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Leadership in Private Christian Schools: Perceptions of Administrators

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to discover the perceptions of private Christian school administrators about leadership characteristics, roles, and teacher professional development. The co-researchers first conducted a demographic survey and focus group interviews with six administrators from K-12 or secondary private Christian schools in Oregon and Washington. Themes that surfaced from the data were who we are as leaders, success and celebration, and what we do as leaders. Results showed that administrators of private Christian schools tended to focus on the importance of the vision and mission of their schools, keeping in mind their influence as spiritual leaders and the importance of problem solving and decision making. Servant leadership was identified as well. However, little information was shared about how they supported teacher professional development or student academic achievement.

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Abstract
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Introduction
Administrators of private Christian schools have multiple hats to wear. They respond to the needs of teachers, students, parents, and the church community at large. Their background knowledge covers various areas of budgeting and finances, curricular instruction, educational law, personnel issues related to hiring, non-renewing, supervising, conflict resolution, and public relations along with the daily routine of managing a school. Sometimes the burdens of daily routines often overshadow explicit work related to the vision and mission of the institution. In addition to the daily routines within a public school setting, the administrator within a private Christian school is given the task of directing the school community toward a deeper spirituality (Banke, Maldonado, Lacey, & Thompson, 2005) and guiding the spiritual ministry of their teachers based on biblical principles integrated into daily work (Brown, 2002).

School administrators must embrace a new perspective of leadership infused with a learning mindset as opposed to the role of a commander (Reeves, 2006). The learning leadership approach balances the complexity of administrative task with explicit simplicity. A learning leader rejects any heroics of leadership based on command and control and creates a distributed leadership model by placing decision making and action into the hands of others. In an era of accountability and teacher voice in professional development, a shift needs to take place in the educational arena to include teacher leaders (Harrison & Birky, 2011). As Barth (2001) asserted, the possibilities for school reform reside in the hands of teachers: "Ask the teachers—for a change. They're on the front lines. Forget the bureaucrats and politicians and statisticians. Ask the teachers. They know the daily drama of the classroom" (p. 2).

Christian administrators and teachers must develop both professionally and spiritually in the private Christian school to fully develop their students. Many private Christian schools are accredited members of the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI). One core value, in particular for the ACSI, is professional development. "Professional resources and training are vital for the development and growth of Christian educators and schools" (Smitherman, 2002, p. 1). Professional development resources and training are a foundational core value to ACSI schools, yet good intentions cannot solely drive instructional or organizational change. The commitment to professional development must not only be actualized by core values, practical guidelines, and planning, but also include a collaborative focus with teachers taking an active role in transforming professional learning into action (Reeves, 2010). Knowing effective teaching practices is not enough to build capacity for long-term change. Turning knowledge into action requires a clear commitment to a shared performance agenda with teachers taking an active role. Without such internal capacity

building and teacher leadership, schools fail to translate their knowledge about effective work performance into action (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). The professional learning community approach (Eaker, Dufour, & Dufour, 2002) and the instructional coaching model have shown to support effective school leadership sustaining change in schools and increasing student learning success (Eaker et al., 2002; Marzano, 2003; Reeves, 2006, 2010).

As colleagues of Schools of Education, representing two private Christian universities in the Northwest, the co-researchers were interested in collaborating with administrators of private Christian K-12 schools to learn more about private K-12 school communities and the schools' vision for effective work since both higher education institutions provide preservice teacher education programs. Furthermore, many preservice teachers at our institutions received their own K-12 schooling from private Christian schools and feel a call to return to the private sector upon graduation to teach within the United States or abroad. Philosophically and programmatically, both higher education institutions include teacher education training that focuses on collegial teamwork and collaboration as well as the belief that learning is lifelong and effective teacher work should include professional development opportunities shaping and empowering teachers as leaders. We encourage the "voice" of the preservice teacher to become an integral part of the decision making process within a school, to step forward as teacher leaders initiating change in their future school communities and to teach their own students to become change leaders within their life communities. As practitioners in higher education preparing teachers—many which ultimately serve in the private sector—we want to not only equip our teachers with pedagogical skills, but also to serve as teacher leaders in their school buildings. Further, it only seemed natural for both higher education institutions to investigate perceptions of private Christian school administrators and to enter into discussion with the private Christian K-12 schools to offer support where needed.

Theoretical Framework

The co-researchers viewed the theoretical framework through the lens of transformational leadership, servant leadership, and the teamwork approach with the belief these models are interconnected. The theoretical framework is supported, first, by the meta-analysis conducted by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) that outlined transformational leadership. In addition, the transformational leadership in this study was based on the works of Bass and Riggio (2006), Leithwood and Poplin (1992), and Burns (1978). Marzano et al. suggested that transformational leaders:

1. Attend to the needs and give attention to individual staff members.

2. Help staff members think of old problems in new ways.

3. Communicate high expectations for teachers and students alike.

4. Provide a model for behavior of teachers through personal accomplishments and demonstrated character.

Secondly, the co-researchers included the framework of servant leadership based on the work of Robert Greenleaf. Greenleaf (1977) suggested that a great leader wishes to serve and is able to point the direction toward a vision and goal. The leader inspires others. The key principles of servant leadership suggest that leadership is centered within the organization rather than a position at the top of a hierarchy. In servant leadership, the focus is on understanding the personal needs of those within the organization, healing wounds caused by conflict within the organization, being a steward of the resources, developing the skills of those within the organization, and being an effective listener (Marzano et al., 2005, pp. 16-17).

Lastly, the researchers included the leadership model of teamwork that was specifically supported by Sergiovanni (2005). Sergiovanni suggested that "when collaborative cultures work, everyone in the school is part of a role that defines each individual's obligations and everyone is a part of a reciprocal role relationship that spells out mutual obligations" (p. 119).

It ought to be noted that the co-researchers viewed leadership success using the aforementioned theoretical model. This was the lens of the study and the definition of effective leadership practice adopted by the co-researchers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study utilizing a focus group interview approach was to

discover the perceptions of private Christian school administrators about leadership characteristics, roles, and teacher professional development. This led to the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of private Christian school administrators regarding the role and attributes of a school administrator?

2. What are the perceptions of private Christian school administrators regarding their view about success as administrators?

3. What are the perceptions of private Christian school administrators regarding teacher professional development?

Literature Review
Leadership is a complex process with researchers holding various perspectives in their conceptualization of leadership. Over the years, a wealth of research has been conducted about effective leadership in education and what makes an effective leader in various settings. However, there was less research about an effective leader in private Christian K-12 schools and that which was available focused on outcomes of the school setting as opposed to leadership perspectives of effective daily work. The literature review highlighted the characteristics and roles of effective leaders, Christian school leadership perspectives, and teacher growth and professional development.

Effective School Leaders: The current literature described leadership from varying perspectives and a shift from the past of the authoritative to a more participatory, teamwork approach (Eaker et al., 2002; Marzano, 2003; Reeves, 2006, 2010). Such recent research placed more focus on leadership that was linked with student achievement and professional teacher growth (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000; Reeves, 2006, 2010; Schmoker, 2006). At one time, the business community, as well as the field of education, was dominated by a single person as leader running the organization in an authoritative role. However, in recent years organizations have moved to a learning community, learning together (Senge, 2007). Kelley, Thornton, and Daugherty (2005) found in their study that principals have the power, authority, and position to impact the climate of a school. Further, highly skilled principals developed feelings of trust, had open communication, and supported collegiality.

Successful leaders were role models to others and shared a vision with their constituents; they knew the people and understood their needs and the interests of these people. In addition, a successful leader encouraged others (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). When there was a genuine vision versus simply a vision statement, staff would excel and learn (Senge, 2007). Furthermore, the vision must be shared by people involved in the organization.

"Leadership is the process of persuasion or example by which an individual (or leadership team) induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers" (Gardner, 2007, p. 17). Relational skills are essential to strong leadership. It is important to listen, problem solve, and support staff (Donaldson, Marnik, Mackenzie, & Ackerman, 2009). Administrators need to take time to develop connections with the teachers and build collegiality. According to Marzano et al. (2005), collegiality "deals with the manner in which staff members in the school interact and the extent to which they approach their work as professionals" (p. 60). Leadership involves teamwork, fostering collaboration, and building trust (Kouzes & Posner, 2002).

Servant leadership calls for a collaboration and working together. In the servant leadership model, the leader is placed in the center, not at the top of the hierarchy. The leader understands the personal needs of those within the organization, helps to heal wounds caused by conflict within the organization, is a steward of resources, develops the skills of those within the organization, and is an effective listener (Greenleaf, 1977; Marzano et al., 2005). Sergiovanni (2005) suggested that love becomes a duty and responsibility and is the basis of servant leadership. "Servant leadership requires that one loves those who are being served" (Sergiovanni, 2005, p. 100). In addition, teacher leadership roles appeared increasingly important as a part of the educational reform environment (Smylie, Conley, & Marks, 2011).

Many pathways lead to effective leadership, according to Bolman and Deal (1995). Focus, passion, wisdom, courage, and integrity emerged as important qualities of an effective leader. Sergiovanni (2005) expanded a bit further to include hope, faith, trust, piety, and civility. "Good evidence exists that caring can help bridge the

achievement gap that exists in too many schools" (Sergiovanni, 2005, p. 100).

Christian School Leadership: Little research appeared in the literature that focused on leadership perceptions within the private Christian school environments in the United States. What did appear were the important role of the administrator as a spiritual leader for the school and the importance of the school values in relation to family (Cardus Education Survey, 2011). According to Wheatley (2002), a spiritual leader possesses a sense of calling, while Blackaby and Blackaby (2001) shared that a spiritual leader acts from the desire to serve. Banke et al. (2005) found in their work that spiritual leaders desired to help others to grow in their relationship with God with a focus on the mission and vision of the school. It was further suggested that leaders in Christian schools viewed their role as not one as an intellectual leader, but rather as a spiritual leader. Banke et al. (2005) further stated,

> Characteristics of spiritual leadership most frequently described by the participants were having a personal, ongoing relationship with God, developing relationships with constituents, being humble, being accessible, being a mentor, being an encourager, and being a support of all members of the school community. (p. 10)

All schools, regardless of whether private or public, operate from a context of philosophical and pedagogical beliefs. Parents who desire education from a Christian faith-based perspective chose to place their students in the private Christian school for a nurtured faith. A recent study investigated the alignment of private Christian school motivations and outcomes to understand the purpose of Christian education and the role of the school in students' lives after graduation (Cardus Education Survey, 2011). A survey response was used with both private school administrators and their student graduates to examine the impact and role of the private Christian school to determine factors that increase effectiveness of the school. The private Christian school administrators ranked family priorities and values of paramount importance. Student development goals reflective of relationships, attitudes, and behaviors were also top-ranked priorities leaving other outcomes as secondary values to private Christian school administrators.

A further look at the same study found that private Christian school administrators put less value on a rigorous education as defined by course offerings and university attendance at competitive institutions in comparison to Catholic or public schools (Cardus Education Survey, 2011). Almost twice as many opportunities for advanced placement courses existed in Catholic and public schools when compared to the private Christian school. Explicit teacher support was not mentioned, yet the study found that Protestant Christian schools "… end up falling short in the academic development of their students" (Cardus Education Survey, 2011, p. 13). Private Christian school teachers were expected to connect academic learning with engagement in the world to shape cultural engagement; however, there was substantial variation of deep engagement and critical inquiry among private Christian schools and most teachers were dependent on the formal curriculum.

Teacher Professional Development
Professional development is often regarded as workshops, PowerPoint presentations, and the opportunity to investigate newly purchased resources. This simplistic view of professional development held by the well-intentioned school administrator was measured by explicit seat time, a calendar date, and often included insufferable PowerPoint presentations (Reeves, 2010), all with hopes of change. Professional development which entices growth is not a one-shot, sit-and-get experience that an administrator can then mark off a long list of priorities in a school. Instead, high impact professional learning requires a slowing of the harried pace to develop active engagement allowing teachers time to consider, reflect, evaluate, and readjust practice.

According to Reeves (2010), some principals accept instructional leadership as the new approach of transforming ideas into action that requires distributed leadership, shared decision making, and collective discussions. School communities using a shared approach develop a vision for active professional engagement.

In addition to active professional engagement, the school environment was important to consider. Just as a school's culture includes norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the school (Peterson & Deal, 1998), so too school culture

influences everything that happens within the school. Positive school cultures were places where there is shared leadership, care and concern for others, and a commitment to student learning. Toxic schools, or subcultures within a school, negatively influence the people working within that environment—administrators, teachers, and students (Allen, 2007). Researchers have noted that a positive and healthy school culture strongly correlates to increased student achievement, teacher productivity, and job satisfaction (Stolp, 1994).

Professional development has long been an important aspect of the school with teachers in particular. Professional development activities vary from school to school; however, key aspects of professional development have been highlighted by Headley (2003); namely, continuity, coherence in approach, agreed upon vision and aims, focus on educators as learners, collaboration, based in teachers' own inquiry, planned with results in mind, and student centered. According to Lykins (2011), effective professional development remained a missing link in the Christian schools. Administrators need to plan for professional development that includes teamwork between the teachers and administration in setting goals and embracing core values that ultimately influence student learning and achievement.

Research Methods

The purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions of private Christian school administrators about leadership characteristics, roles, and teacher professional development.

This led to the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of private Christian school administrators regarding the role and attributes of a school administrator?

2. What are the perceptions of private Christian school administrators regarding their view about success as administrators?

3. What are the perceptions of private Christian school administrators regarding teacher professional development?

Participants and Setting: Using a convenience sampling approach (Berg, 2007; Creswell, 2007), all six private Christian school administrators participating in a grant-funded mentorship project through a Christian university in the Northwest during the 2010-2011 school year, participated in this study. Four of the administrators were principals and two were superintendents, all representing separate private Christian high schools. Three schools were secondary level while three were K-12 schools. Each school was located in different communities within western Oregon and southwest Washington. Some of the schools were located in a metropolitan community while others were located in smaller communities within the region. Some of the schools belonged to the ACSI, while others did not. In order to ensure confidentiality and the non-identification of individual schools, the co-researchers intentionally did not include more detailed demographics of the schools. We chose to maintain confidentiality while realizing it became a limitation of the study.

Research Ethics: Permission to conduct this research was obtained from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to conducting the study. In addition, the participants gave written permission to participate in the study and were informed that their identity and institutions would be kept confidential. A commitment to ethical conduct and the regulation of such was consistent with the professional conduct outlined by the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2010).

Research Design and Instruments: This was a qualitative exploratory study (Creswell, 2003) using focus group interviewing as the primary method of data collection (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). We used a pre-existing group of private Christian school administrators in this convenience sample as it was an intact group that could be easily accessed. Using focus group interviewing utilizing guided and unguided group discussions, the co-researchers could learn through group interaction as part of the data-gathering method (Berg, 2007).

Focus group interviews were appropriate as a strategy for either standalone data gathering or in a triangulated project (Berg, 2007, Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009) and for small groups of six to ten individuals (Krueger, 2002). In our study, we triangulated the data based on the following data sources: (1) two focus group interview verbatim transcripts; (2) one written questionnaire; and (3) observation field notes. Procedurally, the co-researchers first met the participants and

administered the written questionnaire that covered demographic information (current role, years of teaching and/or administrative experience, and school data: grade levels, number of teachers, administrators, and students in their school) and a question to rank order leadership attributes. The ranking activity was based on 22 leadership attributes adapted from the GLOBE 2004 project (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, as cited in Northouse, 2010, p. 357). The focus group interviewing then followed. During the two focus group interviews, each co-researcher took turns creating observational field notes with one of us acting as the moderator while the other as a participant observer (Berg, 2007).

We developed open-ended semi-flexible questions to guide the first focus group session. A second focus group session took place two months later as a follow-up to questions and responses from the written questionnaire and the first focus group interview. The focus group interviews were designed to stimulate discussion among participants giving way to interactions, brainstorming, and generating ideas; one member could react to a comment made by another member of the group (Berg, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The advantage of this approach to interviewing provided the co-researchers easier access to this particular group of administrators over a short period of time. In addition, it was an approach that was deemed appropriate in gathering insight about the viewpoints of the participants in relation to the research questions.

The first focus group took approximately two hours with the six participants sitting at an oval table, taking turns responding to the following guiding interview questions:

1. What does educational leadership mean to you?

2. What do you celebrate as a leader?

3. How do you know when you are successful? Describe success in your school community.

4. How do you support your teachers' professional development?

5. Describe the most important behaviors of the principal as a leader of the school.

Based on the responses to the written questionnaire and the first focus group interview, it was determined that a follow-up focus group session

might be valuable. Therefore, two months later, the researchers met with the same six participants for about an hour asking the following guided questions:

1. What is an effective teacher? What does a good teacher do?

2. Describe the support that is given to your teachers.

3. Trust appears as a top characteristic for a leader to possess according to your group. How is trust developed in your school between teachers and supervisors?

4. What does the word "just" mean to you?

5. What should the principal be willing to confront?

Role of the Co-Researchers: The two researchers knew each other from prior work together at one Christian university in the Northwest. One researcher continued to work in that university as an assistant professor in the School of Education. The other researcher worked as an administrator and faculty member at another Christian higher education institution in the area. Both researchers had a keen interest in leadership within K-12 private Christian schools based on direct and indirect support and collaboration with private Christian schools in the respective area.

Data Analysis: Analysis took place by looking at the triangulated data set from the written questionnaire, focus group interviews, and the co-researchers' observation field notes. First, the written questionnaire was synthesized by organizing the demographics into a general overview of the educational background of the six participants, all administrators in private Christian schools in western Oregon and southwest Washington. Then, the section from the questionnaire regarding 22 leadership attributes (House et al. as cited in Northouse, 2010, p. 357) were tabulated using descriptive statistics and by looking at the five highest and five lowest ranked mean scores. Secondly, the two focus group sessions were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Lastly, the co-researchers' observation field notes from the focus group interview sessions were kept and analyzed. Once the data from the written questionnaire, transcription and coding of the focus

group interviews, and field notes were synthesized, the co-researchers looked for themes and patterns.

Findings

This study took place during the fall 2010 school year over a two-month period. Upon completion of the focus group interviews, the research questions were revisited as the sorting, coding, and re-sorting of data took place to seek themes or patterns within the data set. The findings were addressed in this way: background information about the six private Christian school administrators followed by three emergent themes: (1) who we are as leaders; (2) success and celebrations; and (3) what we do as leaders.

Participant Background Information: Based on the six participants in the study, the co-researchers analyzed the data from various aspects: overall years of experience in education, experience as an administrator in the private Christian school, and whether the participant held administrative licensure or not. In order to maintain confidentiality and the integrity of our relationship with the participants, the data were not organized by school or by administrator to prevent possible identification of any given school or administrator.

The participants served in six different private Christian schools located in western Oregon and southwest Washington. In addition, some of the schools were located in a metropolitan region while others in smaller, more rural communities. Some of the schools belong to the ACSI while others do not. Some of the schools were nondenominational Christian, while others were affiliated with a specific Protestant denomination. All schools were located in close proximity to various private and/or public higher education institutions that provide preservice and inservice teacher training as well as administrative licensure programs. Of the six participants, four were principals, while two were superintendents. Three of the participants held a doctorate, while the other three held a master's degree. Three participants were state licensed as an administrator, while three were not. Four administrators worked in secondary schools, while two worked in K-12 schools. The number of teachers they supervised ranged from 11 to 50 teachers. Student population in these participants' schools ranged from 119 to 700. Experience as a school administrator in a private Christian school ranged from two years to 25 years. Two

administrators also had public school experience; one with 30 years and the other with only one year. Initially, we anticipated the administrators to have similar years of experience in the private Christian school and we thought they would all be licensed administratively within their respective states.

Who We Are As Leaders: The first of three themes addressed in this study was "who we are as leaders." The six administrators first responded to the individually administered questionnaire that listed 22 leadership attributes. We were interested how the administrators would rank the 22 leadership attributes discussed in the GLOBE 2004 project (House et al. as cited in Northouse, 2010, p. 357). According to Northouse, these leadership attributes were identified as universally desirable by 17,000 people in 62 countries in the GLOBE study. Although, this study was based on leaders within the business world, and would be considered from a worldly viewpoint, we were interested in finding out what attributes the administrators in our study would identify as important leader characteristics.

The six administrators in this study identified the five most important attributes as trustworthy, honest, communicative, administratively skilled, and positive. The five least important were motive arouser, coordinative, just, dynamic, and effective bargainer. The five most important leadership attributes identified by the administrators coincided with many of the comments during the focus group interviews. As the co-researchers listened to the discussions during the focus group sessions and also verified by the observation field notes and verbatim transcripts, characteristics such as trustworthy, honest, communicative, positive, and administratively skilled came through again as of value to these administrators. Frequently, they referred to their roles that involved managerial and daily routine activities as important. The characteristics of trustworthiness and honesty, for example, would fall in line with a Christian worldview of how to treat others.

The lowest ranked attributes related more to a leader who leads with more of an "iron hand" and less relational. The one surprise to the co-researchers was the ranking of "just." We then asked the participants during the second focus group to share what they defined as "just." With some further conversation, it was determined that it

meant fair, treating students fairly. The participants, however, did not elaborate.

From the ranking of the 22 leadership attributes, the co-researchers listened for further connections with these characteristics in relation to the topics discussed during the focus group interviews. Two key topics emerged from the discussions: having a vision and decision making related to "who we are as leaders."

Having a vision. – An important role of the leader, as stated by these administrators and supported the literature (Kouzes & Posner, 2002), was that of visionary for the school. "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18). The participants all mentioned having a vision and following the mission of the school. A shared vision and overall culture of the school was mentioned by one participant as important. Research in leadership mentioned the importance of the leader possessing a vision for the school as well (Marzano et al., 2005); this was a strong component of what the administrators in this study believed to be true.

Some of the participants mentioned vision from the point of view that it was up to the administrator to create that vision. For example, one participant stated, "A leader takes a vision and then converts it into a shared vision that everybody can participate in and own." Another participant mentioned, "…The school leader casts the vision; however, in the past the leader had been more in the trenches directing where the organization was going and perhaps that is a shift that is taking place in our school."

However, another participant shared a bit different perspective. This participant stated, "…A leader should inspire people to lead and to equip them to lead as well. It is important to understand the overall culture of the school and the learning environment that you are trying to establish." The participants more frequently mentioned that it was up to the administrator to create the vision for the school; however, an alternative perspective was shared in that perhaps a more collaborative approach might be beneficial. In addition to establishing a vision for the school, the participants mentioned the importance in their role as the decision maker. This was described in various ways.

Decision making. – The administrators frequently mentioned their role as decision makers in their respective schools. In these first few examples, it appeared the administrator would make most of the decisions for the school. One participant mentioned his role as making decisions "all day long," while another mentioned, "The leader needed to make the tough calls in decision making." Another participant mentioned that "decisions affect so many. We need to do what is best for kids… and lean on God."

However, another participant took a bit different approach by stating,

> It is important for the educational leader to build strong teams because you are all alone without a really solid team you are going to be ineffective empowering those people to be able to make decisions and exerting that in people; it also means offering pastoral support, sometimes for parents sometimes for students.

The participant did not clarify who served on the team. It was not apparent from the group discussions whether more of the administrators believed similarly or not. Based on continued conversation and probing, it did not appear overall that the administrators involved teachers in decision making outside of their classroom or that it was a value of importance to them.

In summary, the following quote generally set the tone and value regarding decision making for these participants:

> When it comes to making decisions, the thing I keep coming back to is the common denominator of what's best for kids and oftentimes it's almost like politics, you have all these different groups vying for attention, your teachers you are supposed to support, champion, and especially during these economic times if you ask the 'what ifs' you really need to lean on God because the decisions you make seem to affect so many people and yet you can't play God.

Success and Celebration: The second theme, moved from "who we are as leaders" to "success and celebration." The co-researchers wondered what these participants would highlight. Based on much of the research related to public education, student academic achievement was highly rewarded

and celebrated. In some of the recent research, student achievement and professional teacher growth were closely linked (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000; Reeves, 2006, 2010; Schmoker, 2006). However, in the literature review, it appeared that private Christian schools might celebrate success in other ways, particularly from student spiritual growth and formation (Brown, 2002; Cardus Education Survey, 2011).

During the focus group sessions, the participants discussed success and what it meant to them as well as in their school community. The responses from the participants varied. For example, one participant mentioned, "When those around me are becoming better than I am or when the student becomes better than the teacher, that's when I know I've been successful." Another participant viewed success when "[teachers] feel empowered to do what needs to be done and had the confidence to do it… the place truly can operate without you having to be there." Additionally, the participants mentioned that "when you hear God say, 'Well done!' you know you've been successful." However, on many occasions "the work of an administrator is not completed; it seems to be an unfinished job;" a comment shared by two participants. What became apparent to the co-researchers were the minimal responses related to student achievement, student academic growth, and a laser-like focus on assessment results when the group discussions centered on success and celebration.

In seeking further insight, the participants were asked what they celebrate as a leader. Not surprisingly, they mentioned those stories from teachers or staff about a spiritual moment for a student. Banke et al. (2005) found in their work as well, that spiritual leaders desired to help others to grow in their relationship with God with a focus on the mission and vision of the school. Three participants mentioned the value of seeing the students grow spiritually, "seeing a life transformed," or "seeing a dormant seed [child] fall on fertile soil in the school and they get to grow, their life has changed and you realize that probably couldn't have happened anywhere else except in the environment that your school provides." One participant mentioned, "Moments of discipleship with students, demonstrating maturity by initiating conversation, demonstrated their desire to be discipled." In addition, another administrator

celebrated when a student "gets it." Additionally, the following quotes paint a picture of what the participants celebrated as leaders: "stories of teachers or staff," "a spiritual moment," "life transformed," "see a dormant seed, see growth and life changed—environment of the school," and "graduates gone on and the vision is lived out." A paraphrase of one participant could sum up success this way:

> I feel a sense of success when the entire organization is functioning appropriately and efficiently. That includes from the Board Directors in relationship with me on down to the staff, the students, and the parents. Leading the school is a huge operation with so many components from the legal aspect to cheerleading the staff.

The participants in this study saw success and a time for celebration primarily in relation to the growth of a student, particularly spiritual growth. Success was not mentioned in relation to student academic achievement. This supported the literature from a Christian school perspective that the role of the private Christian school administrator as a spiritual leader for the school was of importance as well as the school values in relation to the family (Cardus Education Survey, 2011). It was further suggested that leaders in Christian schools viewed their role not as an intellectual leader but rather as a spiritual leader.

What School Leaders Do: The last theme was identified as "what school leaders do." Throughout the interviews, several participants mentioned decision making as an aspect of their daily routine. It was about meeting with parents, especially unhappy ones, and shielding the teachers from uncomfortable conferences with parents. One participant stated, "I think it has to do with having a correct understanding of what really matters, sometimes being willing to do that." Another participant stated, "In a smaller setting it seems mostly about making decisions all day long." The participants generally talked about the managerial or daily routine activities of leading a school. They met with not only parents, but students, teachers, and church leaders on a regular basis for problem solving and taking care of various daily tasks or issues. Another participant mentioned the importance of "being able to react to whatever

comes but at the same time someone who is planning, thinking three, four, or five steps ahead."

In addition, the co-researchers probed further about the role of the administrator in the school. Some of the responses included the importance of being visible, staying optimistic, being a servant leader, willing to listen, and having a sense of humor. The administrator also needed to be "a reflective practitioner and, with that, reflection as prayer." One participant mentioned, "…It's not having to make yourself the most important person in the room; it's almost servant leadership, but sometimes it's even more than that. You don't have to be okay for everything to be okay."

Servant leadership was mentioned in various ways throughout the focus group sessions both in relation to who they were and what they did as mentioned in prior quotations from participants. This aligned with the theoretical model first expressed in this study (Greenleaf, 1977; Marzano et al., 2005; Sergiovanni, 2005).

As the co-researchers further probed to find out what else the participants did, we were waiting to hear about teacher professional development and activities that promoted teacher professional growth. The participants were asked how they supported their teachers' professional development. One school had a mentoring program; however, most of the schools represented did not. One participant mentioned that "he talked to his teachers and how they were the experts, they were the professionals and, therefore, they could feel safe to try something new." Another participant provided "many tangible and formal resources along with help with graduate school or workshops." Another administrator mentioned the importance in a "commitment to professional development to care, to love, to support, then perhaps without even talking about differentiated instruction, they're able to apply that in the classroom better because they already learned it…." Another administrator mentioned a traditional model for professional development once a week while another administrator stated that in his school the teachers "take a day to go out into other schools to observe other teachers and share with each other."

Overall, however, it did not appear that professional development was interpreted similarly between the six administrators, nor did it appear that a clear

focus on professional development for each school was in place. In analyzing the responses about teacher professional development, it appeared that the participants viewed professional development from different perspectives among themselves and in relation to current literature (Headley, 2003; Reeves, 2010). Little was stated about formalized and regular professional development opportunities for their teachers. Some of the responses were best characterized by the fact that little funding was available to these participants to provide outside professional development activities.

Discussion
The results of this exploratory qualitative study using a focus group interview approach gave the co-researchers new knowledge, as well as an understanding about the participants in the study. Since this study utilized a small convenience sample and was qualitative in nature, we were aware of the lack of generalizability. Although the co-researchers intentionally established delimitations based on this qualitative study using focus group interviewing and convenience sampling , we were faced with additional challenges as the study unfolded. Initially, we thought the participants knew each other, but in fact, their first meeting was at the first focus group session.

During the focus group sessions, the co-researchers took turns facilitating the group discussions, while the other took field notes. The field notes gleaned some understanding about the group dynamics and interactions among the participants. This led us to share this piece of data which may have contributed to a bit less in-depth data set that we desired to capture during the focus groups.

It was observed that the six participants generally gave brief responses to the interview questions. The co-researchers needed to encourage and probe for further conversation. The participants were polite and gave wait time for each other to respond to questions. Participant comments were couched in politeness and brevity.

The first interview question regarding the meaning of educational leadership began the conversation that related to their perception about leadership roles and the attributes a leader should possess. The participants described who they were as leaders, their roles, descriptions of leadership success, and what they did related to daily administrative tasks.

We anticipated hearing more about teachers and their professional work. In fact, we did not. We heard about their work with parents, with the school or church governing boards, and students in particular. It was not clear what emotional or collegial support was given to teachers, nor the support given for professional growth. However, it was clear the schools do not have much funding for professional development.

Further, discussions of success and celebration centered on the administrator's work that related back to the school vision, mission, and core values heard by the administrator. This finding was consistent with the work released by a recent study in which private Christian school administrators protect school mission and values of family as part of a school distinctive (Cardus Education Survey, 2011).

A challenge of the focus groups was twofold. One of the six the school administrators held a strong understanding of transformative leadership (Marzano et al., 2005) using a distributed or shared leadership model. This participant answered many of the questions where others fell silent. In fact, the group allowed this particular participant to lead the conversation when questions of leadership attributes and role were asked. This participant had over 25 years of experience in the private setting and a doctorate in educational leadership. In comparison, four of the remaining private school administrators had been school leaders in the private setting for six or fewer years with the remaining participant having 14 years of experience in the private setting.

Due to additional questions and clarity needed on the part of the co-researchers, a second focus group was held to probe further about support the administrators gave to their teachers. This second focus group shed little light regarding the support given to teachers and in helping teachers grow professionally. It was unclear if the co-researchers were "talking" the same language when asking the administrators how they supported their teachers. Several of the responses referred to support given to teachers in reference to parent-administrator interactions, support for the teachers' classroom discipline, and administration making the difficult decisions. The silence in the focus group sessions left the researchers wondering if private school teachers were given support beyond simplistic resources or being the recipients of "tough decisions" made by the administrators.

Although the research questions did not explicitly ask about effective teacher work, the current research base on leadership and school improvement pointed out that effective schools redefine leadership by building leadership teams to focus on learning and to solve problems (Eaker et al., 2002; Schmoker, 2006). Teams must be recalibrated to focus on what is essential and equipped to make vital decisions. The key component of effective teams links leadership to student learning assessment data for large-scale instructional improvement. Thus, educational leadership centers on teamwork with teacher leaders and focusing on student learning assessment and instruction. However, in this study the participants did not mention their role as instructional leaders.

In analyzing the focus group data, the omission or lack of discussion about student learning, assessment, and instruction became apparent. Little mention of the teacher role in the school took place and the researchers were left wondering about the voice of the teacher and the private administrators' willingness to empower teacher leadership in their school communities. Most of the data from the focus group interviews surrounded who the administrators were as leaders themselves and what leaders do; a one-way direction. This data supported the work from the Cardus Education Survey (2011) in that almost twice as many opportunities for advanced placement courses existed in Catholic and public schools when compared to the private Christian school. Explicit teacher support was not mentioned, yet the study found that Protestant Christian schools "…end up falling short in the academic development of their students" (Cardus Education Survey, 2011, p. 13). Most private Christian school teachers were dependent on the formal curriculum.

Only one participant in the study, with doctoral training and over 25 years of experience in the private setting, linked teacher support and the impact on student learning by ways of professional development, empowering teacher leadership, providing learning opportunities through workshops, graduate work, and holding teachers accountable to standards of excellence consistent with current literature describing a roadmap to improvements in teaching and learning (Schmoker,

2006). The co-researchers were aware that financial support for teacher training and professional development opportunities was limited within most of the six schools represented. This lack of financial resources could influence the limited opportunities for professional development activities, which supported similar findings found by Headley (2003).

Many of the focus group responses centered on administrator decision making, a more paternalistic and authoritative approach to leadership. As the public school arena moves forward with professional learning communities (PLCs), a model that involves collaboration among teacher educators (Eaker et al., 2002; Schmoker, 2006), PLCs might be a useful model for private Christian schools. Further research is needed to delve into the roles of administrators and their perceptions of supporting teacher leaders in the school setting. If active engagement using a shared leadership model is desired to spur innovation and school transformation, additional development and selection criteria is needed for private school administrators. The identification of this value is necessary for closer theoretical and methodological alignment between teacher preparation program outcomes and the leadership approach of private Christian school administrators.

Conclusions

Although the co-researchers cannot generalize to the greater population of private Christian school administrators, we were able to identify a general pattern of responses from the participants in this study, a trend within the group. This information may be of value to the participants as they continue to participate in their own professional development. A strength of the group was their respect for each other's thoughts and opinions. The dialogue may have sparked inward thoughts about their own leadership characteristics, how they might envision a more collaborative approach with their teachers, and spark some additional incentive to pursue professional development opportunities for their teachers.

The private Christian school administrators, who participated in this focus group study, expressed their strong commitment to Christian faith values, the development of spirituality as a goal for their students, and a strong desire to serve their school communities. This commitment to their Christian faith, development of student spirituality, and service to the community aligns with the literature about private school leadership (Cardus Education Survey, 2011). Further, the areas the school administrators shared that connected to effective leadership were: the sense of calling (Wheatley, 2002), the desire to help others to grow in their relationship with God (Banke et al., 2005), and their desire to serve (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2001; Greenleaf, 1977; Marzano et al., 2005).

The co-researchers were not surprised with the findings from the study related to visioning, decision making, and the value of spiritual development. However, with our public school lens and current educational research about the importance nationally regarding student achievement, assessment, and staff collaboration for the purposes of student academic improvement, we were a bit surprised to hear so little reference to student academic achievement. The potential dilemma for private higher education preservice and inservice programs that place students in private Christian K-12 schools for internships might need to revisit their own programs.

What we know now that we didn't know before the study informed the co-researchers' respective work in their respective training programs. We may need to rethink field placements in the private Christian schools and how to best align those experiences with our teacher education program requirements. We recognize and commend the private Christian school missions for the high value on spiritual development of the students, and as members of Christian higher education institutions, we intend to continue our support of this mission. However, it appears that the gap between private and public school missions may be growing in relation to the focused expectations on achievement placed by the state, as well as nationally.

Recommendations

Further studies of individual private Christian school administrators are needed regarding decision making, instructional leadership, and professional development for teachers. In addition, studies that include teachers from private Christian schools related to their perception about support from their administration, shared leadership, and professional development opportunities would be of value.

The mean years of administrative experiences in this study was 11.5 with only two administrators having been trained as administrators. The paternalistic, one-way leadership style combined with the lack of training creates a need within the administrators themselves.

Intentional professional growth and development opportunities are of importance. Several of the private Christian school administrators mentioned the importance of service to others or servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Marzano et al., 2005). Are the administrators viewing servant leadership as a one-way direction or are they willing to include teachers helping to serve other teachers and the administrators? The bible states, "The greatest among you will be a servant" (Matthew 23:11, NIV).

Based on the conclusions and recommendations from this study, members of the International Community of Christian Educators (ICCTE) who represent private Christian higher education institutions, may wish to consider collaborative work to deliver various professional development opportunities to teachers and administrators of K-12 private Christian schools that focus on shared leadership, collaboration between administrators and teachers, and mentorship opportunities. This could be accomplished through informal connections between institutions as well as through formal ICCTE conferences. Life as a community of Christian higher education institutions and K-12 private Christian schools is consistent with scriptural truth to walk together imploring one another in truth, wisdom sharing, and active mentoring. "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1, NIV).

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