Learning Outside the Classroom: How Principals Define and Prepare to Be Instructional Leaders

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This qualitative study surveyed 50 practicing principals in a Rocky Mountain state to explore what elements of their responsibilities these educational leaders identified as part of their instructional leadership roles. The study also examined what experiences these principals identified as helpful in preparing them to assume the role of school instructional leader, specifically in the areas of teacher supervision and evaluation, the use of technology to support student learning, and the use of data to inform instructional practices. These areas have been identified through research as significant elements of instructional leadership. By identifying the specific actions that principals identify as their instructional leadership responsibilities, programs that prepare school leaders and state and district personnel who provide professional development for principals can develop learning experiences that could more effectively support principals’ success as instructional leaders.

1. Introduction

Instructional leadership has been identified as a critical, if not primary, task of school leaders since Brookover and Lezottes [1] work with effective schools. “Since then, the evidence of the importance of instructional leadership at schools continues to mounts,” according to [2] (p. xv). Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe [3] conducted a meta-analysis of 34 studies examining school leadership and student outcomes and determined that “the leadership dimension that is most strongly associated with positive student outcomes is that of promoting and participating in teacher learning and development” which is the “heart of instructional leadership” (p. 667). Robinson et al.’s findings were similar to those by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty [4], where a meta-analysis was conducted on 70 American studies to determine school leader actions that positively impacted student achievement. Principals who were instructional leaders were also found to have a stronger positive impact on student achievement “beyond the impact of school context and principal demographics” in the study conducted by [5] (p. 445) across 37 American elementary schools. The positive impact of instructional leadership on student achievement is not confined to the United States, such as Day, Gu, and Sammons’s [6] examination of the work of principals in primary and secondary schools in England and Hallinger, Hosseingholizadeh, Hashemi, and Kouhsari’s [7] study of Iranian primary schools which added to the recently growing body of research on instructional leadership in non-Western countries.

Many recent studies on the impact of the principal regarding student achievement have addressed both the instructional and transformational leadership aspects of school leadership (i.e., integrated leadership) in order to address the broader organizational and instructional actions of a principal because the two constructs are difficult to separate [3, 5, 6, 8, 9]. Even within studies on integrated leadership, instructional leadership was still delineated and recognized as a critical area which effective principals must address [3, 8]. Even if the effects are indirect, instructional leadership has been found to clearly play a critical role in how principals can “enable teachers to improve student achievement” [8] (p. 531).

Particularly, with the emphasis on narrowing the achievement gap between groups of students who have been identified as at-risk for failure or low achievement in
American schools that has been legislated through the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the Obama administration’s Race to the Top competitive education grants, and most recently the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, instructional leadership remains a focus of school improvement efforts [10–12]. The Obama administration’s Race to the Top competitive grants emphasized the role of the principal in developing teacher effectiveness specifically through the supervision and evaluation process; the development and use of meaningful data systems to “measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction,” and turning around low-performing schools through leadership of the instructional program [13]. The areas identified by Race to the Top as critical areas in the school improvement process were also reflected in the 2015 iteration of the National Policy Board for Educational Administration’s (NPBEA) Professional Standards for Educational Leaders. The NPBEA standards are the most recent iteration of what was formerly known as the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards which, since the creation of these standards in 1996 and revision in 2008, has served as the “pervasive” model for national and state principal preparation program accreditation and state licensure policies [14–18]. Although the earlier ISLLC standards have been criticized as being “a blend of both the empirical evidence on school leadership and ‘craft knowledge’” [19] (p. 170), the 2015 NPBEA standards were heralded as “informed by an extraordinary amount of research into educational leadership over the past 10 years” [20, 21].

NPBEA’s Professional Standards four and six particularly address instructional leadership. Standard four focuses on school leadership of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, underscoring the promotion of effective instructional practices, the use of data to monitor and guide learning, and the use of technology to support teaching and learning [14] (p. 12). Standard six continues the emphasis on principals developing the capacity of school personnel, particularly in promoting teacher growth to increase student learning including the delivery of “actionable feedback about instruction and other professional practice through valid, research-anchored systems of supervision and evaluation” (NPBEA, p. 14). From recent federal programs to the most current national school leader standards, the emphasis on principals as instructional leaders encompasses the tasks of teacher supervision and evaluation, data use to guide instruction, and use of technology to enhance student learning. Research discussed earlier involving the examination of integrated leadership (i.e., transformational and instructional leadership), such as the work of Hitt and Tucker [8], can also be used to identify how several of the other Professional Standards also reflect instructional leadership, including the development of a school’s mission, vision, and core values (Standard One); equitable and culturally responsive practices (Standard Three); inclusive, supportive, and caring school and professional community (Standards Five and Seven); engagement with families and the larger community (Standard Eight), operations and management (Standard Nine); and general school improvement efforts (Standard Ten) focused on student academic success and well-being. This might seem to beg the question as to whether everything a principal does might be viewed as instructional leadership if it is intended to positively impact student achievement, leaving the definition of instructional leadership quite broad and ambiguous.

While there has been a great deal of research regarding instructional leadership, the definition remains complex and somewhat elusive. In 1984, DeBrevoise [22] defined the term as “those actions that a principal takes, or delegates to others, to promote growth in student learning” (p. 15). This can be seen as a very general statement that could include much of what a school leader might do in allocating resources, setting goals, articulating a mission and vision, and managing school operations. Hallinger [23] defined the original conception of instructional leadership as encompassing the three dimensions of defining the school’s mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school learning climate with ten functions delineated across the three dimensions, but, after reviewing the literature at that time regarding principal effects on student achievement, emphasized the need for a shared instructional leadership construct which emphasized a “mutual influence process” between leaders and teachers (i.e., collaboration and dialogue) that takes into consideration the specific school context (p. 235). The concept of instructional leadership has evolved since the 1980s from a narrow focus on supervision of teachers and classrooms to a more integrated view, also articulated by Printy, Marks, and Bower [24], that “includes leadership practices aimed at enhancing teachers’ professional learning and growth (talking and collegial dialogues) and various mediating educational and organizational practices (missions, goals, school climate, curriculum, etc.) by which principals are to support successful teaching practices and share responsibilities of instruction” [25] (p. 492).

How practitioners define instructional leadership is still being explored, because, as Urick and Bowers [26] explained, educators do not necessarily agree on what instructional leadership looks like in a school setting. In Urick and Bower’s study of principals and teachers from 20 countries, the school leaders’ definition of instructional leadership focused on “(1) setting goals and vision for the organization, (2) promoting and leading professional development of teachers, and (3) supervising instruction” (p. 2). In their study of principals in Norway, Sweden, and Finland, Salos, Nylund, and Stjernstrom [25] drew upon Moller and Eggen [27] work regarding how a narrative approach to understanding the instructional elements of school leadership might provide greater insight into how principals construct meaning about instructional leadership.

The qualitative study discussed in this article took a similar approach to Salos, Nylund, and Stjernstrom [25] and examined the narrative responses of principals in one Rocky Mountain state regarding how they defined instructional leadership in terms of their own job responsibilities and how they gained the knowledge and skills they felt enabled them to be instructional leaders. Because of the complexity and lack of a clearly agreed upon definition of
instructional leadership, the questions asked of the participants in this study were left very open-ended. However, because the NPBEA 2105 Professional Education Leadership Standards specifically identified (1) the development of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (2) the use of data to guide instruction; (3) the use of technology to support instruction; and (4) feedback through the supervision and evaluation of teaching process, questions specific to those four areas were included in the open-ended survey completed by participants. The definition of instructional leadership that guided this study discussed in this article drew from Hallinger [23] definition and the 2015 NPBEA leadership that guided this study. M_ the definition of instructional leadership, the questions asked of the principals identified as their lived experience of instructional leadership. The epistemology that guided this study was constructionism, described by Crotty [34] as a perspective where “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage in the world they are interpreting” rather than simply being either objective or subjective (p. 43). Constructivism also applies to the theoretical perspective of this study in that the responses of the participants were viewed as “the meaning-making activity of the individual mind” (p. 58). In this study, principals constructed their definition of what they did as a school leader that they deemed to be part of their instructional leadership role. The participants then also constructed a path of how they felt they came to be able to fulfill their instructional leadership role.

An open-ended survey was used as the data collection method in this study in order to allow participants to fully explain their understanding of instructional leadership and how they feel they prepared to be an instructional leader. Participants were informed that the survey would take 30 to 60 minutes to fully answer the questions in the invitation to participate e-mail they were sent in order to encourage substantive responses. Demographic data were collected through the survey on the professional and educational background of the participant as well as the size and type of school (rural, suburban, or urban as defined by [35] that they current led. While the participants were provided categories for school size and type, the questions regarding professional and educational background were open-ended so that participants could include anything that they felt was pertinent. Other open-ended questions included the following as correlated to the definition of instructional leadership used for this study described earlier based on Hallinger [14, 23] Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL):

1. Please describe your typical workday. (General for scope of responsibilities)
2. What parts of your job do you feel make you an instructional leader? (General to draw out the participants’ definition of instructional leadership encompassing all aspects)
3. What experiences have you had that have helped you serve as an instructional leader? (General to draw out the participants’ definition of instructional leadership encompassing all aspects)
4. What experiences have you had that have helped you supervise and evaluate teachers effectively? (PSEL Six)
5. What experiences have you had that have helped you facilitate the use of technology in classrooms to enhance student learning? (PSEL Four)
6. How do you use data to inform your decisions regarding each of the following?
7. What experiences have you had that have helped you use data to inform your decision regarding each of the following:
   a) teacher performance (PSEL Six)
   b) student performance (PSEL Four)
   c) school improvement (PSEL Four)

2. Methods

This study was guided by the following two research questions:

1. How did principals in one Rocky Mountain state define their instructional leadership responsibilities?
2. What preparation for instructional leadership did principals in one Rocky Mountain state find valuable?

Because the focus of this study was the phenomenon of instructional leadership, a qualitative study was the most appropriate methodology to focus on the understanding of participants’ experiences and priorities. As Patton [33] explained, phenomenology assumes that there are “core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced” (p. 106). This study sought to identify the mutual understandings of what current principals identified as their lived experience of instructional leadership. The purpose of this study was to add to the understanding of what current school leaders include in their definition of instructional leadership and how they feel they have been prepared to take on this role. In addition to adding to the discussion regarding instructional leadership, the findings of this study also can be used to inform principal preparation programs regarding how to capitalize on preservice principals’ past educational and personal experiences and enrich fieldwork integrated into a preparation program. This is particularly relevant since such programs have been criticized in the past for not adequately preparing completers to provide “meaningful immersion in practice” or opportunities to “apply theories to real life situations” [28–32].
The electronic survey was constructed in such a way that respondents could not go back and revise answers to earlier questions that they had completed so that specific questions later in the survey around teacher supervision and evaluation, technology, and data use would not predispose participants to discuss those aspects of instructional leadership. The survey was administered electronically in order to collect data from a diversity of participants in a timely manner and with the hope that the ease of an online survey would prompt more individuals to respond. After Institutional Research Board approval was obtained, the e-mail addresses of all 1,876 schools (including public, private, and charter schools) in one Rocky Mountain state were obtained through the marketing e-mail list service (Marketing Emailist, 2015, https://www.emailistus.com). Four districts in the state required district research approval and were removed from the list of possible participants because the identification of participants used a random selection process in which those districts may or may not have been selected. This removed 346 school leaders from the population to be sampled, which left 1,530 schools available for possible participation in this study. A number was assigned to each school, and a random number generator was used to select school leaders who were then sent e-mails explaining the study and a link to the electronic survey. Completion of the survey indicated consent to participate. The target number of participants was 50 as this was felt to constitute an adequate representation of perspectives across school size and types in the state to generate a manageable amount of qualitative data to address the research questions.

E-mails were sent to the randomly selected school leaders until at least 50 surveys had been completed. Because participants were encouraged to thoroughly explain their experiences and understandings, 50 surveys generated a large amount of qualitative data that were still viewed as manageable for analysis. Thus, 50 responses were determined as a sufficient number for an initial exploration of the research questions in this study. School leaders were sent one follow-up e-mail after the original e-mail, inviting them to participate in the study before additional school leaders were randomly selected and contacted. The researcher conducted three rounds of random selection of possible participants and invitation e-mails before the target number of surveys were completed. Random selection was used with the hope that responses would be somewhat representative of the different school contexts (size and school type) across the state; however, this did not come to fruition and is more fully discussed in the limitations section. Differences in responses across the size and types of schools was not, however, a focus of this study, so the stratification of participants was not considered a factor in the construction of sampling in this study.

Responses were received from 54 principals. The participating principals predominantly served public schools (83%), while seven percent led public charter schools and nine percent led private schools. Forty-four percent of respondents said that they led suburban schools, 37% led rural schools, and the remaining 19% identified their schools as urban. Respondents led schools with student populations between 201 and 499 students comprised 44% of participants, while the second largest group of respondents (21%) indicated that their school’s student population was between 500 and 750 students. Fourteen percent of respondents led small schools with student populations at or below 200 students, eight participants (14%) led schools with student populations between 1,000 and slightly over 2,000 students. Responses did not reflect the demographics of the state in that there are 67% public, 12% charter, and 21% private schools listed by the state department of education, and the types of community served by the school districts across the state are 83% rural, 9% suburban, and 8% urban (state department of education website, 2015), and this will be discussed in the limitations section. Thus, the voice of public school leaders, particularly those leading suburban schools, is reflected more strongly in the findings of this study.

The qualitative responses to the open-ended questions on the questionnaire were analyzed using NVIVO software. Open coding was first conducted followed by axial coding for each question and then across questions to group similar ideas and concepts together. Finally, dominant themes were identified within each question and across responses. For example, open-coded concepts for question two included such codes as “walk-throughs,” “class visits,” and “daily observations” which were then grouped together under the axial code of “observations” while open codes of “teacher feedback,” “modelling,” and “coaching” were group under the axial code of “coaching” and later combined into the theme of “teacher supervision and coaching” because the two concepts were frequently expressed together in participants’ responses. For the same question, participants frequently discussed looking at student data (demographic and assessment data) as part of their coaching of teachers. While these actions were clearly viewed as part of the teacher supervision and coaching process, enough respondents identified these discussions of particular student data that the subthemes of “data analysis discussions” were created to delineate general student data which included demographic data and “assessment data analysis” to delineate student achievement data that principals discussed with teachers in order to help them meet the needs of their students through the supervision and coaching process. Ideas that had been identified in the literature as significant but were not strongly represented in the data were also identified. For example, reflection has been found to play a role in effective school leadership [36–38] but was only mentioned by two participants in this study.

2.1. Limitations. This study was intended as an initial exploration of the definition of and perspectives on preparation for instructional leadership from a small nonstratified sample of principals in one specific state. The limitations of this study include the following, several of which are discussed in more detail below:

(1) A small sample size \((n = 54)\) which limits the transferability of the findings. The results are accurate only for this particular group of respondents at this specific point in time.
(2) The sample included in this study was not stratified to be representative of the different school types (elementary, middle, and high school or other configurations) or location (rural, suburban, and urban), and so the results are not representative of the overall population of principals in this state.

(3) The sample includes principals from only one state again limiting any transference of findings to principals in other states. Responses of participants from this particular state may have been influenced by specific mandates pertaining to student achievement accountability.

(4) Nonrespondent data were not included, and so those not completing the survey may have different views than those expressed by the participants of this study.

(5) The data collection format of an electronic survey may have limited participation (as compared with personal phone call invitations).

(6) The data collection format of an electronic survey may also have limited the depth of responses. An interview format of data collection might have yielded more in-depth data and details.

(7) The omission of demographic data related to gender and length of time as a principal, as well as the number of schools that participants had served as a principal, also limits the transferability of the findings of this study.

(8) This study did not ask any questions directly related to participants’ formal preparation programs regarding the various elements of instructional leadership identified in the literature. Such a question was avoided so as not to skew how the participants felt they had been prepared for instructional leadership; however, such a question may have caused the participants to reflect more deeply on what they learned and found useful in their formal preparation programs.

As listed above, there are several factors which limit the transferability of the findings of this study. First, the sample is relatively small and confined to one state. The principals in this study represent slightly less than 3% of all principals in the state. While repeated invitations for participation in the study were issued to try to increase the number of participants, the 54 respondents represent predominantly public rural schools which are not representative of the state’s distribution of rural, suburban, and urban or public, charter, and private schools. The responses of principals in this state also reflect their concern and actions pertaining to specific accountability measures implemented in this state, pertaining to teacher supervision and school improvement. Principals in other states may list other tasks as related to their perceptions of instructional leadership based on initiatives in those other states.

Participants were not asked how long they had served as a principal, and so more experienced principals who completed their preparation program several years ago might not refer to the experiences in those programs or view those experiences as valuable, given more current and perhaps lengthy “on the job” experiences in their current practice. Because participants were asked about their experiences which they felt prepared them to be instructional leaders, responders might have interpreted the question as asking about personal experiences rather than professional or formal preparation that they had engaged in.

Even though participants were informed in the invitation to participate in this study that the time to complete the survey instrument would take from 30 to 60 minutes for complete responses, participants may not have taken that amount of time to provide responses. Thus, while narrative responses were secured, more in-depth narratives could have been obtained through interviews, although with a smaller sample. The collection of stratified interviews from principals in this state as well as others is an option for future research.

3. Findings

3.1. Preparation for School Leadership. Participants were asked to identify their professional background before becoming a school leader and what education they obtained in order to prepare to become a school leader. These questions were asked to build an understanding of the participants’ prior experiences in education and leadership, as well as formal preparation they had sought. Particularly, in identifying past experiences that led to school leadership, the question was open-ended, which allowed participants to report those roles and experiences which they felt were significant. An additional question was asked regarding any other experiences which they felt had prepared them to become a school leader to ensure that all life roles and experiences were taken into consideration.

Only one respondent did not mention teaching as a background experience. This person focused rather on a series of business positions that had been held. Sixty-seven percent of respondents identified the number of years that they had served as a classroom teacher. Experience as a teacher ranged from four to 21 years, with the majority (44%) having between six and ten years of classroom teaching experience, 22% having between 11 and 15 years of teaching experience, and 20% having 16 and 21 years of classroom experience. Participants then identified prior education leadership positions that they had held. Fifty-two percent of respondents reported being an assistant principal or dean (28%) and/or instructional coach (14%) or district coordinator (14%). Fourteen percent also reported having served as an athletic coach and only one respondent reported serving as an athletic director.

The level at which one had taught was the third most reported background experience (48%), with the majority of respondents having taught at the high school level (46%), 31% at the elementary level, and 23% at the middle school level. Thirty-three percent of respondents listed what subject they had taught, with the greatest number (28%) having taught special education and 14% each having taught language arts, math, or social studies.
the primary focus of their instructional leadership responsibilities (91%), including assessment data use as a critical component of these processes (63%). “Working with teachers around student outcomes and really looking at the data that teachers need to inform what they do in the classroom” is what one principal identified as the core of his/her instructional leadership responsibilities. “I believe a good instructional leader needs to be committed to staying up on the latest research and practices, then helps teachers embed those techniques and strategies into their teaching,” one respondent explained. “Conversations with teachers” was repeatedly discussed across responses, as well as “providing feedback and returning to observe it in action.”

The idea of being first and foremost a learner of best instructional practices in order to support and inform what teachers were doing echoed throughout most of the principals’ responses. “I have to know how to be a really good teacher in order to provide instructional leadership for my staff,” summarized one school leader. Respondents emphasized how they used classroom observations and walkthroughs to provide feedback to teachers to better support student learning.

Data analysis discussions were also specifically mentioned by 72% of the participants as an important element of their instructional leadership which they used to coach teachers in how to engage students and increase student achievement. The data analysis discussion subtheme included all responses that discussed the use of general student data to help students understand “where students were coming from in their classrooms” while the assessment data analysis subtheme included all responses that specifically described discussions with teachers regarding student achievement data such as classroom, district, and state test results as part of the supervision and coaching process (see Table 2 for a summary of responses regarding what the principals in this study identified as their instructional leadership responsibilities).

Descriptions of working with teachers regarding specific content or the development of curriculum also emerged as a subtheme under teacher supervision and coaching. Seventy percent of the principals in this study discussed advising...
teachers on class content, particularly numeracy and literacy, as part of the feedback that they provided to teachers. The implementation of new curriculum discussion with teachers was also included in this subtheme regarding advice and support provided by principals to improve teacher practices and outcomes.

The next most frequent response regarding how participants served as instructional leaders is reflected in the theme of planning and implementation of professional development (35%), which included Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings and faculty meetings, as well as more formal professional development experiences. One participant explained, "I firmly believe that a principal best impacts kids by taking care of teachers. I am thoroughly immersed in our professional development and believe in building teacher capacity within the building. My goal is to support and push every teacher so that they may support and push every student." Another principal explained that even faculty meetings were used "as opportunities to instruct [and] share strategies that work. I also lead book studies [and] teach classes to the staff." Over a third of the respondents discussed how they felt planning professional development or making sure that PLC time was structured and appropriately used to focus on student learning outcomes were critical to their role as instructional leaders. While only 9% of principals in this study specifically used the term "collaboration" in terms of working with individual teachers, 12% talked about how they worked with teachers in PLCs, data teams, or school leadership teams to identify student learning needs and develop instructional responses in their role as school instructional leader of professional development, implying collaboration with teachers in groups rather than individually. Thus, working with teacher teams and collaborating with individual teachers in the planning and delivery of professional development were considered subthemes.

Curriculum planning and implementation was the third most frequent response (17%) regarding what they did as instructional leaders, with participants emphasizing the importance of selecting curriculum that responded to the needs of the students. While implementation of curriculum was specifically mentioned in conjunction with curriculum selection, 70% of all participants also explained that they facilitated the implementation of new curriculum by providing professional development for teachers and providing coaching and feedback as part of classroom observations (included as a subtheme under teacher supervision and coaching for responses specifically related to teacher feedback). When all activities in support of curriculum implementation identified by the principals in the study are taken into consideration, curriculum implementation becomes the second most dominant responsibility identified by participants.

Resource allocation and work around developing and implementing a vision were mentioned by 7% of the respondents. Human resource issues regarding the advocating for additional faculty or support personnel were the focus of each resource allocation response. Implementation of a vision was also consistently discussed in the context of building a collaborative school environment by the principals in the study. "I help lead the conversation among teachers as to what our vision is and how we can get there. I also try to make sure everyone has buy-in and is working toward that goal," one respondent explained.

Technology use or implementation, however, was not mentioned by any of the principals in this study as part of their responsibilities as instructional leaders. This is interesting as technology is included in standard four of the NPBEA [14] Professional Standards for Educational Leaders. It is also interesting to note that two participants discussed how they feel their role as an instructional leader is limited. "I do not spend as much time on instructional leadership as I should," explained one principal. "There is not enough time in my life... I hire good people, steer them a bit, and let them run." Another participant simply said that, "I do not spend much time in the classroom," but did note that she/he determines the instructional focus for the building. The two responses did not reflect the majority of responses which indicated that a strong presence in classrooms and actively working with teachers were the most salient aspects of the participants' role as instructional leaders.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 3: Summary of instructional leadership preparation responses.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Response</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Preparation for Instructional Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development (as a teacher or principal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching or Instructional coach experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other experience in school setting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coursework/Readings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supervision/Evaluation Preparation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technology Use Preparation</td>
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<tr>
<td>District professional development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Little or no preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal learning (self-use/students/use as a teacher)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3. Preparation for Instructional Leadership. Over half (52%) of principals in this study identified professional development that they had received either as a teacher or as a principal as instrumental in developing their capacity as instructional leaders. "Continuing professional development has helped me have fruitful academic conversations with teachers," noted one principal. Workshops provided by the state association for school leaders and by individual school districts were highlighted by one-third of the principals in this study. Regarding preparation specifically to become an instructional leader, 31% of principals in this study said that their years of teaching or instructional coaching experience had been the most helpful in preparing them to lead instruction in their school. "My 10 years as an instructional coach were priceless in shaping my understanding of adult learners as well as how to coach them. This was the single best preparation for this role," a participant shared. Other experience in school settings that included school and district committee work, coaching, and general experience
as an educator were noted by 30% of the participants. Twenty-six percent identified the influence of others such as mentors, principals, or lead teachers as most helpful in preparing them for their current instructional leadership roles. Six (11%) principals in the study identified coursework and readings as influential in their instructional leadership preparation; however, only two participants specifically stated that the coursework was part of a school leadership preparation program. Two other participants noted the research they conducted for their doctoral programs were very instrumental in helping them understand how to be an effective instructional leader (see Table 3 for a summary of responses regarding instructional leadership preparation.).

3.3.1. Preparation to Supervise and Evaluate Teachers. When looking at teacher supervision and evaluation, 48% of the respondents in this study identified their own time and experience in classrooms as teachers as the best preparation they had. One respondent succinctly replied, “Lots of years of experience doing it myself in the classroom. I know what good instruction looks like.” Professional development was noted by 31% of the principals, particularly in terms of cognitive coaching classes, district professional development, and workshops conducted by the state association for school leaders. “The state user guide [for teacher evaluation] and state training were really helpful to know what to focus on and how to collect data” regarding teacher evaluations, one principal explained. “Working with other administrators in our district to understand what is required” was helpful to another participant. Individual reading and reflection were mentioned by only five participants. Only one principal referred to principal preparation program coursework; however, this person explained, “I had the usual coursework in my principal prep program, but my work with kids is more readily transferable to coaching teachers than the theoretical classroom perspective.”

Most of the responses regarding preparation to supervise and evaluate teachers focused on understanding the process required, while only the principals who discussed cognitive coaching or instructional coaching experiences focused on the feedback provided to teachers through the supervision and evaluation process. The state in which this study was conducted adopted a new teacher evaluation system in 2011 as part of the federal Race to the Top grant competition which made the teacher evaluation process much more standardized across the state. After being piloted by several districts, the system was fully implemented in 2015. The relative newness of the system might explain why participants in this study emphasized the evaluation process and data collection rather than feedback provided to teachers. This also may point to a weakness in the implementation of the new system as the focus of a supportive, formative supervision and evaluation system should be providing actionable feedback to teachers to improve their instruction and increase student achievement [40].

3.3.2. Preparation to Use Technology to Support Student Learning. Workshops and professional development provided by the participants’ school districts were identified by 38% of the principals as the most helpful in preparing them to use technology to enhance student learning as part of their instructional leadership role. The implementation of state tests via computers or a technology grant were the most frequent impetus for professional development. Another 30% of participants explained that they had learned how to use technology for instructional purposes through personal use, the students explaining it to them, or by having to use technology when they were classroom teachers. “My personal learning and playing around with different programs and applications is how I learned best, although I have attended a couple of technology conferences in my current role,” one principal explained. “Honestly, you just have to stay caught up. I use the kids to help keep me in the loop. I think Twitter is the best professional development tool in existence, and I learn almost all of my ideas (especially in regards to innovation) from Twitter,” another principal shared. Another principal noted that, “I taught on PowerPoint as a teacher and found it to be an effective classroom management tool” in explaining his support for the use of technology to enhance teaching and learning. Two participants mentioned have taken college courses regarding technology, but they did not indicate if those courses were part of their undergraduate teaching preparation or part of their principal preparation program. Thirty-one percent of the principals in this study said that they had “little” or “none” preparation for using technology to support student learning. However, ten of these seventeen respondents noted that they “pay for” the technology used in their buildings by helping to write grants to obtain outside funding for technology initiatives and professional development for teachers. “I buy it, I get them trained, and then I trust my staff to run with it,” one principal summarized. Three of the respondents in this study did explain that they had always been intrigued by technology and actively used technology as a teacher (in delivering blended learning or flipped classroom instruction), which prepared them to lead technology initiatives in their schools.

As noted earlier, the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders adopted in 2015 by the NPBEA stated that instructional leaders should, “Promote the effective use of technology in the service of teaching and learning.” The responses received from principals in this study would indicate that the acquisition of technology and arranging for teacher training to use that technology seem to be the common extent of principal involvement in using technology for teaching and learning. Whether this rather laissez-faire approach truly supports the effective use of technology in classrooms by teachers and students could be a point of contention in defining an instructional leader’s responsibilities. If principals who are instructional leaders provide meaningful feedback to teachers regarding classroom practices that enhance teaching and learning, it could be argued that feedback regarding the use of technology in the classroom would and should be included in the supervision and evaluation process. One might also question whether the use of PowerPoint as a classroom management tool or Twitter as a source of professional
development and innovation truly addresses “the effective use of technology in the service of teaching and learning” in the classroom and school environment.

3.4. Sources of Preparation for Instructional Leadership. Professional development that occurred after the completion of a degree or licensure program was most valued by the participants of this study in preparing to be instructional leaders, especially in the use of technology to support teaching and learning, and emerged as the most dominant theme in preparation for instructional leadership from the data in this study. Professional development was the second most frequently noted means of acquiring necessary skills to be an effective instructional leader, particularly skills required for teacher supervision and evaluation. The kinds of professional development that participants discussed included specific software packages related to student assessments and teacher supervision and evaluation that were adopted by their school districts. State- and district-provided workshops were identified by participants as the most useful in providing training on system processes specific to state or district initiatives such as student assessment and teacher evaluations.

The second theme that emerged across survey question responses was the importance of the participants’ teaching experience. This theme included instruction of children and adults, with 33% of respondents identifying their service as instructional coaches, mentoring of other teachers, and planning and implementation of professional development at the district level as valuable in developing their instructional leadership skills as teacher leaders. Time spent in classrooms, collaboration with other teachers, and working with a mentor as a teacher were other frequently mentioned topics in this theme. “Getting feedback from other teachers, my mentor, and instructional coaches really helped me to understand what good teaching looks like. Years of working with kids and finding out what works also has helped me guide what takes place in classrooms in my school now,” a principal explained. “In a teacher leadership role, I was able to mentor others and provide professional development which help me to understand how adults learn and what I can do as a principal to help them learn,” another principal stated.

Experience outside of the classroom was the third theme identified in the data regarding preparation for instructional leadership. While 20% of the principals felt that they have grown from their work as school administrators, several used the term “trial and error.” One veteran principal shared that, “I have over twenty years of experience as a principal and, honestly, a lot of my growth has been trial and error to find out what works and what does not. The same things do not always work at different schools, so it is all about learning about the context of each school and going from there.” An equal number of participants identified experiences outside of the school environment as valuable in helping them become school leaders. Coaching and participation in athletics, military service, and personal reading were all identified as valuable preparation to be an instructional leader in this study. “I have drawn upon my football coaching experience more than anything” reported one principal. Another school leader felt that experience in the business world “really prepared me to explain to people how to do things and then motivate them to do them.”

Being a good teacher, actively continuing one’s learning regarding best instructional practices, and pursuing as many leadership opportunities and positions both within schools and within communities or other organizations were emphasized by the participants in this study as critical preparation to becoming instructional leaders. While reflection has been increasingly emphasized in studies regarding the improvement of instructional practices [42], individual reflection was mentioned only twice by respondents in this study. Participants emphasized instead the significance of learning they had gained from working with others, whether that was with students, peers, mentors, or supervisors. Learning, as well as instructional leadership, was discussed by the principals in this study as most meaningful when done collaborative in an exchange of ideas with others. It is perhaps that interaction in the learning process and anchoring in life experiences that university preparation programs need to emphasize and capitalize on in order to ensure that learning in a preparation program is a valuable experience that school instructional leaders will value and call upon in practice.

4. Discussion and Recommendations

4.1. Participant Backgrounds. Compared to the teaching experience of public school principals in the last Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) conducted in 2011–12 by the National Center for Education Statistics, a division of the U. S. Department of Education, the participants in this study had less teaching experience prior to becoming principals. In the SASS study, 33% of principals had between five and 10 years of teaching experience, whereas 44% of principals in this study had the same amount of teaching experience. Twenty-nine percent of SASS principals had between 10 and 15 years of teaching experience and 32% had more than fifteen years of experience as a classroom teacher. In this study, 22% of the principals had between 11 and 15 years of teaching experience and 20% had served between 16 and 21 years as a teacher. This is important in light of the findings of Hitt and Player [43], where a positive relationship was identified between the number of years a principal spent as a teacher and effective leadership practices in their analysis of SASS principal data from the 1999–2000 survey. The number of years spent as a teacher might cause principals to focus on different aspects of school leadership, specifically instructional leadership, than the participants in this study identified.

Hitt and Player [43] also examined the correlation of prior roles in education held by public school principals who participated in the 2011–12 SASS study and effective leadership domains. The roles of assistant principal, department coordinators, and former curriculum specialists were associated with higher scores in various domains of effective leadership; however, the role of assistant principal was
positively correlated with “facilitating a high-quality learning experience” which relates to instructional leadership. Former department coordinators were associated with higher scores in the domain of building professional capacity, also an element of instructional leadership regarding teacher professional development. The roles of athletic coach and guidance counselor were not correlated with any of the effective leadership domains. The prior roles in education of the participants in this study included assistant principal and athletic coach, but other roles listed were not specified in Hitt and Player’s study, such as dean, district coordinator, or instructional coach leaving room for future investigation of the correlation of these prior roles to effective leadership practices, particularly regarding instructional leadership. The relationship between the level of educational attainment in subject areas and educational leadership administration and principal instructional leadership was not discussed in the literature reviewed, providing another avenue for research to further the understanding of what formal educational preparation supports principal instructional leadership.

4.2. Definition of Instructional Leadership. The participants in this study focused primarily (91%) on the elements associated with the third area of instructional leadership identified by Hallinger [23] which was the management of the instructional program in their descriptions of their instructional leadership role. Of the components Hallinger and Murphy’s [44] Instructional Management Framework, these Rocky Mountain principals focused primarily on the supervision and evaluation of instruction (with an emphasis on providing feedback and coaching for improvement), the implementation of curriculum again in the context of providing feedback and coaching to teachers through the supervision process, and monitoring of student progress in terms of assessment data as well as other data that were viewed as helpful to understanding the learning needs of students, also in terms of dialogues with teachers in the supervision process. Teacher supervision, especially feedback and coaching dialogues, appeared to be the main vehicle of instructional leadership for these principals. These dialogues were seen as the time where instructional practices, student achievement data, and implementation of the curriculum were discussed that could positively impact instruction and student learning.

Promoting professional development of teachers was identified a little more than a third of the principals in this study as part of their instructional leadership role. Professional development, whether in the planning or implementation, was frequently linked to or identified as opportunities for these principals to collaborate with teachers either individually or in a team setting. The development of a school mission in terms of vision implementation was identified by only seven percent of participants as part of their instructional leadership responsibilities. The responses of principals in this study echoed the findings of Urick and Bowers [26] where principals from 20 countries identified “promoting and leading professional development of teachers” and “supervising instruction” as instructional leadership; however, the principals in that study also identified “setting goals and vision for the organization” (p. 2). The lack of focus on vision and mission by the current study participants perhaps indicate that creating and communicating school goals are viewed as more general leadership tasks rather than directly related to instruction. This finding might also signify that, while research has explored the concept of integrated leadership which includes organizational as well as instructional leadership tasks, practitioners still narrowly associate the term instructional leadership with what they feel they do that most directly impacts what takes place in the classroom and promotes student learning.

4.3. Preparation for Instructional Leadership. While perhaps the emergence of promoting teacher growth through the teacher supervision and coaching process as an overwhelmingly dominant theme in this study is not a surprise, the identification of the importance of professional development that occurred after completion of a principal preparation program is a disturbing finding and perhaps highlights a deficit in preparation programs, at least those completed by the participants in this study. The participants went through a variety of different programs, however, so this could indicate that the deficit is widespread. Only eleven percent of the principals in this study identified their graduate level coursework as valuable in preparing them to be instructional leaders. However, the participants indicated that the professional development they found the most informative was provided by either the state department of education, state school executive association, or by their own districts. The responses of the participants in this study appear to echo the criticisms noted earlier regarding the lack of transfer of theories presented in preparation programs into instructional leadership practices [28–32].

The importance of in-service professional development of principals is not a new revelation. Reference [45] discusses the literature regarding the importance of principal professional development in order for principals to understand and be able to respond to the “changing role, responsibility, and scope” of “current and future job demands” (pp. 4–5). Davis et al. conducted an analysis of principal professional development policies in all 50 states and developed seven recommendations. In addition to recommending that states require research-based professional development for principals throughout their careers, taking into account the individual contexts of the schools that principals led and allowing for reflection and networking, as well as the implementation of a mentoring system for new principals who would in turn serve as mentors as they progressed in their careers as school leaders. The inclusion of “strategies and professional development opportunities allowing aspiring principals to collaborate with one another, reflect on performance and practice, and analyze, interpret, and act on data pertaining to the position” in principal preparation programs was also a recommendation by Davis et al. [45].
The challenge for preparation programs, however, might be providing aspiring principals with authentic experiences which are comparable to what they will face once in the position of school leader. Internships are typically required by preparation programs with the hope that aspiring principals will gain those authentic experiences which can then be reflected on and analyzed by preservice principals [46]. Practicing principals who work with interns, however, might be reluctant to engage interns in activities that truly involve having those “hard conversations” because of possible political consequences and confidentiality issues. These vital but difficult experiences include budgeting during a decline of resources that might involve teacher dismissals, teacher discipline, supervision of ineffective teachers, and handling upset parents. It is difficult to have interns experience leading in these instances, and even observation of handling such situations may not be sufficient to prepare aspiring leaders adequately [47–50]. Opportunities to assist with curriculum adoption and implementation as well as the support of other initiatives may not fall within the timeline for each intern although important for instructional leadership. If the recommendations of Deschaine and Jankens [51] are followed, however, aspiring principal interns should be able to experience a breadth and depth of responsibilities and situations commonly encountered by principals in an array of other critical areas. This includes providing training for principals working with interns to ensure that such a breadth and depth of authentic experiences are contained in each internship, as well as preparation program ongoing oversight of the internship experiences.

The use of simulations or discussions of those “hard conversations” which principals must have can be included in the coursework of preparation programs. The preparation program which the author is affiliated convenes an annual advisory board meeting of superintendents and human resources directors from school districts around the state in order to keep abreast of the specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions that districts require, as well as to gain feedback on graduates of the program. A frequent topic of discussion is the use of case studies, simulations, and collaborative discussions embedded within preparation coursework regarding how principals should handle difficult situations including allegations of sexual harassment, misconduct of teachers, angry parents, and a plethora of other challenging situations. While this is not the same as being in these situations, often unexpectedly, it has been viewed by the practitioners on this advisory board and others in the field as a sufficient proxy to increase preservice principals’ awareness of how to handle such difficult situations [48].

The participants in this study identified much of the professional development that they received as principals that they found valuable was on specific programs, initiatives, or processes that were unique to the state or school district. Training on processes or initiatives specific to a state could be included in university principal preparation programs; however, too much of that kind of state-specific focus could become a liability for programs that serve or strive to serve students from across the nation. District initiatives vary widely and may not be realistic to address in any depth in a university preparation program. While one-to-one computer implementation could be discussed as an example of strategic planning in leading large-scale change, training on policies, practices, or software packages used by leaders in individual districts would not be realistic or beneficial to include in a school leadership preparation program. Overviews of policies such as implementation of a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) or teacher evaluation software would be helpful in making preservice school leaders aware of what is kinds of policies and practices are currently being used or are at issue, but going into detail with every new initiative in districts across a state might not be feasible. This is where those entities responsible for training principals need to recognize what they can and should be responsible for and what falls outside of their purview and in another stakeholder’s arena. State departments of education can regulate preparation program requirements and professional development for in-service principals as discussed earlier; however, training on policies, programs, and processes unique to a district should rightly take place at the district level. Training at the district level is appropriate for the detailed learning that a school leader would require to understand the context, constraints, policies, and processes unique to each district, particularly specific curriculums, instructional designs, and teacher supervision and evaluation processes.

More research is needed to identify which professional development experiences principals find helpful as instructional leaders that cross district borders and would be appropriate to include in a university preparation program, particularly regarding state initiatives. In the state in which this study was conducted, numerous participants noted that the state department of education and school leadership association trainings were helpful in the area of supervision and evaluation. University principal preparation programs in this state are required to cover the state teacher evaluation criteria and process; however, the respondents in this study did not identify their preparation coursework as being of as much value as the state organization training. This might indicate a lack of detail at the university level. It also might indicate university course coverage of additional supervision and evaluation models such as clinical supervision and cognitive coaching to provide meaningful, actionable feedback to teachers to support their growth as educators. The inclusion of but not sole focus on the state teacher evaluation system could provide a more well-rounded or balanced understanding of the many methods and tools that can be used by a school leader to support teacher growth. The provision of a broader spectrum of strategies and techniques might then be appropriate at the preservice school leader level with state training the correct venue for a strict focus on a mandated state process. The findings in this study would indicate that practicing school leaders are more focused on the required processes that they are responsible for rather than a broader understanding of elements of the supervision process that are not required in their current positions.

Participant responses in the area of technology use to support student learning is also a finding in this study that
merits consideration in that 21% reported that they had received no or little preparation from any source. An additional 28% of respondents discussed how they depend upon staff and even students to understand and use technology. Obviously, it is difficult to be an instructional leader in the use of technology if you are learning from those you are supposed to lead. The findings from this study would imply that principal preparation programs should both integrate technology in support of the learning of preservice school leaders, modelling those best practices as to how to use technology to support teaching and learning, and provide an overview of current hardware and software that schools are using that support teaching and learning of students. This would require further study to identify the technological practices that lead to increased student learning. Given that school and district capacities for funding equipment, software, teacher training, and continued support of both the technology and teacher use of the technology vary a great deal, it is often difficult to generalize or bring to scale across a state successful strategies and techniques. However, this research would be very helpful in informing principal preparation programs as to the knowledge that principals need to effectively lead the use of technology to support teaching and learning. Current research in this area is still somewhat limited and dominated by individual case studies rather than large-scale evaluations of specific technology or use of technology [52].

The findings of this study are significant in highlighting the areas in which principals need increased preparation related to instructional leadership, particularly in their licensure programs. Further research is required to clearly identify the processes and policies regarding state education initiatives that should be included in university preparation programs and to what level of detail. While university researchers can certainly conduct these inquiries, it will require communication among all entities that contribute to the development of school leaders, both preservice and in-service, for principal preparation to be authentic and thorough. Discussions need to take place to determine what information is most appropriately provided in preparation programs and what information is district specific and should appropriately be conveyed through district professional development. Universities and school districts, as well as state education agencies and school leadership organizations, need to work together to ensure that school leaders are prepared to support teacher and student growth with all the knowledge and skills necessary at the beginning and throughout their careers as instructional leaders.

4.4. Recommendation. As with all research, each finding often opens several more avenues for exploration of new questions that arise. This study is no different. The following is a summary of the recommendations presented in this section related to the discussion of findings:

(1) Further research should be conducted, both qualitative and quantitative, regarding how the length of teaching experience and time spent in teacher leadership roles such as teacher mentor, master teacher, and/or instructional coach influences the demonstration of instructional leadership by principals.

(2) Research should be conducted to investigate the relationships between the instructional leadership behaviors of principals who have varying levels of educational attainment in subject areas and in educational leadership or administration to determine if and how degree completion helps to better prepare instructional leaders.

(3) Further research should be conducted regarding principals' definition of instructional leadership to inform the further development of an instructional leadership framework. This should include nationwide qualitative survey studies with a stratification of respondents according to school size and type as well as smaller quantitative studies that could provide more detail and depth in understanding how principals enact their roles as instructional leaders.

(4) Principal preparation programs should explicitly include the discussion of various constructs of instructional leadership with aspiring principals in order to identify the broad spectrum of actions which school leaders can use to promote best instructional practices and student learning.

(5) Principal preparation programs should review the structure of principal internships to ensure that the recommendations of Deschaine and Jankens [51] are implemented and that aspiring principals are able to obtain an authentic breadth and depth of leadership experiences.

(6) In order to ensure that aspiring principals have an awareness and practice dealing with difficult situations that they may not be exposed to during an internship because of timing, confidentiality, legal, or political factors, principal preparation programs should integrate the analysis and reflection of case studies and simulations related to issues such as sexual harassment, angry parents, teacher misconduct, ineffective teachers, curriculum implementation, and other situations requiring "hard conversations" or activities that intern may not be able to be exposed to within an internship into their curriculum.

(7) Principal preparation should also be mindful to draw upon the lived experiences of aspiring principals in order to make explicit connections between prior experiences and how those experiences can serve as assets in demonstrating the many facets of school leadership, particularly instructional leadership, to promote student learning and achievement.

(8) Discussions should take place between state education departments, principal preparation programs, and school district leaders to articulate the knowledge and skills that are applicable across
school districts and appropriate for inclusion in principal preparation programs as differentiated from training on policies or processes that are state or district specific that should be provided by state or district stakeholders.

(9) Principal preparation programs should include content on research regarding the effective use of technology to support student learning and model this use of technology within preparation program to address the lack of knowledge of best practices in the use of technology to promote student learning.

(10) Further research should be conducted regarding the use of technology to support student learning which could inform the acquisition and implementation of technology within schools and districts as resources allow.

(11) Research should be conducted to assist education stakeholders with identifying what knowledge, skills, and dispositions cross state and district boundaries in order to more fully inform preparation programs as to the content that should be included in principal preparation programs (while it could be argued that the [14] Professional Standards for Educational Leaders provides this research-based guidance, further research could provide greater detail as to the depth required in addressing each standard and elements within each standard within a preparation program).

The findings from this study can help inform principal preparation program curriculum, district leadership of in-service principal professional development, and state departments of education policies to ensuring the readiness of new principals to serve as effective instructional leaders. While the sample size of principals in this study was relatively small, the voice of the practicing principal was allowed to define what instructional leadership looks like for these participants. This voice, amplified through future studies, could create a dialogue between researchers and practitioners to develop a more authentic and dynamic framework to explain what instructional leadership is and how aspiring principals can acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to become effective instructional leaders who positively impact student achievement.

Data Availability
The data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Conflicts of Interest
The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References


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