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Principals as Instructional Leaders: An Embedded Descriptive Case Study of One Rural School's Effort to Improve Student Outcomes Through Reading Plus

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ABSTRACT

PRINCIPALS AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS: AN EMBEDDED DESCRIPTIVE CASE STUDY OF ONE RURAL SCHOOL'S EFFORT TO IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES THROUGH READING PLUS

The purpose of this descriptive embedded case study is to address a reading literacy problem at a rural school district through a principal's instructional leadership and to determine whether student outcomes improved. Campus principals are tasked with the responsibility of ensuring every student receives high-quality instruction that aligns with research-driven best practices by implementing current interim assessment cycles to track classroom trends and determine appropriate interventions (Texas Administrative Code [TAC §149.2001.]). However, the manner in which the principal influences student achievement varies based on leader capacity and school setting. While leadership in rural settings is as diverse as the community being served, teacher instruction in rural schools can be positively impacted by principal instructional leadership, which looks different than instruction in urban schools. Findings support the use of interim assessment cycles to track classroom trends and determine appropriate interventions. Findings also affirm the instructional leadership challenges faced by principals in rural settings.

Key words: Instructional leadership, rural education, high-leverage practices, literacy intervention

Introduction

The purpose of this embedded descriptive case study was to explore perceptions of and experiences with the principal's instructional practices during efforts to address a reading literacy problem at a rural school district, and subsequently to determine whether student outcomes improved. Campus principals are tasked with the responsibility of ensuring every student receives high-quality instruction that aligns with research-driven best practices by implementing current interim assessment cycles to track classroom trends and determine appropriate interventions (Texas Administrative Code [TAC §149.2001.]). However, the manner in which the principal influences student achievement varies based on leader capacity and school setting. While leadership in rural settings is as diverse as the community being served, teacher instruction in rural schools can be positively impacted by principal instructional leadership, which looks different than instruction in urban schools.

The role of instructional leader for principals is a paradigm shift from the effective school's movement. Lezotte (2001) suggested principals lead with the vision that learning must be inclusive, communicate the vision to others, and create critical masses of support for all. This shift was influenced mostly by researchers who found effective schools usually had principals who stressed the importance of instructional leadership (Brezicha, Bergmark, & Mitra, 2015; Duze, 2012; Grigsby, Schumacher, Decman, & Simieou, 2010; Omar, Kalulu, & Alijani, 2011). Principal instructional leadership is one way to build capacity for improved teacher instructional effectiveness and subsequently impact student outcomes (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010). Specifically, researchers found that principals' capacity for instructional leadership has the potential to positively influence teachers' instruction through collaboration and communication (R. D. Goddard, Goddard, Kim, & Miller, 2015).

Although there exists a plethora of research on leadership in urban and suburban school settings, there is a lack of emergent research on leadership specific to rural schools (Starr, 2015). More specifically, the role of principal as instructional leader in rural school settings lacks empirical investigation, including the utilization of leadership strategies used to engage the instructional challenges inherent to the unique rural school environment. While a shortage of rural schools does not exist, perhaps a study that is attentive to one unique school environment can advance the practice of instructional leaders that face challenges associated with ensuring every student receives high-quality instruction. These challenges are specific to best practices from research by implementing appropriate interventions as deemed necessary. It is well noted that teachers at rural schools face challenges that include professional isolation, instructional preparation for multiple subjects and grade levels, and lack of professional development opportunities (Autio & Deussen, 2017; King, 2017; National Education Association, 2018). Addressing academic achievement requires adapting leadership behavior to address the diverse needs of stakeholders (Templeton, Hammett, Low, Arrambide, & Willis, 2016). More importantly, facing challenges unique to a rural school setting is difficult (King, 2017). While student achievement remains at the forefront of the national discourse on school accountability, improving student learning as evidenced by gains on standardized tests is but one measure of instructional effectiveness (Goe, Bell, & Little, 2008). Effective principals must plan to exhibit more competence while leading the instructional community. Therefore, an embedded descriptive case study that explores educator experiences with school leadership, as a single campus principal implements reading intervention program to promote increased student outcomes at a rural north Texas school district was relevant.

The findings of this study offer insight into an instructional leader's efforts to support students' academic learning. The research method of embedded descriptive single case study allowed the researchers to focus on multiple sources of evidence collected for this study through teacher interviews, a focus group, field notes, and quantitative analysis. Accordingly, the study explored descriptions of the principal's leadership efforts and also the Reading Plus intervention program as it related to student outcomes. The research pursued a complete understanding of the importance of meeting the individual needs of all students to ensure learners receive the highest quality education. Moreover, the study provides a better understanding of the role of implementing a reading intervention program and how the intervention relates to student outcomes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the embedded descriptive case study was to explore perceptions of and experiences with the principal's instructional practices during efforts to address a reading literacy problem at a rural school district, and subsequently to determine whether student outcomes improved. Although there exists a plethora of research on leadership in urban and suburban school settings, there is a lack of emergent research on leadership specific to rural schools in Texas (Autio & Deussen, 2017; Parsley & Barton, 2015). More specifically, the role of the principal as an instructional leader in rural school settings lacks empirical investigation, including the utilization of leadership strategies used to engage the instructional challenges inherent to the unique rural school environment. Therefore, because modern rural schools face unique challenges that differ from urban school settings, educational opportunities and student outcomes are significantly impacted (Parsley & Barton, 2015) making this study important in advancing research in the field of rural educational leadership.

Theoretical Frameworks

The Situational Leadership Model is one of the most acknowledged, applied and effective leadership, and professional developing strategies in the history of the behavioral sciences (Blanchard & Johnson, 2015). As a leadership theory, situational leadership frames the basis of the relationship between leaders and followers by providing the framework for analyzing situations based on task behavior, relationship behavior, and the readiness or skill level of the follower. In essence, situational leadership is the ability to align an effective leadership behavior with group or individual capacity (see Figure 1).

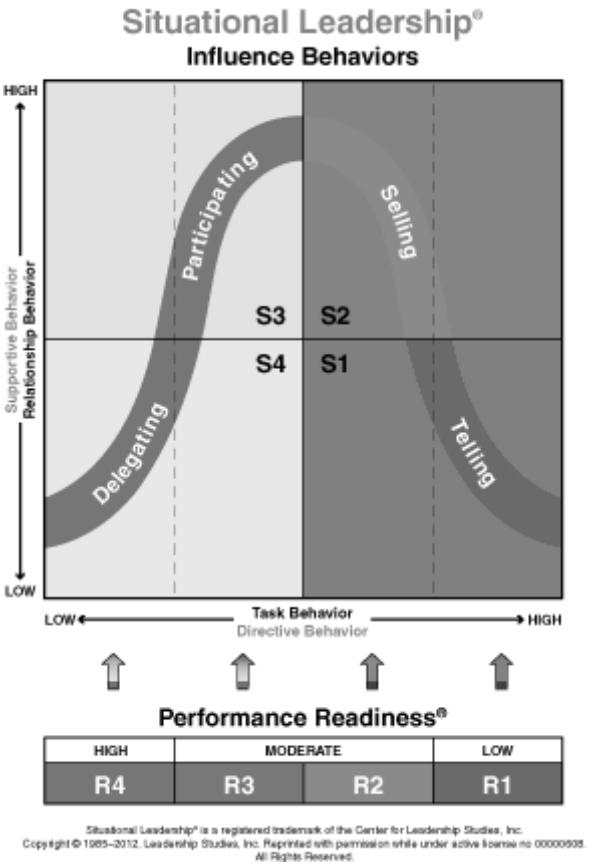

Figure 1. Situational leadership model that demonstrates the four leadership behaviors. Adapted from "Life Cycle Theory of Leadership" by P. Hersey and K. H. Blanchard, *Training and Development Journal*, *23*(5), 26–34. Copyright 1969.

Hersey and Blanchard (1969) established a matrix comprising of four classifications:

1. Telling leaders = S1 (specific guidance and close supervision): Telling leaders are known for making decisions and communicating directives to employees. These leaders develop roles and objectives and expects personnel to follow the directions. One-way communication is the primary means of discussion. This leadership style is most useful with novice workers.
2. Selling = S2 (explaining and persuading): Selling leaders develop roles and objectives for employees. However, leaders utilizing this style are open to recommendations and opinions. These leaders "sell" personal beliefs to increase cooperation from followers.
3. Participating = S3 (sharing and facilitating): Participating leaders consent choices to employees. Even though these leaders contribute to the decisions being made, the final verdict is left to the followers.
4. Delegating = S4 (letting others do it): Delegating leaders are accountable for a team, yet offer little direction to employees or aid the problem solving process. Followers of these leaders periodically ask for assistance when making decisions (p. 72).

Ideally, situational leadership posits the intentional leader as one whose leadership behavior aligns primarily within the domains of the nondirective behaviors of selling and participating. By contrast, telling and delegating are more directive behaviors, requiring more guidance, direction and support from the leader. On the other hand, group capacity is defined as low, moderate, or high, ranging from R1 to R4. In R1, followers lack knowledge, skills, and readiness to finish the task. R2 followers are eager and passionate, yet lack aptitude. R3 followers have the abilities and capacity, but are reluctant to assume responsibility. Finally, R4 followers demonstrate a high aptitude of skills and eager to complete the task.

Regarding alignment of leadership behavior with performance readiness and as indicated in Figure 1, selling and participating, shown in domains S2 and S3 respectively, indicate a high readiness level of the group or follower. By contrast, telling and delegating, shown in domains S1 and S4, indicate moderate to lower group readiness levels. Situational leaders utilize task specificity to function as an instrument, which leaders maximize their influence-related impact. Essentially, situational leaders exercise high levels of flexibility and adaptability, learning to build capacity in others through the demonstration of four critical leadership competencies:

- Diagnose: Understand the situation they are trying to influence
- Adapt: Adjust their behavior in response to the contingences of the situation
- Communicate: Interact with others in a manner they can understand and accept
- Advance: Manage the movement (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2012).

More specifically, situational leaders are reflective and reflexive in nature, being keenly aware of leadership capacity and areas where skill sets need additional honing. As part of understanding one's leadership capacity, the deliberate leader also understands when to be flexible versus when to be consistent. In what Hersey et al. (2012) described as leadership awareness (understanding when a particular leadership style will have success), situational leaders focus on creating support structures by frequently conducting highly effective coaching conversations in order to cultivate group engagement and commitment; thus purposefully initiating behavior changes from self-dependence to self-motivation by articulating the need for competence, connectedness, and autonomy (DuBrin, 2013).

Situational leadership provided the overarching framework for this study. Addressing academic achievement requires adapting leadership behavior in order to address the diverse needs of stakeholders (Templeton et al., 2016). More importantly, change in public school

settings is difficult. While student achievement remains at the forefront of the national discourse on school accountability, improving student learning as evidenced by gains on standardized tests is but one measure of instructional effectiveness (Goe, Bell, & Little, 2008). Therefore, effective principals must plan to exhibit more competence while leading the instructional community. As such, one must have the understanding when to enact a variation in leadership style, and which strategy best fits a new paradigm.

The ancillary framework that guided this study was emergent literacy theory. Dahlin, Durant, Xiang, and Cronin (2010) hypothesized that learning begins at birth and continues prior to formal schooling, which is often used to describe the knowledge an adolescent has of reading and writing prior to the age of where these skills are taught. The contemporary understanding of emergent literacy postulates that children who struggle with phonemes, or blended units uncommon to specific sounds, at an early age often struggle reading during the developmental years. In addition, Dahlin et al. (2010) explained students that struggle with oral language, phonological awareness, concept development, and alphabetic knowledge will likely struggle as readers in later years.

Likewise, the whole language approach aspires to support the reading environment. This approach centers on teaching an understanding of the function of reading rather than the skill of reading, which is directly related to emergent literacy theory (Adams, 2001). Conventional reading and writing skills have a strong predictive correlation with later literacy achievement (Au, 2011). Conventional literacy skills are described by the ability of students to decode, fluently read out loud, comprehend what is read, write, and spell. These skills are essential to literacy practices, and easily recognizable as being essential components of reading.

Conventional skills are merely described as sophisticated, mature, or later-developing indicators of reading and writing.

While fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension are essential to literacy development (Dickinson & Newman, 2006; Sumeta, Compton, & Fuchs, 2012), rich literacy experiences are crucial to reading acquisition. Reading and writing acquisition is conceptualized better as a developmental continuum rather than as an all-or-nothing phenomenon. Reading and writing develops well with intentional instructional planning. Children need motivating interaction with oral and written language, including print. Experiences in these early years defined the assumptions and expectations of future literacy skills, and provided learners the motivation to work toward developing the skillset to read and write (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, & Murphy, 2012).

Furthermore, parental involvement is vital to early literacy development (Dickinson & Newman, 2006). The authors further discussed how home and parent initiatives produced statistically significant and moderate to large effects on leaner's oral language abilities and general cognitive skills. Specifically, using parents as agents of intervention stimulates childrens' linguistic or cognitive development. Parental involvement in education is crucial. Regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, students with involved parents are more likely to have higher achievement scores, social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school (Schoenbach et al., 2012). Simply to reiterate, the framework of situational leadership served as the overarching context of the study as addressing academic achievement demands adapting leadership behavior to address varied needs of stakeholders (Templeton et al., 2016). Furthermore, situational leadership theory developed the underlying theoretical basis for the

impetus or "why" a small, rural school principal must play the role of a strong instructional leader.

The Principal as an Instructional Leader

Rural principals are generally not prepared for their position in rural schools. Educational leadership programs are not known to offer a specialization in rural settings, (Arnold, 2004) causing gaps of much needed research in the area (Sherwood, 2001). To fill the gap in empirical research, opinion papers have been used in past literature reviews (Shuman, 2010). Howley and Pendarvis (2002) stated that rural administrators would benefit from negotiation, communication, and conflict resolution skills. According to Madden, Livingston, and Cummings (1998), the typical path of becoming a principal for men in a rural school was by holding an assistant principal position, as well as coaching and teaching positions. For women, it was family support, their graduate education, communication and interpersonal skills, mentoring, and networking (Gill & Feinstein, 1994). A principals' religious affiliation was found to be an important characteristic (Young & Hite, 1994) as well as community fit for becoming a rural towns' principal candidate (Wallin, 2003). If the religious affiliation of a candidate was dominant in the community, then they would fare well (Young & Hite, 1994). Additionally, the difficulty of separating church and state is an inherent characteristic of rural areas and schools (DeYoung, 1994).

The rural principal is a leader in the community and therefore often develops a close relationship with the town's people (Templeton, 2018). To build trust, Harmon (2001) stated that the principal of a rural school needs to focus on the people and not the business. Since the principal often has a close relationship with the community, they can face unrealistic demands by their constituents where every decision is critically analyzed in public (Howley & Pendarvis,

2002). It is not surprising that rumors and gossip are more present in rural schools because of the tighter community (Madden et al., 1998). Because most community members do not want to see a tax increase in their rural area, principals face additional pressure to make due (DeYoung, 1995), which has turned accountability into an acute problem. Another challenge of rural principals is that they often work in a managerial capacity instead of in an instructional role. Chance and Lingren (1989) stated "If the perception of instructional leadership is ever to become reality, rural principals must be provided opportunities to become effective leaders" (p. 11).

The principal, as an instructional leader, serves the pivotal role of ensuring teacher instruction is aligned with student outcomes (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2015; Levin, 2010; McNeill et al., 2018; Taylor Backor & Gordon, 2015). The role of instructional leader is a paradigm shift from the effective school's movement. This shift was influenced largely by research that found effective schools usually had principals who stressed the importance of instructional leadership (Brezicha, Bergmark, & Mitra, 2015; Duze, 2012; Grigsby, Schumacher, Decman, & Simieou, 2010; Omar, Kalulu, & Alijani, 2011). Grissom, Loeb, & Master (2013), sampled 100 urban school principals for 3 years using a meta-analysis to determine the relationship between principal leadership and student achievement, calculated an average coefficient of .25. Similarly, a longitudinal study conducted by Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin (2013) differentiated between effective versus non-effective principals, and found no relationship between instructional leadership and student achievement. However, interaction with teachers through coaching and evaluating were positively associated with achievement gains. Similarly, data from a statewide large-scale data quantitative study by Finkel (2012) revealed that highly effective principals extended approximately two to seven months of learning in mathematics when compared to a school with an average principal.

Methodology

Mertler (2018) postulated the definitive goal in research studies is to find answers to particular questions identified in the onset of the study. Hence, the definitive goal of the research was to answer the questions that guided the study. The researchers were interested in understanding the phenomenon surrounding reading intervention, principal leadership, and student reading outcomes in a rural school. Moreover, Yin (2018) stated that case studies should utilize the *how* type of question (Yin, 2018). Therefore, this embedded descriptive case study was guided by the following questions:

RQ 1: How do educators describe instructional experiences with school leadership in a single campus rural school district? (QUAL Interview)

RQ 2: How do educators describe the role of the campus principal with the implementation and sustainability of the reading intervention program, Reading Plus? (QUAL Interview)

RQ 3: How does the principal describe their instructional leadership practices as it relates to the implementation of Reading Plus? (QUAL Field Notes)

RQ 4: How do educators describe the effectiveness of the Reading Plus program as it relates to increased student outcomes? (QUAL Focus Group)

RQ 5: What is the descriptive relationship between student progress measures and Reading Plus as demonstrated by student Lexile scores? (QUAN Descriptive Statistics)

Design of the Embedded Descriptive Case Study

Case studies are used to identify problem areas in real-time in order to find solutions that allow teams to investigate the phenomenon. Yin (2018) recognized case studies are a design of inquiry found in many fields, especially evaluation, in which the investigator develops an in-

depth analysis of a case, often a program, which is considered appropriate to answer the research questions. Further, case studies are a pragmatic research tool that can be used with interdisciplinary teams to research the diversity and complexity of a given problem (Scholtz & Tietje, 2002; Yin, 2018). Additionally, Yin (2018) stated that there are three criteria that are important about a case study: the researcher is an observer and does not control events, the research is conducted in a real-world setting, and the use of how and why questions. The descriptive case study design is an empirical form of study appropriate for descriptive studies, as the aim is to describe the context, process, and features of a phenomenon (Scholtz & Tietje, 2002; Yin, 2018). A descriptive case study is the most appropriate for the research study as Yin (2018) defines the objective is to "describe a phenomenon in its real-world context" (p. 21). The context of the study included one rural school district site located in north Texas.

Embedded case studies can use sources from qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Yin (2018) noted the embedded case study approach is particularly relevant to the investigation of a setting where the boundaries between the phenomenon of interest and context are not clearly evident. Accordingly, an embedded design is most appropriate for this study since it is not clearly apparent to the best leadership approach of implementing a reading intervention program in a rural school context. Lastly, the researchers must determine an appropriate specification for the case study between single and multiple case designs. The single unit of analysis is the rural school principal's instructional leadership effort. According to Scholz and Tietje (2002), embedded case studies contain multiple units (or sub-units) that can be analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. This study the embedded sub-units of analysis include the teachers' inquiry from the interviews, field notes, and the ongoing Reading Plus diagnostic assessment data.

In an embedded case study, there are three steps that researchers must do after collecting basic information: (a) identify case experts who have in-depth knowledge (ie. educational professionals), (b) data collection through survey invitations to complete questionnaires, and (c) case agents determined how to organize data based on their shared values and interests, questionnaire outcomes, and available resources (Scholz & Tietje, 2002). For example, the case agents for this embedded case study were educational professionals from School A that had experience working with students on *Reading Plus.* The case and embedded units of analysis provided an in-depth perspective of a single principal's instructional leadership approach. The data collected came from interviews, focus group, and descriptive quantitative analyses from students participating in *Reading Plus* intervention. The research questions were based on the theoretical propositions of the study, and guided data collection and analysis. The findings from the study demonstrated how one principal's instructional leadership effort of implementing a reading intervention program can attempt to address a literacy problem in a rural north Texas school. Commingled and implementation rival explanations were investigated to determine their influence on the principal's instructional leadership effort.

Data Collection

Yin (2018) suggests researchers begins by connecting the data from the case study to a concept of interest, and then allow the concepts to provide direction for the treatment of the data. The researchers applied the general strategy of relying on theoretical propositions, which follow the theoretical propositions that led to the case study. This strategy allowed the theoretical frameworks to guide the case study in the development of the research questions, the design of the study, and the procedure. Allowing the theoretical propositions to guide the study allowed the investigator the ability to maintain a chain of evidence that linked all components of the

study (Yin, 2018).

The study utilized four instruments to collect sources of evidence. The first instrument to gather evidence was individual semi-structured face-to-face interviews with teachers, followed by a focus group with five educators, field notes by the principal, and quantitative analysis of the reading intervention program and student outcomes. Yin (2018) emphasizes that participant interviews often produce the best data for a case study design. The primary use of focus groups was to amplify data to better understand the phenomenon from the perspective of the group participants (Stalmeijer, McNaughton, & Van Mook, 2014). Yin (2018) stated that quantitative materials help authenticate evidence from other sources in case studies, but warned that the data source was used for other purposes (Baskarada, 2014).

Participant responses from open-ended interview questions were transcribed at the time of the interview by the student investigator. Once the data were transcribed, each response was hand-themed and coded using a technique defined by Braun and Clarke (2014) as thematic analysis. The six steps of thematic analysis include (a) familiarize with data; (b) create initial codes; (c) identify themes; (d) reexamine themes; (e) describe and label themes; (f) develop a report. After member checking is completed, the transcripts were uploaded to a case study database in Microsoft Word. The data were kept on a secured digital file located in a locked cabinet and was kept for three years, upon which it was destroyed after meeting the required time.

Semi-structured interviews, a focus group, field notes, and quantitative analysis was triangulated to strengthen reliability and validity of the results. Methodological triangulation can consist of two different types, within method or across method (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). Casey and Murphy (2009) define within-method studies use at least two data-collection

procedures, either qualitative or quantitative, but not both. The study used across-method studies, which combined qualitative and quantitative descriptive data-collection techniques (Casey & Murphy, 2009; Hussein, 2015), to simply view the case from multiple perspectives- a numerical perspective and a perspective of others descriptions.

Summary of Findings

In order to contextualize the findings of the study, as Baskarada (2014) and Yin (2014) explain, the summary delivers readers adequate understanding of the phenomenon and allows closure among the findings. To describe a rural principal's instructional leadership practices of implementing a reading intervention and how the program impacted student outcomes, the researchers gathered and synthesized data from participants' interviews, a focus group, field notes, and descriptive quantitative measure of descriptive statistics. The qualitative analysis established eleven thematic categories. Accordingly, the researchers identified eleven themes which provided a comprehensive understanding of a rural school principal's instructional leadership efforts when implementing a reading intervention program to improve student outcomes.

(see Figure 9).

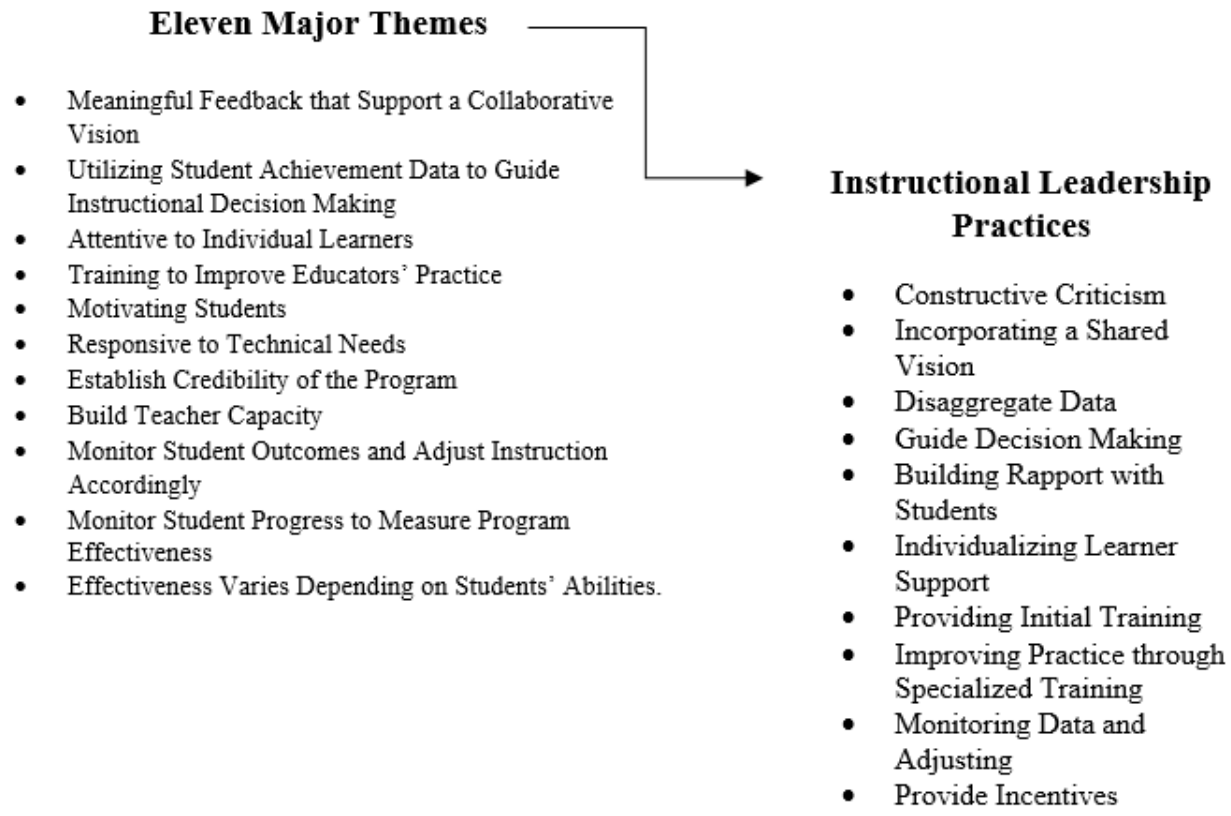

Figure 9. Phenomenon of rural principal instructional leadership practices of implementing a reading intervention program to improve student outcomes.

Furthermore, to answer research question 5, the researchers used a quantitative perspective of descriptive statistics to investigate the relationship between student progress measures and reading plus. In particular, the study considered the students' mean Lexile level on a Reading Plus diagnostic assessment compared to the students' end of the year Lexile level. Comparing the two data measures, the mean Lexile scores by grade levels, 3-10, increased throughout the study. Students' mean scores in grades 3 and 4 demonstrated the highest increase from the Reading Plus diagnostic to the end of the year measure. When comparing the individual students' grade level proficiency status, 17% (n = 14) of students improved from reading below grade level to at least on grade level and the number of students reading above grade level increased by 17% (n = 14).

Comparing the mean Lexile scores by grade level on the Reading Plus diagnostic assessment to the end of the year measure, all grade levels mean increased. This indicates students are progressing as readers. The largest increase in mean Lexile scores were grade 3 with 179.1 and grade four with 171.8. The lowest increase was fifth grade with 31 and ninth grade with 33.4. Another worthy notion, when comparing the descriptive statistics, the standard deviation of the mean Lexile level on the end of the year reading plus measure increased across all grade levels. An increase in standard deviation designates a larger variation among student Lexile levels. The last notion compares the students' individual grade level proficiencies as defined by TEA's Lexile levels. According to the Reading Plus Diagnostic assessment 48% (n = 40) of students are reading below grade level, 34% (n = 29) are reading on grade level, and 16% (n = 14) are reading above grade level. The end of the year Reading Plus Lexile measures indicate 31% (n = 26) of students are reading below grade level, 34% (n = 29) are reading on grade level, and 33% (n = 28) are reading above grade level. Comparing the two measures of grade level proficiency, the number of students reading below grade level decreased by 17% (n = 14) and the number of students reading above grade level increased by 17% (n = 14).

Scholarly Significance and Implications

Although there exists a plethora of research on leadership in urban and suburban school settings, there is a lack of emergent research on leadership specific to rural schools (Starr, 2015). More specifically, the role of principal as instructional leader in rural school settings lacks empirical investigation, including the utilization of leadership strategies used to engage the instructional challenges inherent to the unique rural school environment.

While a shortage of rural schools does not exist, perhaps a study that is attentive to one unique school environment can advance the practice of instructional leaders that face challenges

associated with ensuring every student receives high-quality instruction. These challenges are specific to best practices from research by implementing appropriate interventions as deemed necessary. It is well noted that teachers at rural schools face challenges that include professional isolation, instructional preparation for multiple subjects and grade levels, and lack of professional development opportunities (Autio & Deussen, 2017; King, 2017; National Education Association, 2018). Addressing academic achievement requires adapting leadership behavior to address the diverse needs of stakeholders (Templeton et al., 2016). More importantly, facing challenges unique to a rural school setting is difficult (King, 2017). While student achievement remains at the forefront of the national discourse on school accountability, improving student learning as evidenced by gains on standardized tests is but one measure of instructional effectiveness (Goe et al., 2008). Effective principals must plan to exhibit more competence while leading the instructional community. Therefore, an embedded descriptive case study that explores educator experiences with school leadership, as a single campus principal implements reading intervention program to promote increased student outcomes at a rural north Texas school district was relevant.

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