

# Teacher Leaders' Perceptions of Charter School Principals' Instructional Leadership Practices

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Teacher leaders are a population to consider when observing instructional leadership or the instructional leadership behaviors of the school principal. A voice rarely illuminated within research, teacher leaders should have the ability to perceive and speak to the instructional leadership behaviors of the school principal. It is through the display of the instructional leadership behaviors and implementation of processes and programs that teacher leaders are able to more accurately perceive and communicate beliefs about their school principals' practices regarding instructional leadership. One overlooked presence in the research on instructional leadership practices is the charter school principal. To address this issue, our goal is to examine the instructional practices of the charter school principal from the lens of Mendel's five effective leadership practices for instructional leaders as perceived by the teacher leader. Several concepts emerged from this phenomenological study indicating that teacher leaders perceive that effective charter school instructional leaders (a) use diverse communication styles with all stakeholders, (b) promote professional capacity, (c) employ varied data to inform instructional practices and decisions, (d) have a visual and resounding vision statement, and (e) maximize and preserve instructional time for teachers with few daily interruptions.

**Keywords:** *instructional leadership, principals, charter schools, teacher leaders*

## Introduction

Devine and Alger (2011) declared that a school's success is due to a collective approach to leadership. It will take the hard work, dedication, and collaboration of a school's stakeholders to address the issue of academic achievement (Nelson, 2006). Schools do not operate compartmentally, and leaders do not work in isolation. Additionally, leaders—even when they do not work well together—coexist in schools and often share responsibilities for instructional improvement. Simply put, one school leader cannot shoulder the results and consequences of the accountability measures placed upon educators within schools and the challenging work required for effective and sustainable school improvement. In addressing the complexity of the principal as a hierarchical leader in 21st-century schools, Spillane (2009) suggested that the role of the leader should be challenged, and a significant change requires a shift toward a more collaborative and community-like structure within schools (Wenger, 1998). Principals can no longer serve in leading an entire school instructional program without substantial participation from other educators (Devine & Alger, 2011). In this regard, Leithwood (2001) and Spillane (2009) agreed that one mainly overlooked area is a form of leadership distribution, that is, a form of "substitutes-for-leadership" (Jermier & Kerr, as cited in Leithwood, 2001, p. 232) in which "tasks are distributed among person and non-person sources of leadership" (p. 232).

More recently, teacher leaders have taken on roles of instruction in the areas of teaching and learning within schools. Teacher leaders are educators who serve in many capacities and roles within the school. Regardless of the particular position that the teacher leader may fulfill at that time (e.g., a facilitator, curriculum writer, chair, etc.), the collaborative force of both principals and teacher leaders working together is essential for student achievement. Teacher leaders are usually classroom teachers who share their expertise with others in different forms (Nappi, 2014). They are an extended branch of leaders who inspire instructional and cultural standards in the school. Teacher leaders' influence is significant in the success of a school because of their ability to continue teaching students while extending their reach beyond their classrooms to other colleagues and classrooms (Nappi, 2014). The partnership of the principal and teacher leader is an extraordinary fellowship that can prove to be beneficial to a school community. Both principals and teachers have essential and reciprocal roles in the overall leadership quotient of a school, but an open and equitable relationship must be in place to increase student achievement (Helterbran, 2010).

The Obama Administration created its signature education reform initiative, *Race to the Top*, to ignite education innovation at the state level (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). *Race to the Top* served as a challenge and a call for states to create their best ideas that would raise the stakes in preparing students to be college and career ready, invest in America's teachers and school leaders, turn around America's lowest performing schools, and use data to make decisions to support educators (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). While there were six priorities in the *Race to the Top* Initiative that states were assigned to address in their plans, there was an assigned focus to shift certain conditions at the school level for reform, innovation, and learning as found in Priority 6 of the initiative (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). *Race to the Top's* Priority 6 assigned states the task of formulating provisions for reform, innovation, and learning by providing flexibility and autonomy at the school level. This particular priority provided a means for schools to create a refined approach toward improving school leadership (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

The priorities cataloged in *Race to the Top* intentionally ensure that there is a definitive reach to the school level. The initiative directly impacts and supports principals as instructional leaders (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). According to Bickmore and Dowell (2014), research supporting the explanations of school leadership practice and principals' performance as instructional leaders in charter schools is almost exclusively grounded in those attributes of the traditional public school principal. However, research conducted by the National Charter School Research Project at the Center on Reinventing Public Education found that charter school principals held other responsibilities differing from those of the traditional public school principal. Gross (2011) stated that charter school principals "also have to deal with payroll and facilities management, reporting requirements, and the school's marketing and student recruitment. In addition, they have to be active advocates for charter schools in local and state policies" (p. 13). These research perspectives provide indication of conflicting views of charter school principals' actions and behaviors.

Further support of charter schools is reinforced with the passing of the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 in the form of "a dedicated funding stream" (Rees, 2015, p. 2) and "...the replication and expansion of proven charter school models" (p. 2). The Every Student Succeeds Act provides flexibility regarding the use of Title I funds for transportation to charter schools.

Opposers of charter schools believe that tax payer monies should dwell in the public school system and refrain from funneling into charter schools (Pendergrass & Kern, 2017). However, O'Brien and Dervarics (2012) added that most charter schools are, in fact, public schools, and close to 41% of voters are unaware of this fact. Although it is true that charter schools generally receive per-pupil funding from state and federal governments, many are supported with private funds in contrast to the traditional public school that is primarily state funded through local taxes (Caffee, 2017). Caffee went on to say that while most charter schools are independently run, they must still meet the

performance goals set by their charters to secure state funding. Traditional public schools abide by state school board policies and rules. The local school district and school board govern traditional public schools.

With such support for continued growth of charter schools from both the federal and state departments of education, it is essential to consider the successful leadership components or attributes of the principals within these schools. In fact, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2017) firmly believed that charter schools "...are led by dynamic principals who have the flexibility to create a school culture that fosters student performance and parent satisfaction" (para. 1). Principals' roles have changed and magnified. Whereas the roles of the 20th-century principal encompassed hiring teachers, attending parent conferences, and performing other general administrative duties; there is a significant shift in the role of modern-day 21st-century principal. Tyre (2015) claimed that the role of the traditional principal is akin to a CEO. One example of training the principal as CEO is the Rice Education Entrepreneurship Program in Houston, Texas, where principals are learning about crisis management and organizational behavior. Principals are demonstrating mastery of "strategic problem solving, data-driven planning and decision making, effective leadership and motivation, to name a few" within their school-sites (Kohn, n.d., p. 1). While such training is evident in principal preparation programs, according to Tyre (2015), a new generation of principals servicing urban communities is more involved in the instruction occurring within the classroom. Shirley (2009) concluded that any meaningful effort involves supporting teachers with various levels of expertise in teaching to increase student achievement. Hanson (as cited in Tyre, 2015), president of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, indicated that "the teacher evaluation system requires principals to be in and out of the classroom and to drive instructional practices to be better" (para. 8).

Because charter schools operate outside of local school districts' direct control, the role of the charter school principal appears different from the role of the traditional school principal (Bickmore & Dowell, 2014). Although autonomy is a foundational characteristic of charter schools, there are workload distinctions between charter school principals and traditional school principals. Generally, charter school principals do not have the same kind of district support and resources as traditional principals. Instead, charter school principals' duties function as a school-based management site with decentralized mechanisms of control (Gawlik & Bickmore, 2017; Gawlik, 2016). That is, with responsibilities for decision-making and school operations customarily performed by staff within the public school district central office (i.e., human resources, accounting, transportation, and special education departments; Bickmore & Dowell, 2014), charter school principals have autonomy and flexibility in this regard (Gawlik & Bickmore, 2017). More specifically, charter school principals' roles generally function as head of operations, which may include overseeing managerial subcontracts, partnerships, or contracts with management organizations, whereas traditional public school principals rarely engage in such exercises, if any. Thus, the complex role of the charter school principal involves balancing several managerial functions that would normally be executed by the superintendent or central office administrator (e.g., directors, assistant superintendents) in traditional public schools.

In a recent seminal longitudinal study conducted by Ingersoll, Dougherty, and Sirinides (2017) at the New Teacher Center, the variables of instructional leadership (i.e., the principal) and teacher leadership were analyzed to determine a correlation with student achievement. The findings of this study provided evidence that the combination of instructional leadership and teacher leadership leads to higher student performance in schools. The researchers indicated that three specific characteristics of the instructional leader within the school led to higher student achievement: fostering a shared vision, establishing and supporting an active school improvement team, and holding teachers to high standards. The authors indicated that other relevant factors, such as teacher involvement and participation in the decision-making process related to school improvement

and student conduct policies, contributed to higher student achievement. Finally, the authors purported that high-poverty schools often lacked instructional leadership and teacher leadership characteristics that lead toward higher student achievement.

Studies similar to the current seminal work conducted by researchers from the New Teacher Center are a clear indication that more research is needed on a smaller scale to study and reflect upon principals' efforts toward school improvement in the areas of teaching and learning (see Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Marks & Printy, 2003; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). With the exception of a seminal research study conducted by Blasé and Blasé (2002), few studies have been conducted reflecting teacher leaders' perceptions of the effectiveness of instructional leadership practices of principals. The Blasé and Blasé study included 809 teachers who reported in an open questionnaire by identifying effective instructional leadership characteristics that improved the culture and climate of classroom instruction and student achievement. Two themes emerged from the research study conducted by Blasé & Blasé: a critical dialogue with teachers and teacher support and collaboration. Such school improvement efforts as those reported by Blasé and Blasé are inclusive of a more thorough process of leading that encompasses focused instruction, accountability of teaching and learning, and clear expectations (O'Donnell & White, 2005). A focus on these areas surrounding teaching and learning will undoubtedly enhance student achievement levels.

While there are various methods used by states to evaluate educators, Tennessee was one of the first states to implement a comprehensive student outcomes-based educator evaluation system (Tennessee Department of Education, 2013a) under Obama's Race to the Top legislation. The Tennessee educator acceleration model (TEAM) is an observation model adapted from the National Institute of Excellence in Teaching. Although TEAM provides principals and teachers a means to engage in meaningful conversations regarding student data, student growth, teacher observation, delivery of instruction, and student learning, it is only one approved evaluation instrument in the state of Tennessee.

The general educator rubric, TEAM (Tennessee Department of Education, 2013b), was approved by state officials as an evaluation tool for teachers. Teachers are evaluated and scored using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*significantly below expectations*) to 5 (*significantly above expectations*). The rubric covers three core areas: design and planning instruction (with subareas for instructional plans, student work, and assessment), learning environment (with subareas for expectations, managing student behavior, environment, and respectful culture), and instruction (with subareas for standards and objectives, motivating students, presenting instructional content, lesson structure and pacing, activities and materials, questioning, academic feedback, grouping students, teacher content knowledge, teacher knowledge of students, thinking, and problem solving). Teacher leaders are one group of educators who provide feedback across these core areas.

Likewise, the TEAM administrator rubric contains four standards of instructional leadership—continuous improvement, culture for teaching and learning, professional learning and growth, and resource management. The TEAM administrator rubric contains a subsection on teacher leaders used to evaluate coaching and teaching practices. Similar to the TEAM general education rubric geared toward teacher effectiveness, the TEAM administrator rubric is designed to improve leadership effectiveness.

The general objective of a rubric to evaluate teacher leaders and instructional leaders is to provide measurable and specific feedback that will improve student learning and the overall school culture. Missing from the discussion on school improvement are the voices of teacher leaders' and their perspective on their lived experiences with school principals within charter schools. More specifically, this study aims to understand the collaborative nature of the teacher leader and the charter school principal, if any, and teacher leaders' perceptions of how the charter school principal

engages in the process of carrying out the vision and goals of the school. More importantly, there is a paucity of research that provides descriptive information regarding how instructional leaders leverage their resources and use human capital in the organization to increase educator effectiveness and cultivate growth within an organization, particularly those of urban charter schools. The behaviors and actions of school leaders are very critical in shaping the perceptions of the school climate and culture, markedly to community members and other stakeholders (internal and external).

Even more, there is a greater need to investigate the perceptions of teacher leaders concerning effective instructional practices that are revealed by the actions and behaviors of their urban charter high school principals. Such behaviors and actions have a significant effect on school culture, climate, teacher efficacy, and student learning. The perceptions of teacher leaders can determine the level of confidence school community stakeholders have in the principal's ability to lead schools. As well, the role of the teacher leader as a part of the leadership team within the school community has provided a new well-respected alternative perspective on the term *leadership* in the educational arena.

This study considers an alternative voice and perspective such as those of teacher leaders regarding the perceptions of their charter school principals as instructional leaders. Even when researchers have attempted to study the effectiveness of school leaders, the charter school principal is either minimized or excluded. To address the lack of research on the instructional practices of charter school principals, this study will highlight viable perspectives of teacher leaders as they explore the varied teaching and learning strategies, implementation of schoolwide interventions and plans, and teacher support mechanisms of their instructional leaders. Hence, the goal of this study is to add to the literature on school improvement from the lens of the teacher leader as she or he examines the leadership practices of the charter school principal as the instructional leader of two urban high schools.

## Conceptual Framework

Effective principals create a vision and set high expectations, develop and support teachers and school staff, and strengthen school culture (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011, p. 4). Effective principals build leadership teams to share or distribute leadership roles among teachers and other school staff to bolster student academic achievement (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011). Simultaneously, instructional leaders are responsible for creating a shared vision, observing instruction, giving quality feedback about instruction, allocating educational resources, making decisions that are both driven by data and address the school improvement plan to positively impact the instructional program, creating positive school, student, and adult cultures; nurturing adult learning; and building teacher capacity (Stronge, Richard, & Catano, 2008). With an overwhelming amount of responsibility involving the characteristics of managing and leading, creating and maintaining successful schools is not an easy task.

In this study, the perceptions began with the teacher leaders who shared the same space with the principal as discussions occurred and participated in the process of hammering out the needed instructional details that would hopefully drive the processes of teaching and learning into forms of academic success. Whether positive or negative, perceptions will affect the school community, thereby affecting the road toward reaching or not reaching the academic goals set by the instructional leader of the school and the stakeholders.

To this end, this research study employed a conceptual framework derived from Mendel's (2012) five practices of effective school leadership. The five instructional leadership roles of the school principal are (a) shaping a vision of academic success for all students based on high standards; (b) creating a

climate hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail; (c) cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision; (d) improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost; and (e) managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement (pp. 54–58). Mendel’s work supports the notion that charter school principals must be adamant about fulfilling their role as instructional leaders.

Principals in charter schools, especially, face many daily challenges that disrupt their intended goals of enacting change within their schools, causing their intended leadership actions to become dormant or misconstrued by staff and other outside stakeholders. Goff, Mavrogordato, and Goldring (2011) revealed that the challenges charter school principals face not only consume large amounts of time, but they also detract from the principal’s focus as an instructional leader. An added measure is the rigorous demands involving principals who start up charter schools. This measure of work means that the principal has to create all operational, managerial, and educational practices for the school (Bickmore & Dowell, 2014). Even with the multitude of areas that charter school principals must focus on for the success of their instructional programs, they must also work hard to display instructional leadership behaviors. Current research referencing a study of first-year urban principals in traditional and charter schools also supports Mendel’s theory, revealing that schools in which principals focused on improving teacher capacity and staff cohesiveness, which are essential aspects of effective instructional leadership, obtained substantial student achievement gains (Bickmore & Dowell, 2014).

## Method

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to gain insight on the perceptions that charter school teacher leaders in two Mid-South charter high schools have about their principals’ instructional leadership practices. A case study approach was deemed the appropriate research design for this particular study, based on Leedy and Ormrod’s (2016) suggestion that “researchers study two or more cases—often cases that are similar or different in certain key ways—to make comparisons, build theory, or propose generalizations” (p. 253). The study used focus group analysis for teacher leaders that yielded primary qualitative data. A phenomenological approach allowed the researchers to understand the collective and varied perceptions of charter high school teacher leaders regarding their principal as an instructional leader. Plano Clark and Creswell (2015) indicated that focus groups are used to acquire shared information from several individuals about a specific phenomenon. The researchers conducted focus group research on each campus.

Crotty (1998) emphasized that constructionists seek to understand reality and the meaning through human experiences and the contexts that surround them rather than discovering knowledge. Central to this approach to research is the idea of symbolic interactionism: that the reaction humans have to objects is based on the meanings they ascribe to the object, that meanings are derived from human immersion in its culture, and that meanings evolve through interpretation over a period of time (Esterberg, 2002). Charter school teacher leaders at each school site provided insight regarding the effectiveness of instructional leadership displayed by their principal. The constructed information established the interactions and observations teacher leaders had with the principal during the school year.

### Participants

Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) stated that a researcher conducts qualitative research when a “complex and detailed” understanding of the issue is needed, as well as the contexts of which the

participants of the research speak to a particular issue (p. 40). The participants for this study were eight high school teacher leaders from two charter high schools in an urban city located in the Mid-South region of the United States. Selected research participants were from two out of the nine charter high schools functioning in this large urban city. The schools participating in this study have been chosen based on common characteristics such as operating over 10 years, having been an operating charter located in the Mid-South urban city, and offering fully functioning high school grades (9–12) for students. To determine a sample of two charter schools, researchers in this study used the state website, which lists functioning charter schools. The researchers sought participants who held the position as teacher leaders of their respective charter schools and could provide personal insight on the school principal as an instructional leader. The higher education institution granted institutional review board approval for the study. Communication led by the researchers of the study provided each charter school principal information on the study's benefits and goals, to establish a working relationship and to obtain permission to contact teacher leaders for their voluntary participation in this study.

Eight teacher leaders from two charter high schools (Charter School A and Charter School B) were selected as participants and engaged in the focus group interview process (see the Appendix for interview questions). Along with the taped focus group interviews, the researchers took reflective field-based notes. A pseudonym provided identification for each teacher leader participant (Participant A1, A2, etc.) for disclosure and anonymity. The eight teacher leader participants were of African American descent and held a title of the department chair or instructional specialist within their charter schools. Two of the participants were male, and six of the participants were female.

## Data Analysis

Data gained in the two high school settings of the eight teacher leaders assisted in understanding the patterns of leadership behaviors of instructional leaders and relationships of charter school instructional leaders, regarding the five key leadership elements. The researchers gathered data from focus group interviews. The focus groups transcripts were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. A transcription of field notes provided textual data. Transcripts were reviewed and then organized into a matrix. The eight teacher leaders provided information relating to the five effective instructional leadership practices. The data collected was organized by the responses to each interview question and then as a deductive approach, strategically aligned with Mendel's effective leadership practices. The focus group transcripts were analyzed by hand using in vivo codes and then narrowed down into the broader themes emerged from the data related to effective instructional leadership practices. By examining the notes from the focus group sessions, the researchers were able to identify themes from the teacher leaders' responses. The analysis resulted in five themes related to effective instructional leadership practices.

## Findings

Using a qualitative approach with a focus group method of data collection, five themes emerged from the data analysis (see Table 1). Instructional leaders within these two high schools (a) provided a visual and resounding vision statement, (b) used diverse communication styles with all stakeholders, (c) promoted professional capacity, (d) used varied data to inform instructional practices and decisions, and (e) maximized and preserved instructional time for teachers with few daily interruptions.

When compared to Mendel's (2012) effective instructional leadership practices, Table 1 provides a direct comparison of the findings from this research study. The five instructional leadership practices that charter school teacher leaders exhibit provided insight into their school principals'

behaviors and actions as effective instructional leaders in accordance to the elements of Mendel’s effective instructional leadership model.

**Table 1. Comparison of Mendel’s Model of Instructional Leadership and Themes**

<b>Mendel’s Effective Instructional Leadership Practices</b>	<b>Charter School Instructional Leadership Practices</b>
Shaping a vision	Providing a visual and resounding vision statement
Creating a positive and hospitable environment	Maximizing and preserving instructional time for teachers
Cultivating leadership	Promoting professional capacity
Improving instruction	Using varied data to inform instructional practices and decisions
Managing people	Using diverse communication styles with all stakeholders

**A Visual and Resounding Vision Statement**

Participant A2 stated that the principal communicates the vision during in-service time, which takes place at the beginning of the school year, and also highlighted that the principal reinforces the vision during other meetings throughout the year. Participant A1 spoke of other times the principal has communicated the vision, whereas Participant A3 highlighted the level of buy-in from students toward the vision by acknowledging student gains and achievement. Participant B1 indicated that the principal communicates the school’s vision during faculty meetings. Participants B2 and B3 mentioned other methods in which the principal communicated the school’s vision, such as communication with parents, and noted that the vision is written all over the school.

Study participants identified an assortment of instructional leadership behaviors their principals display as school leaders. Based on the information provided by the teacher leaders, there is an extreme satisfaction in regards to the instructional leadership behaviors displayed by their principals which impact the school environments. Teacher leaders indicated that their principals communicate the school’s vision to members of the school community by conveying the vision with teachers during in-service time and subsequent meetings and other stakeholders such as parents, community members, and students.

**Maximize and Preserve Instructional Time for Teachers**

Participants A1 and A3 confirmed that the principal uses the intercom daily to address the school community and encouraging students to make smart decisions. Participants B1 and B2 revealed that the principal makes announcements about students’ academic progress during morning and afternoon announcements. Notifications on student academic progress include information about the number of students accepted into colleges and universities and the awarded scholarships of those students. Participant A4 confirmed that the principal both makes calls and meets with parents throughout the year to inform them of progress (or lack of progress) of the students. Participants A2 and A3 mentioned that the principal writes personal comments on each student’s report card.

The findings indicated that principals create a favorable, hospitable climate by openly rewarding and acknowledging achievement while also framing high expectations, showing high visibility inside the school (hallways and classrooms) and outside the school (extra-curricular activities), communicating with parents about school matters, and providing individual feedback and responses to students about their academic performance on report cards. Spiro’s (2013) assertion supports these findings

that the role of the principal has changed from primarily administrative to a multifaceted role incorporating the feedback from teacher leaders and the student and community needs. Darling-Hammond (2009) added that a democratic approach involving multiple stakeholders shapes the vision of the school and those members of the school community become responsive to the needs of students in which they serve and have a vested interest.

### **Promote Professional Capacity**

Participant 4A stated that the principal allows her to attend district-level meetings. She believes that she would not be effective in her job if the principal did not provide such leverage and opportunities to attend professional development meetings. Contrary, Participant B1 articulated that teachers have to seek professional development opportunities. Participant A1 stated that the principal sends emails on professional development. Participants A2, A3, and A4 agreed that their principal identifies teacher strengths and teacher growth areas through one-on-one communication, observations, and evaluations.

The majority of teacher leaders in this study reported that their principals cultivate leadership in others by identifying prospective leadership opportunities based on staff members' present performance, through general observations and evaluations, and by encouraging professional development for professional enhancement. In support of this finding, Bickmore and Dowell (2014) indicated that principals should begin focusing on improving teacher capacity and staff cohesiveness. Darling-Hammond (2009) introduced the concept of the professional approach in which there is a vested interest amongst colleagues to enhance the effectiveness and expertise of the practitioner (the teacher). Thus, "knowledgeable professionals...can use good judgment to make sound decisions appropriate to the unique needs of children" (p. 50).

### **Use Varied Sources of Data to Inform Instructional Practices and Decisions**

Participants A2, A3, and B2 indicated that the principal engages in informal walkthroughs at the beginning of the school year to obtain a synopsis of individual classroom practices and functions. Participant B2 also emphasized that the principal is visible in the hallways during instructional time. Participant B4 announced that she and other teachers have similar unscheduled observations known as "pop-ins." Participant B4 also included that administration would follow-up with feedback about the lesson.

According to the respondents, their principals ensure that instructional time is sacred, observe instructional practice, and give instructional feedback by protecting instructional time from interruptions on the intercom and keeping assemblies to a minimum. A recent research study found a similar perspective on the protection of time-related indices (Boudreaux, McNeal, & Martin, 2015). These interruptions to the school day include intercom announcements and assemblies.

The principal conducts walkthroughs and performs informal and formal observations, which include feedback about instructional practices. In support of this finding, Wahlstrom and Lewis (2008) maintained that principals need to be able to provide constructive feedback to improve teaching or be able to design a system in which others provide that support.

### **Use Diverse Communication Styles With All Stakeholders**

Participant A2 expressed that the principal utilizes data analysis to set behavior and climate goals in the school improvement plan. Participant A2 added that the primary data points are state exams and end-of-course exams. Participant B3 confirmed that the results from state tests are used to determine goal attainment. Participant B3 also indicated that the principal uses observation data, walkthrough data, and evaluation data to ensure that instruction is up to par and students are

progressively achieving academic success. Participant B1 included that the school uses academic reports, and the results from these reports highlight the need for tutoring sessions held within departments from Monday to Thursday to help students who are not progressing academically.

Various forms of data are used throughout the year to determine goal attainment, growth targets, and identify at-risk students. The principals use diverse forms of data reports that inform his or her decision-making. Teacher leaders indicate that student retention data, chronic absenteeism data, and tardiness data are various forms of detailed information that guide decision-making within their schools. Englert, Fries, Goodwin, Martin-Glenn and Michael's (2004) work supports these findings suggesting that instructional leaders utilize multiple measures of assessment practices and student performance that have an impact on student success.

## Discussion

With the problems that are evident in today's schools, collaboration among administration and appointed leaders such as teacher leaders and other administrative staff is imperative in garnering student success. While many believe that the increase in charter schools' presence is an answer to low-performing schools in urban neighborhoods, others have alternate views that the increase of charter schools in inner cities is resulting in the belief that a market type approach to educating students far outweighs the quality of education in traditional public schools (Cordes, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2009). Despite differences in beliefs regarding charter schools, school principals that are leading these types of schools are showing success; therefore, learning more about the actions and behaviors that guide these instructional leaders is beneficial to other leaders within the field of education and other public stakeholders. To this end, the purpose of this study focused on charter high school teacher leaders' perceptions of their principals' instructional leadership practices.

In doing so, this study examined the insight teacher leaders provided concerning instructional leadership rendered by their charter school principal. From an in-depth analysis of teacher leaders' responses to the interview questions regarding effective instructional leadership practices of their principals, there lies a perception of evidenced-based instructional leadership practices within the high schools. In support of this assertion, teacher leaders were able to identify their principals' actions and behaviors that coupled with their roles as effective instructional leaders. Thus, these actions and behaviors that the charter school principals rendered concerning instructional leadership practices directly align with Mendel's (2012) effective leadership model. Green (2017) acknowledged that followers recognize principals' behaviors through their actions; therefore, those actions are recognizable by other stakeholders.

In an attempt to answer the research question of what are the perceived successful attributes, actions or behaviors of the principal as instructional leadership in charter school teacher leaders, the findings in this study indicate that principals use a variety of methods to communicate the mission, vision, and core values to teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders. These communication methods include using schoolwide announcements and reinforcing the vision statement during faculty meetings, at recruitment and community fairs, and through outbound communications. Principals in this study place a high emphasis on others by highlighting the accomplishments of students and teachers. By doing so, principals recognize student progress through the use of schoolwide daily announcements, writing individualized notes on each student's report card, and highlighting achievement during quarterly awards ceremonies. Principals in this study emphasize the accomplishments of teachers through schoolwide faculty meeting announcements and emails, a highly visible presence in the school hallways and classrooms, and an active participant and support for students during extracurricular activities.

In regards to cultivating and creating a favorable school climate that is committed toward professional growth, teacher leader responses indicate that principals encourage professional development/growth and collaborative opportunities for teachers to showcase their expertise through collective learning opportunities. Additionally, teacher leaders explained that their principals use teacher evaluations as a method of identifying growth opportunities for teachers. The use of the TEAM evaluation is a means of reflection, collaboration, and an essential element toward impacting student performance (Tennessee Department of Education, 2013b). Participants indicated that principals observe and give feedback using the districtwide evaluation system including other means of observations such as one-on-one meetings, informal walkthroughs, and pop-ins.

## Conclusion

Enthralled in the poststandardization era, the result of educational reform efforts dictates a stronger role that principals must play as instructional leaders in schools. Shirley (2009) advocated for a critical role that teachers and teacher leaders must play in developing their professional expertise, autonomy, and leadership. Principals as instructional leaders will need to use both evaluation and supervision skills to positively affect change efforts in their schools regarding teaching and learning. Consistently communicating the vision and engaging others in creating an action plan toward implementing change to meet the goals and aims of school improvement are specific skills and behaviors needed to lead successful schools. Such insight begins with instructional leaders learning the "internal climate of the organization" (Kotter, 2005, p. 208). The process begins with the principal as an instructional leader, mapping out a strategy with his or her followers that will engage all stakeholders in the process of school improvement. These stakeholders include teacher leaders or those considered as "substitutes-for-leadership" (Jermier & Kerr, as cited in Leithwood, 2001, p. 232).

While this research study is limited to perceptions of teacher leaders regarding their charter high school principal as an instructional leader in an urban setting, an unmasked priority for charter school leaders is the autonomous nature of maximizing efforts to address a combination of school managerial and administrative practices. This combination includes budget, policy issues, collective negotiations, induction, hiring and firing staff, and other internal structures as instructional leaders (Kindzierski, Mhammed, Wallace, & Lesh, 2013). Moreover, while educational leaders of both charter and traditional schools remain overtly consumed with limitless managerial and administrative tasks, the vast majority of principals see instructional leadership as a critical mission (Johnson, 2008).

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[Appendix follows]

## Appendix

### Focus Group Interview Questions

1. How does your principal communicate the school's vision to the school community?
2. In what ways does your principal discuss students' progress, reward and recognize superior performance, and show visibility or vested interest in the school?
3. How does your principal create professional growth opportunities for staff?
4. What forms of data are used throughout the year to determine goal attainment, growth targets, and identify at-risk students?
5. How does your principal ensure that instructional time is sacred, observe instructional practice, and give instructional feedback?

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