

Leadership Practices: A Scholarly Deliverable

by

Justin Richardson

A Scholarly Delivery Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Educational Leadership

West Texas A&M University

Canyon, Texas

December, 2021

Approved:

Dr. Janet Hindman Associate Professor of Educational Leadership Chair, Scholarly Delivery Committee	Date
Dr. JoAnn Franklin Klinker Associate Professor of Educational Leadership Member, Scholarly Delivery Committee	Date
Dr. Ervin Knezek Member, Scholarly Delivery Committee	
Dr. Mark Garrison Professor of Education Methodologist, Scholarly Delivery Committee	Date

*Qualified Signature	✓	Yes		No		Literature Review		Case Study	✓	Empirical Study
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*The qualified signature of the methodologist indicates agreement only with the scholarly deliverable(s) checked. The lack of one or more checked scholarly deliverables is not indicative of disagreement, but instead reflects a lack or absence of the methodologist's involvement with the unchecked scholarly deliverable(s).

Dr. Gary Bigham, Director Department of Education	Date
Dr. Janet Hindman, Head Department of Education	Date
Dr. Eddie Henderson, Dean College of Education and Social Sciences	Date
Dr. Angela Spaulding, Dean Graduate School	Date

Scholarly Delivery Framework

The research focus of the scholarly delivery is leadership practices of principals. The first scholarly deliverable is a case study article that can be used for teaching doctoral or master's candidates in the field of educational leadership. The title of this article is "Who Made That Rule? A Saga of the Bold and the Beautiful[ly Compliant]". The case represents the role of beliefs in the decisions principals make related to student learning. The final scholarly deliverable is an empirical article that focusses on spiritual practices of campus leadership. The title of this article is "Soulful Leadership: Spiritual Practices of Principals".

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS
Letter of Approval**

June 1, 2021

Dr. Hindman:

The West Texas A & M University Institutional Review Board is pleased to inform you that upon review, proposal #2021.05.006 for your study titled, **"The Role of Spirituality in Leadership Practices of Principals,"** meets the requirements of the WTAMU Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) No. 15.99.05.W1.01AR Institutional Review Board (Human Subject Research). Approval is granted for one calendar year. This approval expires on **May 30, 2022**.

Principal investigators assume the following responsibilities:

1. **Continuing Review:** The protocol must be renewed on or before the expiration date if the research project requires more than one year for completion. A [Continuing Review form](#) along with required documents must be submitted on or before the stated deadline. Failure to do so will result in study termination and/or loss of funding.
2. **Completion Report:** At the conclusion of the research project (including data analysis and final written papers), a [Close out form](#) must be submitted to AR-EHS.
3. **Unanticipated Problems and Adverse Events:** Pursuant to [SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.13AR](#), unanticipated problems and serious adverse events must be reported to AR-EHS.
4. **Reports of Potential Non-Compliance:** Pursuant to [SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.05AR](#), potential non-compliance, including deviations from the protocol and violations, must be reported to the IRB office immediately.
5. **Amendments:** Changes to the protocol must be requested by submitting an [Amendment form](#) to AR-EHS for review by the IRB. The Amendment must be approved by the IRB before being implemented. Amendments do not extend time granted on the initial approval.
6. **Consent Forms:** When using a consent form, only the IRB approved form is allowed.
7. **Audit:** Any proposal may be subject to audit by the IRB Administrator during the life of the study. Investigators are responsible for maintaining complete and accurate records for five years and making them available for inspection upon request.
8. **Recruitment:** All recruitment materials must be approved by the IRB. Recruitment materials distributed to potential participants must use the approved text and include the study's IRB number, approval date, and expiration dates in the following format: WTAMU IRB##-##-## Approved: ###/###/#### Expiration Date: ###/###/####.

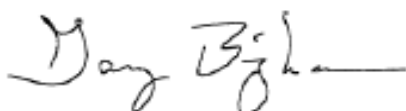
9. **FERPA and PPRA:** Investigators conducting research with students must have appropriate approvals from the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

administrator at the institution where the research will be conducted in accordance with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) if applicable to the research being proposed. The Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) protects the rights of parents in students ensuring that written parental consent is required for participation in surveys, analysis, or evaluation that ask questions falling into categories of protected information.

Sixty days prior to the expiration of this proposal, you will receive a notification of the approaching expiration date at which time you will need to submit an [Amendment/Continuation/Close out](#) form.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



Dr. Gary Bigham
Chair, WTAMU IRB



Dr. Angela Spaulding
Vice President of Research and Compliance

Acknowledgements

First, I give glory to God for the opportunity to use my abilities to change the world for the better. I have been blessed to be surrounded by people who believe that our lives have a higher purpose. Throughout my life these people have encouraged and inspired me to make a difference. I am forever grateful.

This accomplishment belongs to my family. My mother, Sharon gives me the confidence to just “go for it”. Thank you for always believing in me. My wife, Mandy unselfishly gives me the space to chase my dreams. Thank you for loving me through this process. My son, Jack gives me hope in a brighter future. I am proud of you. Follow your dreams and work hard. I love you all.

Thank you to my chair, Dr. Janet Hindman. You challenged me to take a risk, and then you walked with me along the way. This program would not exist without your bold vision, and this study would not exist without your willingness to ask, “what if”.

Finally, it is my honor to be part of Cohort 1 of the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program at West Texas A&M University. I have learned so much from this brilliant group of leaders.

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Author Note

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Justin Richardson,
Department of Education, West Texas A&M University, Canyon, TX 79016. Email:
jbrichardson1@buffs.wtamu.edu

Abstract

To facilitate conversations among district and campus leaders, this case study focuses on the decision-making process of two different principals. Inspired by real-life events, these two principals experience a common professional development event and must decide on what to implement from their learning – one led by her beliefs about compliance and the other by her beliefs about professional learning.

Keywords: decision making, beliefs, priorities, instructional leadership, commitment, compliance, structure, autonomy

Case Narrative

First Impressions

As Brad walked into the foyer of the Freeland ISD administration building, he was immediately greeted by the receptionist and directed to the training room for the day. You only get one shot at first impressions, and this was Brad's day. Although he was a veteran consultant, seasoned by his work with districts across the state and the United States, he approached his new client with the typical unknowing of a first date. The setting in Freeland ISD was predictable – twelve folding tables, one for each campus team, surrounded by stiff chairs, transformed the boardroom into the learning space for the day. Over the next hour, the room began to fill with the smell of donuts and coffee, the sounds of handouts rustling, and the buzz of conversation, as campus teams claimed a table in their "usual" spots. Brad got an idea of who they were by where they sat, how they joked with each other, and how many were in each group.

Freeland's recently-promoted Assistant Superintendent for the curriculum, John, requested the training to be held a few months earlier. John had previously served as a Compliance Officer for the state education agency and, most recently, as the Director of Professional Development for Freeland ISD. He was under the watchful eye of the School Board and Superintendent, who had given John a mandate to improve campus accountability ratings across the board. John was a systems guy, and he understood the foundational components of school improvement. He knew that schools need a guaranteed and viable curriculum, quality instruction, meaningful assessments, and structures for intervention. By all measures, John loved order; he loved predictability, and he loved forms. Oh, how he loved forms!

John took his mission seriously and sought an easy answer to a complex problem. Freeland varied widely on the quality of instruction from campus to campus, and that is where he wanted to start. Brad's job was to provide the antidote, the cure, the magic potion, or at least the

answer. Brad's company was known for helping develop instructional systems, but he knew that it would require bold thinking. John and Brad had collaborated virtually, prior to the event, to ensure that the outcomes of the day were on target. The mission was clear -share a common framework for the teacher teams to use while planning their units of instruction, then monitor to make sure they were complying. John's belief was that getting everyone to plan the same way was the fastest way to move the system forward. This was his priority, and the plan was underway.

Speech Bubble or Check Box?

Training with Brad always started with a predictable rhythm—a brief introduction, personal connection to the work, an overview of the day and a question to get people talking. His question to start the planning instruction class had two purposes. First, it was intended to get participants to reflect on their current planning process. Second, it challenged their beliefs about the purpose of planning. He wanted to hear their ideas and to learn where he was starting. Was this going to be a day where he would leave inspired by the rush of new ideas or was it going to be a head-shaking, got-a-lot-of-work-to-do kind of day? Brad framed the question using the visual of a speech bubble on the left and a check box on the right. He asked the campus teams to discuss with their table, whether planning on their campuses was more like the speech bubble on the left or the checkbox on the right. In other words, when teachers come together to plan, are they focused on conversations or completing tasks?

In a matter of seconds, the hum of quiet conversation became a room filled with noise. The campus teams leaned in to hear one another. The teachers talked with their hands and gave non-verbal affirmations. When Brad called everyone back together, he asked the volunteers to share. The consensus in the room was that their planning process resembled the check box more.

Meet at 9:45AM in the conference room—check.

Document the content objectives for the following week—check.

Document the language objectives for the following week—check.

There was consistency it seemed. Check, check, check, but where was the quality, he wondered?

Brad, in his kind, reflective, calming way, asked the group to rethink the priorities for collaborative planning. He posed the following questions:

“Can we create a planning process built around meaningful, open-ended questions?”

“Can we create a planning process that gives teachers the needed time to exchange professional dialogue?” “Can we improve teacher commitment by creating a process that reduces form completion?” “Would you like to know how?” Then, Brad said, in his best gameshow host voice, “Well, when we come back from break, we’ll explore the planning guide.” The participants laughed and got up for a stretch, made a fast break for the restroom or a coffee refill. However, one campus team didn’t move.

Can You Come Talk to Us for a Minute?

What was up with this campus? Why aren’t they moving? Maria, principal of Lakeside Elementary in Freeland ISD, had been the principal on that campus since its opening seven years ago. As a positive, dynamic leader, she had built a bold, committed, risk-taking leadership team over the years. Her assistant principal, an instructional coach, and three classroom teachers made up the team that day and were obviously deep in thought about their conversation. It was this team that Maria brought along to learn, and it was this team that did not get up to take a break. They stayed at their table and called Brad over to talk to them. She told him that they understood the concept of prioritizing teacher dialogue during planning time, and they thought this would be a game changer for them. Brad knew what was coming next – the clash of campus and district expectations. He knew the look, anticipated the set-up, and mustered the strength to answer honestly. Maria spilled the beans... all their planning time was focused on completing the lesson

plan form created by the district administration some years earlier and shared as a mandate for instructional planning. The teachers felt stuck, frustrated, and overwhelmed by competing expectations. They couldn't picture being able to complete the form and engage in the type of conversations Brad was suggesting. "How do we do both?" Maria asked. "Honestly, I do not think you can," he responded, "is this other lesson plan required?" The Lakeside leadership team's eyes lit up as they glanced at each other, and then Maria waved John over to their table.

When John came over, Maria asked if he knew about the expectation related to the lesson plan form. She shared the concerns of her team and asked, "Who made that rule?" Much to Maria's delight, John responded he did not know. Maria then asked whether her campus could try something new in terms of planning, to leverage their learning. After a few minutes of deliberation, John (who loved both compliance and forms) granted Maria and her leadership team the permission to try a new approach. However, it was clearly out of his comfort zone.

As the day progressed, Brad had a chance to check-in with each campus team to answer questions and clarify misconceptions. Each table group had a unique personality and a variety of questions. Some asked bold questions, while others sought clarifications. Most were reflecting on how they could operationalize what they were learning. Things were going well until Brad sat down with Carol and her leadership team from Valleyview Elementary. He should have sensed something when he found only two people on her leadership team. "How are you guys doing? Anything I can help you think through?" he asked. "No, we're good," Carol quickly replied.

Carol was in her third year as principal of Valleyview Elementary. In earlier years, she had been a highly respected assistant principal in Freeland ISD and clearly had little desire to shake things up like Maria. Carol believed in consistency and compliance, doing what she was told. She ran a tight ship, followed the rules as they were written, and rarely if ever questioned the *status quo*.

One wouldn't have known that these two campuses attended the same training, for their takeaways were very different. Maria believed in being bold, asking questions, and taking risks. Her priority in planning was to create a culture where teachers commit to the conversation about learning. In contrast, Carol believed her campus would improve if they all consistently plan, in compliance with the district expectations, or at least with the perceived expectations. Carol appreciated the opportunity to learn something new, but she ended the day with a desire for her teachers to recommit to the lesson planning form provided by the district. Both principals made decisions based on their beliefs and priorities. Although John, the former compliance officer, ultimately wanted a consistent approach to planning throughout the district, he allowed the principals the autonomy to decide on the approach that would be the most effective for their leadership style and staff competence.

Principal of the Year

Each of the twelve campuses had started at a different place. Maria's and Carol's campuses, like the two leaders themselves, represented the opposite ends of the spectrum. Planning instruction on Maria's campus was incredibly messy. They tried and learned and adapted, their conversations led them to new discoveries which called for new instructional approaches. They kept asking hard questions and challenging the *status quo*. The district curriculum staff often rolled their eyes when Lakeside Elementary staff asked a question. They found it difficult to support them, they didn't fit into the boxes on the form - they did not do things like everyone else. The Lakeside staff felt it – they were the rogue innovators and it indeed felt like the district staff kept trying to put them back in the box.

Carol does not do messy. Planning on her campus was neat, well-documented, and easy to replicate. Each grade level completed the same lesson plan form in the same way for each unit of instruction. Carol's teachers were efficient and required very little support. The district support

staff liked working with Valleyview Elementary; they were predictable, their conversations low level, and their work neatly fit into the literal and figurative boxes. Their questions were few and related to the expectations from the district. Their planning process could be easily replicated throughout the other campuses in Freeland ISD.

Risk takers can rub people the wrong way. Maria, once celebrated for her leadership, began to be overlooked in the monthly principal meetings. Instead, time and time again, Carol was recognized for her teachers' compliance with district mandates. During the March principals meeting, John proudly announced that Freeland's Elementary Principal of the Year was Carol. Perhaps the award should have been Freeland's Compliant Elementary Principal of the Year. Brad could have predicted it – after all, that is what the district valued.

Be Careful What You Ask For

Ask for compliance, get compliance. Although both campuses were allowed to continue through spring with their planning processes, it was becoming increasingly clear which model John preferred. Maria's campus, however, was becoming increasingly confident, which was difficult for her, because she knew John wanted consistency. Just when they were getting good, it could all come crumbling down. And then it happened, one glorious day, with one beautiful data set with state accountability ratings. Lakeside Elementary earned an "A" rating with four distinctions for their performance, most notably a 100 in "Closing the Gap," which measures equity in instruction among student groups. Valleyview earned a "C," with zero distinctions and a 67 in "Closing the Gap." The proof is indeed in the pudding; perhaps the consistency needed was not in the uniformity of product, but in expectations. Afterwards, Maria got a call from John, wanting to know more about her planning process. And that is where the story begins.

Literature Review

Principals have a variety of responsibilities on campus, such as facility- management, staff development, student discipline, district office liaison and parent and community relations. Among these many responsibilities, it is important to question how one's beliefs and priorities inform decisions related to instruction.

Instructional Leadership. The broad concept of instructional leadership has been the subject of numerous scholarly articles. Wang (2018) created a concept co-occurrence network to indicate the groundings of educational leadership research over the past decade. In this study of over 1300 educational leadership articles, Wang identified the most frequently-cited and interconnected leadership qualities, of which instructional leadership was almost at the top of the list. Both Maria and Carol studied in this JCEL case clearly recognized the importance of instructional leadership. It is the approach to instructional initiatives that differentiates our two principals – compliance with organizational structures vs. commitment to professional learning. White-Smith (2012) presented the findings of a cross-case analysis of principals in high-performing, low-income minority schools. These principals shared the opinion that the most important aspect of their job was to develop learning opportunities for their teachers. According to White-Smith, the most effective instructional leaders shared a commitment to developing the teaching staff, which had a direct impact on student learning.

Sanzo (2011) surveyed teachers about the type of assistance they would like to receive from building-level administrators. The teachers opined that effective administrators should “ensure through effective communication that all staff members have a clear understanding of the shared vision and long-range plan of the school and expectations for implementation of specific programs” (p. 14). Further, the teachers wanted campus teams to have flexibility in making educated decisions about the implementation of certain programs (Sanzo, 2011).

The principal's role as an instructional leader is a well-researched topic, and principals realize the importance of developing teachers, which ultimately benefits the students. Teachers value a principal who communicates a clear vision and yet offers flexibility to make instructional decisions, while the best interests of the students are served. To understand the instructional initiatives employed by principals better, it is essential to analyze the beliefs and behaviors that guide their decision-making related to these initiatives.

Beliefs. In order to understand how principals lead instructional initiatives, there is a need to study the beliefs and behaviors that influence their thinking. Louis (2010) examined shared leadership, trust and collaboration through a mixed method survey. He revealed a need for principal development programs to continue, by emphasizing both the emotional and behavioral aspects of leadership (Louis, 2010). The most important behavioral aspect of leadership that creates an increase in instructional capacity is shared leadership (Louis, 2010). Principals can influence student learning most effectively by building the leadership team around them. However, it may be questioned whether teachers share this same belief.

Zorlu (2016) surveyed teachers to understand their perceptions on how principals create a good learning atmosphere on campus. "Supporting teachers to do their jobs better" (p. 289) was the most commonly exhibited behavior of those principals who were perceived to be effective instructional leaders, and the teachers recognized the behaviors of the principals that supported their work. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether these behaviors changed based on school achievement.

Lang (2019) surveyed middle school principals to look at the perspectives of principals on instructional leadership practices. The study examined the differences in the perceptions of instructional leadership in high-, middle- and low-achieving schools. Lang found that school achievement status was not a determining factor in how a principal perceived instruction.

Although Lang's study was limited in scope to differentiated instructional practices, it is an important statement related to instructional behavior beliefs. Regardless of student achievements, the principals' beliefs toward instruction remained constant. However, every initiative cannot be given equal importance, and principals do have to understand the different needs in their campus based on district or state/federal requirements.

Priorities. It is important to understand how principals prioritize initiatives in the educational cacophony of regulations, mandates and daily management tasks on a campus. In interviews conducted by Muse (2011), principals consistently felt "torn between the instructional leadership that almost everyone agrees should be the top priority and the daily management chores that are almost impossible to ignore; often, the managerial responsibilities seem to take precedence" (p. 56). The needs of parents, staff and students and for facilities can regularly be rearranged to fit a principal's calendar, but skilled principals can manage these management chores to keep instruction in focus on most days.

The larger focus of the literature reviewed was on identifying priorities when given instructional mandates from outside the campus. Wieczorek (2015) took a particular interest in how the Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative affected the principal's role. Given the rapid approach to a change in the RTTT initiative, Wieczorek asked principals how they prioritized the need for instructional changes along with the emotional needs of the teaching staff. The principals did this by bridging the new instructional expectations from RTTT with previous professional habits (Wieczorek, 2015).

In addition to balancing the emotional needs of the staff with instructional change in state and/or federally mandated programs, principals also have to prioritize district initiatives, which are established to support principal's instructional leadership. In a study that included interviews, observations and document analysis, Honig (2012) found that the most effective district support

used initiatives to “trigger negotiations among individuals about which actions might contribute to particular goals rather than prescribe action” (p. 740). The role of an instructional leader is one that principals must be purposeful in prioritizing. The most effective instructional leaders leverage mandates to strengthen teaching practices and goals, while maintaining emotional balance on their campus.

Decision Making. The literature on decision-making related to principals as instructional leaders is limited. The studies in this review are limited to whether principals and teachers perceived themselves to be in control of the decisions related to instruction. Noel (2009) surveyed principals and teachers to gauge their involvement in decisions related to budgeting, curriculum, staffing and staff development. The findings confirmed that making teachers partners in the decision-making process created accountability that positively influenced classroom-level changes (Noel, 2009).

It is ideal for principals and teachers to work together in harmony and make decisions on campus, but what happens when principals have to integrate external mandates, especially when they perceive conflicts with their own beliefs? Louis (2012) posed this question in a survey of seven principals, where the principals of high-performing campuses made decisions that were educationally richer and more ambitious than the decisions made by principals of lower-performing campuses. Higher performing campuses “articulated educational purposes that were broader than relationships, broader than accountability imperatives and yet inclusive of both” (Louis, 2012, p. 647). This relationship between the centralization of decisions in high- and low-performing campuses was further explored in Johnson’s (1992) study of top down-mandates, which showed that low-performing campuses denoted more central control over campus-related decisions. Additional literature is required in the area of decision-making, particularly in relation to a principal’s sense of autonomy in low-performing campuses.

Literature Review Summary. The role of a principal as an instructional leader is well-researched and connected to student achievement. Even though the wealth of research supports this focus in principals, it takes dedication to remain focused on improving teaching and learning, while in the throes of leading a campus. To achieve this objective, shared leadership is helpful. The development of teacher leaders is critical for instructional progress in the classroom. Another unique challenge that has been revealed in the literature is the relationship between externally mandated initiatives and a principal's perception of autonomy in decision-making. It should be questioned whether decision-making within a campus leadership team can co-exist in an environment with external supports.

Teaching Notes and Guiding Questions

Effective school leaders make instructional decisions based on their beliefs and priorities. Effective district leaders empower campus principals by establishing policies and supports that balance structure and autonomy.

Principals need structures to make quick and accurate decisions. For example, when a student violates a code of conduct, there are consequences, and these are widely known by students and parents. Structures provide stability and predictability to organizations. Processes for establishing the structures should reflect best practices and the values of the community, and once the structures have been established, it is the responsibility of leaders to adhere to those decisions and to implement them effectively.

However, many decisions that principals make do not have a simple input/output function. This is especially true of instructional decisions. If schools exist to maximize student achievement, then principals must engage teachers in professional dialogue that challenges assumptions about learning. Campus leadership teams need the autonomy to be responsive to student needs. Autonomy confers power, but it can be messy. Autonomy on a campus requires

openness to ideas and a commitment to discourse. Principals enhance professional learning when teachers are enabled to clarify their own problems and identify solutions.

This case study does not propose to judge compliance with structures or commitment to professional learning as good or bad. Effective organizations understand the importance in balancing the two. Rather, this case study is intended to start a conversation between district administrators and campus principals about decision making. The following questions can be used after reading the case narrative.

Guiding Questions

- Why do school districts need structures that require compliance from campus to campus?
- Share examples of common structures within your district
- Why do school districts need opportunities for leaders to make autonomous decisions?
- Share an example of when you feel you have the autonomy to make decisions
- As a leader in this district, do you know when compliance is expected?
- Do you know when you have autonomy to create unique solutions?
- How much time, energy and resources are dedicated to compliance requirements that are not leading to gains in student achievement?
- How do you share feedback about compliance requirements?
- How much time, energy and resources are committed to problem-solving through professional dialogue that are not leading to gains in student achievement?
- How do you share feedback about problem solving processes?

- When it comes to instructional leadership, where do we need to do a better job of being on the same page?
- How would this help support student achievement?
- When it comes to instructional leadership, where do we need more flexibility to come up with unique solutions?
- How would this help support student achievement?

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Author Note

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Justin Richardson,
Department of Education, West Texas A&M University, Canyon, TX 79016. Email:
jbrichardson1@buffs.wtamu.edu

Abstract

Being a principal can be complex - budget constraints, accountability systems, staffing challenges, parent concerns, student mental health. Burnout sets in when leaders work under such circumstances. Understanding how spirituality and leadership interrelate may keep their leadership spark alive. **Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to define, in terms of both words and actions, the characteristics of spiritual leadership in schools, and principals' perceptions of the role spiritual practices have in creating a campus culture that influences the behaviors of others. **Research Method:** The study was qualitative in nature and the research methodology included the use of Interactive Qualitative Analysis. Surveys, focus group analysis, and interviews were conducted with principals of schools within a 30-mile radius of a regional university in West Texas. **Findings:** Spiritual leadership, as described by participants in this study, consisted of three components: belief in a higher calling, personal values, and interpersonal relationships. **Conclusion:** Spiritual leadership in schools may be developed through meaningful interactions and has the potential to groom a set of leadership practices that could strengthen a campus community, empower leaders to pause and seek guidance, and improve communication skills.

Keywords: Spiritual leadership practices, affinities, belief in a higher purpose, personal values, interpersonal relationships, Interactive Qualitative Analysis, empirical paper

Introduction

Diverse perspectives and personal experiences make the study of spiritual leadership complex. However, despite the complexity, there is a growing interest in a leadership approach that requires a comprehension of the whole leader, including their spirituality. Zaharris et al. (2017) revealed a substantial increase in the study of spiritual leadership over the past 20 years: “Although some may consider the topic of spirituality unworthy of scientific study, the power it contains to transform traditional thinking about leadership is well worth the academic risk” (Zaharris et al., 2017, p. 82). Despite the interest in studying the topic, defining spirituality is complicated, even divisive. Some definitions of spirituality draw a connection with religion, while other definitions center on a sense of connectedness with the world (Schlehofer et al., 2008; Dames, 2019). Hermans and Koerts (2013) suggested the definition of spirituality is rooted in discernment: “Discernment is a human capacity for making decisions that promote human fullness” (p. 207) The participants in this study were asked to examine their leadership practices and determine if those practices had a spiritual connection. The findings from this study revealed a description, developed by principals, of spirituality related to school leadership.

Specifically considering school leadership, Zaharris et al. (2017) found that principals often “balance the tensions inherent in the pursuit of desired school goals with the need to prioritize the well-being and care of the human spirit” (p. 82). Yet the topic of spiritual leadership in public schools is often considered off limits, creating a gap in the research. Dent et al. (2005) provided a narrative that served both as a synthesis and compelling reason for further study. The researcher analyzed academic articles, seeking to characterize the relationship between leadership and spirituality: “Leadership and spirituality are two pervasive constructs in life, and a greater understanding of how they interrelate may do much to increase the welfare of the workplace, humanity, and the environment” (Dent et al., 2005, p. 648).

Upon further examination, the literature revealed the importance of understanding the relationship between spirituality and leadership, while a gap in the literature emerged when examining this relationship within public schools (May et al., 2012; Elmeski, 2015; Mehdinezhad & Nouri, 2016). Therefore, additional study may add value to the current field of knowledge. The purpose of this research was to define, regarding both words and actions, the characteristics of spiritual leadership in schools. The descriptive data gathered from interactions and interviews reflect principals' perceptions of spiritual leadership in terms of reflective practices, actions of the leader, and influence upon the behaviors of others. An analysis of responses of the principals defined the characteristics of spiritual leadership, and follow-up interviews uncovered how leaders described how these characteristics influenced their practices.

Problem Statement

As school districts continue to meet the complex demands of educating students, there are increasing expectations from principals and teachers—implement more, assess more, intervene more. The time and emotional investment of continuing to do more will eventually lead to an organizational implosion (Reeves, 2006). Leaders and teachers alike eventually reach the burnout stage. “Not only will the new initiative fail under such circumstances, but the energy and resources available to old and continuing initiatives are dangerously compromised as well” (Reeves, 2006, p.108).

Merely doing more does not lead to improved outcomes, although systems intended to support principals often encourage just that—do more. Despite these actions, instructional leaders try to maintain their focus, avoiding the allure of more money and high-profile initiatives (Fullen, 2014). Pink (2009) described the drive behind actions in three parts: autonomy, mastery, and purpose, stating that “Autonomous people working toward mastery perform at very high levels. But those who do so in the service of some greater objective can achieve even more” (p. 133).

Thus, systems designed to develop principals should empower them with the freedom to identify a focused set of initiatives and provide the support to implement those initiatives with mastery. Pink (2009) further states that beliefs about the human spirit give purpose to leadership actions, and additional study could reveal a connection with leadership action in schools.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to define, in terms of both words and actions, the characteristics of spiritual leadership in schools, and principals' perceptions of the role spiritual practices have in creating a campus culture that influences the behaviors of others. Principals from school districts within the Texas Panhandle were selected for this study. The descriptive data gathered from interactions and interviews reflected their perceptions of leadership as a spiritual practice in terms of reflective practices, actions of the leader, and behaviors of others. An analysis of the principals' responses defined the characteristics of spiritual leadership among school leaders, and follow-up interviews uncovered how leaders described the relationship of spirituality with leadership. This research study answered the following questions:

1. Is leadership a spiritual practice, and if so, to what extent?
2. What are the affinities (categories) of spiritual practices among principals?
3. What is the relationship between these affinities and leadership actions?
4. How do principals perceive the influence of spiritual leadership upon the behavior of others?

Literature Review

Research on leadership as a spiritual practice is abundant in peer reviewed articles dedicated to the topic. The organization of this review narrowed the focus to three areas of study: 1) understanding the complexities of the idea of spirituality, 2) the role of spirituality in

leadership, and 3) an investigation of the current research in spiritual leadership practices found in schools. One central pattern of thought became clear in reviewing the literature: spirituality is an important topic worthy of study in the increasingly troubled world in which we live (Fry, 2003; Gibson, 2014; Schlehofer et al., 2008; Zaharris et al., 2017; Zohar, 2005).

Understanding Spirituality

Given the interest in spirituality, the literature included numerous studies dedicated to the difficulty of defining the term. The complications in defining spirituality often arose from personal experiences with the concept. For example, the relationship between spirituality and religion was the object of a mixed-method study by Schlehofer et al. (2008) designed to determine how the public differentiates between these terms. Interviews with older adults found that religion and spirituality are often used synonymously (Schlehofer et al., 2008). Although the terms are often seen as the same, distinguishing between the two is important. One meta-analysis concluded that religion described a specific group or organizational structure, while spirituality was often associated with closeness with God, feelings of interconnectedness with the world, and sometimes even incorporating more than one religious approach (Zinnbauer et al., 1999). Researchers have been careful to distinguish between the two terms when studying spirituality related to the workplace. This study separated the two terms, and employed a definition of spirituality that remains agnostic to religious affiliations.

Another layer of density arose when studying the value ascribed to one's spirituality. Senreich (2013) described the issue of people being seen as "more" or "less" spiritual. When value is granted to a person based on their viewpoint of something relatively indefinite, such as spirituality, the foundations of social work education break down. Social work education is built on the value of inclusiveness, and the cornerstone of inclusiveness is diminished when priority is given to certain perspectives (Senreich, 2013). In contrast, Fry (2003) described *membership* as a

foundation of spirituality, stating that “organizational culture be based on altruistic love whereby leaders and followers have genuine care, concern, and appreciation for both self and others, thereby producing a sense of membership and understood appreciation” (p. 695). Spirituality, in and of itself, is inclusive. Dames (2019) connected the idea of spiritual membership beyond the human connection; spirituality connects people through a common higher purpose.

Spirituality is a search for and means of reaching beyond human existence. It creates a sense of connectedness with the world and with the unifying source of life [...] an expression of people’s profound need for coherent meaning, love, and happiness. The need to create coherent meaning (in terms of wholeness, fullness, ultimacy) is inherent for our very existence as human beings (Dames, 2019, p. 39).

Spirituality and Leadership

In a review of over 150 studies, Reave (2005) found a clear consistency between spiritual practices and effective leadership. Spiritual ideas such as integrity, honesty, and humility overlap with “crucial leadership skills: showing respect for others, demonstrating fair treatment, expressing caring and concern, listening responsively, recognizing the contributions of others, and engaging in reflective practice” (Reave, 2005, p. 655). Studying spirituality and leadership is important not only because of the common attributes, but also “a greater understanding of how they interrelate may do much to increase the welfare of the workplace, humanity, and the environment” (Dent et al., 2005, p. 648). Decision-making may be elevated through the concept of discernment when leadership and spirituality interrelate. Hermans and Koerts (2013) defined spirituality as discernment: “Discernment is a human capacity for making decisions that promote human fullness” (p. 207) Studying the confluence of effective leadership practices and spirituality may uncover a new philosophy of leadership. Noghiu (2020) introduced this idea in a framework for spiritually infused leadership, stating, “Spiritual worldviews are more likely to present

fundamental and creative alternatives to many current leadership ideas (such as competition, zero-sum thinking), raising spirituality to a leadership and organizational advantage” (p. 57). Leadership influenced by spirituality not only strengthens effective leadership practices, but also informs judgement in a way that could infuse reate alternatives to leadership practices (Reave, 2005; Dent et al., 2005; Noghiu, 2020).

These findings associated with spiritual leadership created direction for a new leadership paradigm. Great leaders throughout history have been called upon to lead through troubling times. This type of leadership required leaders to find an inner security that lies in their spiritual intelligence (Smith & Gage, 2016). There are now more than 30 MBA programs offering courses in spirituality in the workplace for future leaders (Phipps, 2012). Development of future leaders was, on one level, a matter of intelligence. Sidle (2007) identified five archetypes of intelligence: action, intellect, emotion, spirit, and intuition. The key to unlocking leadership potential was helping leaders find a balance across multiple intelligences, including spiritual intelligence (Smith & Gage, 2016). Although Smith and Gage (2016) did not assign a hierarchy to the types of intelligence, Zohar (2005) made a case for spiritual intelligence, a leadership intelligence that focused on a higher purpose, being the ultimate intelligence, and was the form of intelligence demonstrated by leaders like Churchill, Gandhi, and Mandela (Zohar, 2005). “Leader’s spiritual beliefs, activities, and practices should provide promising new ways to understand how leaders transcend and progress through the stages of human development” (Dent et al., 2005, p. 648). Effective leaders and spiritual practices do share common attributes; however, it is a leader’s spiritual intelligence or leading with a higher purpose that differentiated predicted leadership effectiveness (Wigglesworth, 2006).

Spiritual leadership was most effective during uncertain times because spiritual leadership enhanced team effectiveness by helping workers find value, purpose, and significance

in their work (Yang et al., 2019). Pawar (2014) further supported this finding that subordinates of spiritual leaders felt cared for, concerned about, carefully listened to, and recognized for contributions. However, the study of spirituality and strategic leadership did raise caution, particularly when examining the interpersonal aspects of spiritual leadership. Phipps (2012) questioned the level of analysis possible concerning the complex relationships between the leaders and subordinates throughout an organization. Researchers found that spiritual leadership may be used as a management tool to pry into personal lives (Bell & Taylor, 2003). Additionally, Lund, Dean and Safranski (2008) advised against managing or manipulating an employee's spirituality. Contrarily, an alternative was to maintain a work environment that was open to reasonable levels of spiritual expression.

Yet, despite the concerns, spiritual practices of both the individual and collective continued to be “encouraged as part of day-to-day work life as a way to energize behavior in employees based on meaning and purpose rather than rewards and security” (Konz & Ryan, 1999, p. 627). Motivation of a spiritual leader played a critical role in understanding actions and potential risks. According to one study, leadership grounded in spirituality tended to lend an intrinsic meaning to life (Fry et al., 2017). Further, Fry et al. (2017) defined extrinsic motivation as effort driving performance that was rewarded, that is, the greater the reward the more the effort. Alternatively, a definition of intrinsic motivation was offered as effort driving performance, where the result of the work *was* the reward (Fry et al., 2017). Leaders, particularly spiritual leaders, who are motivated by the results of the work, shared inherent risks. Cregard (2017) published a study examining the potential personal risks of spiritual leaders and warned against “the demands of limitless care and love (empathy) and personal sacrifice, which might result in work overload” (Cregard, 2017, p. 540). In this study of the spiritual leadership of public-school principals, the researcher noted that there was little, if any, extrinsic reward for the

personal sacrifices of a principal, so the risk of overload was highly possible for school leaders who were often intrinsically motivated. Therefore, the balance of risk and reward was important to understand.

Spiritual Leadership in Schools

Leadership practices of the principal is critical to success in schools (May et al., 2012), and this study sought to examine how spirituality informs leadership practices. The literature that specifically focused on spiritual leadership in schools was limited. School leadership has been analyzed from a technical perspective related to the functionality of running a school. Foster (2004) concurred by stating that “the language that has generally contoured school leadership has often been a functionalist positivistic and technical language oriented largely to modernist issues” (p. 178). The role of the modern principal required a new pattern of language. Leading learning communities involved more than rational, value-free techniques and empirical accountability (Dantley, 2010). Dantley (2010) proposed an alternative language of servanthood, purpose, and personal reflection, believing that by shifting the language, the field of education could move beyond the limits of the current educational landscape. This shift in the language may “welcome the totality of self, in particular, the inclusion of the spiritual self” (Dantley, 2010, p. 218).

As the executive leader of a campus responsible for the well-being of children throughout a community, the job of being a principal can be emotionally taxing. Elmeski (2015) pointed to spirituality as an anchor for principals, crediting core spiritual values for keeping their “leadership spark alive” (Elmeski, 2015, p. 10). If spirituality ignites the spark, bureaucracy can seek to extinguish that spark. Dantley (2015) attributed spirituality with “broadening leadership beyond the parameters of hierarchical duty to one of impacting the transformation of societal forms and rituals through the educational process” (p. 440). Gibson (2014) went a step further with a case study of lived experiences of spiritual principals, finding the following:

[...] integration of their spirituality perspectives helped them sustain positivity in the challenging and stressful role of principal leadership, by providing inner strength and a strong sense of purpose. For example, spirituality was believed to help them have a hope for the future, to see the potential in children, and to have a positive disposition in the face of significant educational and social challenges. (p. 528).

This held true not only for the principal, but also for the membership of the campus. Stylianou and Zembylas (2019) encouraged principals to think on a higher, spiritual level because of the potential of creating a more inclusive campus. When spiritual behavior was emphasized, staff felt part of a family environment in a school (Özgenel & Ankaralıoğlu, 2020). A level of influence was achieved when spirituality was shared, as the ideals permeated and elevated the campus as an organization. Rocha and Pinheiro (2021) shared that when individual spirituality aligned, organizational spirituality thrived. Individual spirituality enlightened the purpose of life; thus, organizational spirituality created social good (Rocha & Pinheiro, 2021).

Spiritual leadership may be developed through personal and professional experiences that shape knowledge, emotions, and virtues (Woods, 2007). The awareness gained through spiritual development opportunities shaped an individual's spiritual well-being, that was believed to be predictive of leadership behaviors (Mehdinezhad & Nouri, 2016). Mehdinezhad and Nouri (2016) found that principals who were spiritual leaders were the first to come to school every day, shared breakfast with students and staff, encouraged direct communication, substituted for teachers, and shared leadership responsibilities. Woods (2007), Mehdinezhad and Nouri (2016), and Luckcock (2008) agreed that programs designed to develop spiritual well-being should be a foundational component of leadership development.

Spirituality connected people around purpose. Aspects of effective leadership and spirituality were interrelated and unlocked new levels of leadership potential when truly

understood. Although the literature in school leadership setting was less robust, a clear pattern did emerge. Spiritual leadership in schools may be developed through meaningful interactions and has the potential to create hope, form community, and maintain focus on the higher purpose and reward of the work (Fry, 2003; Gibson, 2014; Rocha & Pinheiro, 2021; Woods, 2007).

Research Goals

The goal of this study was to define the characteristics of spiritual leadership in schools and determine the perceptions of principals on the influence spiritual leadership practices have upon others. An analysis of principals' responses defined the characteristics of spiritual leadership among school leaders, and follow-up interviews detailed how leaders described the relationship of spirituality and leadership actions. The university institutional review board approved this research method design as detailed in the following section.

Method

The methodology for the qualitative research chiefly involved the use of Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA). Bargate (2014) investigated the use of IQA as a method for qualitative research and reported, "What sets IQA apart from other forms of qualitative inquiry is that it provides an audit trail of transparent and traceable procedures where the constituents, and not the researcher as expert, do the analysis and interpretation of their data" (p. 11). IQA is based on the idea that those closest to leading a campus, i.e., principals, were most suitable to analyze the data. Schlehofer et al. (2008) reinforced the marriage of IQA and studies on spirituality through their conclusion that it might be fruitful to ground the definition of spirituality, at least partially, in the lay definitions from the population of interest (p. 423)

The data analysis process was conducted in a collective setting, to allow for collaboration among the principals, with the researcher acting as facilitator for the analysis (Bargate, 2014). The affinities developed by the principals provided the protocol for semi-structured interviews,

wherein the principals' experiences were explored further. IQA is a method where the participants were empowered to do more than just generate data, and the researcher was not considered to be the only person knowledgeable enough to analyze the data. Thus, this study was conducted within the collaborative approach of IQA.

Participants

This study intended to survey 94 campus principals within a 30-mile radius of a regional university in West Texas. For the purposes of this study, private schools were excluded. However, the assistant superintendent of one district requested that their principals be excluded from the study, stating that the topic of this study lacked direct and actionable feedback about instruction and student performance. Due to this request, study participation was reduced to 38 campus principals. Participants were recruited through an email invitation to complete a survey. The participants surveyed answered one question and indicated willingness to participate in two additional protocols—an in-person data analysis focus group and a one-on-one interview. Principals indicating a willingness to continue participation were invited to continue. As a result of the 38 invitations sent, 27 principals completed the survey. Twenty-three principals indicated *strongly agree* or *agree* that spirituality played a role in leadership practices and expressed willingness to participate further in the data analysis process. Ultimately, 14 principals participated in the data analysis focus group, and ten of those principals completed the follow-on interview. The data analysis focus group and interview protocols took place within four weeks of the closing of the survey.

Research Design

This qualitative research design methodology included surveys, focus groups, and interviews as the main sources for data collection and analysis. The data collection and analysis procedures are outlined below.

- I. Survey
- II. Focus Group
 - A. Silent Nominal Group Technique
 - B. Open and Axial Coding
 - C. Identifying Research Affinities
 - D. Developing the Affinity Relationships
- III. Interviews

Surveys

Thirty-eight principals within a 30-mile radius of West Texas A&M University were invited to complete an online survey consisting of two questions. The first question was constructed based on a five-point Likert scale for agreement, that measured the extent the principals felt that leadership was a spiritual practice (1: strongly agree to 5: strongly disagree). The second question was used to identify those participants who would be willing to continue with the next two phases of the study.

Data Analysis

Focus Group

The 23 principals answering *strongly agree* or *agree* were invited to form a focus group that was assigned the collaborative task of generating descriptive data and analyzing the relationships found in the data. Fourteen principals participated in the interactive analysis were facilitated by the researcher, and the interactions were documented in the notes of the researcher. The focus group contributed to the analysis through four processes: a silent nominal group technique, open and axial coding, identifying research affinities, and developing the affinity relationships; each process is defined below. The focus group met in person within four weeks of

closing the survey—the date was determined based on availability of the participants. The in-person data analysis process took approximately one hour, and participants were encouraged to follow local COVID-19 protocols for in-person meetings.

Silent Nominal Group Technique. The silent nominal group technique allowed for participants to brainstorm on a topic without discussion, to prevent the influence of more dominant members of the focus group. Each participant responded to the prompt: You answered on the survey that spirituality plays a role in leadership practices. We would like to know more about those practices. On your own, without help from others, list eight to ten leadership practices that you believe relate to your spirituality. Use the sticky notes for your brainstorming. Please write one idea per sticky note. Participants were given enough time for most of the group to note eight to ten ideas on the sticky notes. At this point, each participant was given an opportunity to share the ideas they had generated. The sharing process provided a brief recap of the ideas written and was not an opportunity for expanding on answers.

Open Coding and Axial Coding. Open coding is a data analysis method that allowed participants to sort responses. The principals were given the prompt: Thank you for sharing your responses. As you listened to others, did you hear similar responses? Did you hear unique responses? Work together as a team to group the sticky notes, based on similarities. You may have some sticky notes that do not fit in a group; therefore, some groups may be made of a single sticky note. Participants required time to arrange their responses into groups. The researcher facilitated the process; however, the participants analyzed their own data. When the participants completed the open coding of the data, a spokesperson was invited to share the thought processes used to group the responses.

Axial coding required participants to refine and narrow the categories established during open coding. Participants analyzed the relationships among the groups of responses, using the

prompt: Now that you have identified the different groups of responses, look for relationships between the groups. Could any of the groups be combined into broader categories? This may require you to remove/add to/revise some of the wording in the responses to clarify big ideas. Work together to clarify the grouping and identify the relationships between the different groups of responses. Collaboratively, participants moved the groups of responses into broader common groups. In this study, open coding of 121 initial responses resulted in 14 categories of common responses. Axial coding narrowed the 14 open codes into three broad affinity groups. The purpose of axial coding was to construct linkages among the data. During the coding process, the researcher solely facilitated and did not participate in the sorting of responses.

Identifying Research Affinities. Affinities are words used to describe commonalities among the responses. Each grouping of sticky notes represented a socially constructed consensus of meaning. The focus group decided on the words or phrases used to describe the affinities, by following the prompt: Now that we have formed groups of responses that are related, work together to name, or categorize the groups based on the meaning of the groupings. You can use a single word or group of words to name the groups. The names given to the different groupings were called affinities. These affinities formed the definition of spiritual leadership practices for this research.

Developing the Affinity Relationships. Finally, the focus group analyzed the affinities through directional coding to demonstrate the relationships among the affinities. Directional arrows were used to show influence of the relationships. For example, an arrow from Affinity #1 to Affinity #2 showed that Affinity #1 influenced Affinity #2.

Interviews

The semi structured interviews took place within two weeks of completion of the data analysis focus group and were approximately 20 minutes long for each participant. Each member

of the focus group was asked to be interviewed using a protocol, developed based on the affinities and relationships identified among them. Ten of the 14 focus group members were able to participate in the interviews. The interviews served as a tool to collect additional data related to leadership actions within the affinities, as well as perceptual data on how spiritual leadership actions influenced the behavior of others. Principals were asked to describe what each affinity looked like in their leadership practices. Additional probing questions generated more specific examples. Finally, the participants described their perceptions of the influence of their actions on the behavior of others on campus. The interviews were conducted using the Zoom video conferencing platform, at a time determined by each principal and the researcher. Each interview was recorded on audio and transcribed by a third party. The principals were given pseudonyms using the alphabet A through J. Principal A is referred to as PA, Principal B is referred to as PB, and so on. The pseudonyms were used to code data from the interviews. A frequency distribution of the coded responses was used to find commonalities throughout the responses.

Findings

The findings of the study are presented in two sub-sections: spiritual leadership affinities and spiritual leadership practices. These two sub-sections will define the characteristics of spiritual leadership in schools in terms of both words and actions. The data were collected through an interactive qualitative analysis and follow-on interviews. The participant analysis determined the themes that emerged. The interviews served as the descriptive portion of the analysis. The rigor of qualitative analysis depended on presenting factual descriptive data, often called “thick data,” so that others reading the results can comprehend and interpret independently (Ponterotto, 2006). The interviews of the principals described the spiritual leadership practices related to the affinities developed by the focus group.

Spiritual Leadership Affinities

The first part of the data analysis aimed to answer the research question: What are the affinities (categories) of spiritual practices among principals? Interactive Qualitative Analysis processes were used to collect, code, and analyze data to produce affinities. First, the focus group responded to the prompt: list eight to ten leadership practices that you believe relate to your spirituality. The focus group members individually generated 121 responses. Next, the responses were open coded creating 14 categories. These 14 categories were further coded to identify three affinities of spiritual leadership: belief in a higher purpose, personal values, and interpersonal relationships. Supporting the theory of Schlehofer et al. (2008), religious beliefs were present when principals were asked to describe spiritual practices. However, as principals conducted the open and axial coding process the responses became more inclusive. Looking specifically at the first affinity, belief in a higher purpose, the responses indicated a religious foundation: direction from God, pray over the school and staff, give God the glory, trust that God has a plan. Yet many of the responses that were coded to the same affinity were not directly related to religion: be at peace with decisions, journey, leading in times such as these. The collaborative process of data analysis could have contributed to the more inclusive language chosen by the principals to describe the affinities.

Table 1

Coding Scheme from the Focus Group: Concept of Spiritual Leadership Practices

Affinities from the axial coding	Categories from the initial open coding	Key Ideas from the individual responses
Belief in a Higher Purpose	Vision	Be at peace with decisions, lead in such a time as these, seek direction from God

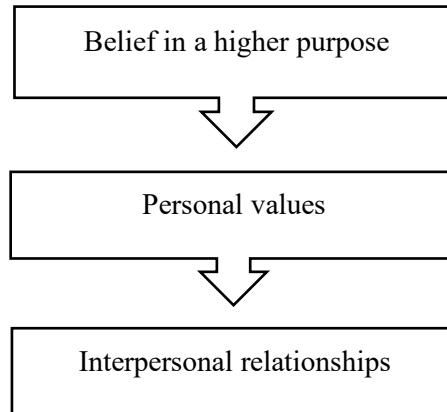
	Prayer	Pray over the school and staff, daily prayer, give God the glory, find peace and calm through prayer
	Calling	Journey, on God's path, felt called to be an educator, trust that God has a plan for me
Personal Values	Forgive	Extend grace, show mercy, start each day new, avoid punishing mistakes, forgive quickly
	Live by example	Embrace differences, treat teachers with respect, live by the Golden Rule, live by the model of Jesus
	Seek advice	Seek guidance from the Lord, inspirational reading, learn from setbacks, daily devotional, surround yourself by like-minded peers
	Love	Be present, believe in the good of others, be genuine, care for self
Interpersonal Relationships	Share faith	Seek opportunities to teach relationships beyond the superficial, speak about personal faith, approach conflict with love

Servant leadership	Lead with heart, serve others, empathy, make the most of resources, focus on the welfare of others
Celebrate success	Spread joy, make connections, put others before self, share gratitude
Community	Family, pay attention, make others feel important, share kindness, focus on the common purpose
Listen	Mentor, be slow to react, think from their perspective, be available, think of the whole person
Inspire	Praise efforts, write notes of encouragement, communicate, take a stand for what is right, be authentic
Be kind	Show compassion, be calm and kind, patient, respectful to the needs of others, and be giving

Once the affinities were identified, the focus group was then asked to describe the relationship among the affinities using the concept of directionality. They described *belief in a higher purpose* as the apex of spiritual leadership. The belief in a higher purpose then influenced their personal values, that influenced their interpersonal relationships. Figure 1 visualizes the relationships described by the focus group.

Figure 1

Relationships among the affinities



Spiritual Leadership Practices

Descriptive data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The descriptive results served to answer the research questions: what is the relationship between these affinities and leadership actions, and how do principals perceive the influence of spiritual leadership on the behavior of others? Participants were asked to describe leadership practices related to the three affinities. They were also asked how they perceived the influence of spiritual leadership practices upon others. The significant findings from the interviews could be summarized into three leadership practices: creating membership, taking pause, and purposefully communicating.

Belief in a Higher Purpose

The interviews began with commentary about the affinity: *belief in a higher purpose*; however, the conversation about purpose started during the focus group. While coding responses, they described their job as principal as more than the technical day to day running of a school.

They shared that this affinity is really about the reason for being, the purpose of life. The interviews revealed their connections with the idea of *higher purpose*.

A frequency distribution of their responses from the interviews is displayed in Table 2 showing the most frequently referenced topic being membership shared by eight of ten participants. Principals described the topic of membership in various ways; however, in general, principals described membership as the importance of people being connected. Many principals described membership through a relationship with one of the other topics. PB explained the relationship between *membership* and *love*, “We have a responsibility to love one another—students, staff, parents, community. Our higher calling is to love others.” While the frequency of *care for others* was only two, PD related the actions of *care for others* to *membership*, “I have been called to care for people. I don’t know everything. I am not great at everything. But I do try to care for people with my whole being.” PJ connected *personal background* of being raised by a single dad to *membership*, “I was raised by a single dad. People invested in me, and I want to give back. I want families to know that it does not matter what your background is our campus will be there for you.” To remaining focused on a higher purpose, principal responses revealed a clear leadership practice of creating membership through actions such as letting others know they are loved, caring for others, and acceptance.

Table 2

Frequency Distribution of Principal Interview Responses for Beliefs in a Higher Purpose

Belief in a higher purpose	
Membership	8
God	5
Love	5
Create opportunity for others	4

Personal background	2
Care for others	2
Share faith	1

Personal Values

While coding responses in the data analysis focus group, principals made a connection between the first and second affinities. They concluded that believing in a higher purpose informs personal values. During the interviews principals described the practices they implement to stay true to their personal values.

The topic of *pause* was most frequently mentioned in eight of ten interviews. The frequency of the other topics discussed related to personal values are displayed in Table 3. Pausing allowed principals to seek guidance through prayer, daily readings, and networks of colleagues, among other connections. PB used *pause* and prayer as an anchor to fight off cynicism, “We are living in a very tough time that is full of finger pointing and placing blame. It is easy to become cynical. Prayer is how I keep from becoming cynical.” *Pause* and a reminder of *grace* was identified as a leadership action for PC, “I have to step back when I begin to get frustrated with others on campus. I remind myself that I need grace daily. I need to extend grace to others.” *Pause* and *gratitude* were also connected throughout the interviews. PE found gratitude through the pause of evening walks, “I make myself go home and walk every night. I focus on something that God has created and be grateful for that. It gives me peace. I start the next day with more gratitude.” The leadership action of *pause* was a central topic during the principal interviews. They used the practice of pause to strengthen their personal value like, *happiness*, *grace*, and *gratitude*.

Table 3*Frequency Distribution of Principal Interview Responses for Personal Values*

Personal values	
Pause	8
Seek guidance	7
Happiness	5
Grace	4
Gratitude	4
Humility	3
Perspective	3
Servant	1
Share faith	1

Interpersonal Relationships

The third affinity, *interpersonal relationships*, was generally described by the principals as how we treat others. Table 4 displays the frequency of topics from the interviews when the principals were asked about *interpersonal relationships*. *Communication* was mentioned most frequently in eight of ten interviews. Many of the principals emphasized that communication starts with listening. PH commented, “Ask a meaningful question and listen. Listen to the whole response. This requires empathy.” They also described the importance of taking time to communicate through writing. PC gave the example, “I write notes to my staff. Sometimes it is just a little celebration or word of encouragement.” Principals connected *communication* throughout the other topics referenced in the interviews. For example, *servant leadership* practices were described by many of the principals, yet the reason for being a servant leader often

related back to a form of *communication*. PE stated, “My actions speak louder than my words. I ask for my staff to do hard things, but I never ask them to do something I am not willing to do myself.” How we communicate was identified as an important leadership action, though what we communicate held importance for the principals, as well. *Share faith* was a topic referenced during the interviews in the other affinities; however, *share faith* was a strong theme, referenced six times, for this affinity. PI indicated, “I am careful not to share my specific faith, but I remind people that we have a higher calling.”

Table 4

Frequency Distribution of Principal Interview Responses: Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal Relationships	
Communication	8
Servant leadership	7
Share Faith	6
Truth	6
Encouragement	5
Role Model	4
Acceptance	3
Focus on Progress	3
Forgiveness	3
Empathy	2
Relief	2
Vision	2
Respect	1

Influence Upon Others

The interviews culminated with the question about the principals' perceptions of whether these spiritual leadership practices had an influence on the behavior of others. The most common response initially was *I do not know, but I hope so*. This question required more prompting than the previous questions; however, the principals provided numerous examples after some reflection. Their examples can be found in Figure 2.

Table 5

Principal Perceptual Responses to the Influence Their Spiritual Leadership Practices

Principal	Statement
PA	If my campus understands we are all here for a common purpose, then when one of us struggle we know it is our responsibility to be there for each other. Needing help isn't a negative thing. When I as the leader make a mistake, I own it publicly. I think we are getting better at just acknowledging a mistake and moving on.
PD	When we share our faith, it holds us accountable to each other – we listen, we offer forgiveness, we show respect to others.
PE	I am so proud because I think grown-ups here model servant leadership and kids do as well. It's contagious.
PF	Being a servant leader is important. Just this week I had to serve meals in the cafeteria because we were short staffed. Helping in the cafeteria, wiping tables, sweeping a mess – that is all servant leadership. And my staff is good to pitch in when we need additional help. They see me do it and they know that is just what we do.

PG	I believe encouragement rubs off on my staff and the kids. Their words of affirmation certainly encourage me to do more.
PI	Forgiveness is becoming part of our culture. I can see it in the way teachers talk with students and parents.

An additional finding was that the focus group benefitted from their social interactions. Through their conversations, this group of principals recognized they share a common purpose. They began asking questions of each other and sharing practices. By simply participating in the interactive data analysis, principals reported heightened spiritual connections. Although the conversations were meaningful, the principals were asked to continue coding to complete the analysis and expressed eagerness to read the final analysis. Through the comradery that the focus group generated, the interest in learning from each other further underscored the concept that effective leaders understand the value in spiritual teachings (Reave, 2005).

Discussion

This study advances the research on spiritual leadership practices among principals. Leadership development is often too narrowly focused as Pearce (2007) suggested leadership development should be more comprehensive, including a broader set of behaviors and competencies, including spirituality. Therefore, gaining insight into the concept of spiritual leadership in schools is an important study especially for those charged with leadership development.

The qualitative research design encouraged collaboration among principals to describe spiritual leadership and provide examples of practices influenced by their spirituality. Through a data analysis focus group, the principals were able to identify three affinities of spiritual leadership: belief in a higher purpose, personal values, and interpersonal relationships. They were

also able to describe how the affinities related to each other. The principals discussed that when we understand that life has a higher purpose, then our personal values should reflect that higher purpose and our personal values influence how we treat others. Interviews revealed leadership practices related to each affinity.

Of those principals who completed the initial survey, 85% agreed or strongly agreed that leadership is a spiritual practice. This validated the findings of Woods (2007) that spiritual experiences among principals are widespread. Throughout this process several other principals who had learned of the study asked if they could be included in future conversations about spiritual leadership. This could be considered further evidence that this topic is relevant and has a wide reach. If principals broadly share a belief in spiritual leadership, then the natural progression of thought leads to the second research question.

The in-person data analysis focus group coding reflected the Gibson (2014) case study that described spirituality as having internal dimensions in terms of beliefs and values, as well as external applications pertaining to relationships. The focus group displayed the relationship between the affinities in a linear path. They explained that our beliefs in a higher purpose define our personal values, and those values influence the interactions we have with others.

Semi structured interviews provided an opportunity for principals to give examples of leadership practices related to the three affinities. Although the interviews took place through an online video platform and had a formal format, the participants seemed immediately at ease. They openly shared stories of faith, difficult childhoods, professional failures, and personal struggles. The willingness of the participants to freely share in the interviews could support the theory presented by Yang et al (2019) asserting that spiritual leaders focus on purpose and meaning can positively impact the climate of an organization. The interviews revealed a focus on three leadership practices: creating membership, taking pause, and purposefully communicating.

Spiritual leaders create membership. They build campus communities where people feel connected by a common purpose. This supported the theory Fry (2003) introduced wherein spiritual leaders motivate others through a sense of calling and membership. The principal interviews revealed that spiritual leaders who believe in a higher calling were focused on helping students, teachers, parents, and community members feel like they belong and are appreciated.

Spiritual leaders find power in pause. They know the importance of slowing down to seek guidance. The interviews revealed the business of being a principal. They shared stories of juggling responsibilities and late night or weekend work. When they were asked about practices, they use to maintain their personal values, they described different ways to pause. Some took walks, some read, others would sit on the side of the bed for a few minutes in the morning to find gratitude, and many referenced prayer. Regardless of how they decided to pause, the purpose seemed to be about recentring on the higher purpose and recommitting to personal values.

Spiritual leaders value purposeful communication. Zohar (2005) identified traits of spiritually intelligent leaders and found that they ask deeper ‘why’ questions and listen to understand the wider context. The principal responses supported Zohar’s findings. They practiced asking meaningful questions and genuinely listened with empathy. The principals also regularly reminded people of the higher purpose of the work through personal interactions, faculty meetings, and written correspondence.

This research question was focused on principal perception. The interviews bogged down here. The principals, in general, were unsure if their spiritual leadership practices influenced the behavior of others. Follow-up probing questions helped them make connections or gave them time to recall examples. This is an area worthy of additional study.

Limitations

The limitations of this study included the population sampled and the accuracy of self-reported data. The study focused on school leaders within the Texas Panhandle; therefore, the study may not be generalizable to all school leaders. In addition, self-reported data from school leaders may not accurately reflect the perception of teachers on campus.

Implications

This study contributed to the growing body of research related to spiritual leadership, specifically the spiritual leadership practices of principals. Through collaborative processes and individual interviews, the research questions were explored. The IQA methodology supported the theory proposed by Schlehofer et al. (2008) that definitions of spirituality be grounded in the language of the population of interest. The findings of this study clearly defined spiritual leadership affinities and provided examples of leadership practices connecting beliefs about the human spirit to purpose and actions (Pink, 2009).

The research presented has significant implications in four areas: research design, recruitment and hiring, professional development, and further study.

Implications for research design

Qualitative researchers who are comfortable facilitating processes should consider using IQA. The participants shared meaningful dialogue that informed the study. The interactive focus group analyzed a very complex subject and gave the researcher lay persons' perspectives and definitions. The community building in the focus group contributed to an open, friendly interview climate.

Implications for recruitment and hiring

This research suggests the recommendation that organizations consider selecting individuals with characteristics and values that predispose them to spiritual leadership (Wang et

al., 2019). Human resource directors should consider designing interview questions that encourage responses related to the three affinities: What do you believe is your higher purpose for being a principal? What are some of your personal values? How do those values influence your relationships with others? A review of principal evaluation systems could provide an opportunity to strengthen feedback to principals within the themes identified in this research: membership, pause, and purposeful communication. A consideration should be given to teacher hiring, also. Future principals are classroom teachers today. Interview questions with a spiritual component could be enlightening when hiring teachers.

Implications for professional development

School districts should provide leadership training that focuses on beliefs in a higher purpose, personal values, and interpersonal relationships expanding the toolkit for principal practices. Provide opportunity for leaders to examine complex situations with others through a spiritual lens. The use of IQA could be leveraged to help unpack complex problems.

Implications for further study

Future studies could focus the different perceptions of influence of spiritual leadership practices upon others. If the principal has a higher calling to create membership on campus, do students form social groups differently? If the principal models the importance of pause, do teachers see the value of pause during instruction? If principals focus on asking better questions and pay attention to the answers, do parent meetings function differently? Additional study could validate this study by replicating it across broader ranges of schools and across various geographic regions. Additional exploration of the relationship of spiritual leadership and school performance would add value to existing knowledge.

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