructional leadership?	1. In what way has participating in this research impacted your work as an instructional leader?
	2. Why do you believe that participating in this research project will benefit you and others in your role?

APPENDIX F

Focus Group Protocol

Introduction:

Good afternoon and thank you for sitting down with me today. I want to begin by letting you know a bit of what I have planned for our time together. I will be asking you questions about your approach to the coaching of the principal(s) you are supervising and how you specifically support the principals you lead in their efforts to improve. Do you have any questions, or would you like clarification about anything I have just said or what you read in the informed consent paper?

I appreciate you taking the time to help me out with my dissertation research. I want to express in the strongest terms my appreciation for you sitting down with me at this time. I am confident I will have all my questions answered at the end of this interview session, but if I need to follow up, I may be contacting you with a few more questions. Are you ready to begin?

We will begin our interview by exploring your perspectives on the work of the principal supervisor.

1. How would you describe the work of the principal as an instructional leader?
2. What instructional leadership skills do you see having the most significant impact on improving teacher practices?
3. How would you describe the joint work of the principal and supervisor with regards to building instructional leadership capacity?
4. How is the current principal evaluation tool used to assess instructional leadership performance?
5. What is the process for ensuring that principal needs (for support/development) are identified and then met?
6. If any, what suggestions would you make to the district as it reviews its structures to support principal supervisors' work?