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WHO'S NEXT: ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS' PROCESS FOR IDENTIFYING FUTURE
SCHOOL LEADERS IN WASHTENAW COUNTY, MICHIGAN

By

Jennifer M. Bookout

THESIS

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WHO'S NEXT: ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS' PROCESS FOR IDENTIFYING FUTURE
SCHOOL LEADERS IN WASHTENAW COUNTY, MICHIGAN

This thesis by <u>Jennifer Bookout</u> is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis
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ABSTRACT

WHO'S NEXT: ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS' PROCESS FOR IDENTIFYING FUTURE SCHOOL LEADERS IN WASHTENAW COUNTY, MICHIGAN

By

Jennifer Bookout

This qualitative study investigated how six experienced elementary school principals in Washtenaw County identify internal candidates for future principal positions, aiming to enhance understanding in educational leadership and succession planning. The research addresses two primary questions: (1) How do principals identify prospective internal candidates for school leadership? and (2) What competencies or characteristics do principals use to determine candidates' suitability for school leadership? Three themes emerged for the first question: informal recognition of leadership potential through daily interactions; providing leadership opportunities such as leading committees or mentoring teachers; and engaging in direct conversations about career goals. For the second question, five themes emerged: instructional leadership, where candidates demonstrated a deep understanding of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; personal influence, characterized by self-confidence, integrity, and the ability to inspire others; relationship building, with an emphasis on maintaining strong relationships with staff, students, parents, and the community; resilience and adaptability in handling the complexities of school leadership; and decision making, with the ability to make sound decisions under pressure. The study underscores the crucial role of school principals in identifying and nurturing potential school leaders from within their schools. The identified competencies align closely with established educational leadership standards, suggesting that a strategic and systematic approach to leadership identification and development can ensure a strong pipeline of effective leaders prepared to drive positive change in schools.

DEDICATION

To my family, for their unwavering support and endless encouragement. Your belief in me has been my constant source of strength and inspiration. Thank you for your understanding and patience with the many evenings and weekends I spent away from you while working on this thesis. Your love and support have made this possible.

To all the mentors who have guided and encouraged me to step up and lead, your wisdom and faith in my abilities have been invaluable. Thank you for seeing in me what I did not always see in myself.

And to those who aspire to lead but doubt their potential, this work is dedicated to you. Remember, leadership is not defined by innate talent but by courage, perseverance, and the willingness to grow. You have what it takes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the members of my thesis committee for their invaluable support and guidance throughout this journey. Special thanks to my thesis chair, Dr. Bethney Bergh. Your encouragement, feedback, and expertise have been instrumental in shaping this thesis and my graduate studies at Northern Michigan University. I am deeply grateful for your unwavering support and dedication to helping me grow as an educational leader.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA), Seventh Edition.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background and Identification of the Problem

In the educational landscape, the role of a principal holds significant influence over the success and development of schools. Principals play a pivotal role in shaping the school culture, implementing effective policies, and fostering an environment conducive to student achievement (Grissom, et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004). With increasing numbers of principals who anticipate leaving the profession within the next five years (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2023; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2021), the need to identify suitable candidates for future principal positions has become critical.

While looking for external candidates is common practice, many educational organizations are increasingly recruiting internal candidates (Sabina & Colwell, 2018; Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011). Promoting internal candidates allows schools to capitalize on the existing talent pool and foster professional growth within their own ranks. Research demonstrates that internal candidates act as stabilizing agents by fostering a sense of continuity which positively impacts school culture and student achievement (Pendola & Fuller, 2021; Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011). Promoting from within may also lessen the risk of a bad hire, as "internally developed principals have a personal history and observable track record, so district leaders should have a better sense of the strengths of the candidate and appropriateness of their placement" (Pendola & Fuller, 2021, p. 2). Internal hires have also been found to be more stable in their positions with significantly lower rates of turnover (Pendola & Fuller, 2021).

In addition to the practical concerns of succession planning, leadership development is also embedded in principals' job responsibilities. The 2012 and 2021 *Michigan Standards for the Preparation of School Principals* include references to the necessity of principals engaging in the

practice of distributed leadership (Michigan State Board of Education 2012, 2021). Distributed leadership requires principals to share responsibility and empower their staff to lead in formal and informal ways. It shifts the role of the principal from being "someone at the apex of the organization, making decisions, to seeing their core role as developing the leadership capacity and capability of others" (Harris, A., 2012). In addition to this, both of the two administrative evaluation tools recommended by the state of Michigan, the MASA School ADvance Administrator Evaluation Instrument and the Michigan Multidimensional Leadership Performance System, include leadership development as a required component of effective school leadership (Michigan Department of Education, n.d.; Reeves et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2014).

Despite this, however, there is little preparation provided to principals about how to identify and develop talent internally. A survey of the primary principal preparation programs in Michigan, including the University of Michigan, Eastern Michigan University, Northern Michigan University, Michigan State University, Grand Valley State University, Western Michigan University, Wayne State University, and Central Michigan University found that none of these programs offered any coursework that explicitly prepared principals to identify future leaders. Given that identifying and developing future school leaders is part of a principal's expected job responsibilities and that principal preparation programs do not teach this skill, how then do school principals carry out this crucial task?

While some school districts participate in a 'grow your own' principal preparation program, this is more the exception than the rule (Cary & Foran, 2006; Joseph, 2009; Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011). In most districts, internal candidates for leadership are identified informally by a process described by Myung et al. (2011) as 'tapping' in which an

administrator notices something noteworthy about a teacher and encourages them to pursue leadership. Myung et al. (2011) found that ninety-three percent of principals and eighty-nine percent of assistant principals were tapped by an average of three different individuals before assuming a formal leadership position. What process and criteria, however, do principals use to determine whom to tap?

Purpose Statement

A review of the existing research on principal preparation focuses mainly on the different components of leadership preparation programs. There is little research, however, on how individuals are selected to participate in these programs. This is a critical omission, as "at the foundation of succession management is the definition and identification of talent--what it looks like [and] who has it" (Fulmer & Conger, 2004, p. 45). If we are to have a robust principal pipeline, we must ensure that we have both the right content and the right participants.

The process of identifying which teachers have the greatest potential for leadership is complex. While a teacher may be a high performer in their current position, that doesn't always translate into success as a leader. As explained by Jackie White, director of the Delaware Academy for School Leadership, "We [tend to] think just because a person is a great teacher, that they could be a great principal. But what we're learning is, being a great teacher should certainly be one of the components—but it takes a certain skill set to be a school leader" (Wilson, 2009, as cited by Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011). In order to successfully identify future leaders, principals need to have an understanding of the skill set required to be an effective school leader and an individual's potential to succeed at the next level.

The purpose of this study was to determine the process and criteria used by current elementary principals in Washtenaw County to identify prospective school leaders.

3

Understanding this process sheds light on the factors influencing principals' decision-making and the qualities they believe are essential for successful leadership at the building level.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research was grounded in the transformational theory of leadership, initially proposed by James V. Downton in the 1970s and further developed by James MacGregor Burns and Bernard M. Bass. According to this theory, transformational leaders possess certain behaviors and qualities that enable them to inspire and influence their followers, ultimately leading to enhanced performance and growth (Anderson, 2017; Hay, 2006). Rather than viewing leadership as operating from the top-down, transformational leaders embrace a collective approach in which they seek to increase the capacity of others (Sun, 2010). Leadership development is an integral aspect of transformational leadership theory as it seeks to create positive change in followers with the end goal of developing followers into leaders (Burns, 1978).

In contrast to the trait theory of leadership in which leadership is an innate quality reserved for those with specific personality traits, transformational leadership theory posits that leadership is "an observable pattern of practices and behaviors and a definable set of skills and abilities" that can be learned by anyone (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 335). Therefore, those who aspire to leadership positions can learn to become effective leaders through consistent practice, feedback, and coaching. By the same token, those who wish to identify future leaders can utilize the transformational leadership framework to look for those who exhibit the desired practices and behaviors.

Although there is no universal agreement on the individual competencies that constitute transformational leadership (Hay, 2006), most models are based on the Four Is: Individual Consideration, Intellectual Stimulation, Inspirational Motivation, and Idealized Influence (Bass & Riggio, 2005). The Four Is model was further expanded upon by Kouzes and Posner (2012) who defined a set of five exemplary leadership practices: Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart. For the purposes of this thesis, I utilized Kouzes and Posner's (2012) framework. My research examined how school leaders use the key competencies of transformational leadership to identify future leaders.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Impact of Principal Quality and Turnover

There is a sizable body of research that points to the importance of having highly effective principals in schools. Effective leadership positively impacts various factors including teacher satisfaction, school culture, staff retention, and instructional quality (Boyd et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2012; Louis et al., 2010). The impact of a quality principal is so significant, in fact, that it has been found to be second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that impact academic achievement (Grissom et al., 2021).

When an effective principal leaves a school, however, the negative impacts on school culture, student achievement, and teacher turnover can be just as significant (Ashley, 2013; Fuller, 2012; Henry & Harbatkin, 2019). When principal turnover occurs, school improvement initiatives often stop or stagnate. It is estimated that it can take between three to five years to regain the momentum lost when a principal leaves a school (Henry & Hartbatkin, 2019). The impact of turnover is further compounded if the incoming principal is less effective than the departing principal (Henry & Hartbatkin, 2019).

Despite this, principal turnover is a common occurrence. The average tenure of a principal is only four years with one in five schools losing their principal each year (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Principal turnover is even more common in schools serving low-income, minority, or low-achieving students (Henry & Harbatkin, 2019; Levin & Bradley, 2019). The stresses and disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic seem to have only increased this trend, with nearly forty percent of principals indicating that they planned to leave their positions within the next three years (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2021).

Succession Planning

Due to the high rate of principal turnover and its associated negative impacts, educational organizations should invest in ongoing high-quality succession planning for the principalship. Succession planning is an ongoing and proactive process that attempts to ensure the continuity of leadership by cultivating talent within the organization (Fusarelli et al., 2011; Riddick, 2009; Sanschagrin, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2011). This concept is common practice in the business world but is relatively new in the education sector (Brundrett et al., 2009). While there is not yet extensive research on its application in schools, there is increasing pressure for schools to practice succession planning in order to build strong principal pipelines that "can help ensure that every school is staffed with highly effective school leaders who can work successfully with communities, teachers, staff, and students" (Goldring et al., 2023, p. 1).

A review of the existing literature on the succession planning process in educational institutions includes identifying future leaders among existing staff as the necessary first step (Fusarelli et al., 2011; Goldring et al., 2023; Riddick, 2009; Sanschagrin, 2019; Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011; Zepeda et al., 2011). According to Lovely (2004), we must "encourage those with promise to become school leaders. Securing effective candidates to take over when we're gone will guarantee a successful future for students, schools, the nation, and the world" (p. 18). Goodlad (2004) further recommended that districts view identifying teachers with leadership potential and developing them for principal positions as their top priority. Despite this, however, few districts have a systematic process in place to do so (Fusarelli et al., 2011; Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011). As a result, only thirty-three percent of teachers report having been encouraged to pursue leadership roles and just twenty-three percent believe that the most talented people in their schools and districts move into formal leadership positions (Bierly & Shy, 2013).

Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership offers promise as a way for school principals to engage in succession planning. Through the practice of sharing leadership responsibilities and decision-making across various stakeholders within a school community, principals have the opportunity to identify teachers who exhibit the skills and desire to move into formal leadership positions (Hargreaves, 2005; Harris, 2012; Klar et al., 2016). Research also indicates a positive relationship between distributed leadership and improvements in school culture, teacher retention, and student learning (Harris, 2012; Klar et al., 2016). For these reasons, the 2012 *Michigan Standards for the Preparation of School Principals* emphasizes the importance of distributed leadership with five references to its practice in Michigan Standard 3, which centers around the effective management of school organizations, operations, and resources (Michigan State Board of Education, 2012).

Interestingly, the 2021 *Michigan Standards for the Preparation of School Principals* only refers to distributed leadership once (Michigan State Board of Education, 2021). At first glance, the decreased emphasis on distributed leadership seems to indicate a shift in how Michigan views the role of the principal, with a move towards a more hierarchical leadership approach and less priority on developing professional capacity. If this were the case, it could have significant implications for succession planning as it would reduce incentives and opportunities for principals to promote leadership development among current teachers.

Upon closer examination, however, the concept of distributed leadership and leadership development is even more deeply embedded in the updated standards. A significant shift between the 2012 and 2021 standards is evident in the introductory sentence stem for each standard. In the 2012 standards, principals were changed to "apply knowledge that promotes the

success of each student" (Michigan State Board of Education, 2012, pp. 4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24, 27). In contrast, the 2021 standards now emphasize the principals' mandate to "demonstrate the capacity to promote the current and *future* [emphasis added] success and well-being of each student and *adult* [emphasis added] (Michigan State Board of Education, 2021, pp. 10-13). This revised language clearly indicates that fostering staff capacity is equally crucial as enhancing student capacity.

Furthermore, the Michigan State Board of Education (2021) introduced a new standard, Standard 7, which explicitly outlines the principal's responsibilities in developing staff and cultivating professional capacity in others. These collective changes underscore an expanded emphasis on principals' role in intentionally identifying and nurturing the leadership abilities of their staff.

Tapping and Sponsored Mobility

One of the most common methods used to identify internal candidates for leadership is an informal process referred to in the research as *tapping* or *sponsored mobility* (Lortie, 2009; Myung et al., 2011). In this approach, principals select a candidate from the existing teacher pool based on their personal perception of the candidate's suitability for leadership. In his study of suburban principals in Chicago, Lortie (2009) found that three out of every four principals within the district had been tapped for the principalship. Myung et al. (2011) found an even higher number in their study based in Miami-Dade County in Florida, with ninety-three percent of principals reporting that they were a recipient of tapping.

One of the benefits of tapping is that it allows those in leadership positions to identify and encourage teachers who demonstrate aptitude for leadership, rather than relying on individuals to

self-select themselves (Myung et al., 2011). Myung et al. (2011) explain that current principals have insight into the demands of the job, which may make them better able to understand the needed attributes and skills of successful building leaders. They also have the benefit of proximity, which provides them with the opportunity to observe teachers in a variety of settings and situations.

Myung et al. (2011) found that tapping seems to be effective at motivating teachers to consider a career in leadership. The authors noted that a teacher who had been tapped was more than three times as likely to report interest in becoming a principal as a teacher who had not been tapped. Furthermore, principals were significantly more likely to tap teachers with higher rates of leadership skills and competencies as measured by internal and external ratings (Myung et al., 2011). This finding indicates that principals may be well-equipped to identify leadership skills in their staff.

While tapping holds promise for building a strong principal pipeline, there are significant equity concerns. Kanter (1993) found that sponsored mobility practices such as tapping are frequently associated with perpetuating systems of inequality. She found that there is a strong tendency for those in authority to promote others who share similar demographic characteristics, a process that she referred to as homosocial reproduction.

Myung et al. (2011) uncovered strong evidence of this with gender and race being significant predictors of being tapped, even after controlling for all other variables. The authors found that having a principal of the same race greatly increased the odds of a teacher being tapped for a leadership position. While they considered the possibility that principals may be intentionally looking for future leaders who were representative of the student population, they ultimately found that there was no correlation between the demographics of the school and the

race of the tapped teachers (Myung, et al., 2011). This suggests that principals are more likely to tap teachers of the same race. They also found that male teachers were twice as likely to be tapped as female teachers, even after controlling for leadership experiences, preparation for leadership, and teacher interest in the principalship. Interestingly, this held true even for female principals, which indicates that both male and female principals have a bias towards male candidates.

Myung et al.'s (2011) research on tapping indicates that while principals may be effectively tapping teachers who demonstrate leadership potential, they also unconsciously favor men and those of their own race. The authors conclude that districts should continue to encourage tapping but base it around an analysis of leadership competencies rather than principals' individual perceptions which may be subject to unconscious bias. They encourage districts "to explicitly define the competencies that make for an effective school leader as well as how those competencies can be identified early in teachers" (Myung et al., 2011, p. 723).

Leadership Competencies

While researchers agree on the need to identify future leaders using defined competencies (Bierly & Shy, 2013; Huber & Pashiardis, 2008; Myung et al., 2011; Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011; Turnbull et al., 2013, 2015; Zepeda et al., 2011), there is little consensus on what those competencies should be. Some researchers argue, in fact, that relying on a single set of competencies could be misguided, as skills and competencies may vary based on the leadership context (Fusarelli et al., 2011; Huber & Pashiardis, 2008; Pont et al., 2008). As a result, many researchers advocate for the local creation of leadership competencies created and revised collaboratively with multiple stakeholders in the district (Bierly & Shy, 2013; Fusarelli et al., 2011; Turnbull et al., 2013; Zepeda et al., 2011).

A benefit of having a defined list of leadership competencies is that it provides "consistent expectations and a common language around what great performance looks like" (Bierly & Shy, 2013). It also promotes transparency, reduces bias, and motivates employees by providing them with concrete next steps (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011; Turnbull et al., 2015). The use of leadership competencies in developing a robust principal pipeline can also eliminate individuals who may have the necessary qualifications for leadership, but not the necessary skills and disposition (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011).

In many districts with formalized leadership succession plans, the leadership competencies used to identify future leaders are based on the current standards for principals (Goldring et al., 2023; Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011; Turnbull et al., 2013, 2015; Zepeda et al., 2011). While this allows for greater continuity as individuals transition into the principalship, it can limit their usability in identifying future leaders as many of the standards do not easily apply to teachers' roles and responsibilities. It would be difficult, for example, for a teacher to demonstrate proficiency in standards related to budget oversight or teacher evaluation as they do not have the opportunity to practice these skills in a classroom setting. It also adds complexity and ambiguity as principals and prospective leaders must determine how standards could be enacted differently in a classroom context versus a school context.

For this reason, some districts and organizations have expanded their leadership standards to include a specific set of leadership competencies directly for aspiring leaders. Alabama, for example, created a *Continuum for Instructional Leadership Development* that describes each of its leadership indicators at five distinct levels of development: Pre-Service Leadership, Developing Leadership, Collaborative Leadership, Accomplished Leadership, and Distinguished Leadership (Alabama State Board of Education, 2005). The continuum is meant to offer "a

shared vision and common language to guide an instructional leader's professional development across their career" and serve as a "tool for self-assessment, personal and collegial reflection, goal setting, and professional learning" (Alabama State Board of Education, 2005, p. 5).

Denver Public Schools designed the *LEAD Growth and Performance System* with an intentional focus on identifying and developing great leaders through learning and continuous improvement (Denver Public Schools, 2022). The *LEAD Framework* includes a competency progression that defines effective performance in each of its six key leadership competencies: Instructional Expertise, Vision and Strategy, People and Culture, Community and Equity, Personal and Values, and Operations and Organization, across the principal, assistant principal, and leader of others (aspiring leader) levels. The *LEAD Framework* further breaks down each competency into distinct indicators with a seven-point rubric for measuring performance at each level, as well as listing "career stallers" which are behaviors that would limit future leadership growth (Denver Public Schools, 2022, p. 54). It also includes a suggested list of items that would support evidence of impact and a series of guiding questions that individuals or supervisors can use to promote self-reflection.

The KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) charter school organization utilizes a *Leadership Progression Roadmap* that describes the competencies needed at various leadership levels (KIPP, n.d., 2009). Similar to the other models, the *Leadership Progression Roadmap* lists the specific behaviors within each competency for each level of leadership using a standardized rubric. KIPP takes this one step further by also including a detailed explanation of what an individual can expect when transitioning from one position to another by listing the necessary shifts needed in the areas of competency, time, and perspective.

While the Alabama, Denver, and KIPP models are outliers to the normal practice of leadership succession in schools, they offer an innovative approach to identifying and developing future leaders and building a more robust principal pipeline.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

The process of identifying suitable candidates for principal positions is a critical aspect of educational leadership and plays a pivotal role in the success and development of schools. Principals are tasked with selecting individuals who possess the necessary leadership qualities and competencies to lead the school effectively. Limited research exists on the criteria used by principals when identifying candidates for principal positions within their educational institutions. By gaining a deeper understanding of the process, this research contributes to the enhancement of leadership development and succession planning in the field of educational administration. The following research questions and methodology guided data collection and interpretation.

Research Questions

1. How do elementary principals in Washtenaw County identify prospective internal candidates for school leadership?

2. What competencies or characteristics do elementary principals in Washtenaw County use to determine prospective candidates' suitability for school leadership?

Methodology

The chosen methodology for this study was an interpretive qualitative design. Qualitative research is an approach used to explore and uncover the meaning individuals or groups provide to explain their experiences and actions (Creswell, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is meant to provide a framework to explore a process, event, or phenomenon rather than explain an outcome (Creswell, 2017). An interpretative qualitative design allows researchers to participate

in the process of interpretation and sense-making to derive insights and understand participants' experiences from their own perspectives. Utilizing this methodology provided an opportunity to uncover the underlying meanings and perspectives related to the criteria employed by principals in the candidate identification process.

Design

The primary method of data collection was individual semi-structured interviews conducted in person or via a digital video conferencing platform (Creswell, 2017). The interview protocol was designed to explore the criteria used by principals, the rationale behind their decisions, and any contextual factors influencing their choices. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their experiences and insights freely. Probing questions were used to elicit detailed responses and uncover nuances in the decision-making process. Detailed notes were taken during and after each interview to capture observations, non-verbal cues, and personal reflections. Participants were recruited through an email invitation sent to experienced elementary principals in Washtenaw County. Interviews were scheduled at a time and location convenient for the participants. The interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed for analysis.

Participants

The participants for this study were drawn from the population of elementary principals in Washtenaw County. Washtenaw County is located in southeast Michigan and has a total student population of 43,352 students with 4,362 teachers and 351 school administrators (Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2024). It includes nine

traditional school districts containing forty-five elementary schools, and twelve charter school organizations containing nine elementary schools. This provided a total population of fifty-four elementary principals. I reduced this population by only including principals who have five or more years of experience as a school leader. Research shows that principals become more effective over time (Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlsrom, & Anderson, 2010; Béteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012). Setting a parameter of five years increased the likelihood that the sample consisted of effective principals who understand the skills needed for effective leadership. In order to identify the participants, I sent an email to all elementary principals with five or more years of experience inviting them to participate in the study. Out of these responses, I randomly selected eight principals to participate, with a minimum expectation of five principals. A sample size of five to eight falls within the recommended number of participants for this type of study (Creswell, 2017).

Analysis and Validity

After the data is collected, the transcripts underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns related to the process and criteria used by principals. This analysis involved the systematic identification, coding, and categorization of data into meaningful themes. The themes were reviewed and refined to capture the essential aspects of the decision-making process (Creswell, 2017). To ensure the validity of the study, several strategies were employed. These included member checking, where participants reviewed and validated the findings, and peer debriefing, where the research process and initial findings were discussed with colleagues to gain multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2017).

Potential Bias

This study's population was drawn from elementary school principals of Washtenaw County. As a current member of this group, I have existing professional relationships with many of the prospective participants. These relationships could introduce social desirability bias into the research, as participants may be more likely to respond to questions in a way that creates a positive impression (Sheth, 2010). If respondents provide answers in order to present themselves in a favorable light or in ways they believe align with my expectations, the collected data might not accurately reflect their actual behaviors (Sheth, 2010).

I also have prior experience in the field of leadership development as I helped to create a formal program for teachers who were interested in pursuing a career in school leadership. As part of this experience, I developed criteria for school principals to use when evaluating prospective candidates for leadership positions. As a result, I have preestablished ideas and expectations about how principals should evaluate and develop leadership potential. In order to avoid introducing my own bias into this study, it was important for me to practice bracketing and put aside my own preconceptions so I could focus on accurately capturing the experiences of the research participants (Ahern, 1999; Creswell, 2017). During my research, I continuously reflected on how my preexisting beliefs might be impacting my interpretation of the data (Ahern, 1999). Member checking and peer debriefing was also utilized in order to ensure that my analysis aligned with participants' experiences (Creswell, 2017).

Limitations

The research's focus on elementary principals in Washtenaw County may limit the

generalizability of findings to a broader context. Washtenaw County is home to several major educational and medical institutions, including the University of Michigan, Eastern Michigan University, and Concordia University, as well as the University of Michigan Hospital and Trinity Health Ann Arbor Hospital. The presence of these institutions contributes to a younger median age (35.1 years in Washtenaw vs. 40.1 years in Michigan), a higher percentage of residents with a bachelor's degree or higher (57.9% in Washtenaw vs. 32.1% in Michigan), a higher median household income ($79,665 in Washtenaw vs. $66,986 in Michigan), a higher mobility rate (4.7% in Washtenaw vs. 1.6% in Michigan), and a greater percentage of households where a language other than English is spoken (15.5% in Washtenaw vs. 10.2% in Michigan) (United States Census Bureau, 2022). The unique demographic, economic, and educational characteristics of Washtenaw County may influence the principals' perspectives and practices.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH RESULTS

This qualitative study focused on investigating the process, competencies, and criteria used by six experienced elementary school principals in Washtenaw County when identifying internal candidates for future principal positions. The principals, comprising four females and two males, all hold at least a Master of Arts in Educational Leadership, with two possessing an Educational Specialist degree in Leadership. Representing four different districts, these principals oversee student populations ranging from 389 to 513 and teacher populations from 25 to 34. Their administrative experience spans from 7 to 21 years, and their classroom experience ranges from 9 to 14 years. The following table summarizes the demographic information of the principals.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants

Principal	Gender	Highest Level of Education	District	Student Population	Teacher Population	Years of Administrative Experience	Years of Classroom Experience
Davis	Male	MA	District 4	389	28	21	9
Gates	Female	MA	District 3	477	26	7	14
Martin	Male	MA	District 2	445	28	19	9
Reed	Female	Ed.S.	District 2	513	34	19	10
Sinclair	Female	MA	District 1	435	31	9	11
Walker	Female	Ed.S.	District 1	485	25	8	11

Through in-depth interviews with these experienced principals, the research sought to gain insights into the decision-making process, key considerations, and the significance of various criteria in selecting potential future leaders within the educational setting. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview transcripts. The interview transcripts were carefully reviewed, coded, and organized into categories representing key aspects of the decision-making process. To ensure confidentiality, the names of research participants have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Research Question One

The research question: *How do elementary principals in Washtenaw County identify prospective internal candidates for school leadership?*, led to the identification of three themes: Informal Recognition of Leadership Potential, Providing Leadership Opportunities, and Direct Conversations about Leadership Aspirations.

Informal Recognition of Leadership Potential

All of the principals interviewed for this study stated that there was no formal, systematic process in place for identifying internal leadership candidates in their district. They also revealed that they had received no formal training on leadership identification that could help them recognize prospective candidates for leadership positions. As a result, all six principals utilized a variety of informal methods to recognize leadership potential in their staff. These methods included noticing teachers who took the initiative in implementing new programs, were perceived as leaders by their peers, demonstrated a willingness to take on additional responsibilities, or expressed an interest in leadership positions. Principal Chase Martin admitted,

"Sometimes I'm just looking to see who raises their hand to say they want to be a part of different things in the building" (C. Martin, personal communication, January 25, 2024).

Principals also observed how staff members interacted with students, colleagues, and parents in everyday situations, as well as their ability to problem-solve and make a positive impact within the school environment. The principals felt that these informal recognitions, rooted in observations of teachers' proactive involvement and positive impact on the school community, serve as crucial indicators of their potential for assuming leadership roles within the school.

Providing Leadership Opportunities

The principals also actively sought to provide different leadership opportunities for their staff to identify and nurture leadership potential. These leadership opportunities included appointing teachers to lead committees, taking on mentoring roles for other staff, spearheading special projects, facilitating professional development sessions, or developing community outreach programs. In order to reduce bias, Principal Elizabeth Sinclair emphasized the importance of creating a systematized approach to providing leadership opportunities, ensuring that all staff members, including those who may be hesitant initially, are considered for leadership roles. Offering a variety of leadership opportunities allowed principals to empower teachers to develop and showcase their leadership skills and served as a practical way for the principals to observe and assess teachers' readiness for future leadership positions within the school.

Direct Conversations about Leadership Aspirations

In addition to informal observations of teachers and providing leadership opportunities, the principals also engaged in direct conversations with teachers about their leadership

aspirations. These conversations often involved discussing teachers' career goals, interests in professional growth, and willingness to take on leadership roles. For instance, Principal Katherine Gates mentioned encouraging a teacher to pursue an instructional coach position after noticing their interest and readiness for such a role. Similarly, Principal Scott Davis emphasized the importance of discussing teachers' potential for leadership during evaluation processes. Based on teachers' goals and interests, principals provided opportunities for their staff to take on more responsibilities. By openly addressing teachers' aspirations and aligning them with available leadership opportunities, principals gained valuable insights into individuals' motivations, aspirations, and readiness for leadership positions within the school community.

Research Question Two

Five themes emerged from the data in response to the research question: *What competencies or characteristics do elementary principals in Washtenaw County use to determine prospective candidates' suitability for school leadership?* These themes were categorized as Instructional Leadership, Personal Influence, Relationship Building, Resilience and Adaptability, and Decision Making.

Instructional Leadership

Principals consider teachers' instructional leadership as a pivotal factor in identifying their potential for assuming a more formal leadership role within the school community. As explained by Principal Scott Davis, "You can't be an effective principal unless you were first an effective teacher" (S. Davis, personal communication, January 5, 2024). While the number of years of teaching experience is certainly a consideration, the focus is more heavily weighted on

the candidate's effectiveness as a teacher, their subject expertise, and their success in the classroom.

Principals generally prefer successful teaching experience, typically ranging from 5 to 10 years, when evaluating potential leaders from within their schools. They believe that this experience not only demonstrates a candidate's commitment to the teaching profession but also their ability to develop and refine their instructional skills over time. Principals look for evidence of sustained success in the classroom, as measured by student achievement, engagement, and overall learning outcomes.

Principals also highly value knowledge of curriculum, student developmental needs, and the ability to align instruction with educational standards. They look for prospective leaders who demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of curricular frameworks, assessment strategies, and the specific learning needs and characteristics of students at different developmental stages. The principals feel that this knowledge base is essential for promoting effective instruction and building credibility with colleagues.

Closely tied to teaching experience and professional knowledge is the candidate's ability to identify and support effective teaching practices. Principals want to see that a prospective leader has a deep understanding of research-based pedagogical strategies and can recognize and promote high-quality instruction across various subject areas and grade levels. This competency is crucial, they believe, as principals must be able to provide meaningful feedback, model effective teaching techniques, and facilitate professional development opportunities for their staff. Leah Walker described it this way, "Lots of teachers do a good job in their classroom. What I am looking for is a teacher who can identify what good teaching looks like and knows how to help other teachers get there" (L. Walker, personal communication, December 29, 2023).

Personal Influence

When identifying prospective internal candidates for school leadership roles, the elementary principals place a strong emphasis on personal influence. This encompasses a range of competencies that demonstrate the candidate's ability to lead and inspire others through their own actions and behaviors.

One key aspect of personal influence is the candidate's ability to model core values such as integrity and transparency and set the standard for ethical conduct (Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Michigan State Board of Education, 2021; Sergiovanni, 2013). Principals emphasized the importance of candidates who not only articulate their values but also embody them in their actions and decisions. Principal Chase Martin emphasized the importance of integrity, noting that candidates who display honesty and ethical behavior are more likely to inspire confidence among staff members. Principals actively look for evidence that a candidate has established a reputation for being a trusted, reliable, and principled individual within the school community.

Possessing self-confidence and emotional intelligence emerged as another essential component of personal influence (Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Tschannen-Moran, 2013). Principals want to see that a prospective leader is willing to make difficult decisions, stand up for their beliefs, and be transparent in their communications with others. Principals valued candidates who demonstrated a strong sense of self-assuredness, coupled with the ability to empathize and understand the emotions of others. This blend of confidence and emotional intelligence allows prospective leaders to navigate interpersonal relationships effectively (Goleman, 1995).

The ability to motivate and influence others is another critical aspect of personal influence that principals consider. Successful school leaders must be able to inspire their

colleagues, rally support for new initiatives, and foster a positive, collaborative school culture (Anderson, 2017; Hay 2006). Elizabeth Sinclair explained, "I look for those who can bring people together, who can motivate and inspire not just their students but also their fellow educators" (E. Sinclair, personal communication, December 20, 2023). Similarly, Principal Katherine Gates emphasized the importance of candidates demonstrating "a passion for education and a passion for continuous development" who possess "attitudes and personalities that draw people to them" (K. Gates, personal communication, January 12, 2024).

The principals also look for prospective leaders who demonstrate a genuine commitment to the school's mission, a willingness to go above and beyond in their work, and a track record of collaborating effectively with colleagues. As Principal Scott Davis explained, effective leaders need to be "willing to do the work that everyone does without boasting, not asking people to do anything you wouldn't do, doing whatever it takes, doing it for the good of the school and not just what serves me and my team" (S. Davis, personal communication, January 5, 2024). By going above and beyond in their work and collaborating effectively with colleagues, the principals assert that candidates establish themselves as influential leaders who are well-positioned to take on greater responsibility.

Relationship Building

Strong relationship building skills are another key competency elementary principals look for when identifying potential leaders from within their schools. Successful school leaders need to be able to connect with a diverse range of stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, and community members (Michigan State Board of Education, 2021). The principals assess a candidate's interpersonal communication skills, empathy and emotional intelligence, and ability to foster collaborative working relationships.

Strong communication skills across various stakeholder groups are a critical aspect of relationship building (Tschannen-Moran, 2013; Tyler, 2016). As explained by Principal Tracy Reed, prospective leaders should be "personable" and "caring," with the "ability to connect with staff, parents, and the community" (T. Reed, personal communication, December 27, 2023). Active listening skills and openness to different perspectives are essential for fostering open dialogue and promoting a collaborative approach (Baker, Dunne-Moses, Calarco, & Gilkey, 2019; Murphy, 2013). Principal Katherine Gates noted that she looks for candidates who can "see the big picture" and "adjust based on feedback," demonstrating a willingness to consider diverse viewpoints (K. Gates, personal communication, January 12, 2024). Principal Elizabeth Sinclair emphasized the importance of being "open-minded" and able to "speak on behalf of" various stakeholders, showcasing their capacity to advocate for the needs and perspectives of the larger school community rather than push for their own agenda (E. Sinclair, personal communication, December 20, 2023).

Principals also look to see evidence that a candidate can bring people together, build consensus, and create a positive, supportive school culture. Katherine Gates explained, "I observe how they navigate difficult conversations, whether they can rally support for new initiatives, and how they handle conflicts within the team" (K. Gates, personal communication, January 12, 2024). Principal Scott Davis echoed these sentiments, saying, "I observe their interactions with colleagues, how they seek input from others, and their willingness to take on additional responsibilities to support the team" (S. Davis, personal communication, January 5, 2024).

The ability to navigate and manage conflicts is another critical aspect of relationship building that principals consider when identifying prospective school leaders. As Principal

Katherine Gates pointed out, candidates need to have the "ability to handle pushback" and possess the skills to effectively address challenges without becoming defensive or damaging the relationship with the other person (K. Gates, personal communication, January 12, 2024). Principal Tracy Reed also emphasized the importance of being "thick-skinned" and being able to accept criticism, even unfair criticism, with grace (T. Reed, personal communication, December 27, 2023). All of the principals agreed that they look for candidates who are able to maintain their composure and find constructive solutions when faced with difficult situations, ensuring that they promote a positive environment for all stakeholders.

Resilience and Adaptability

Resilience and adaptability are crucial qualities that elementary principals seek when identifying prospective internal candidates for school leadership positions. In an ever-changing educational landscape, school leaders must be able to navigate challenges, embrace innovation, and maintain a positive outlook in the face of adversity (Ledesma, 2014).

Flexibility and adaptability in handling multiple tasks and demands are essential qualities for prospective school leaders (Buenaventura & Arenga, 2021). As Principal Chase Martin pointed out, effective leaders need to have the "ability to handle multiple tasks at once" and "think quickly on their feet to identify their top priorities, knowing that the situation may change at any moment" (C. Martin, personal communication, January 25, 2024). Principal Tracy Reed felt that the need for flexibility was one of the most significant differences between the skill sets needed for a teacher and an administrator. As she explained it, "When you're running a classroom, you set that pace. You decide how much is coming at you at once. Whereas as an administrator, you don't get that choice. You never know what is going to come at you, and you

have to be able to manage whatever it is" (T. Reed, personal communication, December 27, 2023).

Innovative thinking and the ability to foster a culture of continuous improvement are also important qualities for resilient and adaptable school leaders (Riveras-León & Tomás-Folch, 2020). Principals discussed looking for candidates who are not afraid to think outside the box, who are comfortable with unpredictability, and who can think about multiple ways to get things done, demonstrating a willingness to adapt and think creatively. They also emphasized the importance of finding people who have a growth mindset, a willingness to learn from mistakes, and a commitment to ongoing learning and improvement.

Navigating and embracing change, as well as responding effectively to evolving school needs, are key indicators of resilience and adaptability (Sparks, 2021). All of the principals agreed that the job of a school leader has changed over time, with a greater emphasis on handling external influences and pressures. These influences and pressures include dealing with political and social issues, especially managing increasingly polarized viewpoints of the role of education. As a result, principals look for candidates who have the emotional and mental fortitude to navigate these complexities effectively. As Principal Chase Martin puts it, "I'm looking for people who know when to swim with the current and when to stand like a rock" (C. Martin, personal communication, January 25, 2024). School leaders must be able to maintain composure and make sound decisions in high-pressure situations, even when faced with criticism or adversity. This requires a strong sense of self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and the ability to regulate one's own stress levels (Ledesma, 2014; Starratt, 2013).

Many of the principals discussed the ability to handle stress and high-pressure situations as a key factor in identifying candidates for school leadership positions. They argue that the

demanding nature of school leadership roles can significantly impact an individual's well-being, making it essential for candidates to demonstrate effective strategies for managing stress and prioritizing self-care. Several principals recounted instances where they had to deliver difficult feedback to teachers, indicating they would not be suitable candidates for leadership positions due to their response to stress. This feedback underscored the importance of resilience and adaptability, as leaders must demonstrate the capacity to navigate challenges with composure and poise (Sparks, 2021; Starratt, 2013).

Decision Making

Elementary principals seek decision-making skills and the ability to see the big picture when identifying prospective internal candidates for school leadership positions. Effective school leaders must be able to make well-informed, strategic decisions that align with the school's mission and prioritize the best interests of students (Michigan State Board of Education, 2021).

Principals assess a candidate's critical thinking skills, their ability to gather and synthesize relevant data, and their capacity to make sound judgments under pressure. They place a high value on people who can make difficult decisions and communicate them openly and honestly. The principals believe that this requires a strong moral compass, a willingness to stand up for what is right, and a commitment to being accountable for one's actions.

Strategic thinking and the ability to see the "big picture" are considered essential qualities for effective decision-making in school leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Price & Lisk, 2014). As Principal Leah Walker noted, prospective leaders need to be able to "think about things through a principal lens" and consider the broader impact of their decisions on the school community (L. Walker, personal communication, December 29, 2023). This requires a

comprehensive understanding of the school's mission, values, and long-term goals, as well as the ability to think critically and anticipate potential challenges and opportunities. Principals also highlighted the importance of understanding how individual decisions fit into the larger context of the school's operations and aspirations. They assert that effective leaders must be able to connect the dots between various initiatives and priorities, making strategic choices that align with the overall direction and vision of the school.

Making decisions that consider various perspectives and understanding the impact on different groups is also essential for effective school leadership (Davies & Davies, 2006). As Principal Elizabeth Sinclair pointed out, prospective leaders need to be open-minded and consider the needs and perspectives of various stakeholders when making decisions, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued. This means actively seeking out input from students, staff, families, and community members, and carefully weighing the potential consequences and benefits of each decision for different groups.

The principals contend that making decisions in the best interest of students is perhaps the most critical aspect of decision-making for school leaders. As Principal Chase Martin emphasized, effective leaders need to have the "ability to be with kids [and] listen to kids" when making decisions to ensure that student needs and perspectives are always at the forefront (C. Martin, personal communication, January 25, 2024). The principals believe that candidates should prioritize the growth, well-being, and success of all students by considering their academic, social-emotional, and developmental needs, even when faced with challenges or resistance from other stakeholders.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview of the Study

This qualitative study investigated the selection process used by six experienced elementary school principals in Washtenaw County to identify internal candidates for future principal positions. Recognizing the need for a deeper understanding of how leadership potential is identified, this research explored the unseen aspects of the selection process, aiming to contribute valuable insights to the field of educational leadership and succession planning. The findings from the data analysis were organized around the two primary research questions, with themes identified for each question:

Research Question 1: How did elementary principals in Washtenaw County identify prospective internal candidates for school leadership?

Three main themes emerged from the data:

1. Informal Recognition of Leadership Potential: Principals often identified potential leaders through everyday interactions and observations, noting individuals who demonstrated initiative, problem-solving abilities, and a positive influence on school culture.

2. Providing Leadership Opportunities: Potential candidates were given opportunities to take on leadership roles, such as leading committees, mentoring new teachers, or managing school-wide projects. This hands-on experience helped principals assess candidates' skills and readiness for higher responsibilities.

3. Direct Conversations about Leadership Aspirations: Principals engaged in candid discussions with prospective candidates about their career goals, providing guidance and feedback to help them prepare for future leadership roles.

Research Question 2: What competencies or characteristics did elementary principals in Washtenaw County use to determine prospective candidates' suitability for school leadership?

Five themes emerged from the data:

1. Instructional Leadership: The ability to guide and improve teaching and learning practices within the school was considered paramount. Effective candidates demonstrated a deep understanding of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

2. Personal Influence: Candidates needed to exhibit strong personal influence, characterized by self-confidence, integrity, and the ability to inspire and motivate others.

3. Relationship Building: Successful leadership was rooted in strong relationships with staff, students, parents, and the community. Candidates were evaluated on their ability to build and maintain these relationships.

4. Resilience and Adaptability: Principals looked for individuals who could navigate the complexities and challenges of school leadership with resilience and flexibility.

5. Decision Making: Effective leaders had to make sound decisions under pressure. Candidates were assessed on their ability to analyze situations, consider multiple perspectives, and make informed choices.

By better understanding the process and criteria used by this subsection of principals, this research seeks to provide insights that can inform success planning practices and contribute to the development of effective school leadership pipelines.

Discussion of Research Question One

The findings of this study highlight the importance of informal methods, leadership opportunities, and direct conversations in identifying internal candidates for school leadership

positions. The absence of formal, systematic processes or training for leadership identification underscores the need for principals to rely on their observations, intuition, and interpersonal skills to recognize leadership potential among their staff.

All of the principals interviewed for this study agreed that identifying future leaders was of vital importance and something they knew they should be doing. Despite this, many of them felt ill-equipped and unprepared to take on this critical responsibility. Principal Tracy Reed admitted, "I know it's something I should be doing, but I don't feel like I have the tools or the training to do it effectively" (T. Reed, personal communication, December 27, 2023). Similarly, Principal Scott Davis expressed, "It's a challenge to balance this with all of my other responsibilities, and I don't always feel confident in my ability to identify the right candidates" (S. Davis, personal communication, January 5, 2024). All of the principals expressed a strong interest in and desire to create a more systematic approach to leadership identification and development within their schools. They believed that this should be a priority for district-level leadership, with Principal Elizabeth Sinclair stating, "We need more guidance and support from the district to create a consistent, structured process for identifying and nurturing future leaders" (E. Sinclair, personal communication, December 20, 2023).

While the principals may not have felt confident in their ability to identify future leaders, their actions align with the research on effective leadership development. The principals' emphasis on providing diverse leadership opportunities is supported by research suggesting that hands-on experience and exposure to various aspects of school leadership are crucial for developing future leaders (Barnett, Shoho, & Oleszewski, 2012; Browne-Ferrigno, 2003). This practice also aligns with Michigan Standard 8 which requires candidates to complete an internship under the supervision of an experienced school leader which provides them with

"coherent, authentic, and sustained opportunities to synthesize and apply the knowledge and skills identified in National Educational Leadership Preparation standards 1-7 in ways that approximate the full range of responsibilities required of building-level leaders" (Michigan State Board of Education, 2021, p. 13). By offering these leadership opportunities, principals not only identify potential leaders but also foster a culture of distributed leadership and continuous professional growth within their schools.

The practice of engaging in direct conversations about leadership aspirations is consistent with the literature on effective succession planning in education (Myung, Loeb, & Horng, 2011; Peters-Hawkins, Reed, & Kingsberry, 2018). Open communication between principals and teachers regarding career goals and interests allows for targeted support and the alignment of individual aspirations with organizational needs.

However, the reliance on informal methods for identifying leadership potential raises concerns about potential biases and the inclusivity of the process. The research of Kanter (1993) and Myung, et al. (2011) revealed that these methods often perpetuate systems of inequality as leaders often favor men and those of their own race. As Principal Elizabeth Sinclair noted, creating a systematized approach to providing leadership opportunities can help reduce bias and ensure that all staff members are considered for leadership roles.

Discussion of Research Question Two

The five core leadership competencies sought after by these principals—Instructional Leadership, Personal Influence, Relationship Building, Resilience and Adaptability, and Decision Making—align closely with established educational leadership standards and the transformational theory of leadership. This discussion will connect the research findings to the

Michigan Standards for the Preparation of Elementary and Secondary PK-12 School Principals
(Michigan State Board of Education, 2021) and the five exemplary leadership practices of
Kouzes and Posner (2012): Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process,
Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart.

Instructional Leadership

Instructional Leadership emerged as a critical theme, reflecting the principals' emphasis
on improving teaching and learning. This aligns directly with Michigan Standard 4: Learning and
Instruction, which emphasizes the capacity to promote student success and well-being through
the development and implementation of coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and
assessment (Michigan State Board of Education, 2021). The standard requires principals to
demonstrate high-quality, equitable instructional practices and foster a culture of continuous
improvement.

Kouzes and Posner's (2012) practice of Model the Way connects to instructional
leadership. Kouzes and Posner (2012) believe that exemplary leaders must model standards of
excellence and set an example for others to follow. The principals echoed this belief, stating that
effective instructional leaders must set clear expectations and demonstrate a commitment to
educational excellence by modeling best practices in teaching and learning. Principal Scott Davis
noted, "when teachers see other teachers invested in their own professional growth and
constantly learning, they feel more motivated to improve their own practices. It creates a culture
of continuous improvement" (S. Davis, personal communication, January 5, 2024).

Personal Influence

The theme of personal influence reflects the importance of a candidate's ability to lead and inspire others through their own actions and behaviors. This theme aligns with Michigan Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Improvement, which highlights the importance of creating and sustaining a shared vision for high-quality education (Michigan State Board of Education, 2021). It also aligns with Michigan Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms, which calls upon leaders to model ethical behavior in their personal conduct and relationships (Michigan State Board of Education, 2021).

Personal influence is closely linked to Kouzes and Posner's (2012) leadership practices of Model the Way and Inspire a Shared Vision. Leaders with strong personal influence exemplify Model the Way by demonstrating their values and principles through their actions and decisions, thereby setting a positive example for others to follow. They also Inspire a Shared Vision by effectively communicating a compelling vision of the future, inspiring others to embrace and work towards a common purpose (Kouzes & Posner, 2012).

Relationship Building

Relationship Building was considered essential for creating a supportive and collaborative school environment. This theme is reflected in Michigan Standard 5: Community and External Leadership, which emphasizes the need for principals to engage families, community members, and school personnel in strengthening student learning and supporting school improvement (Michigan State Board of Education, 2021).

This theme strongly aligns with Kouzes and Posner's (2012) leadership practices of Enabling Others to Act and Encouraging the Heart. According to Kouzes and Posner (2012),

leaders who excel in building relationships create an atmosphere of trust and collaboration, fostering an environment where people feel valued, supported, and empowered to take ownership of their work. These strong relationships also provide a foundation for Encouraging the Heart, as leaders recognize and celebrate the contributions and successes of their team members, creating a sense of community and shared purpose.

Resilience and Adaptability

The principals believe that resilience and adaptability were vital for navigating the complex and challenging landscape of school leadership. This theme aligns with Michigan Standard 3: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness, which requires principals to cultivate a supportive and equitable school culture that can adapt to diverse needs and challenges (Michigan State Board of Education, 2021).

Kouzes and Posner (2012)'s leadership practice of Challenging the Process connects to this theme. Resilient and adaptable leaders take risks, experiment with new approaches, and learn from their mistakes. By embracing change and innovation, resilient and adaptable leaders can inspire their teams to think creatively, push beyond their comfort zones, and continuously improve their practice (Kouzes & Posner, 2012).

Decision Making

The theme of decision making was listed as a critical competency for effective school leadership, ensuring that principals can make informed, ethical, and strategic choices. This aligns with Michigan Standard 6: Operations and Management, which emphasizes the importance of data-informed decision making and the effective management of school resources. Principals

must be capable of analyzing data, evaluating outcomes, and making decisions that promote student success and operational efficiency (Michigan State Board of Education, 2021).

Decision making ties to Kouzes and Posner's (2012) leadership practices of Modeling the Way and Enabling Others to Act. Leaders who excel in decision making demonstrate their values and principles through their actions and choices (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). They also involve team members in the decision-making process, fostering collaboration and building trust (Kouzes & Posner, 2012).

Discussion Summary

This study underscores the crucial role that elementary school principals play in identifying and nurturing potential school leaders from within their own schools. The findings highlight the importance of principals taking a proactive, strategic, and inclusive approach to cultivating future leaders. This involves recognizing leadership potential in staff members, providing them with opportunities to develop and demonstrate their leadership skills, and engaging in direct conversations about their leadership aspirations.

The leadership competencies identified by the elementary school principals in Washtenaw County when selecting internal candidates for future principal positions are aligned well with both the 2021 *Michigan Standards for the Preparation of Elementary and Secondary PK-12 School Principals* and Kouzes and Posner's (2012) five exemplary leadership practices. This alignment underscores the relevance and significance of the study's findings, providing a framework for understanding the essential qualities of successful school leaders.

The study also demonstrates the importance of developing and nurturing these key leadership competencies in aspiring school leaders to ensure their success in the principalship.

By focusing on cultivating skills in instructional leadership, personal influence, relationship building, resilience and adaptability, and decision making, principals can help prepare the next generation of school leaders to effectively navigate the complex challenges of the role and drive positive change in their schools.

Limitations

Despite the valuable insights gained from this qualitative study, there were several limitations. The first limitation is the small sample size. The study focused on six experienced elementary school principals in Washtenaw County, which limits the generalizability of the findings. While the in-depth interviews provided rich qualitative data, the small sample size means that the results may not be representative of all elementary school principals in the region or beyond. Future research with a larger and more diverse sample could provide a broader understanding of the competencies and processes used in identifying internal candidates for school leadership.

The study was also confined to Washtenaw County, which has unique demographic, economic, and educational characteristics that may influence the principals' perspectives and practices. The findings might not be applicable to principals in different geographic areas with varying contexts. Comparative studies involving principals from multiple regions could offer more comprehensive insights into the commonalities and differences in leadership identification practices.

Recommendations for Future Research

Leadership development and succession planning are critical areas of research because effective school leadership is directly linked to improved student outcomes, teacher satisfaction,

and overall school performance (Grissom, et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004). As experienced leaders retire or move on, the need for a robust pipeline of well-prepared successors becomes increasingly important to maintain continuity and sustain school improvement efforts (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2023; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2021). Understanding the processes and competencies involved in identifying and nurturing future leaders helps ensure that schools are led by capable and visionary individuals who can meet the diverse needs of students and communities. To build on the findings of this study and address its limitations, several recommendations for future research are proposed:

1. Expand Sample Size and Diversity: Future research should include a larger and more diverse sample of principals to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Including principals from different geographic regions, school types (e.g., urban, suburban, rural), settings (e.g., elementary, middle school, high school), and varying demographic contexts would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the competencies and processes used in identifying internal candidates for school leadership.

2. Longitudinal Studies: Conduct longitudinal research to track the evolution of leadership identification practices over time. Such studies would provide insights into how changes in educational policies, school demographics, and principals' professional development influence their approaches to identifying and nurturing internal leadership talent. The principals in this study all agreed that the Covid pandemic impacted the criteria they use to evaluate future leaders. It would be interesting to compare how their responses might change in response to future events.

Conclusion

This qualitative study aimed to investigate the process, competencies, and criteria used by six experienced elementary school principals in Washtenaw County when identifying internal candidates for future principal positions. The findings revealed that principals rely on informal methods to recognize leadership potential, provide various leadership opportunities to nurture and assess readiness, and engage in direct conversations with teachers about their leadership aspirations.

The principals identified five key competencies they look for when determining a candidate's suitability for leadership: instructional leadership, personal influence, relationship building, resilience and adaptability, and decision making. These competencies align with the literature on transformational leadership and the standards set forth by the Michigan Department of Education.

The study also highlighted the lack of formal, systematic processes for leadership identification and the need for principals to receive more guidance and support from district-level leadership in this area. The principals expressed a strong desire to create a more structured approach to leadership identification and development, recognizing the critical importance of cultivating a pipeline of future leaders within their schools.

The findings of this study have several implications for practice and policy. At the school level, principals should be encouraged to adopt a more proactive and intentional approach to leadership identification, utilizing a combination of informal methods and systematic processes to recognize and nurture leadership potential among their staff. This could include utilizing competency-based checklists to identify future leaders such as in Figure 1, implementing a

structured leadership development program, providing targeted professional development

opportunities, and creating a culture that values and supports distributed leadership.

Figure 1

Leadership Competency Checklist

Leadership Competency	Michigan Standard	Look Fors:
Instructional Leadership	Michigan Standard 4: Learning and Instruction	☐ Demonstrates pedagogical and subject level expertise ☐ Understands student cognitive and developmental needs ☐ Reflects on their professional practice and seeks continuous improvement ☐ Is able to identify and support effective teaching practices in others
Personal Influence	Michigan Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Improvement Michigan Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms	☐ Serves as a role model of integrity and ethical conduct ☐ Exhibits self-confidence and emotional intelligence ☐ Motivates and inspires others ☐ Goes above and beyond ☐ Collaborates effectively with colleagues
Relationship Building	Michigan Standard 5: Community and External Leadership	☐ Demonstrates strong communication skills across all stakeholder groups ☐ Engages in active listening and is open to diverse viewpoints ☐ Builds consensus and creates a positive culture ☐ Manages conflicts effectively and appropriately
Resilience and Adaptability	Michigan Standard 3: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness	☐ Handles multiple tasks with flexibility ☐ Thinks innovatively and seeks continuous improvement ☐ Navigates change and evolving needs ☐ Manages stress appropriately and maintains composure in high-pressure situations

Leadership Competency	Michigan Standard	Look Fors:
Decision Making	Michigan Standard 6: Operations and Management	☐ Thinks critically and demonstrates sound judgment under pressure ☐ Thinks strategically in alignment with the school's mission ☐ Considers multiple perspectives and the broader impact of decisions ☐ Prioritizes students' best interests in all decisions

At the district level, there is a need for more guidance, resources, and training to support principals in their efforts to identify and develop future leaders. This could involve developing a district-wide framework for leadership identification and succession planning, providing professional development for principals on talent management and leadership development, and establishing mentoring and coaching programs for aspiring leaders.

Policymakers and educator preparation programs should also consider the competencies identified in this study when designing and implementing leadership development initiatives. By focusing on instructional leadership, personal influence, relationship building, resilience and adaptability, and decision making, these programs could better prepare aspiring leaders for the complex challenges of the principalship.

This study contributes to the limited research on leadership identification practices in elementary schools and highlights the critical role that principals play in cultivating future leaders from within their schools. By adopting a more strategic and systematic approach to leadership identification and development, schools and districts can ensure a strong pipeline of effective leaders who are prepared to drive positive change and improve student outcomes.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW REQUEST

Colleagues,

I hope this email finds you well. I am reaching out today to seek participants for a research project I am conducting as part of my coursework for an Education Specialist degree in Educational Leadership. The focus of my research is to understand the criteria and practices that elementary principals use when identifying potential internal candidates for formal leadership positions. I am particularly interested in exploring the process you employ, the specific qualifications and attributes you look for in aspiring leaders, and any contextual factors that influence your decision-making.

As someone with 5 or more years of experience as a school principal, your insights and expertise are invaluable, and I believe that your perspective will greatly contribute to the success of my study. The interview is expected to last approximately 45 minutes, and it will be conducted at a time and place that is most convenient for you. I am open to conducting the interview either in person or via Zoom, whichever you prefer. All information shared during the interview will be kept strictly confidential, and your identity will be anonymized in the final research report.

Your participation in this study would be immensely valuable, and I am confident that your insights will contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in leadership identification for school leaders. If you are willing to participate, please let me know your availability, and we can schedule the interview accordingly. If you have any questions or would like further information about the study, please don't hesitate to reach out to me.

Thank you very much for considering my request, and I look forward to the possibility of speaking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Bookout

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your name and position?

2. How long have you served as a principal?

3. What is your educational background? Have you received any training on leadership identification and development?

4. Are there any specific competencies or skills that you believe are essential for effective school leadership?

5. Have you ever encouraged someone on your staff to consider a formal leadership position? What was the outcome?

6. Describe the process for how you identify candidates for future leadership positions. How do you approach this process, and what are the key steps involved?

7. What specific criteria do you consider when evaluating prospective candidates for school leadership positions?

8. Are there any specific qualifications or educational backgrounds that you prioritize?

9. How do you evaluate a candidate's leadership skills and competencies when they are not in a formal leadership position?

10. What role does the candidate's teaching experience play in your decision-making process? Do you consider the number of years of teaching experience, subject expertise, or teaching evaluations?

11. What differences are there between the qualities you look for in a prospective teacher and the qualities you look for in a prospective school leader?

12. Have you noticed any changes or evolutions in the criteria used for candidate selection over the years? If so, what factors have contributed to these changes?

13. How do you ensure fairness and transparency in the candidate identification process?

What steps do you take to maintain objectivity and avoid potential biases?

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Nov 9, 2023 11:23:02 AM EST

To: Bethany Bergh

Scl, Ed, Ldrshp & Pblc Service

From: The Northern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Board

Dr. Lisa Schade Eckert, Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

NMU Institutional Official

Re: Initial - HS-23-15 Who's Next: Elementary Principals' Process For Identifying Future

School Leaders In Washtenaw County, Michigan

IRB Study Number: HS-23-15

The Northern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Board has approved your study,

Who's Next: Elementary Principals' Process For Identifying Future School Leaders In

Washtenaw County, Michigan.

Include your study number, HS-23-15, on all research materials and any correspondence

regarding this project.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and the research participant.

Study Modifications:

If you find that modifications of investigators, methods, or procedures are necessary, you must submit a modification submission through Cayuse IRB. Any changes or revisions to your approved research plan must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

Incident Reporting Responsibilities:

If any unanticipated problems arise involving human subjects, such as a subject suffers an injury during research or if there is an incident of non-compliance with IRB policies and procedures, you must take immediate action to assist the subject and notify the IRB at (hsrr@nmu.edu) and NMU's IRB Institutional Official (leckert@nmu.edu) within 48 hours. Additionally, you must complete an Incident Form in Cayuse IRB.

For more information, visit NMU IRB Forms and Regulations or contact the IRB at hsrr@nmu.edu.