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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Communication behaviors of principals at high performing Title I elementary schools in Virginia: School leaders, communication, and transformative efforts

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Abstract. Principals of modern Title I elementary schools, where at least half of the student population lives in poverty, must possess a broader set of leadership skills than has been historically necessary. The ability to motivate teachers utilizing effective communication is one such skill set. This qualitative research proposes a division-level training program designed to improve communication skills of principals and aspiring principals based on the self-reported communication strategies of principals at high-performing Title I elementary schools. High performing Title I schools represented just 8% of all Title I schools in Virginia during 2014. This qualitative data was derived from semi-structured interviews with 8 of these principals, surveys of principals, and publicly available data about these schools. Analysis of the self-reported information resulted in 11 specific communication strategies practiced by most or all of the principals in the participating high performing Title I elementary schools. Further uncovered were 5 themes of communication in leadership which include a student-centered approach to decision-making, transparency of decision-making, shared decision-making with principal and teachers, the role of faculty trust, and principal preparation. Specific principal communication behaviors with teachers were implemented in motivating teachers toward earning high-performing status. These included frequent face-to-face and personal communications, minimal use of whole-school meetings, and weekly principal participation in grade level meetings. Additionally, principal certification programs were found to have had little impact on the participants in the area of communication. Finally, the critical importance of mentoring, together with school-division level training in the area of communication development, was revealed. This research concluded that communication skills are necessary for building trust between school principals and teachers, with trusting relationships vital for leading teachers toward effective instruction. More structured leadership training is essential in the area of communication skills in preparing school leaders and is most effective at the school division level.

Keywords: communication, principle, Title I, leadership, training

Introduction and statement of the problem

Public school principals today manage people, data, and processes. Principals are tasked with setting goals and motivating constituents to meet these goals. The quality of personnel, teachers, and principals has a significant impact on student test scores (Cullen, Levitt, Robertson, & Sadoff, 2013). According to a 2005 study by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty the quality and performance of a school's teachers and principals accounted for nearly 60% of the school's total impact on student achievement. The principal's impact is of significance due to the actions that they take to hire teachers, create the school-wide conditions that support student learning, and directly influence teacher effectiveness.

Skillful communication has been broadly accepted as an important leadership attribute across disciplines. Scholars have focused much attention on the study and practice of communication skills in fields, such as business, medicine, and social services (Aspegren, 1999; Goby & Lewis, 2000; Makoul, 2001). McEwan's (2003) research identified the role of communicator as the number one most important element of highly effective principals. However, more study is needed in the area of communication skills specifically for school

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leaders (National Association of Secondary School Principals & National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013).

This study examined self-reported principal communication strategies and uncovered common themes and communication behaviors present in high-performing, high-poverty schools. This research also explored the nature of school leadership and the importance of communication for building a vision and encouraging stakeholders to work toward such a vision.

Problem

Today's principals face heavy workloads that require working at a rapid pace that is both hectic and taxing. "On average, elementary school principals work fifty-one hours a week… [and] high school principals average about fifty-three hours a week." (Lunenburg, 2010). Principals are also facing increased responsibilities for instructional and community leadership roles. Moreover, Mendels (2012) believes that today's principals need to be focused on instruction and not building management. Managing this overwhelming list of demands requires building principals to have exceptional oral communication skills (Tobin, 2014). They spend upwards of 70 – 80% of their time in interpersonal communication, most of which is face-to-face and by telephone (Tobin, 2014). Add to this the volume of daily e-mail communication and this role becomes even more complex (Lunenburg, 2010).

Teaching and leading in a school with at least half the student population living in poverty increases this challenge where the element of home support for students has often been eliminated from the equation (Payne, 2005). An examination of children living in poverty by Prince and Howard (2002) summarized:

> Not only do children who are poor have higher dropout rates, higher rates of retention at grade level, and higher special education placement rates than children who are not poor (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994; Ford, 1992; Haynes & Comer, 1990; Sherman, 1997) they are also more likely to have serious physical and mental disabilities and ill health. Being poor is also associated with poor nutrition, living in substandard housing and dangerous neighborhoods, receiving substandard child care, teen pregnancy, juvenile delinquencies, child abuse, and death in childhood (CDC, 2000).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), approximately 20% of school age children are living in poverty. These children often do not come to school physically, emotionally, or cognitively ready to learn when the primary focus may be daily human survival (Prince & Howard, 2002). The Federal Title I program provides funding to schools that serve high poverty areas (United States Department of Education, 1999). Title I schools have been required to meet the same outcomes as their non-Title I counterparts in spite of the socioeconomic status of the community.

At the time of this study, the Virginia Department of Education (2014) reported that 728 of all elementary schools in Virginia received Title I funding. Twenty-eight percent of these schools (204) were in warning status for failing to make annual yearly progress (AYP) in math and/or reading for two consecutive years. AYP is defined at the state level but is a complex formula that determines the amount of improvement made each year based on test scores of the school (United States Department of Education, 2014). However, 55 of these Virginia schools, or just 8% of all Virginia Title I schools, were celebrated as Distinguished or Highly Distinguished.

Distinguished and Highly Distinguished designations are applied to schools that demonstrated growth over a 2-year period and exceeded the state expectations for standardized test scores (Virginia Department of Education, 2014), thus supporting the idea that these schools have the potential to succeed despite the challenges that poverty places

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upon the student population. Based upon publicly available data about Title I schools in the state of Virginia, the researcher isolated all schools identified as Distinguished and Highly Distinguished Title I schools, for this research referred to as high performing. By studying principal communication behaviors in a sampling of these successful schools, professional development and improved principal training could result as one method of addressing leadership deficiencies.

A significant piece of research that supports the correlation between high performing schools and communication significance came from Donnelly (2012) in an examination of Distinguished Title I schools in Montana and principal leadership qualities inherent in those schools. This four-year study discovered that principal leadership behaviors categorized as transformational in nature, combined with relational trust, contributed to high student achievement in the schools studied (Donnelly, 2012). Transformational leadership has been categorized by strong open communication styles (Bass, 1999; Riggio, 2009). Additionally, Donnelly reported well-organized professional learning communities and collective efficacy among the faculty in these successful Title I schools with open, two-way communication pathways between school leaders (principals) and followers (teachers). Additional research has reported that a transformational style of leadership can have a positive effect on an overall group (Bass, 1999; Riggio, 2009). Clear and consistent communication is an attribute of this style. While each of these studies examined leadership in schools, none isolated the skills related to communication.

Any breakdown in, or absence of, communication between leaders and followers results in lost collegiality and teamwork, as reported in much of the research on the topic of leadership, with only a few noted here (Marzano et al., 2005; Linke & Zerfass, 2008; Mitgang & Gill, 2012; Newton, 2015; Rosenthal, 2003; Teschke, 1996; Trail, 2000). Conversely, when high levels of effective communication were present in building leadership in a study conducted by Halawah (2005), student achievement on standardized exams was higher than the national average.

Currently, curriculum related to leadership theory, the law, and the school budget processes, with varying levels of internship requirements, heavily weight principal licensure in many certification programs (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007). Coursework related to communication strategies with constituents is not frequently found in these programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). By identifying common communication characteristics and behaviors in high-performing schools, these same characteristics can then be intentionally taught to leaders of low performing schools as one approach toward improving student performance.

Methods

The purpose of this qualitative research was to identify communication strategies consistently used by principals with the faculty at high-performing Title I elementary schools in Virginia. Individual interviews with eight elementary public school principals of high-performing low-income schools uncovered communication behaviors that were consistent among these school principals. Participants self-reported on their own communication strategies (verbal, nonverbal, and written) and leadership behaviors. The researcher had no prior engagements or knowledge about either the participants or the schools included in this study. Third party data about the participants and schools, in the form of online data culled from school websites and social media, were used to substantiate the veracity of the interviews.

The following research questions guided this qualitative study: How do effective Title I elementary school principals clearly communicate their vision for the school, and what communication strategies are effective in motivating teachers to make that vision a reality? A set of 15 questions, with five subsets of questions, were posed to each participant in the same order and the same way to ensure reliability. Following Institutional Review Board approval,

a formal letter of introduction and an invitation to participate were mailed to each school principal identified as leading a high-performing Title I elementary school in Virginia (Virginia Department of Education, 2014).

Participant description and rationale

The study began with a pool of 57 possible participants using criterion-based sampling. The participants of this study were all principals of Distinguished or Highly Distinguished Title I elementary schools in Virginia and had served as principal at the school for at least two years prior to the school's designation of high achievement. The rationale for selecting principals with experience leading the schools selected for this study was twofold. First, the literature supported that school leadership was an indicator for school success (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Christie, Thompson, & Whiteley, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Second, the status of Distinguished or Highly Distinguished was based upon scores during a period of two years preceding the designation. Therefore, the participants in this study were present and part of the school leadership during the process of growth and achievement.

Of the original 57 possible participants, this researcher communicated directly with individuals representing 19 schools, 33% of all possible participants. Out of the original 57 possible participants, 38 principals did not respond to this researcher's requests with either a negative or an affirmative. Due to school protocols dictating school board approval for interviews, principal moves, health issues, personal reasons, and length of service at the selected school, the final study included eight principals who fit the criteria.

All participants were female and had children of their own who ranged in age from toddlers to adults, which indicated varying ages of the participants. Neither age nor maternal identification was an interview question, though conclusions were drawn based upon answers to other questions and overall exchanges. In addition, though not an interview question, through conversation the participants self-identified as White (n = 6), Hispanic (n = 1), and Black (n = 1) ethnicity. All schools were suburban, but of varying sizes. The smallest school served 290 students and the largest school served 889 students. This researcher likely did not reach saturation. However, the redundancy of information collected from the participants would indicate a near saturation point. Bryant (2004) and Marshall (1996) each wrote that sample size limitation could be a common design flaw, though not a critical issue.

Instrumentation

Two instruments were used for data collection: an electronic survey and a set of interview questions. An electronic survey was designed to identify years of experience as a principal and the length of time spent in the principal role at the identified school. This survey instrument also outlined the goals of the research, informed consent, and gathered data that determined eligibility of the principal for this study based on length of service in the identified school. It was emailed to the principals of each of the original 57 Distinguished or Highly Distinguished schools in the state of Virginia. Included with each survey was a personalized note inviting participation in the study.

A second instrument was implemented to guide the interview process in a formatted and consistent manner. The interview consisted of a list of researcher-developed open-ended questions and was utilized to ensure validity and reliability of information. These questions were grounded in the literature of leadership, communication, and Title I education. The development of these questions included a pilot interview with a former principal of a Title I school in another state.

The open-ended questions provided the participant an unlimited opportunity to self-report beliefs and experiences related to communication and leadership. In the event that more information on a specific topic was needed from the participant, an additional 17 sub-questions provided direction as needed. Those questions were also open-ended. The interview

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questions focused on five objectives: overall leadership style, types of communication, communication strategies and examples, the relevance of communication skills to success of the school, and principal preparation in the area of communication.

Data collection

An individual telephone interview was conducted with each principal who completed the electronic survey and met the employment criteria of at least two years at the high performing Title I elementary school. All participants and any identifying factors remained confidential. Each interview lasted an average 28.9 minutes with a range of 23 to 39 minutes in duration. The interview questions were provided to each participant one week in advance of the interview. Seven of the eight participants previewed and provided thoughtful and on-topic information related to communication and leadership. One participant was frequently off topic and required redirection. This interview was the longest at 39 minutes. All participants talked at length on the topic of overall leadership style and made nearly equal contributions across all five themes. Thus, the voices and views embodied in this study are representative of all eight participants.

Participants were informed that the interview was recorded using a hand-held USB voice recorder. The recordings were each transcribed and then coded using both electronic online software for analysis and storage of the unstructured data, as well as hand coding. Analysis identified common threads of information related to communication attitudes, strategies, and behaviors among the principals. The aim of the study was to create an evidence-based proposal for communication training and influence principal development at the school division level.

Results

The outcomes generated information about communication behaviors consistently demonstrated among the leaders of these high performing schools and the acquisition of these skills through professional development and purposeful training in communication.

Prior classroom experience was a foundational component among all participants. In addition, seven participants reported work as assistant principals prior to earning the position of principal. They described their position as assistant principals and the mentor experience at other elementary schools as vital to their success as leaders of a Distinguished or Highly Distinguished Title I elementary school. One participant served as an instructional coach for the school division prior to her role as principal. Of the eight participants, four served in the role of principal at another elementary school before taking over as principal at the Title I school recognized as Distinguished or Highly Distinguished. One of the participants served as assistant principal at the Distinguished Title I school prior to becoming principal.

The data analysis revealed that principals at these eight high-performing schools identified communication as a key component for their school's success. As outlined in Table 1, five themes of communication were revealed and are presented with direct statements from participants that illustrate the theme:

Table 1. Leadership themes

Theme	Thread to communication as reported by participants
Student-centered focus	We have to have conversations about kids and where they're going and what they're doing and how they're progressing. That's critical, but also the communication piece of what our mission and our vision is, so that everyone's on the same page. People don't know that by following you on Twitter or reading your Facebook page, people know that by being with each other and working as a professional learning community, and talking and dialoguing back and forth and problem solving. I think that's huge. It's huge because we have to talk about students in general, student needs, and student growth. However, it's also critical to have that communication about what your goals and your vision are. (Principal 4)
Earned trust	If I make a mistake I tell them, because we all make mistakes. I'll take responsibility if I make a mistake. Next, I always tell them the truth, not to keep any secrets from them. If I know something new is coming, and I know it's not going to be received well, I am sure to tell them in an honest way and do not try to pretend like I don't realize that it's going to be any added burden to them. (Principal 8) In the rare circumstances that a decision just has to be made or it's a nonnegotiable, people will accept it if they trust you, and understand that it's the right thing for kids (Principal 4).
Frequent communication with faculty	My assistant principal and I are part of each grade level's PLC. We are present at each meeting. We have a lot of structured face-to-face time each week (Principal 5). Sometimes I have to start it and lead by 'this is how I'm going to share my problem', take input, ask questions, and show them that it's okay to ask questions (Principal 4).
Mindful face-to-Face communication	Sometimes leaders are not truly listening. They are nodding their heads and placating the speaker, and then solving the problem for that person…However; I listen until we've worked through the problem. Why do you feel that way? What do we need to do to make it better? As a principal, I try to understand how someone feels, but we do have to find a solution and I'll help them get there and provide advice but will not do it for them... I don't allow excuses, and my teachers know that if you come to me with a problem I will help you fix it, but won't do it for you (Principal 6).
Principal preparation in the area of communication skills	"I know that as a leader, or in any leader preparation through the school divisions, understanding how to communicate was not part of my training" (Principal 5). The most commonly cited source of guidance on communication came from serving under a mentor. Seven participants were former Assistant Principals and reported that the natural mentoring relationship during these experiences provided the opportunity to observe, learn, practice, and ask questions about communication skills and strategies with all constituents. This relationship provided practice in learning effective communication with others.

Discussion

The foundation for this study was to uncover information about leadership communication behaviors that are present in high-performing, yet high-poverty, schools in Virginia. Collectively, the behaviors reported here represent one aspect of the overall leadership style of these principals in motivating teachers to meet the instructional needs of students that led to the student achievement on Standards of Learning (SOL) tests.

An assumption was made about the presence of effective communication based upon the success of the schools selected for this study. As literature supported, effective leaders inherently possess strong communication skills (for example, Barrett, 2007; Bass, 1999; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; and Garfinkle, 2015). Therefore, this research narrowed the specificity to that of communication of vision and motivation. All principals in this study held students' interests above all else as

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part of their school vision. Therefore, each decision was predicated on the idea of a student-centered focus.

Principal 4 explained:

> The day-to-day communication, people have to know what's going on building wise, operation wise, but also student wise, and we have to have conversations about kids and where they're going and what they're doing and how they're progressing. That's critical, but also the communication piece of what our mission and our vision is, so that everyone's on the same page. People don't know that by following you on Twitter or reading your Facebook page, people know that by being with each other and working as a professional learning community, and talking and dialoguing back and forth and problem solving. I think that's huge. It's huge because we have to talk about students, student needs and student growth. However, it's also critical that you have that frequent communication about your goal and your vision.

Verbal communication was the overwhelming preferred method of communicating with teachers, while written email communication was a tool utilized to share business or managerial related items, and hand-written communication was utilized as a motivating tool with teachers. Analysis with an emic focus was iterative and reflective and further revealed 11 specific behaviors consistently found within these themes. The behaviors, as outlined in Table 2, were interwoven among each theme. However, all were strategies used by all participants.

Table 2. Leadership communication behaviors

Behavior	Key element
Relationship building with teachers	Takes time
Earned trustworthiness	Transparency and honesty
Student-centered decision making processes	Involve teachers
Mentor experience	Purposeful and prior to becoming principal
Mindful listening practices	Includes body language and patience
Face-to-face communication	Daily, formal and informal with teachers
Written communication	Weekly email with key management items only;
Visibility	Limited office time and frequent walk-throughs
Collaborative decision-making	Teacher leaders
Small group meetings	Weekly with rare whole faculty meetings
Positive communication	Acknowledge teachers in writing

Because the change process is an ongoing event in education, effective communication is essential to change. An unintended, yet noteworthy, finding in this study was the importance of relationship building between the principal and teachers in a building. Trust and transparency were conveyed as essential to this process. The words *trust* and *relationship* were stated 72 times collectively across the interviews and was a repetitive theme throughout all eight interviews. While the context of the interviews had overlap of topics around leadership and communication, the recurring nature of the terms *trust* and *relationship* was interpreted as substantial. Trust, outlined as a theme, was demonstrated by relationship building with teachers. Good relationships foster innovation and creativity. They also promote cooperation and increased performance among stakeholders in a group (Garfinkle, 2015).

Several elements that make up a good relationship include trust, mutual respect, responsibility for words and actions, and open honest communication (Garfinkle, 2015). Building relationships includes the principal's ability to be transparent, a strategy discussed by all eight participants in this study. Transparency is a behavior that demonstrates to constituents that there is not a hidden agenda. Participants demonstrated transparency by sharing information directly from the central office, as well as overall information about possible changes or problems with teachers on a regular basis. In addition, they shared

information about themselves and postured themselves as approachable and human. These leaders admitted shortcomings and acknowledged others' contributions to success.

Trust was earned through deposits on a daily basis into the bank of trust through behaviors that demonstrated an on-going process that required support, guidance, and assistance to constituents. Some examples of daily deposits included truthful and transparent behaviors.

> If I make a mistake I tell them, because we all make mistakes. I'll take responsibility if I make a mistake. Next, I always tell them the truth, not to keep any secrets from them. If I know something new is coming, and I know it's not going to be received well, I am sure to tell them in an honest way and do not try to pretend like I don't realize that it's going to be any added burden to them. (Principal 8)

"In the rare circumstances that a decision just has to be made or it's a nonnegotiable, people will accept it if they trust you, and understand that it's the right thing for kids" (Principal 4). Principal 5 summed up the importance of communication in building trust: "I think communication is very important because being visible, being open, and being involved in two-way communication on a daily basis has built a climate of trust."

Therefore, a conclusion is drawn here that assignment of a principal to a building should consider the time necessary for the school leader to build relationships with the faculty. Sustained turn-around of unsuccessful schools is unlikely without foundational relationships.

The role of mentor was crucial in the early preparation of these principals. Educational research has supported the importance of this process (Southern Regional Education Board, 2009; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). On-the-job training with a mentor to afford opportunities for observation, discussion, and shared leadership provides a newly appointed principal with the foundation upon which to begin solo decision-making and leadership. Access to this experience should occur for all school leaders during the time as assistant principal. "Effective principals understand they do not act in a vacuum; they realize the importance of bringing stakeholders into the mix in a collaborative decision-making model" (Stronge & Leeper, 2012).

Some mentors were not good role models, and participants commented that they learned what behaviors to avoid by serving under a leader who had demonstrated poor communication skills. All eight participants shared insight gained from experiences working with poor communicators and what happened when there was a breakdown in communication or ineffective communication. Principal 4 described her experience as an assistant principal for a poor communicator:

> He was very much a boss, and avowed to others that 'I'm the boss and you'll do this because I'm the boss.' He took almost, I would describe, pleasure in being the bearer of bad news sometimes just to get a rise out of people. He was quite passive aggressive about things like that. Then I worked for someone who was extremely compassionate and that experience really taught me the importance of being kind in this position and how to listen. If you're kind and treat teachers fairly, and you show them that, then they'll care about you, they will work so hard for you and the kids. I just learned really, I think, by example of watching a great leader in action.

The practice of effective listening and body language awareness was identified as important to effective communication and builds upon the theme of face-to-face communication. While operating a school is a busy job, these leaders made it a point to show their teachers and other constituents that they were not in a hurry and were engaged in the conversation. If they could not dedicate the time necessary for communication, these leaders shared that information with the teacher and then followed up at another time. Transparency of motives was deemed as an important behavior in the area of listening.

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Participants reported that verbal and face-to-face communication occurred daily with most teachers. Principals of larger schools organized charts to keep track of walkthroughs and notes on instruction. All were visible in the hallways and throughout the building during instructional hours and met at least weekly with all staff in small group settings. Of significance was the strategy of small group meetings each week and conversely the minimal number of whole-school meetings. These principals had scheduled time each week to meet with grade level or professional learning teams where an agenda and purpose were outlined. Principals used this time to connect with staff about school, as well as personal items of importance. If there were problems, they were addressed in these small group meetings. Whole school meetings were often only held to discuss items of importance to all faculty and staff within the building and were not regularly scheduled.

In addition, successful Title I elementary school principals in this study did not spend much time in their office space during the instructional day. They were visible and engaged with students, teachers, staff, and parents. Closed office doors did not align with behaviors that offer transparency and approachable personalities.

All participants of this study acknowledged the importance of information sharing with all staff and the use of weekly written communication. These principals used email and wrote a weekly update on school and division happenings for faculty and staff. This included brief notes on key points, praise for positive efforts, and items to think about for the coming week. In addition, email was utilized to communicate specific information to individuals for which it applied, follow up on discussions when written documentation was necessary, and was very limited throughout the day. This was used only when the information to share could not wait until the weekly newsletter communiqué. Attention to misunderstanding and tone was noted by all participants. Email was avoided when misunderstandings might have resulted.

Finally, collaborative decision-making in the school building was a component of the communication element. All participants utilized a Leadership Team with teacher representatives from each grade level. These school leaders described the use of the Leadership Team in almost all decision-making endeavors. The collaborative process in these schools reportedly provided teachers the ability to have a voice, feel empowered, and led to feelings of investment in the school and student outcomes.

A student-centered approach to leadership could not be separated from communication attributes. The topic of communication discussed herein was focused on collaborations that would address student learning. Though described at the end of this analysis, this one behavior was underscored in the research interviews with each talking point. The principals consistently noted the importance of talking about students in a collaborative fashion in an effort to meet each child's needs.

While these five themes have been reported as discrete, there was substantial overlap among them. Further, participants' responses to interview questions frequently addressed multiple themes. In those instances, the interview data were described where they appeared to fit most reasonably.

Principals at these eight successful Title I elementary schools in Virginia possess the knowledge and ability to develop relationships with the faculty that are based on the trustworthy behaviors. Building good work relationships takes time. This required maintaining clear and consistently communicated connections to staff. Without the elements of trust and relationship building, all reported that meeting student-centered goals would have been very difficult. All eight participants reported building trust with the faculty as the most important aspect of leadership. Principal 2 reported that her faculty knows that she is trustworthy, and they can talk to her about ideas, concerns, or problems because, "I'm willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done. I'm here early. I leave late. I want them to know I'm willing to work as hard as I expect them to work. I would never, ever ask them to do anything I wasn't willing to do myself." School-wide responsibility for student success was a cornerstone present in the self-reported leadership of all eight participants. Although Virginia

only requires testing for elementary grades 3 through 5, these school leaders reported a school wide effort in meeting the outcomes across all grade levels. Each school utilized a vertical approach to instruction, data collection, and data analysis. All teachers in all grades shared the responsibility of success for the SOL tests that determine Adequate Yearly Progress according to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (United States Department of Education, 2004) and were provided the opportunities to communicate about students.

During day-to-day communication, participants kept teachers abreast on student progress. "We have to have conversations about kids and where they're going and what they're doing and how they're progressing. However, it's also critical to have that communication about what your goals and your vision are" (Principal 4). Principal 5 stated that she felt a team approach was the "way we solve problems with our students. I think communication plays a huge role in how we do this." Principal 1 also contributed on this topic, stating, "We're all leaders and we all need to work together for the benefit of our students. Certainly as the principal of the school, I carry the responsibility for the whole school, but we work together and I try to build my staff so that there are leaders within the staff." These schools put students first in their vision and attempt to provide instruction that meets each student's needs. Each of the principals in this study evidenced frequent communication about students. They met regularly in small group or one-on-one situations to discuss student progress, student needs, and goals. Scheduling the time to do this during the regular school hours was a priority.

The self-reported attributes of transparency, visibility, collaborative decision-making, face-to-face daily interactions, and relationship building among the faculty and principal were common to all participants and represent transformational leadership. Transformational leadership principles focus on purpose of work, serving as a role model, and collaboration (Marzano et al., 2005).

Each participant noted the frequent face-to-face meetings, both formal and informal, with each teacher to provide guidance and coaching to improve performance and meet instructional goals. These semi-private, open, and honest interactions were reported as indispensable to trust building. Additionally, trust provided a solid foundation from which improvements grew when a "hard conversation" was required. "We all commit to being better tomorrow than we are today" (Principal 7), and this is possible when trust of leadership and a clear vision are present.

A historically common practice in schools has been the institution of regular school-wide faculty meetings. However, this research discovered that only one of the eight principals interviewed for this study utilized school wide meetings on a regular basis. One participant stated that she has not had a school-wide faculty meeting, other than professional development, in more than nine years (Principal 1). The other seven principals institute school-wide meetings only for school-wide problems. These principals each made sure faculty were equally informed about changes, issues, or concerns that affected them all. Weekly or bi-weekly grade level meetings with every teacher in a face-to-face small group setting involved conversations among the teachers that were based on students and instruction. These included data-based meetings or instructional delivery and planning meetings that were usually grade level based. "That's the kind of meeting we think is important. We're talking about the kids, and we're talking about the new kids too and how else we can help them" (Principal 3). In addition, two participants also met weekly or bi-weekly with Professional Learning Communities (PLC) within the school setting. These groups were designed to further study or implement specific elements of instruction-, behavior-, or assessment-related topics and were comprised of teachers from varying grades. One participant built meeting time into the professional development calendar with PLC meetings weekly. "My assistant principal and I are part of each grade level's PLC. We are present at each meeting. We have a lot of structured face-to-face time each week" (Principal 5). The

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small group setting allows for the practice of modeling communication behaviors. A small group setting fosters shared conversations that include a back and forth of thoughts and ideas in a verbal format. “Sometimes I have to start it and lead by ‘this is how I'm going to share my problem’, take input, ask questions, and show them that it’s okay to ask questions” (Principal 4).

Written communiqué weekly via email is an effective method of reporting on administrative- and management-related items that does not require elaboration, explanation, or discussion. All eight participants described this weekly email as a business or management sharing tool only. Principal 4 remarked that “teachers need to know what is going on in the school division from the top down,” and a weekly written communication served that purpose. All eight participants shared the minutes and reporting from the county level meetings of principals and administrators with all teachers via written communication in an email.

The execution of effective communication can help with employee motivation in a variety of ways. Equally as influential, participants noted, was how poor communication can damage employee motivation and relations that lead to employee dissatisfaction. All participants in the study stated the importance of employee recognition in their building for teacher motivation. Some examples included weekly or monthly written recognition for teachers and shared with all constituents. Three of the participants referred to these as “shout outs.”

Another example provided by six of the participants was that of hand written notes. These principals expressly stated that these were not emails. The hand-written note demonstrated to the teacher that time and thought went into the note instead of a few seconds generally required for an email. This exercise was one that these participants spoke about with a passionate tone.

Because an email is a written form of communication, these principals acknowledged the importance of careful email exchanges. If a response to an email request or question was more than a few lines, then a face-to-face conversation or phone call were utilized in response.

Communication through email only is ineffective and does not help to build relationships. “We wouldn't be where we are today if I just emailed people because you can't lead that way. You cannot feel the passion and the heart through an email. I don't know that email is always the best way, but it certainly is efficient at times when you have to reach the masses quickly” (Principal 6).

In addition to email, one participant used social media in the form of Twitter and Facebook to share positive information and “shout outs” about positive happenings within the school building. This communiqué was shared with all constituents, including parents, students, or community members who participated in social media. Communicating positive contributions was behavior consistent among all participants. Principals were intentional about not only motivating teachers, but also honoring daily efforts and accomplishments.

Teachers at six schools in this study were provided the autonomy to attempt instructional strategies that were research-based but may have been outside of the directives prescribed by the school division. These principals stressed that this autonomy came with the responsibility to report on the success or failure of new strategies in a statistical format. This sovereignty was given to those teachers who had already demonstrated a dedication and ability to meet the school vision for success and was intentionally monitored. In these instances, the principal noted frequent face-to-face interactions and communication with the teachers related to the progress of any new instructional strategies. Problem-solving was a shared exercise and empowered the teachers.

Contribution by teachers to the greater good of the school was an important element that principals in seven of the eight schools felt was empowering to teachers. Through listening, collaborating, trusting, and supporting the teachers, the participants felt that this led to the greatest purveyor of empowerment, in turn leading to dedication and success.

The use of a daily walkthrough and face-to-face conversations was an important behavior to understanding the needs of teachers and students. Principal walkthroughs are frequent, short visits to classrooms with specific items to look for (Protheroe, 2009). These opportunities provided principals information to talk with teachers about and collaboratively research. In addition, it provided a venue to talk about good practice habits, while sharing experiences and practices. Six of the eight participants communicated that the conversations resulting from these walkthroughs opened discussions with teachers about more than just discipline or classroom problems.

Visibility in the building and communicating face-to-face with all constituents was a leadership attribute practiced by all participants. Walkthroughs, conspicuousness in the hallways to greet students, parents, and teachers, and having an open door to their office when present were all part of being visible. These face-to-face interactions with faculty were reported as a cornerstone to the establishment of trust in the principal by the faculty. Six participants reported that, because of strong relationships and trust, their teachers felt comfortable in communicating questions or concerns to the principal because "they know I'll listen" (Principal 6). Additionally, teachers were expected to collaborate on solutions to reported problems and not simply be provided with a resolution by the principal.

Active listening to the faculty in a mindful and present way was noted in all interviews for this study. However, it was the second part of active listening that was found to be most important. By repeating the teachers' concerns back to them in a way that proved a level of understanding showed teachers that the principal understood the concern and was actively participating in the conversation. Further, seven out of the eight principals in this study stated behaviors similar to that described by Principal 6:

> Sometimes leaders are not truly listening. They are nodding their heads and placating the speaker, and then solving the problem for that person. Problems are seen as 'just get it over with and just get over yourself, we need to move on and this is what we need to do.' But I listened until we worked through them. Why do you feel that way? What do we need to do to make it better? As a principal, I try to understand how someone feels, but we do have to find a solution and I'll help them get there and provide advice but will not do it for them. It's really getting down deep and dirty to find out what has to be done to fix the problem. I don't allow excuses, and my teachers know that if you come to me with a problem I will help you fix it, but won't do it for you.

The ability to listen was noted as equally as important as the ability to speak and write. In addition, all eight participants stated that body language during face-to-face communication was an area of mindfulness. An example noted was that the teachers see her body language when she is listening or speaking and have learned that she is "truly paying attention and not thinking ahead to a quick fix" (Principal 2).

Conclusion

While this study does not offer a conclusive or all-inclusive answer to transforming schools into high-performing entities through leadership, it does clearly demonstrate the role of communication skills as significant to successful school leadership. Furthermore, school-division preparation of potential school principals, inclusive of communication-based leadership strategies, can improve behaviors of school leaders and transform perform outcomes. The unexpected yet consistent foundational theme presented by all principals in this study was the importance of building relationships and trust early in the leader-follower relationship. Without trust, communication efforts stall. Relationship building could be interpreted as separate from communication; however, this researcher could not overlook the preponderance of importance placed upon this topic as a leadership attribute. A conclusion

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can be drawn that without strong communication skills, relationships could be difficult to establish.

Leadership is a package of skills of which communication is only one element. However, by addressing a series of training modules on the topic of communication skills and strategies, and based upon the 11 behaviors identified in this study, individual school divisions have the ability to improve school building leadership and in turn, school performance. This alteration would develop competent and effective leaders in a structured manner, thus creating the potential for satisfied employees and therefore retention of highly qualified leaders.

Public education is a complex and varied industry governed by individual state legislation. This study represents an initial effort at further understanding of communication behaviors practiced by eight principals of high-performing, high-poverty school in Virginia. However, this is a small sampling of the successful schools in the United States. While each of the five themes could benefit from further exploration, specifically the following questions are implications for further research.

1. Do the themes uncovered represent a composite picture of principals or are there other characteristics that have not surfaced?
2. Is there a unique formula for implementing school-division change as a systemic change at the district level that a group should seek to acquire?
3. Is there a model of mentoring experiences that foster school improvement?
4. What influence do a principal's values and beliefs have on their leadership skills?

Further research to answer the questions that have emerged from this study and literature review will further our understanding of what training can be instituted that would lead to much-needed school reforms. Research efforts have been spent on changing teacher behaviors, but little has targeted the role of the principal's behaviors on change efforts to improve education.

This study was practice-based and could vary based on school division demographics. The five themes that emerged from this qualitative data analysis have been derived from conversations with principals at high-poverty schools in different geographic areas of the state and of varying sizes. It was determined that there was not one common source of training among the principals in this study, but the principals at these high-performing, high-poverty schools practiced similar communications-based strategies, yet they pursued preparation for this leadership position in different ways.

All principals earn licensure through a licensure program at a college or university that provides coursework in the areas of law, finance, and business practice. However, only one reported coursework that directly incorporated communication skills and strategies. Most principals noted experiences similar to Principal 5's statement, "I know that as a leader, or in any leader preparation through the school divisions, understanding how to communicate was not part of my training."

The National Association of Secondary School Principals and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2013), in a joint publication, found minimal changes to the laws that have mandated certification for school leaders over the last two decades. The principals in this study echoed the need for change in the licensure process to include more training that is relevant to the changes in education over the last 20 years.

In conclusion, this research supports training initiatives aimed at communication. These include at least six basic tenants: building relationships; promoting a positive climate through face-to-face and small group communication; leader-follower communication strategies in a variety of situations, including coaching; promoting faculty leadership; student-centered conversations; and a purposeful mentoring program. These recommendations align with the Wallace Foundation's (2013) proposal to improve the current models of preparation for the role of principal, as well as the five themes and 11 common behaviors uncovered in this research study.

The fact that the schools were all high-performing in nature led this researcher to draw the conclusion that the faculty, in charge of leading students to achieve, would report favorably on the strategies and skills of the principal as was self-reported to this researcher. Frase and Sorenson (1992) found that feedback, autonomy, and collegiality were motivating factors for teachers. In addition, Frase and Sorenson also found that recognition, challenging and varied work, increased responsibility, achievement, empowerment, and authority also motivated teachers to work toward increased student performance.

The findings presented in this study support the importance of communication skills in leadership of a high-performing Title I elementary school. By identification of the common behaviors and strategies among principals at such schools, and what is working well, school divisions may institute division-level training to support emerging school leaders.

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