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Exemplary Middle School Principals Leading through Conversation

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Exemplary Middle School Principals Leading through Conversation

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ABSTRACT

Exemplary Middle School Principals Leading through Conversation

by John Ashby

Purpose: The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to describe the behaviors that exemplary middle school principals practice to lead their organization through conversations using Groysberg and Slind's (2012) four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality.

Methodology: This phenomenological qualitative study described the lived experiences of exemplary middle school principals in Orange County, California. The researcher was part of a thematic research team of 12 peer researchers and 4 faculty advisors. Through purposeful sampling, the researcher selected 10 exemplary middle school principals who met at least 4 of 6 criteria identifying someone as exemplary. Data collection included face-to-face semi-structured interviews using a protocol developed by the thematic research team. The researcher conducted observations and gathered relevant artifacts for triangulation, then coded all data for emergent themes.

Findings: The analysis of data resulted in 20 themes and 1,358 references across the four conversational leadership elements of intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality. From these 20 themes, 8 key findings emerged.

Conclusions: Four conclusions were drawn from the data and findings that described the lived experience of exemplary middle school principals who lead through conversation. Exemplary middle school principals must (a) fully commit themselves to engage members of their organization through conversations and build relationships with stakeholders; (b) promote open conversations in an accessible, interactive environment;

(c) create support structures to ensure a clear organizational direction through responsive, purposeful, and well-designed dialogue with all stakeholders; and (d) communicate and model clear expectations to lead stakeholders and ensure clarity of organizational purpose.

Recommendations: Further research still needs to be conducted on conversational leadership. Replications of this phenomenological study should focus on demographics of principals (e.g., gender, age) and middle schools (e.g., size, student population, socio-economic factors). Mixed-methods research studies should add a quantitative tool to draw further insight into the conversational leadership behaviors of exemplary middle school principals. Meta-analysis research studies should consider data from all 12 thematic team studies and another should analyze data drawn from research completed by thematic peer researchers who focused on exemplary elementary, middle, and high school principals.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

PREFACE

Following discussions and considerations regarding the opportunity to study Groysberg and Slinds' conversational leadership in multiple types of organizations, four faculty researchers and 12 doctoral students discovered a common interest in exploring the ways exemplary leaders practice conversational leadership using the four elements of intimacy, interactivity, inclusion and intentionality. This resulted in a thematic study conducted by a research team of 12 doctoral students.

This phenomenological research was designed with a focus on the behaviors of top Principals in middle schools practice to lead their organizations through conversation. Exemplary leaders were selected by the team from various public, for-profit, and non-profit organizations to examine the behaviors these professionals used. Each researcher interviewed 10 highly successful professionals to describe how they lead their organization through conversation using each of the four elements outlined in *Talk, Inc.* by authors Groysberg and Slind (2012b). To ensure thematic consistency, the team co-created the purpose statement, research questions, definitions, interview questions, and study procedures. It was agreed upon by the team that for the purpose of increased validity, data collection would involve method triangulation and would include interviews, observations, and artifacts.

Throughout the study, the term *peer researchers* is used to refer to the other researchers who conducted this thematic study. My fellow doctoral students and peer researchers studied exemplary leaders in the following fields: Nikki Salas, city managers; Jacqueline Cardenas, unified school district superintendents; Chris Powell, elementary school principals; Lisa Paisley, educational services assistant superintendents in southern

California; Kristen Brogan-Baranski, elementary superintendents in southern California; Jennifer LaBounty, community college presidents; Robert Harris, high school principals; Tammie Castillo Shiffer, regional directors of migrant education; Cladonda Lamela, chief nursing officers; Vincent Plair, municipal police chiefs and sheriffs; and Qiana O'Leary, nonprofit executive directors.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The world today is growing ever more volatile and unpredictable. This ever changing and turbulent world was described by Friedman and Mandelbaum (2011) as *VUCA* referring to volatility, unpredictability, complexity, and ambiguity. As such, an ever increasing importance was placed on people and connections (Gardner, 2008). The exponential rate of technology advances increased the amount of information shared between people with a constant flow of text messages, emails, social media status updates, and streaming content (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011). This new world led to an increase in the volume of communication, but not in the depth of communication, and these changes challenged leaders to shape and define relationships mediated by technology (Drucker, 1999).

The essential challenge according to Peter Block (2008) in his book *Community: The Structure of Belonging* was "to transform the isolation and self-interest within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole" (p. 1). Scott Mautz (2015) asserted that, as humans, people constantly looking for ways to make connections to others and for an environment that feels like a community. These communities were based on emotional connections that created a sense of belongingness and gave people meaning. Christopher Bartlett from the Harvard Business School (as cited by Mautz, 2015) found people went to work to gain meaning in their lives. Legendary management expert Peter Drucker (as cited in Bennis, 2009) noted the "chief objective of leadership is the creation of a human community held together by the work bond for a common purpose" (p. 155). This common purpose created an exciting possibility that what people did could have a profound influence on their lives. However, with the results from recent

research indicating an extreme lack of connection and engagement in the workplace, current workplace communities need a leadership transformation creating opportunities for members of the organization to connect to each other and find meaning in their work (Crowley, 2011; Herrera, 2017; Mautz, 2015).

According to Crowley (2011), this historic low-point of employee engagement was due to the breakdown of communication between organizational leaders and their employees. The long-standing practice of corporate communication in organizations to flow in one direction with a top-down approach needs to be reconsidered if true connections and relationships are to be formed within an organization's community. Scott (2011) suggested connections through technology increased the flow of information between people, but they were "one way, directive, quick, clipped, and efficient" (p. 26). Leaders and organizations thought an increased focus on technology and virtual connections would automatically engage employees and key stakeholders, but these messages were often still categorized as ineffective and top-down (Derosa & Lepsinger, 2010). Therefore, despite good intentions, leaders continue to struggle with developing belongingness at work even with an increased use of technology (Derosa & Lepsinger, 2010; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Mautz, 2015; Schramm, 1962).

Schwartz, Gomes, and McCarthy (2010) stated belongingness was a concept first introduced in the 1960s through the work of Abraham Maslow. Research found the desire for belongingness was as compelling as food (Schwartz et al., 2010). However, current businesses and leaders were missing the mark on creating an environment for belongingness (Sinek, 2011). Sinek (2011) described when people belonged to a group with common values and beliefs, they felt connected and safe. Employees and

stakeholders were drawn to leaders and organizations that were good at communicating what they believe. "Their ability to make us feel like we belong, to make us feel special, safe and not alone… and we feel a strong bond with those who are also drawn to the same leaders and organizations" (Sinek, 2011, p. 55).

The more leaders and members of an organization talked with one another, the more employees were encouraged to express their views openly in conversations; a shift occurred from the previous top-down culture to one of genuine conversations (Senge, 1990). "Conversations are dynamic, interactive, and inclusive. They evolve and impact the way we connect, engage, interact, influence others, enabling us to shape reality, mind-sets, events, and outcomes in a collaborative way" (Glaser, 2014, p. xiii). Great leaders, as noted by multiple authors, focused their communication efforts on creating conversations that engaged employees and increased connections to build a community with a shared purpose and values (Glaser, 2014; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Mautz, 2015; Scott, 2011; Senge, 1990; Sinek, 2011; Whitaker, 2012; Whitaker, Zoul, & Casas, 2015).

The importance of conversations was supported by an emerging leadership style – conversational leadership. The work of Brown and Hurley (2009), Scott (2011), and Glaser (2014) helped set the stage for the conversational leadership assertion of Groysberg and Slind (2012b) that "instead of handing down commands or imposing formal controls, many leaders today are interacting with their workforce in ways that call to mind an ordinary conversation between two people" (p. 2). Leaders who harnessed the power of conversations and sustained connections tapped into the greatest source of performance and competitive advantage–people (Crowley, 2011; Groysberg & Slind,

2012b; Mautz, 2015; Scott, 2011).Ultimately, leaders had the choice to create or disrupt connections by means of their conduct and also the communication created in conversations (Mautz, 2015).

During turbulent times, the country cannot afford a disengaged employee base, especially those tasked with preparing the next generation of scholars, leaders, and citizens. The lack of connection and decreased engagement present in the business world may unfortunately extend to the United States public education system. It is imperative school leaders, and specifically school principals, create belongingness, engage in meaningful conversation, and seek to support members of their organization and key stakeholders. According to Whitaker (2012), outstanding principals knew they needed to support great teaching to impact student achievement. "The principals are the architect. The teachers establish the foundation. The students move into the building and fill it with life and meaning. Every principal has an impact. Great principals make a difference" (Whitaker, 2012, p. 141). Although school leadership was previously seen as having no impact on the effectiveness of schools and student achievement, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) offered a different perspective, noting principals made a "profound difference in the achievement of students through strong and thoughtful leadership" (p. 123).

At the middle school level, principals must create a captivating narrative to draw stakeholders toward a common purpose as the middle school years were considered the forgotten years in K-12 education (G. Anderson & Mungal, 2015). Whitaker et al. (2015) indicated the separation between great middle school principals from others was the ability to connect with staff and key stakeholders to build a school community. For

instance, Whitaker (1995) found effective middle school principals brought teachers into decision-making conversations to consistently involve faculty in the direction of the school through input and suggestions. This inclusive leadership process was made possible through the use of conversations (Groysberg & Slind, 2012a). Middle school principals who involved and engaged stakeholders in meaningful conversations created connections between teachers, students, families, and key stakeholders.

Background

The volatile world today is experiencing lightning fast changes in the ways people communicate, connect, and participate in communities. Though written in 1943, Maslow's theory of human motivation remains relevant as human beings continue to be driven by the fulfillment of needs that will ultimately create satisfaction or dissatisfaction in their lives. The high-level of dissatisfied and disengaged employees in the workplace require leadership focused on the needs of employees and key stakeholders to be a part of something bigger than themselves (Crowley, 2011; Mautz, 2015). Senge (1990) called this feeling of connection between people that functioned as a whole *alignment*. This alignment was based on dialogue or conversations people experienced that lifted their sense of connectedness to an organization (Bohm, 1965; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Hurley & Brown, 2009; Scott, 2011; Senge, 1990).

Conversational leadership received attention by researchers regarding the way talk impacts organizational success through conversational connections (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Hurley & Brown, 2009; Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Scott, 2011; Sinek, 2011; Whitaker et al., 2015). Groysberg and Slind (2012b) focused on conversations used by leaders to tap into the organizational power of alignment, connection, community, and

belongingness through a focus on organizational conversation and conversational leadership. For this study, the following sections cover relevant leadership and communication concepts that are fundamental to the overall study on conversational leadership.

Leadership

Leadership across time and history proved to be critical to organizational success (Burns, 1978). It was considered a "highly sought-after and highly valued commodity… as many people believe that leadership is a way to improve their personal, social, and professional lives" (Northouse, 2016, p. 109). The literature on leadership was vast and extended knowledge of, and to, scholars, practitioners, organizations, and communities, providing a theoretical basis for action from those in leadership positions (Bass, 1981). According to Marzano et al. (2005), "Leadership has been intimately linked to the effective functioning of complex organizations throughout the centuries" (p. 4). Some important leadership theorists included Carlyle, Stogdill, Skinner, and Burns (Northouse, 2016). Carlyle was a prominent leadership theorist from the 1840s who posited leaders could not be made but were born with inherent characteristics; this became known as Great Man Theory. This concept of innate leadership abilities gave way to the trait leadership theory by Stogdill where leadership was the social relationship between people in separate situations. Skinner (1953) agreed with Stogdill that leaders could be developed, but focused on the fundamentals of behavior modification of leaders and followers (Northouse, 2016).

Transformational leadership. Burns (1978) forged a new theory, transformational leadership, with a central focus on how leaders tapped into the needs

and motives of followers to attain goals. Bass (1985) built on the work of Burns, but expanded and refined the theory to encompass leaders with a strong set of internal values and ideals who were effective at "motivating followers to act in ways that support the greater good rather than their own self-interest" (p. 83). Bass and Avolio (1994) continued this work on transformational leadership and presented the four transformational leadership factors as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Transformational leadership focused on improving employee performance and helping them reach their full potential. According to L. Anderson and Anderson (2001), the ability of leaders to engage stakeholders earlier and more often was a critical component of organizational transformation. Models of transformational leadership were developed by authors and researchers who described strategies to be successful in change processes (L. Anderson & Anderson, 2001; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Kouzes & Posner, 2003b; Mitra, 2013).

Transformational leadership was often presented in a dichotomy with transactional leadership. The transactional leader was representative of a command-and-control way to manage leadership through contingent rewards and corrective criticism, negative feedback, and negative reinforcement (Northouse, 2016). This leadership style was described as leadership through an exchange of things of value with followers to advance organizational agendas or the bottom line. The transactional leader did not consider the needs of followers or their personal development (Northouse, 2016). In today's complex society where employees look for connections to work and leaders, organizations with transactional leadership were noted to have decreased employee engagement and high turnover (Crowley, 2011; Mautz, 2015).

Communication

Communication was one of the most extensively and intensely studied aspects of human behavior (Sage, Sage, Foss, & Littlejohn, 2009). Although at its core communication is the exchange and sharing of information through written and spoken words, Comstock (2016) also included tone, gestures, and body language of the communicator to the definition, as well as listening and the interpretation of the message by individuals. Duck and McMahan (2017) found research from 40 years ago referenced 126 definitions of communication, but they believed the study of communication was unique as it was something people experience and use every day. As such, Duck and McMahan (2017) went beyond the simple definition of sending and receiving messages. Instead, they presented seven characteristics useful in everyday communication: "(1) communication is symbolic, (2) communication requires meaning, (3) communication is cultural, (4) communication is relational, (5) communication involves frames, (6) communication is both presentational and representational, (7) communication is a transaction" (p. 7). Technology greatly affected communication as it influenced daily lives in work and personal lives as people interacted with through electronic devices.

The focus on technology for exchanging information became more critical than ever given the exponential increase of technology in the 21st century. Block (2008) indicated how people communicate enabled people to build communities. The purposeful interactions and conversations people used toward each other had a profound effect on their lives. Those considered "skillful communicators are happier and healthier, enjoy more satisfying interpersonal relationships, and perform better in school and in their jobs" (Sage et al., 2009, p. 142). In recent research and literature, dialogue and

conversations were presented as critical to communication efforts and had a transformative impact on peoples' lives (Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Mautz, 2015; Nichols, 2012; Scott, 2004).

Conversational Leadership

Conversational leadership is a collective building of wise actions by leaders through dynamic, intimate, inclusive, interactive, and intentional conversations (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2015; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Hurley & Brown, 2009). The term conversational leadership was coined by educator Carolyn Baldwin to describe a leader's deliberate use of conversations to cultivate collective organizational insights that valued people and the organization (Hurley & Brown, 2009). It emerged as a viable response to the increase in organizational and stakeholder complexity and decreased engagement by employees as it was not defined by a specific set of tasks. Rather, "it relies on the innate predisposition to possess and enact humanistic sensitivities that are reflected in the ability to get in tune with people's expectations and concerns" (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2015, p. 425). The leadership style's roots in communication found conversations were constantly in motion and must be thoughtfully considered by leaders to engage and empower those around them.

Conversational leaders understand a person's passion, drive, enthusiasm, and energy are enhanced through discursive social interactions (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). These interactions allow conversational leaders to "remain close to employees – not just in terms of space, but also in terms of spirit – and employees trust them as a result" (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b, p. 2). They cultivate purposeful dialogue to create connections and belongingness with members and the organization.

Organizational Conversations

Today's conversational leader attends to their interactions with employees by focusing on building the organizational culture through connections and relationships formed through conversations, which ultimately allow the organization to thrive (Berson & Stieglitz, 2013; Glaser, 2014; Senge, 1990). These organizational conversations take the place traditionally occupied by corporate communications. They consider a wide range of the patterns and processes by which information moves through the organization, focusing on how content passes between leaders and employees, and employees to one another (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b).

Groysberg and Slind (2012b) contend when organizational conversations flourish, the organization is able to achieve new heights through focus on four conversational elements: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality. Conversational leadership is attentive to the use of these elements to harness the power of people and processes through organizational conversation rather than attempting to control people through top-down communication (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). The following sections extend the understanding of the four conversational elements as they serve as the primary variables in this study.

Intimacy. Conversational intimacy describes the closeness, trust, and familiarity created between people through shared experiences, meaningful exchanges, and shared knowledge (Glaser, 2014; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). It embodies how leaders relate to employees through direct and personal communication as they value trust and authenticity. This communication comes from the bottom-up as the leader purposefully engages members of their organization by emphasizing active listening, rather than the

old style of formal top-down social interactions. Through conversational intimacy, leaders narrow the gap between employees and leadership, which leads to better professional relationships and affects the overall success of the organization (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b).

Interactivity. Conversational interactivity is the bilateral or multilateral exchange of comments and ideas, a back-and-forth process (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). Leaders who practice this conversational element understand dialogue is not a one-way process and therefore use the breadth of communication mediums to promote the two-way exchange of information necessary for organizational growth (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). Leaders using interactivity facilitate two-way social interactions through social media, internal communication blogs, and professional learning community platforms (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). This element of conversational leadership is characterized by an exchange of comments and ideas in addition to a back and forth process.

Inclusion. The commitment to the process of engaging stakeholders to share ideas and participate in the development of the organization is the essence of conversational inclusion (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Hurley & Brown, 2009). The act of conversational inclusion constructs organizational decisions as a collaborative achievement through the management of meaning (Clifton, 2012b). Leaders who engage in this element find new partners to construct an organization's identity through the story that is created within dialogue. When members of an organization assist in creating the message or content, leaders have to relinquish a level of control to create an environment where employees act as brand ambassadors and thought leaders in the organization (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b).

Intentionality. The implementation of conversational intentionality ensures clarity of purpose that includes goals and direction to create order and meaning (Barge,1985, 1986; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Men, 2013). Leaders who use conversational intentionality in their work find that conversations can become a vehicle for strategy. Within the context of an actual dialogue, intentionality means that the leader must have at least one goal in mind when conversing to achieve "operational closure and organizational cohesion" (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b, p. 142). Leaders purposefully build their messaging around company strategy that is co-created with employees via specifically designed communication vehicles.

Role of a Middle School Principal

Middle school principals lead complex organizations while pursuing educational excellence for their students by engaging and supporting staff and key stakeholders. These educational leaders are called on to lead, develop, and facilitate a school that allows students, teachers, staff, and the school community to discover the substance that supports student learning and growth (Mizell, 2002). Effective middle grades principals have to focus on four areas of leadership: "(1) recognize teaching and learning as the main business of the school, (2) communicate the school's mission and vision clearly and consistently to all constituents, (3) promote an atmosphere of trust and collaboration, and (4) emphasize professional development (Anfara, 2013, pp. 697-698). These areas relate directly to how a middle school principal makes connections with students, teachers, staff, and the surrounding school community that consists of families, business owners, and local community services. Middle school principals therefore fill the role of a

transformational leader, tasked with creating and sustaining school culture and community while leading the school communication efforts.

Gap in Research

Significant research was conducted in leadership, communication, and educational leadership (Northouse, 2010). In addition, numerous studies were conducted regarding best practices for school administrators (Kouzes & Posner, 2003a; Marzano et al., 2005; Whitaker, 2012). Studies were conducted regarding best practices for school administrators at the middle school levels (Leech & Fulton, 2002; Whitaker, 2012). More specific focus was been placed on middle schools and their educational leaders (Schaefer, Malu, & Yoon, 2016; Whitaker, 2012). Considerable research also exists on transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006) and a growing interest in conversational leadership (Berson & Stieglitz, 2013; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Hurley & Brown, 2009; Nichols, 2012). Although the expanding research base provides an analysis of the impact of effective leadership in the middle grades linked to later success in life for students (Anfara et al., 2003; Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Mertens, 2006), additional research is needed. Few studies replicated findings and well-designed original research was lacking (Anfara, Roney, Smarkola, DuCette, & Gross, 2006; Balfanz et al., 2007; Gale & Bishop, 2014). Therefore, despite research and literature indicating best practices for middle school principals and conversational leadership, no research could be found explicitly connecting the two.

Statement of the Research Problem

Despite extensive research on leadership, the country finds itself at an all-time low point in employee engagement (Crowley, 2011). Workplaces in all sectors across the

country are for more complex and demanding than in the last 30 years (Harvey & Drolet, 2004). These changes demanded a new type of leadership that harnesses the fundamental characteristic of an engaged workforce or community – energy (Harvey & Drolet, 2004). To actively connect with employees, leaders need to focus on the organizational conversations that occur at all levels of the organization. Senge (1990) believed these conversations were a fundamental requirement of organizations to thrive in the future. "To get to the next level of greatness depends on the quality of our culture, which depends on the quality of our relationships, which depends on the quality of our conversations. Everything happens through conversations" (Glaser, 2014, p. xix). As conversational leadership is an emerging leadership model that focuses on organizational conversation, it has not been researched or studied extensively (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Hurley & Brown, 2009; Nichols, 2012). This study extended the knowledge of conversational leadership to engage stakeholders and achieve transformational change in organizations.

The variables included in this study are drawn from *Talk, Inc.* (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b), where the conversational leader focuses on four elements of organizational conversation: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality. Intimacy is the first and foundational element that supports a vibrant organizational conversation. It entails leaders relating to employees through communication that is personal and direct and values trust and authenticity. The element of interactivity focuses on the communication channels that a leader utilizes to foster an organizational culture that engages in back-and-forth and face-to-face interactions. The third element, inclusion, involved leaders relinquishing some control over content as employees actively engage in organizational

messaging, both inside and outside the organization. Finally, intentionality closes the loop of organizational conversation as leaders build their messaging around organizational strategies and vision that have been co-created with employees (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to describe behaviors that exemplary middle school principals practice to lead their organizations through conversations using Groysberg and Slind's (2012b) four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality.

Central Research Question

What are the behaviors that exemplary middle school principals practice to lead their organizations through conversation using Groysberg and Slind's four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality?

Sub Questions

1. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of intimacy?
2. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of interactivity?
3. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of inclusion?
4. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of intentionality?

Significance of the Problem

School leaders who use conversations to drive connections discover an energy and strength from the school community. Leaders and stakeholders are connected in conversations about needs, and when suggestions are offered, they are tested, tried, and re-tried as an entire community. These conversations move the school community toward a common purpose (G. Anderson & Mungal, 2015; Gale & Bishop, 2014; Mulhall, Mertens, & Flowers, 2001). In an ever-changing society, the principal can make an impact on both student outcomes and engagement with teachers, staff, families, and stakeholders through conversations that create a sense of connectedness and belonging within a greater school community (Anfara et al., 2008; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). Middle schools in particular have a daunting task of meeting the developmental needs of students by focusing on the cognitive domains and paying close attention to the culture of the school community (Jackson & Andrews, 2000). According to Anderman (2002), a strong, positive sense of school belonging by middle school students had a lasting impact on positive self-concept, academic performance, and optimism. Therefore, to ensure high chances for future success for all students, middle school principals must improve their organization to develop caring and ethical citizens in a safe, supportive, and healthy school environment (Jackson & Andrews, 2000).

Significant research was conducted on leadership, communication, and educational leadership, with further studies regarding best practices for school administrators (Kouzes & Posner, 2003a; Marzano et al., 2005; Northouse, 2010) and more specifically, middle school principals (Brown, 2005; Leech & Fulton, 2002; Schaefer et al., 2016; Whitaker, 2012). Conversational leaders who stimulated

organizational conversation through intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality had the ability to tap into an organizational energy that transcended their position and helped them achieve break-through results (Glaser, 2014). Although conversational leadership is a relatively new leadership style, it is gaining attention due to its transformative elements that address employee engagement by creating relationships through connections made during organizational conversations (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Nichols, 2012).

However, limited research connects the leadership behaviors of exemplary middle school principals with conversational leadership, despite the tremendous leadership challenge principals face as they work with teachers, students, and parents to make transformational changes (Anfara et al., 2006; Balfanz et al., 2007; Clark & Clark, 2004; Gale & Bishop, 2014; Mundell, 2010; Walker & Slear, 2011). As educational leaders look to engage all stakeholders in conversations, this study on the practices of exemplary middle school principals who lead through conversation will be critical to others in the field and add to the overall literature on conversational leadership.

Definitions

The following definitions are presented as they are pertinent to the study. They are offered to ensure alignment and clarity during data collection and data analysis.

Behavior. An action, activity, or process that can be observed or measured (Dainton & Zelley, 2005; Griffin, 2012; West & Turner, 2010).

Exemplary. Someone set apart from peers in a supreme manner, suitable behavior, principles, or intentions that can be copied (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014). For the purposes of this research, exemplary leaders are defined as those who are set

apart from peers in a supreme manner with the exhibition of at least four of the following characteristics:

- Evidence of successful relationships with followers
- Evidence of leading a successful organization
- A minimum of 5 years of experience in the profession
- Articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings
- Recognition by their peers
- Membership in professional associations in their field

Inclusion. The commitment to the process of engaging stakeholders to share ideas and participate in the development of the organization (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Hurley & Brown, 2009).

Intentionality. Ensuring clarity of purpose that includes goals and direction to create order and meaning (Barge, 1986; Barge, 1985; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Men, 2013).

Interactivity. Bilateral or multilateral exchange of comments and ideas, a back-and-forth process (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b).

Intimacy. The closeness, trust, and familiarity created between people through shared experiences, meaningful exchanges, and shared knowledge (Glaser, 2014; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b).

Delimitations

"A delimitation is a factor that may or will affect the study in an important way and is controlled by the researcher" (Roberts, 2010, p. 138). This study was delimited by

the researcher to include 10 exemplary public middle school principals in southern California. The selection criteria identified leaders as "exemplary" in their field. Exemplary leaders are set apart from their peers by exhibiting at least four of the following six characteristics: (1) evidence of successful relationships with followers, (2) evidence of leading a successful organization, (3) a minimum of five years of experience in the profession, (4) articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings, (5) recognition by their peers, and (6) membership in professional associations in their field.

Organization of the Study

This study on exemplary middle school principals and their use of conversational leadership is organized into five chapters, a bibliography, and appendices. Chapter I introduced the study, along with the purpose statement, research questions, and significance of the study. Chapter II contains a review of literature expanding on the concepts of conversational leadership. Chapter III elucidates the research design and methodology of the study, with a description of the population and sample, instrument used, and data collection procedures. Chapter IV presents an analysis of the data and a subsequent discussion of the findings. Finally, Chapter V offers a summary, conclusions, and recommendations for further study.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Chapter II provides a comprehensive review of literature covering the historical and theoretical elements important to this study on conversational leadership in the workplace. A summary of literature on declining employee engagement and relevant changes in workplace practices in communication and leadership is presented first. It is followed by a theoretical background on communication and leadership theories that culminate with a focus on transformational and conversational leadership. Literature related to the four elements of organizational conversation (intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality) according to Groysberg and Slind (2012b) is then provided. The chapter culminates with a summary of literature on the role of the middle school principal in organizational leadership.

Our Changing World

This period of history, according to Friedman and Mandelbaum (2011), is considered volatile, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA). Numerous authors found major shifts in science, technology, climate change, demographics, social stratification, culture, moral values, and globalization (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011; Gardner, 2008; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). The last shift, globalization, put every American job under pressure as the free movement of information, goods, and services made work more complex and demanded critical-thinking skills (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011). As the world was flattened through globalization, connections between people increased, but there has not been a correlating increase in employee engagement (Crowley, 2011). This lack of employee engagement was a major concern for the growth of organizations and businesses across the country (Crowley, 2011; Mautz,

2015). The impact of decreased deep, meaningful relationships between people required organizations across all sectors to consider new approaches to solving workplace connection problems (Gardner, 2008). Today's leaders must therefore engage employees to remain relevant in an ever-changing world identified as functioning during an era of VUCA (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011; Senge, 1990).

A research study conducted by Gallup "found that 71% of American workers can be coded as either 'not engaged' or 'actively disengaged' in their work, meaning they are emotionally disconnected from their workplaces and are less likely to be productive" (Mautz, 2015, p. 7). Sinek (2011) elucidated in *Start with Why* that leaders were not capturing this thirst for connection with employees, as over 80% of Americans did not believe they worked in an ideal workplace. This resulted from a lack of connection to the core values of the organization and their leaders, and the way that core value is communicated and lived by the organization (Sinek, 2011). Many leaders grew complacent in this complex society as evidenced by fewer employees experiencing connectedness to their organization, co-workers, and leaders. Sustained collective action within all levels of an organization was required to increase connectedness and engagement levels (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011).

It no longer served to continue with past practices of communication in organizations now in a highly interconnected world. Although the ability of people to communicate through conversations was discussed and studied in many locations across all disciplines, people's innate desire to connect, communicate, and engage expanded exponentially in the last 20 years as advances in technology increased the potential for conversations (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011; Glaser, 2014). Authors found leaders

and organizations lost focus on the power of conversations to create positive working environments instead operating on the belief that transactional leadership driven by an intrinsic reward system would motivate and inspire employees (Crowley, 2011; Groysberg & Slind, 2012a; Mautz, 2015; Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). Active consideration of how people connect, converse, create communities, and lead during these VUCA times became the new pre-requisite for organizational success (Crowley, 2011; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Scott, 2011). Organizations able to connect and create belongingness with workers and stakeholders through conversations could better navigate the flattened world.

Workplace Changes and Declining Employee Engagement

Despite constant communication changes, those in the workforce did not see shifts in leadership that matched their need and desire for connection. According to a recent *Gallup Management Journals* semiannual Employee Engagement Index… 20% of employees were actively engaged in their jobs, 54% were not engaged, and 17% were actively disengaged (Scott, 2011). Crowley (2011) noted "employees feel undervalued and unappreciated, less engaged, less productive, and far less willing to show initiative" (p. 63). Employees were no longer captive audiences in a closed system where input and direction was generated from the top-down. Although the previous closed system concept worked well in stable, predictable environments such as the manufacturing industry, service industries were becoming more economically significant and "as knowledge work supplants other kinds of labor, the need for sophisticated ways to process and share information grow more acute" (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b, p. 7).

Despite this need for increased communication between employees and leaders, authors found leaders had not fully harnessed recent technology such as digital networks. Leaders who relied on older channels of communication without a back-and-forth exchange using technology struggled to harness the energy of their workforce (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Nichols, 2012). Within the last 10 years, large companies began to use social technology to engage in small-scale conversations (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). This demonstrated a shift in organizational structures to a flatter, less hierarchical system that allowed employees at all levels of an organization to provide immediate and tangible input on organizational issues.

Although social media in both internal and external forms took root, it was not the technology that was important, but rather the conversations and interactions among all levels of an organization that produced real connection and power (Groysberg & Slind, 2012a). Crowley (2011) commented, "today's business world, shaped by rapidly changing technology and the far greater value of institutional knowledge, creative thinking, and sophisticated collaboration, the value of each employee has grown exponentially more important" (p. 2). This concept of an increased understanding of the value of employees potential to drive engagement through meaningful connections was rooted in the current workforce's desire to be inspired and empowered to succeed in times of uncertainty (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Engaged workers were more productive, more profitable, and created loyal customers (Sinek, 2011) The importance of leadership that attended to the value of employees through the creation of meaningful connections was therefore critical to organizational success.

Changing Landscape of Public Education

The world of education is not exempt from the changes the world is experiencing. Organizations need to engage the workforce through fresh types of communication to increase productive, meaningful conversations with employees, but Friedman and Mandelbaum (2012) posited as business catches up with technology, a concerted leadership effort is needed in schools. Educational leaders are concerned as more and more students, teachers, and communities are disengaged with the current teaching, learning, and educational leadership as it looks to address historical shifts in federal education policy in the United States. A review of previous educational policies are provided in the following sections before ultimately addressing the impact of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) signed into law by President Barack Obama in December 2015.

A major shift in federal involvement in the American educational system occurred in 1965 when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which increased federal involvement in schools with both oversight and funding. According to Sanders (2016), ESEA legitimized federal involvement in local schools, something previously managed by states and local authority. ESEA also placed an emphasis on marginalized and minority students as it "codified every child's right to high quality education and it made the case that such education was in the best interest of the nation" (Sanders, 2016, p. 367).

The law was a key component of President Johnson's legislative program that declared an "unconditional war on poverty in America"(Kantor, 1991, p. 52). ESEA "promised to improve public education without fundamentally changing public

education" (Reed, 2016, p. 369). However, the law was strongly challenged by southern states that looked to continue the segregation of schools with the highest-performing schools being attended by White children whereas Blacks and minorities attended low-performing schools, thus deepening the divide in education and poverty levels (Sanders, 2016).

Although ESEA was re-authorized approximately every five years, the next major shift was not until the early 1980s with the release of the report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. Through this report, the National Committee on Excellence in Education (1983) indicated the future of the country was in jeopardy due to the mediocrity of the educational system. According to Reed (2016), this report symbolized the need for education standardization as it shifted the focus toward outputs of education – test score results. This movement culminated with No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which "imposed federally mandated sanctions on schools and school districts when their students did not meet performance expectations… It's punitive frame and exclusive focus on language arts and math narrowed education and equated test score results with learning" (Reed, 2016, p. 371).

NCLB required all students to reach 100% proficiency in core academic subjects by 2014 (Issa, 2012). The opinion paper created by President Bush (2001) served as the NCLB blueprint that provided a general vision for the country's education system when it reauthorized the ESEA. He noted Congress, since 1965, has "created hundreds of programs intended to address problems in education without asking whether or not the programs produce results or knowing their impact on local needs." Therefore, President Bush noted to address the "disappointing results" of these programs, the NCLB Act was

created to produce a more effective federal role in education, to raise educational achievement, and close the racial achievement gap.

Darling-Hammond (2007) suggested the strategies of the education initiative focused attention on raising test scores, mandating better teachers, and providing educational choice, but also produced unintended negative consequences that frequently harmed the students the law intended to help. According to Issa (2012), due to an increased importance of test scores to determine student achievement and school effectives, coupled with support or sanctions based on results, states were pushed to "bring students closer to proficiency through informed leadership and instructional practices" (p. 58). However, due to an un-coordinated federal effort to meet standards based solely on test results, the initial intent of NCLB missed the mark. When the deadline of 100% of students meeting proficiency levels approached, most states were far from reaching that level. Therefore, "many states simply lowered them to make it easier for students to pass tests and for schools to avoid the penalty of lost funding or being labeled 'failing school.' Nothing could be more dangerous in today's world" (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011, p. 56). The thought students were not adequately prepared for the future affected the educational system and future workforce, which could have drastic negative effects on the economy.

In December 2015, President Barack Obama reauthorized ESEA with the announcement of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which preserved the idea all students should be given the best opportunity to thrive in schools, but gave autonomy to states in how to measure the achievement of students and schools (U.S. Department of Education [ED], 2015). ESSA replaced NCLB as it prioritized both excellence and

equity through strong federal-state partnerships to "increase educational opportunity and improve outcomes for all students" (p. 3). The focus on innovation, flexibility, and accountability increased as the Race to the Top competition spurned national standards accepted almost universally, except for four states, to get students ready for college and careers.

Education and the Future Economy

Due to the rising importance of educating today's students to be tomorrow's citizens and workforce, school leadership was tasked to engage teachers, staff, and school communities to prepare students for jobs that currently do not exist. Bass and Riggio (2006) noted the current workforce needed to be inspired and empowered in great times of uncertainty. Current educational practices of school leaders, teachers, and the school community needed to embrace this future by reevaluating current practices to educate students (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011).

A recent study by Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2013) noted the immense importance of preparing students for jobs of the future and the impact on the economy should the educational system ignore this concept. The study projected the economy would have 54 million more jobs in 2020 than in 2010, with 24 million new jobs and 34 million openings due to retirement. They described a growing demand for education to produce skills such as active listening, speaking, critical thinking, and writing, in addition to coordination with colleagues, complex problem-solving, and social perceptiveness (Carnevale et al., 2013). Although the current educational system looked to help students become college and career ready, the concept of 21st century learning and classrooms needs to address the increase in knowledge-based and communicative skills in an

innovative economy (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011). It was therefore the task of education to develop communication skills and attributes that transfer to jobs. The foundation for American economic strength on the global scale hinges on the ability of schools to thrive and teach the next generation of students to navigate an ever-changing world through an increased ability to communicate and interact effectively (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011; Fullan, 2014; Gardner, 2008).

Theoretical Background

Conversational leadership received increased attention as an emerging style of leadership that drew from both communication and leadership theories (Nichols, 2012). This leadership style focused on the ability of a leader to effectively communicate through organizational conversations with employees, stakeholders, and colleagues to move the organization toward cohesiveness and productivity by creating connections, community, and belongingness (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). Conversational leadership was grounded in the social relationships formed both vertically and horizontally in an organization to increase the voice and participation of all members of the organization (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Nichols, 2012).

Before delving into the elements of conversational leadership presented by Groysberg and Slind (2012b), an extensive literature review covering communication and leadership theories relevant to conversational leadership is presented in the following sections. It begins with an overview of communication theory highlighting historical origins, current influences, and connections to conversational leadership. The influence of leadership theories on conversational leadership are discussed with focus on the differences between management and leadership, the trait approach, and finally

transformational leadership. The theory of conversational leadership is then presented culminating with analysis of organizational conversation, the underlying principal of the theory. The second section of the literature review details the four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality. These served as the variables considered in the behaviors of exemplary middle school principals to create high-performance communication (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). The closing section of the literature review covers the role of the public middle school principal.

Communication Theory

The field of communication theory is in its infancy. Despite more than 200 theories and an increasing number of universities offering communication classes, Craig (1999) noted no organized field formally existed as there was incoherence from one theory to the next. In fact, an analysis by J. Anderson (1996) of seven communication theory textbooks found only 7% of theories were present in more than three of the seven books. Schramm (1962) found although there was "lively activity in this field…we do not have a satisfactory unifying theory of process and effects" (p. 274). Therefore, despite the difficulties to land on an agreed upon definition of the field, communication theory had implications for the practice of communication as an ongoing dialogue (Craig, 1999). For communication theory to become an identifiable field of study, it must develop commonalities and tensions to constitute a coherent field (Craig, 1999; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2017; Schramm, 1962).

Increased focus on communication in the last century provided a richness of ideas and relevance to development of the field. For instance, Shannon and Weaver (1949) described communication as the action of sending and receiving messages and the

importance of clear communication during that process. Their theory emerged when the telephone and radio gained popularity and highlighted three pitfalls when communication did not occur in a one-on-one, face-to-face manner: technical, semantics, and effectiveness. These three problems address the accuracy of information shared (technical), the delivery of the message in an appropriate manner (semantics), and how the information changed behaviors of the receiver (effectiveness). However, 13 years later, Schramm (1962) indicated communication was not simply the transmission of messages, but "perhaps *the* basic, social process" and mass communication allowed for "the flow of information and influence between persons and in groups" (p. 251). Porterfield (1974) highlighted the rise of interest in the field of non-verbal communication and the importance of active listening in social interpersonal communication. These perspectives demonstrated communication as an interactional process that passed through social relationships and was not simply a linear transmission of information as presented in the early work of communication theorists (Deetz, 1994). Rather, communication was a social process that created a shared meaning and constructed reality for participants (Craig, 1999).

The ability of an organization to tap into the shared construction of meaning through communication was a key indicator of organizational success (Men, 2013). Organizational communication developed the social relationships present between leaders, employees, and stakeholders (L. Anderson & Anderson, 2010; Glaser, 2014; Mautz, 2015; Men, 2013). However, even the most brilliant message was useless if strategic communication was not used. Effective organizational communication was based on effective strategy that was not simply a one-way, top-down hierarchical process

(Kelleher, 2009; Munter, 2006). To elicit a desired response or outcome from a group of people or individuals, interactive variables of strategic communication were interwoven to support clarity of the message and increase connection between members of the organization (L. Anderson & Anderson, 2010; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Mintzberg, 2013). Munter (2006) described a model of communication strategy that embraced dialogue as a continuous loop between the communicator and audience while considering the message, channel choice, response, and culture of the interaction.

Dialogue was considered an important strategic communication tool to produce behavioral change or behavior reinforcement of all parties involved in the organizational communication (L. Anderson & Anderson, 2010; Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Men, 2013). Transformational outcomes occurred when a leader was able to navigate between the five increasing levels of communication described by L. Anderson and Anderson (2010) as sharing information, building understanding, identifying implications, gaining commitment, and altering behavior. Kegan and Lahey (2001), Harvey and Drolet (2004), and Bass and Avolio (1994) agreed effective communication required leaders to be conscious of their own assumptions and those of the audience. This consideration was the crux of effective organizational communication as it built trust, strengthened social relationships, and positioned the organization for success.

Leadership Theory

Although the concept of leadership was first examined by Plato during the Era of Antiquity, the use of the word *leadership* in modern times began approximately 200 years ago (Takala, 1998). This robust concept "occurs universally among all people regardless of culture, whether they are isolated Indian villagers, Eurasian steppe nomads, or

Polynesian fisher folk" (Bass, 1981, p. 5). As such, a wide variety of definitions of leadership and leadership theories were presented through history.

Northouse (2016) noted many ways to define leadership. Stogdill (1974) pointed out there were almost as many different definitions of leadership as there were people who tried to define it. It was much like the words democracy, love, and peace. Although people intuitively knew what was meant by such words, the words held different meanings for different people. In addition, as evidenced by the more than 65 classification systems developed in the past century, effective leadership was highly valued and sought after in all sectors (Northouse, 2016). Marzano et al. (2005) stated "regardless of the theory used to explain it, leadership has been intimately linked to the effective functioning of complex organizations through centuries" (p. 5).

Management vs. leadership. During the industrial age, a great amount of focus was placed on the ability of a person to get other people to produce the most products in the shortest amount of time with the greatest efficiency (Rost, 1993; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). These people were called managers as they were tasked with managing the processes and people to increase overall profits (Owens, 2001). Kotter (1990) presented a clear distinction between a manager and leader whereas management looked to maintain order and stability and leaders wanted to enable adaptation and constructive change. According to Northouse (2010), Kotter called for an organization to "nourish both competent management and skilled leadership" (p. 13). Numerous authors and researchers agreed with Kotter's contention that the differences between a manager and a leader create two separate types of people (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Rost, 1993; Zaleznik, 1977). For example, Rost (1993) described a clear separation between leaders and

managers as he noted real change was achieved when leaders and followers worked together, whereas if the focus in an organization was solely on selling more goods or services, the relationship was then one of mangers and subordinates. Therefore, much of the literature that claimed to focus on leadership described management through a set of transactional interactions (Rost, 1993).

Another key distinction between a leader and manager was provided by Bennis and Nanus (1985), who demonstrated a move toward moral leadership as they stated, "Managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right thing" (p. 221). In contrast, some authors believed leadership and management had overlapping qualities and competencies (D. Anderson & Ackerman Anderson, 2010; Mintzberg, 2013; Northouse, 2010). They contended that although there was a higher level of emotional engagement between leaders and followers, managers engaged in planning, organizing, staffing, and controlling were also moving the group toward common goals.

Trait approach. A popular leadership perspective considered one of the first attempts to study leadership was the trait approach (Northouse, 2016). The underlying concept was "certain people in our society have special inborn qualities that make them leaders" (Northouse, 2016, p. 19). However, a study conducted by Stogdill (1948) that analyzed more than 124 trait studies between 1904 and 1947 found leadership was not dependent on a person possessing certain traits, but rather a relationship between people in social situations. Since this assertion, researchers presented a revised view of Stogdill's commentary on trait leadership, which indicated leadership was a mixture of both innate qualities and reactions to situations. In a second survey, Stogdill (1974) reviewed another 163 studies and found leadership was a blend between both situational

factors and traits. According to Northouse (2016), many researchers focused on the trait approach and determined common traits of leadership include intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability (Bass, 1990; Bradberry & Greaves, 2009; Stogdill, 1948). The trait approach received criticism due to the lack of data linking leadership traits to successful outcomes in organizations in addition to not being a useful approach to training and development of leaders as traits were largely fixed personality structures difficult to change (Northouse, 2010).

Transformational leadership. Transformational leadership, a popular approach that emerged in the late 1970s, focused on the charismatic and affective elements of leadership. Burns (1978) was credited for initiating the movement that defined leadership as a transforming process when leaders and followers engaged in a manner that raised both to greater levels of motivation and morality. It was a new caliber of leadership that called for organizational change by shifting the mindset, culture, ways of relating, and ability to course-correct by both leadership and members of the organization (L. Anderson & Anderson, 2010; Kouzes & Posner, 2012). In recent years, an increasing knowledge base of transformational leadership practices was created as leaders, practitioners, and authors aimed to better support the members of their organizations by minimizing self-interests, maximizing a change culture of collaborative risk-taking, and pursuing breakthrough results from shared vision (D. Anderson & Ackerman Anderson, 2010; Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Kegan & Lahey, 2001). The result of this pursuit were social relationships that converted followers into leaders and leaders into moral agents capable of achievements well beyond expected (Burns, 1978; Northouse, 2010).

In contrast, a transactional leader managed change by bargaining with individual interests of people rather than a joint organizational effort (D. Anderson & Ackerman Anderson, 2010; Burns, 1978; Kouzes & Posner, 2012). This leadership style was based on an exchange or transaction between the leader and follower. Therefore, although transactional leaders offered jobs, security, and favorable ratings for support and compliance of followers, the transformational leader recognized the needs and potential motives of followers, and then engaged the person to achieve breakthrough personal and organizational results (L. Anderson & Anderson, 2010; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Burns, 1978; Owens, 2001).

Transformational leadership was a commonly referred to theory because it had "an identifiable set of skills and practices, that are available to each of us, not just a few charismatic men and women" (Kouzes & Posner, 2003a, p. 1). The work of Bass and Avolio (1994) and Kouzes and Posner (2012) expanded on the work of Burns to strengthen transformational leadership theory. Kouzes and Posner (2012) developed a transformational leadership model that consisted of five fundamental leadership practices: (1) model the way, (2) inspire a shared vision, (3) challenge the process, (4) enable others to act, and (5) encourage the heart. Bass and Avolio (1994) presented a set of four factors to achieve breakthrough results: (1) idealized influence, (2) inspirational motivation, (3) intellectual stimulation, (4) individualized consideration. Ultimately, the goal of transformational leadership was to develop the human capacity of both the leader and followers to produce breakthrough results as leaders supported the members of their organizations in new ways of thinking and operating (Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Scott, 2011). It was people and communication, not programs or processes, that truly pushed

the achievements of organizations forward (L. Anderson & Anderson, 2010). However, this was not to say this type of leadership was free from conflict. Rather, Burns (1978) noted the conflict with others was the catalyst enabling leaders to "arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of others" (p. 248) to create significant change that represents the "collective or pooled interests of leaders and followers" (p. 426). This ability to successfully manage the change process through effective communication during uncertain times was crucial to move an organization toward a desired future state (L. Anderson & Anderson, 2010; Glaser, 2014; Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Kegan & Lahey, 2001).

Conversational Leadership

Conversational leadership was developed by Carolyn Baldwin in 1993. An elementary school principal in Winter Haven, Florida, Baldwin looked to strategically engage in conversations with members of her organization to create a base of common knowledge and understanding of key values that was based on input and perspectives of her staff (Jorgensen, 2010; Nichols, 2012). Brown and Hurley (2009) expanded on Baldwin's concept as they created six communication strategies in a communication model designed to engage employees with conversation as the starting point to move in a common direction. Those six strategies were:

1. clarifying purpose and strategic intent;
2. exploring critical issues and questions;
3. engaging all key stakeholders;
4. using collaborative social technologies;
5. guiding collective intelligence toward effective action; and

6. fostering innovative capacity development. (p. 4)

Glaser (2014) examined the critical relationship between conversational intelligence and leadership. The concept of conversational intelligence was important to conversational leadership. Glaser (2014) noted organizational success was driven by the quality of relationships formed through conversations and noted organizational success "depends on the quality of our culture, which depends on the quality of our relationships, which depends on the quality of our conversations. Everything happens through conversations (p. xix)." In addition, Hurley and Brown (2009) agreed personal relations were the heart of work. Scott (2011), author of *Fierce Conversations*, believed, "the conversation *is* the relationship" (p. 15). Ultimately, all interactions and processes were driven by conversations or harnessing the social interactions through technology.

Finally, Groysberg and Slind (2012b) believed leaders used conversations as fuel to drive connectedness, belongingness, and community within an organization. These times of VUCA called for a new type of conversation as the top-down communication style that distanced stakeholders from leaders gave way to a more fluid model that encouraged employees to express their opinions, ideas, and feelings through genuine communication and dialogue (Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Senge, 1990). The new source of organizational power stemmed from organizational conversation. This power could be harnessed by leaders who developed the four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). As the importance of an engaged workforce became more critical, conversational leadership emerged as a viable response to help build communities through meaningful relationships and increased connectedness.

Conversational Leadership Elements

Organizational conversation provides leaders a new lens when considering how conversations drive connections and increase the engagement of members of the organization. It has a wide application as it encompasses verbal and written communication; new ideas, images, and videos; and moved information through the organization in a dynamic, two-way communication process. Four conversational leadership elements are present when organizational conversations thrive: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b).

Intimacy

According to Groysberg and Slind (2012b), conversational intimacy allows leaders to relate to employees through direct, personal, and informal communication as significant value is placed on trust and authenticity between all members of an organization. This communication comes from the bottom-up as the leader purposefully engages employees and stakeholders by emphasizing active listening rather than the old style of formal top-down interactions where orders were given, and expected to be followed, with little input gathered from those receiving the directives. Through conversational intimacy, leaders narrow the gap between themselves and employees which leads to better professional relationships that have a positive effect on the overall success of the organization (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). This element of organizational conversation truly allows leaders to relate to members of their organization by creating meaningful connections that strengthen relationships and builds communities. Intimacy, meaningful connections, and relationships are reoccurring themes in leadership literature

(Crowley, 2011; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Sinek, 2011).

These connections occur when leaders take the first, and inevitably uncertain, step of trusting the employee. The personal connection leaders cultivate with their employees spurn an opportunity for exceptional results (Crowley, 2011). According to Bennis (2009), leaders and members of an organization can inspire and motivate others to achieve success through thoughtful communication. He describes an underlying issue as leadership from a voice of trust and indicated four ingredients leaders have that generate and sustain trust: constancy, congruity, reliability, and integrity (Bennis, 2009). In today's volatile world, conversational leaders use their voice, not their position, to influence and inspire others.

This crucial leadership decision to engage others in the organization through direct, personal, and informal communication creates an environment of closeness and familiarity based in trust and relationships (Cavanaugh, 2015; Glaser, 2014; Mintzberg, 2013). The conversational leader who focuses on conversational intimacy considers the need for dialogue to create relationships through the cultivation of a communicative space that is an up and down process of shared experiences, meaningful exchanges, and shared knowledge. This engaging practice by leaders opens up the potential transformational growth of all involved in the conversation and is achieved replacing traditional and hierarchical corporate communication where employees and leaders functioned in silos (Mintzberg, 2013). "In place of a traditional system of corporate communication, companies that institute organizational conversation and use

conversational intimacy to ensure that visions and viewpoints migrate up as well as down the company's organizational structure" (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b, p. 40).

Leaders, members of the organization, and the entire work community are able to achieve extraordinary results as intimate conversations inspire and motivate all involved (Gambetti & Biraghi, 2015; George, 2007; Groysberg & Slind, 2012a; Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2012; McKee, Boyatzis, & Johnston, 2008; Nichols, 2012). Leaders must therefore look to inspire, not order, employees (Bennis, 2009; Sinek, 2011). Conversational intimacy is the foundation for the three other conversational elements in Groysberg and Slind's (2012b) model of organizational conversation. Conversational intimacy is based on trust, relationships, and a focus on an up and down communication process. The following sections delve deeper into these components.

Trust. Bennis (2009) considered trust the ability of leaders to get people on their side. People trust leaders when they speak honestly and are transparent. People respond well to honest talk (Bennis, 2009). Kouzes and Posner (2012) go as far to say that "humans are hardwired to trust: they have to trust in order to function effectively in this world" (p. 223). The leadership decision to demonstrate trust in others before asking for trust is paramount to creating emotional connections with employees and stakeholders. However, achieving trust between leaders and constituents is not an easy task that is immediately obtained based on a simple act or set of acts. Rather, it is the result of leaders' willingness to be open, show vulnerability, and let go of a certain amount of control within the conversation (Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Mautz, 2015). Ultimately, trust comes from the investment a leader makes in their constituents

to share and receive information freely to decrease the emotional distance between the levels of an organization.

Shared experiences, meaningful exchanges, shared knowledge. Conversational leaders understand and cultivate a communicative space through shared experiences, meaningful exchanges, and shared knowledge (Clifton, 2012a; Glaser, 2014; Kegan & Lahey, 2001; McKee et al., 2008). The conversations used to create that space can be verbal, written, or electronic as is frequently the case in today's high-paced world shaped by social media and immediate access to information. Glaser (2014) presents a concept of conversational intelligence focused on the ability of leaders to use conversations to connect, engage, and interact with their employees to create a shared meaning through common experiences. These interactions excite those involved in the conversations about the future that they are helping to create together.

These meaningful exchanges occur when information is shared across the organization regardless of position on the hierarchical organizational chart. This sharing of information has the potential to inspire workers as they feel valued and close to leaders. When leaders are purposeful they attempt to communicate "the right things in the right way at the right times" to make those involved in the conversation feel confident, connected, and inspired to do their best (Mautz, 2015, p. 30). Strategist Nilofer Merchant (as cited by Kouzes & Posner, 2012), stated "everyone is better off when they know why decisions are made with as much accuracy as possible. It gives them an understanding of what matters" (p. 260). When people know what matters and engage in dialogue about why it matters, there is a higher capacity for trust and connection to others within the work community (Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Kegan &

Lahey, 2001; Sinek, 2011). Glaser (2014) presents the TRUST (Transparency, Relationship, Understanding, Shared Success, and Testing Assumptions and Telling the Truth) conversational model as a process to engage stakeholders and build intimate work environments. This model is founded on (1) transparency through open conversations to quell fears; (2) relationships founded on connections and engagement through messages of camaraderie and friendship; (3) an understanding of the opportunities conversations create for connections; (4) shared success through discovery of other perspectives; and (5) testing assumptions about reality and focusing on clear expectations that tell the truth about a desired future state of organizational objectives.

Relationships. A second prominent goal of conversational intimacy is to focus on the development of relationships that occur when conversations create emotional connections between people in an organization. These emotional connections, according to Crowley (2011), are a person's feelings about their organization, boss, colleagues, and whether their work ultimately fulfills them. These feelings drive people to be engaged or disengaged and are rooted in each conversation that occurs in the workplace. Those who lead through conversations know relationships are the glue of intimate, honest work communities (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). The relational world provides and demands energy. People are shaped and influenced by relationships, which in turn shape and influence our conversations (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; McKee et al., 2008).

Scott (2011) describes in her book *Fierce Leadership,* that people must focus on the influence of conversations on relationships to increase emotional connections with others. These intimate relationships create room for people to do the right things while improving the general climate within an organization (Bennis, 2009). Relationships

deteriorate when people are afraid of "being real, being ourselves, disclosing our real thoughts and feelings, being seen, being known" (Scott, 2011, p. 31). Intimate conversations that resemble a conversation between friends shift the relationship from judgment to respect (Glaser, 2014; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Scott, 2004). Conversational leaders shape and inspire a team-oriented environment focuses on elevated performance through meaningful interpersonal relationships forged through conversational intimacy (McKee et al., 2008).

Interactivity

Leaders who value conversational interactivity never mistake simply talking for a conversation. Instead they consider each conversation or dialogue as part of an ongoing communication process that allows all stakeholders to regularly contribute to and connect with the organization's purpose and vision (Brown & Hurley, 2009; Clifton, 2012a; Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Senge, 1990; Uhl-Bien, 2006). They view interactivity as part of a dialogic loop that is a cumulative process where current, past, and future communication between people blends to creates a rich back-and-forth process that strengthens relationships and work communities (Kelleher, 2009). Conversational leaders look to stimulate feelings such as connectedness, involvement, appreciation, and meaningfulness through face-to-face interactions or other communicative mediums when a face-to-face interaction is not possible (Bennis, 2009; Cox & McLeod, 2014; Galloway, 2005; Lepsinger, 2010; Scott, 2011; Whitaker et al., 2015). The days when messages were disseminated through one-way corporate communications that broadly cast messages to lower levels of the organizational hierarchy must be left behind. Conversational interactivity fosters back-and-forth

interactions as comments, ideas, and beliefs are frequently exchanged to enrich relationships and build trust at all levels of an organization. (Groysberg & Slind, 2012a; Senge, 1990).

Back-and-forth process. Conversational leaders talk with people, not at them. They encourage feedback, opinions, and challenges to the status quo. Facilitated through a rich back-and-forth conversational process, interactivity manages the organizational conversation created through a stream of knowledge and information between all levels of an organization (Bennis, 2009; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Lencioni, 2002; Senge, 1990). To initiate and sustain this process, exemplary leaders provide information to a wide-range of employees or stakeholders then wait for, and expect, a response through intentionally designed communication forums (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Although the gold standard is still considered to be face-to-face interactions, conversations can occur in a variety of communication mediums to foster greater competence and confidence by leaders and stakeholders, including internal blogs, chat rooms, and other types of social forums (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b).

This opportunity for employees to provide ongoing reflective feedback is crucial for creating connections and strengthening the work-community (Bennis, 2009; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). Communities are built on the interactions between people where all voices are valued (Block, 2008). Therefore, interactivity considers the importance of creating person-to-person dialogues that increases the participation in the pool of common meaning, which is capable of constant development and change (Senge, 1990).

Openness, vulnerability, and curiosity. Effective leaders engage in conversations with openness, vulnerability, and curiosity to allow for frequent and candid exchanges of comments and ideas (Nichols, 2012; Scott, 2011). Senge (1990) called the willingness to express views and concerns in an open, expressive manner *participative openness*. This openness allows for input given from colleagues to be received, reflected on, and responded to in a nurturing manner that also ensures responsibility and accountability. Following Cavanaugh (2015), when leaders demonstrate vulnerability, the quality of the interaction and the intimate nature of the connections made are amplified significantly and become contagious. Dr. Brene Brown (as cited by Cavanaugh, 2015) stated, "Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change" (p. 216). The curiosity that leaders and followers have in back-and-forth interactions also allows for expression of people's true, best self, without fear of judgment or criticism (Nichols, 2012). Werner Erhard (as cited by Block, 2008) noted the ability of leaders to shift the way they speak and listen through purposeful, open interactions can have transformative effects on an organization.

Active listening. The shift from a monologue to dialogue within organizations requires leaders to become active listeners to those involved in the back-and-forth sharing of information. Although the occasional stream of consciousness can be illustrative, important conversations require moments of silence during which people reflect on what was said and consider responses before speaking. Otherwise, knee-jerk responses may not reflect the highest or best thoughts (Scott, 2004). "Leaders who take organizational conversation seriously know when to stop talking and to start listening" (Groysberg &

Slind, 2012b, p. 24). The more emotionally loaded the subject, the more silence is required.

> It's amazing how this seemingly small thing – simply paying fierce attention to another, really asking, really listening, even during a brief conversation – can evoke such a whole-hearted response. A Chinese proverb says, 'When a question is posed ceremoniously, the universe responds.' When someone *really* asks, we really answer. And somehow, both of us are validated. (Scott, 2004, p. 113)

For leaders to actively listen, they must also ask purposeful questions; questions develop people and force them to take responsibility for their own viewpoint while participating in organizational decisions. Asking good questions also forces the leader to listen attentively to constituents and demonstrates respect for their ideas and opinions (Berson & Stieglitz, 2013; Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2012, 2016). In the end, few leadership behaviors enhance both conversational interactivity and intimacy as the practice of attending to what other people say. "It signals a feeling of respect for people of all ranks and roles, a sense of curiosity, even a degree of humility. It tells employees that their views matter within the organization – and that *they* matter" (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b, p. 24).

Social media influences on conversations. When communications with employees or stakeholders are not possible face-to-face due to physical distance or other limitations, the promotion of dialogue through technology via social media, company intranets, or other enhanced communication vehicles is necessary to ensure two-way connections (Cox & McLeod, 2014; Groysberg & Slind, 2012a). Thanks to ubiquitous

cell phones and other forms of instant communication, we are tied to our workplaces as never before, immersed in a context that is volatile, turbulent, ambiguous, and all but impossible to escape (Bennis, 2009). Although there are hundreds of ways to have converse through technology, the smart use of any technology begins with a "low tech aptitude for back-and-forth communication" to support the premise of social media to create, nurture, and maintain dynamic conversations (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b, p. 85).

Inclusion

When inclusion, the third element of organizational conversation, is employed by leaders, members of the organization at all levels are empowered to actively participate in organizational messaging as leaders relinquish a measure of control to engage stakeholders through the co-creation of meaning in the organization. In this relational world,

> Leadership is co-created in systems of interconnected relationships and richly interactive contexts. Despite this, our theories of leadership and approaches to leadership study … are heavily vested in assumptions of individuality, in which leadership is a top-down influence of leaders while followers, process, and context appear secondary. (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012, p. 1043)

Conversational inclusion constitutes a give and take process where leadership is not the sole charge of any one person, rather it is distributed, and open to challenge and feedback. In fact, this shift to inclusion in organizational message creation is dependent on leaders accepting other to be involved in leadership talk (Clifton, 2012a). Harvey and Drolet (2004) noted,

> You cannot have a long-term successful organization where new approaches or ideas are solely dependent on particular individuals. It is critical to long-term change to expand proprietary ownership of change…This practice not only distributes the work load, it also expands investment and ownership. (p. 218)

When leaders provide access to not only information, but the creation of information that is important to the organization, all team members feel included and are able to connect intimately through inclusive interactions (Clifton, 2012a; Harvey & Drolet, 2004). Conversational inclusion enables the organizational message to be enriched as leaders relinquish control, engage stakeholders, and create an environment where members at all levels of the organization become thought leaders and brand ambassadors (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Mintzberg, 2013; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2017; Scott, 2011; Sinek, 2011).

Commitment to engaging stakeholders and relinquishing control. Leaders who engage in conversational inclusion find new partners to construct an organization's identity through the story created within dialogue. When members of an organization assist in creating the message content, leaders relinquish a level of control to create an environment where employees act as both brand ambassadors and thought leaders in the organization. The act of conversational inclusion constructs and supports organizational decisions as a collaborative achievement through the management of meaning by all stakeholders (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). As control is an aspect of leadership and management, the talk that occurs between parties–what gets talked about, how it gets talked about, and who gets invited to the conversation–determines what will happen in

the organization and what won't. A release of control is a symbolic shifting of power to level the playing field between leaders, employees, followers, and stakeholders (Scott, 2004). Success experienced through these collaborative conversations demonstrates the organization lives, breathes, and functions through inclusion of all members (Kouzes & Posner, 2016; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2017).

Inclusive communication means leaders cede what Clifton (2012a) refers to as *epistemic primacy*, which allows others to take control lead. The process of inclusion creates joint authorship of the development meaning. Clifton (2012a) stated,

> It displays that the members of the team know what is on each other's minds so that what the initial speaker of the dialogic turn, the complete of the turn also knows. Consequently, who is doing the leadership is a fluid phenomenon that can change on a turn-by-turn basis. (p. 152)

In this way, colleagues, key stakeholders, and those co-creating the meaning of the message gain co-authorship and equal rights to manage meaning and assess organizational reality, and in doing so become leaders themselves (Clifton, 2012a; Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2017). This is a transformational process for an organization as engagement levels spike when people feel they are valued as their opinions, ideas, and thoughts are considered by leaders.

> You empower people when you give them discretion over resources. To be more specific, when you give employees control over funds, facilities, people, and time, you also induce them to try new ideas, new combinations, and new approaches. Conversely, you reduce creativity when people feel they have no control over resources. They may have

> great ideas, but if they have no way to try them out, to bring them to reality, they become discouraged and disillusioned. (Harvey & Drolet, 2004, p. 200)

The goal for leaders who use inclusive conversational behaviors is to therefore come to the table with employees and allow ideas to germinate thereby tapping into the human potential available in the organization.

Development of the organization through co-creation of meaning. Although those without an understanding of organizational conversation may disregard conversations and talk as minor events, dialogue has more significance in conversational inclusion. This is because with a commitment to engaging stakeholders, leaders use inclusive interactions to "talk the organization into being" (Clifton, 2012a, p. 160). With inclusion, "participation creates a concomitant need for accountability – recognition that every one of us is responsible for what we do" (Harvey & Drolet, 2004, p. 175). Many scholars consider leadership to be a communicative process that extends beyond a leaders' title as connections through communicative interactions instead of one-way, top-down messaging increases engagement and investment by stakeholders in the organization (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Groysberg & Slind, 2012a; Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Mautz, 2015; Scott, 2011).

Leaders and stakeholders work together to construct solutions through common messaging. To do this, leaders must allow others in the organization to construct solutions together to support the intimate and interactive environment created during organizational conversations. "In conversational leadership, the meaning of events and experiences is intentionally created in conversation…with the participation of others, the

conversational leader consciously works to create a solution-focused meaning or significance for events" (Paull & McGrevin, 1996, p.33). Whatever stakeholders do, whatever they say, they are giving us useful information about what we should do as leaders to help bring about change. Therefore, if internal perspectives are incorporated in crafting messages, it could influence external perspective of the organization while building a culture of inclusion internally (Paull & McGrevin, 1996).

Intentionality

Glaser (2014) claims many leaders desire a positive impact on their organization, but fall short because of a gap between their intentions and actual impact. The best communicators, following multiple authors, intentionally align their talk and dialogue with their desired impact in a strategic manner to increase the level of trust between leaders and followers (Barge, 2014; Glaser, 2014; Groysberg & Slind, 2012a; Hurley & Brown, 2009; Jorgensen, 2010). From the perspective of Fairhurst and Sarr (as cited by Clifton, 2012a), "leadership is a language game, one that many do not know they are playing. Even though most leaders spend nearly 70% of their time communicating, they pay little attention to how they use language as a tool of influence" (p. 163). Intentional, purpose-driven conversations give leaders an undeniable social influence that engages employees and stakeholders by attending consciously to people's need for organizational messaging to be geared toward a shared vision (Cavanaugh, 2015; Glaser, 2014; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Scott, 2004). Within the context of an actual dialogue, intentionality means the leader has at least one goal in mind when conversing to achieve operational closure and organizational cohesion (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). Leaders who use conversational intentionality in their work find conversations are a vehicle for

strategy. They purposefully build messaging around company strategy that is co-created with employees via specifically designed communication vehicles. These vehicles require a greater understanding of the discursive resources available to them that enable them to lead (Clifton, 2012a).

As cited by Hurley and Brown (2009), conversational leaders believe in the "intentional use of conversation as core process to cultivate the collective intelligence needed to create business and social value" (p. 3). Attending to this collective intelligence provides clarity of purpose that aligns with common organizational goals. Conversational intentionality complements the other elements of organizational conversation (intimacy, interactivity, and inclusion) as the intentional leader creates "conversational strategy, the way the leader envisions and plans for the conduct of organizational communication and strategic conversation, the process leaders develop communication practices to align their company and their people to the contours of a specific business strategy" (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b, p. 174).

Open-close process and clarity of purpose. Exemplary conversational leaders provide an open arena for dialogue with members of the organization through intimacy, interactivity, and inclusion, but intentionality serves to provide closure to the dialogic loop that enables clarity of purpose. If conversations or interactions meander without a specific focus or ending, the engagement and investment by employees to carry out the action of the conversation can be lost (J. Barge, 2014; Groysberg & Slind, 2012a; Hurley & Brown, 2009; Nichols, 2012). Paull and McGrevin (1996) indicate, "the conversational leader consciously identifies the meaning they want to stand for and align their speaking and actions to that meaning" (p. 84). Conversations with a definite

direction and meaning keep the organization on the road to achieving organizational goals (Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2016; Mintzberg, 2013).

Conversational leaders listen carefully to their own words and the words of others because they recognize that, ultimately, the words of both either empower the organization or hinder progress (Paull & McGrevin, 1996). These leaders are constantly attend to setting clear expectations, supports, structure, and context. They are clear about their expectations and elicit questions from stakeholders to ensure that people do not second-guess their intentions (Harvey & Drolet, 2004). When employees and leaders stay on the same page through multiple and ongoing opportunities they co-create, they are able to hear, talk, and share in the organization's decisions, which increases connections and enhances the work community (Block, 2008; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Hurley & Brown, 2009; Mintzberg, 2013; Nichols, 2012). Leadership to keep conversations on track is essential to closing the conversational loop in organizational conversations.

Vision. A leader without a vision of where to take the organization is not a leader. Leaders have to adapt to a new culture of leadership where vision and character are important (Bennis, 2009). "There are many names for belief statements – tenets, visions, credos, values – but they all come down to one thing: a clear statement of belief toward which all members of the organization can work" (Harvey & Drolet, 2004, p. 15). Exemplary leaders don't impose their visions of the future on people; they liberate the vision already stirring in their constituents. They awaken dreams, breathe life into them, and arouse the belief that people can achieve something grand. Whey they communicate a shared vision, they bring ideals into the conversation. What truly pulls people forward,

especially in more difficult and volatile times, is the exciting possibility that what they are doing can make a profound difference in the lives of their families, friends, colleagues, customers, and communities (Bennis, 2009; Block, 2008; Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Senge, 1990; Sinek, 2011).

People want to know that what they do matters. Groups lacking a shared vision are simply involved in parallel play; they might do the same thing, but they don't do it together. Rather they work in silos working independently of each other (Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Sinek, 2011). "A shared vision is not an idea. It is… a force in people's hearts, a force of impressive power" (Senge, 1990, p. 206). Exemplary leaders envision the future and realize the greater opportunities to come. However, the vision cannot belong only to the leader. It's a shared vision. "When visions are shared, they attract more people, sustain higher levels of motivation, and withstand more challenges than those that are singular" (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 104). Leaders using conversational intentionality begin with the end in mind by imaging what might be possible, then find a common purpose for themselves and others that inspires people to want to make that vision a reality (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Nichols, 2012; Senge, 1990).

Role of the Middle School Principal

Friedman and Mandelbaum (2011) indicate in these turbulent times created by globalization and technology revolution, nothing is more important to the future success of the country than education. The quality of that education is largely dependent on teachers and principals in schools to increase student achievement. Although school leadership was previously seen as having no impact on student achievement and

effectiveness of schools, Marzano et al. (2005) offered a different perspective noting principals can make a "profound difference in the achievement of students through strong and thoughtful leadership" (p. 123).

In the 2017-18 school year, middle school principals will be called on to develop more than 11 million students in grades 6, 7, and 8 (ED, 2017). With the role of the school principal under dramatic reconstruction since the beginning of the 21st century, these principals no longer fill old roles as a plant manager buried in the office with concerns about bells, busses, and building maintenance (Wagner & Kegan, 2013). According to Whitaker (2012), the difference between an effective and ineffective principal is that "effective principals viewed themselves as responsible for all aspects of their school" (p. 21).

The middle school principal establishes and affirms a culture and climate that link students to their school through frequent positive interactions that tell students they care about them as both scholars and people. When a positive school climate is in place, student motivation and positive self-concept are correlated with increased student achievement (Anfara et al., 2006; Weller, 1999). Therefore, exemplary principals are loyal to the student when making decisions to create positive student interactions and experiences, and they expect the same from teachers, staff, and the community (Jackson & Andrews, 2000; Marzano et al., 2005; Weller, 1999; Whitaker, 2012). Asking the question "What is best for our students?" keeps the school's compass set on true north and maximizes learning and development opportunities (Caskey et al., 2010; Weller, 1999). According to the Association for Middle Level Education (2010), "research

confirms that middle grades education is a significant and distinct level of schooling with its own tenets and characteristics" (p. 7). Caskey et al. (2010) noted,

> Central to effective middle grades leadership and organization are (a) establishing a sense of ownership and responsibility for shared and collaborative leadership, (b) building a shared vision among all stakeholders, (c) developing structures to address social and academic challenges unique to middle school youth, and (d) creating a school climate where all stakeholders feel comfortable interacting and discussing important educational issues. (p. 29)

The middle school principal is a key influence and enhancer of school communication and must engage in conversations that create connections between teachers, students, families, and key stakeholders.

Recent research shows a need to focus on creating a developmentally responsive school environment for middle grades students. Caskey et al. (2010) stated the middle school years are transitional years for students who are experiencing significant changes – physically, intellectually, morally, psychologically, and social-emotionally. Students' academic growth and personal development during these crucial years "sets the stage for success in high school and beyond, or for disengagement and the likelihood of becoming a high school drop-out" (Caskey et al., 2010, p. 1). Middle school principals must manage the pressure to lead a complex organization effectively while pursuing educational excellence for students. This study focused on how public middle school principals may bring together and create a school community with students, staff, and key stakeholders through conversations.

Summary

The workforce is currently experiencing a dramatic lack of engagement that many authors believe is due to a lack of meaningful connections to their work, their leaders, and their colleagues (Crowley, 2011; Mautz, 2015; Sinek, 2011). However, effective leaders have the ability to make a drastic impact on their work environment by focusing on the way they connect and build communities through their conversations with employees and key stakeholders (Glaser, 2014; Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Scott, 2011). As leaders spend nearly 70% of their day time communicating, a conversational approach to leadership plays a major role in moving the needle toward engagement, meaning, and connections (Clifton, 2012a; Groysberg & Slind, 2012a; Nichols, 2012).

Conversational leadership builds on the historical traditions of both leadership and communication theories, and relies on the relatively new transformational leadership style (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Hurley & Brown, 2009). This dissertation looked to investigate the conversational leadership theory presented by Groysberg and Slind (2012b) and the four variables of organizational conversation: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality. This chapter presented a review of the literature relevant to the study. Chapter III presents the methodology used to conduct the study. Chapter IV presents findings derived from the data, and Chapter V presents the conclusions, implications for action, recommendations for further research, and concluding remarks from the researcher.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overview

This phenomenological study looked to identify and describe the conversational leadership behaviors of exemplary middle school principals. The lived experiences of middle school principals was gathered to elucidate the manner in which these exemplary leaders used the four conversational leadership elements described in Talk, Inc. by authors Groysberg and Slind (2012b) to lead their organization. Throughout the study, the term *peer researchers* is used to refer to the 12 Brandman University doctoral students who worked under the guidance of four faculty chairs in collaborating on the design and implementation of this study.

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2014), this section of the dissertation, "describes the design of the study" (p. 37). Therefore, this chapter provides insight into the methodology of this phenomenological study. It includes a review of the purpose statement and research questions. In addition, the research design, population, sample, and instrumentation are presented in separate sections. An explanation of the data collection process and the procedures to analyze the data are provided. The interview process is described along with the steps taken to increase validity and reliability. Chapter III concludes with a presentation of study limitations.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to describe behaviors that exemplary middle school principals practice to lead their organizations through conversations using Groysberg and Slind's (2012b) four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality.

Central Research Questions

What are the behaviors that exemplary middle school principals practice to lead their organizations through conversation using Groysberg and Slind's (2012b) four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion and intentionality?

Sub Questions

1. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of intimacy?
2. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of interactivity?
3. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of inclusion?
4. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of intentionality?

Research Design

This qualitative study uses a phenomenological method to identify and describe the behaviors middle school principals use to lead through conversation. This study is part of a larger thematic study on the use of conversational leadership by exemplary leaders. A group of 12 peer researchers along with 4 faculty advisors met, explored, and arrived at the decision to conduct a qualitative phenomenological study designed to gather rich descriptions of the lived experiences of each peer researchers' identified exemplary leaders. The exemplary leaders in this thematic study include City Managers, Unified School District Superintendents, Elementary School Principals, Educational

Services Assistant Superintendents in Southern California, Elementary School Superintendents in Southern California, Community College Presidents, High School Principals, Regional Directors of Migrant Education, Chief Nursing Officers, Municipal Police Chiefs, and Nonprofit Executive Directors.

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) defined research as the collection and logical analysis of data in a systematic, purpose-driven process. The research methodology supports this process by clarifying "the ways that data is collected and analyzed" (p. 8). Specific procedures accompany research methods which can be classified into two major research approaches: quantitative and qualitative (Creswell, 2008; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

A quantitative research study produces results that are presented as a set of numbers or statistics that the researcher planned to collect through a deductive approach that tests possible hypotheses from the literature review. This deductive approach is based on "pre-conceived notions based on published theory and research "(Patten, 2012, p. 19). The quantitative researcher selects a large participant sample through instruments that can easily produce statistical data, such as structured questionnaires, multiple choice questions, or interview schedules with objective formats (Creswell, 2008). The sample is chosen randomly to ensure that all subjects have an equal chance of being selected and mid-study adjustments are seldom made as "midstream deviations might be viewed as introducing subjectivity to the study" (Patten, 2012, p. 19). Finally, quantitative researchers normally do not report on individual participant results electing to provide broad summaries that are then generalized to one or more populations (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

For qualitative research studies, results produced are presented "as discussions of trends and/or themes based on words, not statistics" (Patten, 2012, p. 19). These researchers use an inductive approach to the planning of the research that produces data on preliminary observations, and then make recommendations for additional types of information to be collected. When choosing an instrument to gather the data, the qualitative researcher prefers one that can't be simply reduced to numbers, but rather produces data in words through other measures (Creswell, 2008; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). When it comes to sampling, qualitative researchers do not collect large samples like their quantitative counterparts as "the amount of time required to use (qualitative) measures, such as extended, in-depth, one-on-one unstructured interviews and extensive observations over time" would not be feasible (Patten, 2012, p. 19). These samples are purposeful as researchers look to gather expert, exemplary, or key informants for the study, not just any selection of people. In addition, as the study progresses the qualitative researcher is open to making adjustments such as re-wording or adding questions based on preliminary study results (Creswell, 2008; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Finally, researchers "believe all observational processes are inherently open to interpretation" and also tend to specifically cite individual responses from sampled participants (Patten, 2012, p. 20).

Method

The method selected for this study was qualitative phenomenology, which identified the qualitative oral history of lived experiences by exemplary middle school principals leading through conversation. In this qualitative approach, the researcher gathered data through direct examination (Creswell, 2007). The direct examination was

in the form of digitally recorded interviews with the selected sample population subjects. According to Patton (2002), the phenomenological perspective is rooted in philosophy and the central question is regarding "the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people" (p. 104). Phenomenology refers to a person's perception of the meaning of an event, as opposed to the event as it exists externally to that person (Patton, 2002). The focus of this phenomenological inquiry was what exemplary middle school principals experience in regard to use of the Groysberg and Slind's (2012b) four elements of conversational leadership and how they interpret those experiences.

Rationale. The 12 peer researchers and 4 faculty advisors ultimately decided a phenomenological design best fit the study of conversational leadership by exemplary leaders across a breadth of organizational types. This design was determined to be most appropriate as the non-experimental, descriptive approach would best gather the lived experiences of the exemplary leaders. With direct experience with the phenomena, interviews would collect data required for this approach (Creswell, 2008). As such, after thorough discussion by the thematic group, phenomenology was chosen to enable the study to identify and describe the behaviors of exemplary leaders. In addition, the phenomenological approach was most appropriate to study the behaviors of exemplary middle school principals who practice conversational leadership as it allows for in-depth reflection and analysis based on the everyday lived experiences of this important educational sector. Ten exemplary middle school principals were purposefully selected for interviews and data was collected.

Population

Creswell (2003) stated a population is "a group of individuals who comprise the same characteristics" (p. 644). According to the California Department of Education website (n.d.), there were 1,296 active public middle schools in California during the 2017-18 school year. This population of 1,296 middle school principals was still too large to sample every possible respondent. This large population was narrowed to 690 active public middle schools in southern California to include the following counties: Los Angeles with 325 middle schools, Orange County with 88, Riverside with 76, San Bernardino with 74, San Diego with 99, and Ventura with 28.

Target Population

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) defined the target population as the set of individuals chosen from the overall population for which the study's data was used to make inferences for the larger population. Based on this definition, a smaller population of middle school principals was identified as the target population. For convenience, the researcher considered proximity to southern California as a factor when considering the selection of participants. Therefore, the target population was defined as the 88 middle school principals within Orange County. Although this narrowed the number considerably, it was still not practical to interview all 88 and it was necessary to narrow this number even further for the sample.

Sample

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) defined a sample as "the group of individuals from whom data are collected" (p. 129). This study employed non-probability sampling. The participants were purposefully chosen to allow the researcher to select participants

that result in data that clearly "illuminate the inquiry question being investigated" (Patton & Patton, 2002, p. 264). Convenience sampling was also utilized due to the researchers' time, geography, and resources (Creswell, 2008). Orange County middle school principals were selected due to the proximity and accessibility to the researcher. In addition, criterion-based sampling was used to find participants to address the research purpose, central question, and sub-questions. The specific criteria enabled the researcher to select participants based on this study's operational definition of exemplary (Patton & Patton, 2002). According to Creswell (2008), "The target population or 'sampling frame' is the actual list of sampling units from which the sample is selected (p. 393)." The target population for this study considered Orange County middle school principals. Participants selected from this target population fit the description of "exemplary", as defined by the thematic group and faculty advisors, if they met at least four of the following six criteria:

1. Evidence of successful relationships with followers;
2. Evidence of leading a successful organization;
3. A minimum of five years of experience in the profession;
4. Articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings;
5. Recognition by their peers;
6. Membership in professional associations in their field.

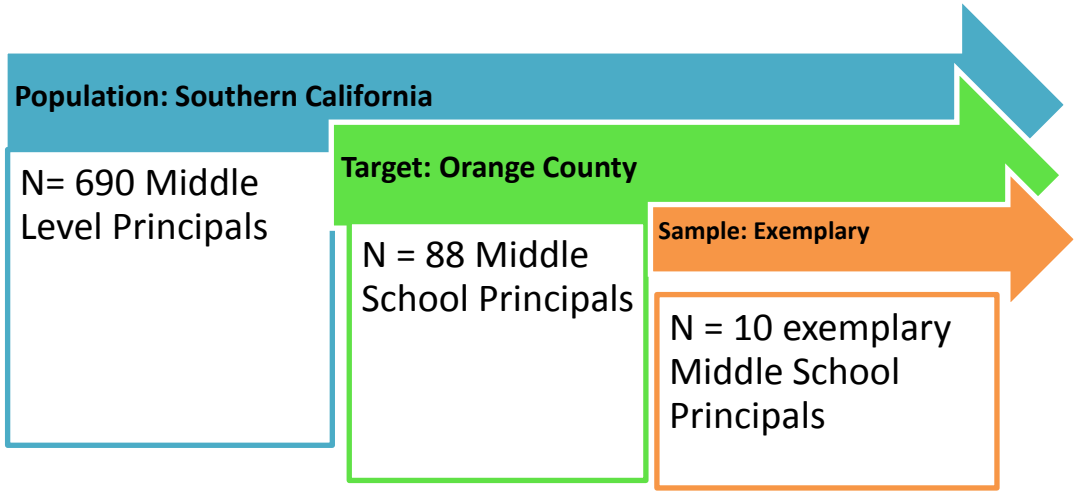

Figure 1: Population, Target Population, and Sample

Although qualitative research studies are time and resource intensive, this allows for great depth and richness when the data is analyzed (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The thematic dissertation team looked to Creswell (2008) and Morse (1994) to determine the sample size for this phenomenological study. Creswell (2008) indicates 5 to 25 participants were needed whereas Morse (1994) recommends at least 6. As such, for this phenomenological study, a sample size of 10 participants was determined to be adequate after deliberation by the 12 peer researchers and 4 faculty advisors. In addition, in qualitative research studies, it is important that the size of the sample align with the purpose of the study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Patton & Patton, 2002). The following process was implemented to select the study participants:

1. An email was sent to all district superintendents of Orange County and the Superintendent of Schools of Orange County to describe the research study, exemplary leadership criteria, and requested nominations of middle school principals that met the exemplary criteria (Appendix A). All principals

nominated were placed into a participant list and principals who met the exemplary criteria were contacted for an interview.

2. While waiting for responses, a list of potential middle school principals was generated using all information available through a search of schools, websites, peer recommendations, social media platforms, and professional associations. This information was then used to further validate the potential exemplary candidates for the study.
3. When verification of a middle school principal who met the exemplary criteria was received, the principal was placed on a separate list. Each of the verified potential middle school principals were sent an invitation email that described the purpose of the research study, along with the purpose, procedures and risk involved (Appendix B). The first 10 principals to confirm participation were selected for research. Interviews began immediately after eligible principals confirmed their involvement.
4. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with the middle school principals who met the criteria of an exemplary leader.

A qualitative phenomenological study provides a rich research depth and this sample size is both fitting and sufficient to fulfill the needs of this research type (Patton, 2002).

Instrumentation

Qualitative research requires the researcher to be the instrument that collects data within the study (Patton, 2002). The 12-member thematic group developed the interview questions with the 4 faculty advisors providing expert guidance over the course of numerous meetings. The 12 peer researchers were divided into 4 teams of 3 to craft

initial interview questions that aligned with the purpose statement and research questions as they related to the definitions of the four elements of conversational leadership by Groysberg and Slind (2012b). These preliminary questions were then submitted to the four expert faculty advisors for feedback that was delivered to lead peer researchers of each smaller group in subsequent meetings. Through this feedback process, revisions were made to the interview questions by both the peer researchers and the faculty advisors, and finalized versions were field tested by each researcher. Probes for each interview question were also developed through a similar process by the four smaller groups of three peer researchers, followed by feedback and revisions. According to Patton (2002), probes are utilized in qualitative research to build richness, depth, and detail. These questions would be used to draw out more information from interview subjects to deepen the understanding of answers given from the main interview questions that addressed the intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality of exemplary leaders.

Once the semi-structured interview and probing questions were developed and agreed upon for use, the peer researchers and faculty advisors researched and discussed the interview protocol. The protocol was developed to be read verbatim by the researcher prior to each semi-structured interview and included an introduction to the interview, a brief overview of the study, an informed consent section required for dissertation research, and finally an opportunity for the interviewee to ask any question prior to commencing the interview (Appendix C). This protocol was used by all 12 peer researchers during field testing and was reviewed after field testing to determine if any changes were needed prior to actual data collection. All 12 peer researchers followed the

agreed upon interview protocol to maintain consistency within the thematic group and to maintain the integrity of the process and data collected.

Field Test

Each peer researcher conducted a field test interview with a leader who met the specific criteria of *exemplary* but were not included in the study. The interview was observed by an expert qualitative researcher. This expert was chosen due to their recent completion of a qualitative research study. This was an exception to the interview protocol but was important to ensure quality of the interview (Patten, 2012). The expert served as a process observer and provided feedback to the researcher regarding the clarity of questions, length of the interview, and format of the interview.

This field test ensured the instrument developed by the thematic group of peer researches was both reliable and valid (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). All thematic group members used the interview questions and protocol to guide the field test interview. This is an important step in the research development process as changes can be made to the instrument based on the feedback given by field test participants and expert observers (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). A feedback form was developed by the expert faculty advisors and was delivered to both the field test participant (Appendix D) and observer (Appendix E). Information received from the participants included feedback regarding interview style and delivery, and adherence to the interview protocol.

The team of peer researchers and faculty advisors discussed the outcomes of the 12 field test interviews by reviewing feedback collected. The faculty advisors made suggestions for changes to the interview questions and probing questions based on the feedback to provide a richer set of potential data to be collected by each peer researcher.

Minor changes to the interview questions, probing questions, and interview protocol were made by all members of the thematic group based on feedback from the expert faculty advisors and final instruments were agreed upon and shared.

Validity

The validity of an instrument has been defined by numerous authors to be the extent to which the instrument actually measures what it is designed to measure (Creswell, 2008; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Roberts, 2010). According to Creswell (2008), the goal of a valid instrument is also to enable the researcher to draw good conclusions from the population sample studied that make sense and are meaningful. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) indicate that to increase the validity of an instrument, multiple strategies should be employed. Therefore, the following methods were used to increase the validity of the data collected: multiple researchers, multi-method strategies, and participant review.

Although all 12 peer researchers conducted their own review of literature, the team mutually created, field tested, revised the instrument, and implemented the instrumentation to be used during the collection of data. As four expert faculty members guided the thematic team during all of the aforementioned stages, they provided expert validation to the instrumentation, interview protocol, variable definitions, and criteria required to obtain exemplary leadership status (Creswell, 2008). The semi-structured, in-depth interview was the main method used in this qualitative study and the researchers triangulated this data with observations, documentation, and artifacts. This allowed for a variety of insights about the topic by broadening the understanding of the phenomenon of interest to the study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Finally, the recorded interviews

were confidentially transcribed and sent to the study participants for review (Roberts, 2010). This provided the opportunity for study participants to ensure content accuracy as any corrections or clarifications were made and sent to the researcher. All interview transcripts were then analyzed and coded using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program.

Reliability

When conducting research, the instruments require numerous methods to test their reliability to ensure the instrument has the ability to produce similar results when used repeatedly or by different researchers. The processes used in this study were internal and intercoder reliability.

Internal Reliability

The 12 peer researchers involved with this study collectively developed not only the instrumentation of the study but also the purpose, variables, definitions of variables, and central research questions. This research team was also accompanied and guided by four expert faculty advisors who created a rich environment for the development of these key areas of study. This method "reduces the possibility that the results of qualitative research represent only the idiosyncratic views of one individual researcher" (Patten, 2012, p. 157).

Intercoder Reliability

Intercoder reliability was another method used to decrease the bias of the individual researcher when coding the data collected through the semi-structured interviews. According to Kimberlin and Winetrstein (2008), intercoder reliability "establishes the equivalence of ratings obtained with an instrument when used by

different observers" (p. 2277). The 12-member thematic peer researcher team shared insights and discussed of the lived experiences collected during the interviews. In addition, each researcher asked another peer researcher to code and analyze 10% of the data collected to increase research reliability. (Patton, 2002).

Data Collection

Data for this phenomenological study were collected from 10 exemplary middle school principals through face-to-face or virtual interviews, observations, and artifacts. Audio recordings from interviews were stored and maintained on the researcher's personal computer with password protection to ensure confidentiality. All field notes taken during the interviews were stored in the researcher's home and were locked in a home office in a locked filing cabinet. No data were collected from research participants prior to approval from the Brandman University Institutional Review Board and completion of the National Institutes of Health certification (Appendix F).

Interview Process

All 10 exemplary middle school principals who agreed to participate in the study received the following three documents prior to the scheduled interview: the 12 open-ended interview questions categorized by research variable (Appendix C), the Brandman University Institutional Review Board (BUIRB) Research Participant's Bill of Rights (Appendix G), and the informed consent and audio recording release (Appendix H). The last two documents ensured the privacy and confidentiality of all participants. The documents were signed by all study participants prior to starting the interviews. Following the interview protocol, the researcher reviewed the statements of purpose and focus at the beginning of each interview. Each of the 12 open-ended questions were

asked with additional probes used if the researcher needed more information or clarification from the participants initial responses to each question (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Patton, 2002).

All interview sessions were recorded using a minimum of two recording devices. By using two devices, the researcher ensured the interviews had a least one back-up device. Handwritten notes taken during the interviews documented body language, facial expressions, and other non-verbal behaviors noted during responses given by study participants. Audio recordings from each device were saved then downloaded onto the researcher's personal computer. These audio files were then sent to a confidential transcriptionist for conversion to word processing documents. The researcher coded all 10 transcripts for themes and analysis using NVivo, a web-based software program.

Observations

Direct observations were recorded during the semi-structured interviews to broaden the scope of the data collected and to support triangulation of research findings. These observations add to the potential data that can be collected by the researcher paying attention not only the verbal responses of the participant, but also noting the participant's body language, facial expressions, and gestures when delivering verbal responses. According to Patton (2002), observational data "describes in depth and detail the setting that was observed, the activities that took place in the setting, the people who participated in those activities, and the meanings of what was observed from the perspectives of those observed" (p. 332). The data were collected and recorded as field notes, which were "text recorded by the researcher during an observation in a qualitative study" (Creswell, 2008, p. 224).

The researcher also attempted to collect observational data in non-confidential settings, such as presentations at meetings or a conference, and during interactions with peers, colleagues, or employees. The researcher received permission from the study participant prior to observations to ensure ethical data collection (Creswell, 2008). Although this was not possible for all study participants, it provided an opportunity for the researcher to conduct observations to assist with the triangulation of data.

Artifacts

A collection of artifacts was compiled from the study participants personally and through an exploration of the schools' websites and social media accounts. These artifacts represented "tangible manifestations that describe people's experiences, knowledge, actions, and values" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 361). Much like observational data collected through field notes, the collection of these artifacts helped with triangulation of data to increase the validity of the study (Patton, 2002). Artifacts included two-way communications between the middle school principal and stakeholders, presentations, agendas, vision statements, strategic plans, newsletters, calendars, pictures, and multi-media videos.

Data Analysis

Although a variety of possibilities exist to analyze qualitative data, the challenge lied in the ability of the researcher to make sense of large amounts of data by identifying general themes (Patton, 2002). A rigorous analysis of data was needed to synthesize 10 hours of interviews that addressed responses to 12 open-ended questions, followed by any probing questions necessary to delve deeper into or clarify preliminary answers. Observation notes and artifacts collected were also coded similar to the interview

transcripts. The researcher organized the data analysis process to interpret meaning and draw conclusions. The data analysis structures included:

1. Transcription of audio recordings of interviews
2. Transcriptions reviewed by study participants to ensure accuracy
3. Preliminary review of all data including transcriptions, observations, and artifacts for possible themes
4. Data uploaded into NVivo software
5. Coding of data using NVivo software
6. Codes categorized into themes
7. Analysis of themes to identify those that described behaviors exemplary middle school principals practiced to lead through conversation

Coding the Data

Qualitative research depended on developing a classification or coding process to simplify raw data into in words, phrases, and ideas (Patton, 2002). The qualitative researcher drew connections from the raw data to the research questions. For this study, the researcher uploaded all data collected (transcriptions, field notes, and artifacts) into NVivo – qualitative research software to perform the coding process. Following data refinement suggested by McMillan and Schumacher (2010), the researcher first read through all data to get an initial sense of the whole of the data collected. Initial codes were created then were compared against each other and similar or duplicated codes were eliminated through convergence (Patton, 2002). Major codes were identified throughout the process as iterative coding further refined the coding system. These major codes

were then organized into themes. Finally, the themes were analyzed to describe the behaviors exemplary middle school principals practice to lead through conversation.

Limitations

Research study limitations are features of a study that could negatively impact the findings and the ability of the researcher to make generalizations from the data (Patton, 2002; Roberts, 2010). As the purpose of a phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of the sample, generalizations are limited to the experiences of people at a certain time and place (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patten, 2012; Patton, 2002; Roberts, 2010). Therefore, this study of exemplary middle school principals was limited due to its sample size, time, geographic location of study participants, and the researcher as an instrument of study.

Sample Size

As phenomenological studies may have sample sizes of 6 to 25 study participants, a sample size of 10 exemplary leaders was mutually agreed upon by the thematic group including peer researchers and faculty advisors (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Patton & Patton, 2002). Although the small sample size limited generalizability, the thematic team determined this was an appropriate sample size to gather in-depth, information-rich data from exemplary leaders. In qualitative research, increasing sample size poses a detriment to the ability of the research to collect in-depth information (Creswell, 2008). A total of 120 study participants were interviewed by the thematic team as all 12 members interviewed 10 exemplary leaders.

Time

Time was also a limitation of this study as school principals were extremely busy; therefore, scheduling extensive or multiple interviews with each participant was not feasible. Each interview conducted was limited to 60 minutes for reflection on the 12 interview questions. To manage this limitation, the researcher afforded each study participant an opportunity to review the transcript of the interview to provide clarification on answers as desired by participants. The actual amount of calendar days was also a possible limitation as interviews and research were part of a dissertation that occurred within university timelines.

Geography

Data collection for this study was limited by the proximity of the researcher to the study participants. The researcher lives in southern California and works in Orange County. Although southern California is a densely populated area, to increase the opportunity for face-to-face interactions, the researcher limited the target sample to exemplary middle school principals in Orange County, California.

Researcher as instrument of study

The researcher as an instrument of study was a limitation of this qualitative study. The researcher was responsible for determining the potential exemplary participants, setting up interviews, conducting interviews, and coding and interpreting all data. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), this caused a potential threat to internal reliability. As the researcher was employed as a middle school principal in an elementary school district in Orange County there was potential for personal bias and the impact the researcher had on the interview process, observations, coding, and analysis of data. Steps

to mitigate any potential personal bias included using a set of questions developed and scrutinized by the team of peer researchers and faculty members, including an expert process observer to examine the interview during the field test conducted by the researcher, and using an outside researcher to code 10% of data collected.

Summary

Chapter III provided information on the methodology used to conduct this phenomenological qualitative study. The chapter included the purpose and research questions, the research design, study population, sample criteria, instrumentation, data collection and analysis, and limitations. Chapter IV provides detailed descriptions of the data collected and research findings. Chapter V concludes the study with a summary of findings, conclusions, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

Overview

This qualitative phenomenological study described the behaviors exemplary middle school principals practiced to lead their organizations through conversation based upon the four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality. The framework of conversational leadership was developed by Groysberg and Slind (2012b) in their book, *Talk, Inc. How Trusted Leaders Use Conversation to Power Their Organizations.* The group of 12 peer researchers and 4 advising faculty collaborated extensively and determined a qualitative phenomenological research design would gather rich descriptions of exemplary leaders lived experiences. The thematic research team collaboratively created research-based definitions of the four elements of conversation, the criteria for an exemplary leader, the sample size, and the semi-structured interview questions. This chapter presents the purpose statement, research questions, population, study sample, research methodology, and data collection procedures. Also included is the analysis of data collected and a presentation of key findings from the study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to describe the behaviors exemplary middle school principals practiced to lead their organizations through conversation using Groysberg and Slind's (2012b) four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality.

Central Research Question and Sub Questions

What are the behaviors exemplary middle school principals practice to lead their organizations through conversation using Groysberg and Slind's (2012b) four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality?

Sub Questions

1. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of intimacy?
2. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of interactivity?
3. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of inclusion?
4. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of intentionality?

Population

The population for this study was the 1,296 public middle school principals in California (Education, 2017). As this population was too large for a single study, a population was narrowed to the active public middle school principals in southern California. According to the California Department of Education (CDE; 2017), Los Angeles County had the most middle school principals with 325, followed by Orange County (88), Riverside (76), San Bernardino (74), San Diego (99), and Ventura (28). Thus, the population was approximately 690 middle school principals in southern California.

Study Sample

The thematic dissertation team collectively developed the sample criteria. According to Creswell (2008), "The target population or 'sampling frame' is the actual list of sampling units from which the sample is selected" (p. 393). The target population for this study was narrowed to include all 88 public middle school principals in Orange County because of convenience to the researcher's time, geography, and resources. Participants were selected through purposeful and criterion-based sampling. Purposeful sampling ensured participants selected would yield rich descriptions to support the phenomenological study (Patton, 2002). Criterion-based sampling was used to find participants who could address the research purpose and answer the interview questions. All potential participants needed to meet four of the following six criteria of exemplary leadership:

1. Evidence of successful relationships with followers
2. Evidence of leading a successful organization
3. A minimum of five years of experience in the profession
4. Articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings
5. Recognition by peers
6. Membership in professional associations in their field

In qualitative research studies, sample size needed to align with the purpose of the study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2002). Creswell (2008) recommended a sample size of between 5 and 25 participants for phenomenological studies. For this phenomenological study, a sample size of 10 participants was determined to be adequate

by the 12 peer researchers and 4 faculty advisors. To identify the 10 study participants, all superintendents in Orange County districts with public middle schools were contacted to gather a prospective list of principals who met the above criteria of an exemplary leader. This resulted in a list of 10 study participants.

Research Methodology and Data Collection

A phenomenological study was chosen for this study to identify and describe the behaviors of exemplary middle school principals who led through conversation. This was a shared decision by the thematic research team because phenomenological studies produced rich descriptions of lived experiences and would add to the depth of the research. Personal, face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted with all 10 exemplary middle school principals to provide insight into their experiences with the four conversational leadership elements. These interviews served as the primary data collection for the study, and additional sources of data, including artifacts and observations, created richer and deeper meanings of the study participants' leadership.

The interview protocol (Appendix C) created collaboratively by the peer research team with faculty input included 12 open-ended questions with three questions for each of the four elements of conversational leadership. A field test was conducted to ensure questions were valid. All 10 interviews were conducted in-person at the principal's office. The interviews lasted between 28 minutes and 50 minutes, and were audio recorded. All recordings were transcribed and sent to each participant for review to ensure accuracy of the transcription.

Observations and artifacts were additional data sources collected to provide triangulation of data collected in the interviews. Seven observations were conducted of

study participants either before or after the interview. These data collection experiences comprised of classroom walk-throughs, campus tours, staff meetings, leadership team meetings, one-on-one interactions with staff, and interactions with stakeholders. In addition, 34 artifacts were gathered directly from participants and public electronic sources. Artifacts included meeting agendas, newsletters, written communication to stakeholders, and memos. Electronic sources were collected through a search of online databases, online collaborative documents (Google Docs), websites, and social media platforms. All these documents were uploaded into NVivo and reviewed to identify connections and emergent themes. Observations and artifacts allowed the researcher to further validate the interview data.

Study Participants

To ensure the confidentiality of study participants, each was assigned a unique ID number. No participant names or schools were used in this study. Table 1 identifies participants and their qualifications according to the six criteria of an exemplary leader developed by the thematic team. All 10 participants met or exceeded the requirements. Of the 10 participants, 5 were female and 5 were male. Due to the exemplary requirements, all 10 were in the profession for a minimum of 5 years, but other demographic data were not collected.

Table 1

Exemplary Criteria, Middle School Principals

Study Participant	Successful Relationship with Followers	Lead a Successful Organization	Minimum Five Years in the Profession	Articles, Papers, Materials Written, Published, Presented at Conferences, Association Meetings	Recognition by Peers	Membership in a Professional Organization
1	x	x	x	x	x	x
2	x	x	x	x		x
3	x	x	x	x	x	x
4	x	x	x	x	x	x
5	x	x	x	x	x	x
6	x	x	x	x	x	x
7	x	x	x	x		x
8	x	x	x	x	x	x
9	x	x	x		x	x
10	x	x	x		x	x

Presentation and Data Analysis

Chapter IV findings stemmed from the content drawn from the interviews, observations, and artifacts. These findings illuminated the lived experiences of the exemplary principals related to the four elements of conversational leadership presented by Groysberg and Slind (2012b).

Data Analysis

The 10 recorded interviews were transcribed through a digital transcription service, reviewed for accuracy, then uploaded into NVivo, a qualitative software coding application. The use of NVivo provided a platform for qualitative data analysis which requires the researcher recognize emergent themes across large amounts of detailed data

(McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). These themes were categorized in codes following the conversational leadership framework of Groysberg and Slind (2012b) that include intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality. When the coding process was completed, the researcher analyzed the strength of each theme from the frequency of codes tallied.

Reliability

According to Patton (2002), multiple sources of data provide data triangulation as the consistency of information, and subsequent themes, are compared and cross-checked at different times or settings. Although the 10 semi-structured interviews were the primary source of data collected in this study, observations and artifacts also gathered data to increase the reliability of the study. In addition, intercoder reliability was used as a peer researcher independently coded 10% of the data generated. This independent evaluation of the data using the same metrics as the researcher provides for similar conclusions to be reached thus establishing inter-coder reliability. A thematic team peer researcher independently coded 10% of the data generated. This secondary coding of the data reached an agreement of 85% and therefore established the coding conducted by the research was reliable.

Research Question and Sub-Question Results

What are the behaviors that exemplary middle school principals practice to lead their organizations through conversation using Groysberg and Slind's four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality?

Sub Questions

1. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of intimacy?
2. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of interactivity?
3. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of inclusion?
4. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of intentionality?

The extensive coding process resulted in 20 themes with 1,358 frequencies across the data sources. The calculation of frequencies involved data from interview transcriptions, observation data, and artifacts. The element of intimacy produced seven themes, interactivity five, inclusion five, and intentionality three (Figure 2).

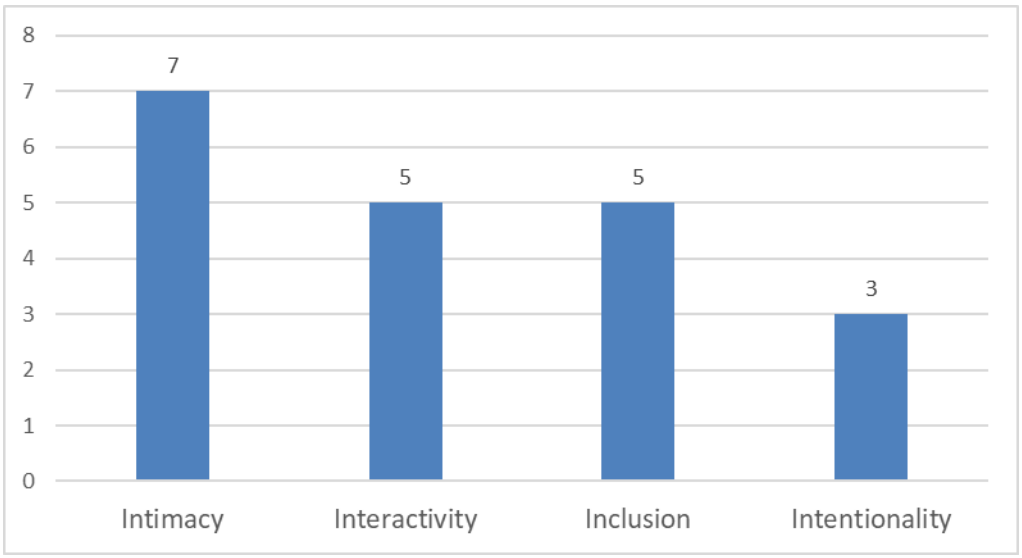

Figure 2. Number of themes in each element of conversational leadership.

The frequency of each theme was also calculated. Intimacy generated the greatest number of references with 447, which accounted for 32.9% of the coded data. Inclusion had 383 references representing 28.2% of the data, interactivity had 320 representing 23.6%, and intentionality had 208 references representing 15.3% (Figure 3).

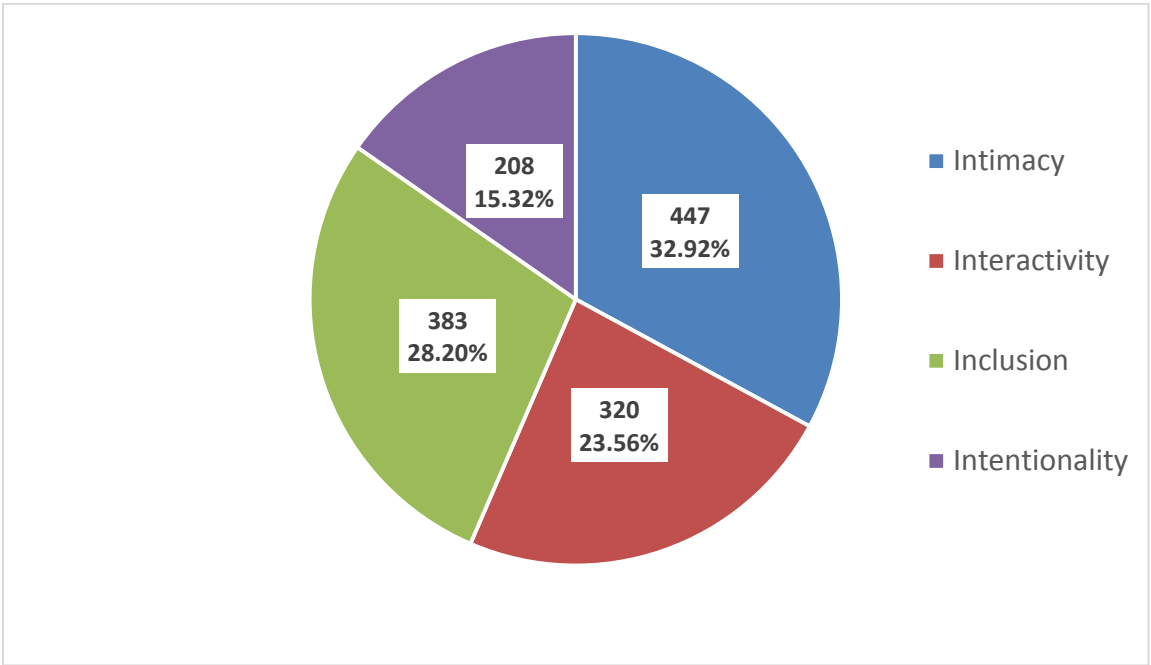

Figure 3. Number of frequencies in each element of conversational leadership.

Intimacy

Intimacy referred to the closeness, trust, and familiarity created between people through shared experiences, meaningful exchanges, and common knowledge (Glaser, 2014; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). The coding process yielded seven themes in the conversational element of intimacy, with 447 references across all data sources. Table 2 presents the themes related to intimacy, along with the number of sources and references.

Table 2

Intimacy Themes

Themes	Interviews	Observations	Artifacts	Total	Frequency
Open conversations promote trusting relationships and connection	10	4	7	21	100
Accessibility	10	5	9	24	98
Belief in creating strong connections with students	10	6	22	38	91
Listening to create closeness and engage stakeholders	10	4	0	14	56
Recognition of stakeholders builds community	7	2	16	25	48
Keep commitments	10	2	1	13	27
Storytelling to demonstrate vulnerability	9	3	0	12	27

Note. Sources came from transcribed interviews, observations, and artifacts.

Open conversations promote trusting relationships and connection. This theme emerged from 21 sources with 100 references, representing 22.4% of the coded content for intimacy. Multiple authors posited the leadership decision to engage in open conversations with members of their organizations allowed information to migrate across all levels, which created personal connections and trusting relationships (Cavanaugh, 2015; Crowley, 2011; Glaser, 2014; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Sinek, 2011). When the principals cultivated connections and belongingness through

open social interactions, they narrowed the distance between themselves and the staff, and created trusting relationships.

One participant shared conversations were "a way to build trust and relationships," and another stated conversations got "people to tell me about things that are meaningful to them." These open interactions were "so powerful…they're honest conversations about who we are and what makes us tick." Yet another principal indicated that during interactions with staff, "just having them open up and share with me has been helpful because we have started understanding each other."

These open conversations provide an opportunity for all members of the organization to feel a sense of community and belonging as they came closer to each other on both personal and professional levels. One principal shared:

> It's really about trying to get to know the person, in addition to what the issue is…it's not about solving the problem but hearing the issues and learning the concerns to create trust. A lot of times it's just sharing the great things that they're doing, and they just want to know that we as leaders value them.

Another principal noted open conversations were about the exchange of information, regardless if the message was positive or negative. He mentioned being "thankful when someone gives you input about something…just appreciate, they're speaking freely. And just let them know it's always a safe place for them to open up how they feel. That includes parents, staff, and the kids."

Open conversations were also evident during observations of principals engaging in friendly conversations with staff during meetings, classroom walk-throughs, and

regular interactions. During a campus tour, the researcher observed the principal engaged in open conversations with students, teachers, and office staff, and it was clear strong connections were present. Another principal was observed interacting with a teacher during an after-school program and the conversation moved fluidly between both professional and personal vignettes, which indicated a trusting relationship was established through previous conversations. Open conversations were evident from collected artifacts such as school meeting minutes, leadership meeting agendas, staff meeting agendas, and internal Google Docs. One principal provided the minutes for her school site council that approved the Single Plan for Student Achievement after a discussion of data and the development of the budget and goals. That approval was gained after open conversations.

Accessibility. This theme emerged in 24 sources across all interviews, observations, and artifacts. This theme had 98 references and represented 21.9% of the coded content for intimacy. To build trusting relationships with members of their organization, these principals made themselves and their environment accessible through mental, emotional, and physical proximity. Multiple authors agree that the variety of opportunities and settings a leader creates for dialogue with stakeholders allows for closeness and familiarity (Cavanaugh, 2015; Glaser, 2014; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Mintzberg, 2013).

Participants in the study noted accessibility included their physical office space, opportunities created outside the office for interactions, their leadership style, and how they talked to build trust with staff. A critical step in creating accessibility, according to one principal, was understanding trust "doesn't happen with one conversation or walking

in the door because the title of principal. The only way to promote trust is to engage in a lot of those conversations, be non-judgmental, and just have a lot of them."

The concept of an open-door policy, brought up by multiple participants, meant they made themselves accessible to stakeholders at key times during the day when interactions could occur, such as before and after school. One principal shared, "I make it a point to be here early in the morning. That's where I allow the openness to flow." Another principal shared "when teachers say, 'I know how busy you are.' My response is 'Never too busy for you,' which is why I rarely close my door. They know they knock and just come in." Another participant mentioned that "setting the scene for conversation… lets everyone know that you're available," and another noted a principal must create an accessible space for conversation so "there is no excuse for people not to communicate." This was mirrored by an interaction during the researcher's observation of a participant who, well after school had finished, was greeted by a teacher at her door to share something with her. The principal shared it took time and effort to build to that level of open sharing with that staff member. She expressed how rewarding this interaction was for her, as the efforts she had taken to create an accessible conversational environment were finally bearing fruit.

In addition, accessibility was created when principals empowered otherwise disenfranchised stakeholders in a variety of settings, such as small groups, one-on-one conversations, or even leadership teams. One participant noted a proactive time when she wanted to gather different perspectives and "reached out to some people specifically because they always like that personal invitation" and formed a committee focused on an issue, but it was "really about building relationships…so people can feel they can add

something to what we're doing." Finally, additional references to accessibility included: "be highly visible," "visit classrooms regularly," "check in both personally and professionally with staff," "meet with individual teachers off site," and "check in with a lot of people, a lot of times."

This theme was evident in observations of principals. During an observation, one principal described how he purposefully rearranged his office lay out, added a dynamic standing conference area, and added a large screen computer monitor to facilitate conversations. All 10 principals had a conference table used for a variety of meetings. Accessibility was also evident in artifacts such as school meeting minutes, leadership meeting agendas, staff meeting agendas, and internal Google Docs. A welcome letter from one principal created accessibility by offering six events to bring incoming 6th grade students and their families to the school campus to prepare for their transition to a middle school. Exemplary middle school principals create accessibility to facilitate conversation.

Shared belief in creating strong connections with students. This theme appeared in 38 sources with 91 references, representing 20.4% of the coded content for intimacy. Within the review of literature, multiple authors presented the importance of the promotion of organizational beliefs by the leader through shared experiences, meaningful exchanges, and shared knowledge (Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Mautz, 2015). Inspiring a shared belief in middle schools centered on making connections with students (Caskey et al., 2010; Fullan, 2014; Marzano et al., 2005; Whitaker, 2012). The principals in this study made concerted efforts and developed a shared belief in creating strong connections with students. They focused

efforts on modeling and encouraging a shared priority to connect with students to ensure academic and developmental needs were met. In coding data collected in interviews, all 10 principals gave specific information supporting this theme.

Principals led members of their organization to a shared belief in creating strong connections with students. One participant commented, "Our number one goal this year is to empower students. Part of our empowering kids was to decide as a staff what do kids have to know when you're empowered." She worked with the staff to enable them to empower kids through student-led analysis, written and oral communication, notetaking, and reading strategies. Another principal expressed that through district-wide collaboration, "we talk about student learning and ensure that all middle school students in the district have access to this or that."

Participants indicated the students who attended their school were the most important group at the site. Participants echoed creating strong connections with students through comments such as: "it's the kids first, and what's best for kids is the conversation," "we're looking at what are the things we're doing to help kids feel connected to school, and teacher, and so on," "the number one priority is to interact with students and get to know them," and "creating a positive school experience for kids." One principal elaborated that student connection and learning drove "whatever we do, whatever I do…whether it's a program, whether it's schedules, whether it's electives …always look at how it is going to impact student learning."

The belief in creating strong connections with students was evident in the interview responses and observations conducted. One principal during classroom walk-throughs was constantly observed making positive connections with students, talking to

them about their day, discussing what they were learning, and providing positive reinforcements for developmentally appropriate behavior. During another observation, a principal referenced her belief in making strong connections with students during a leadership meeting as they planned an activity to highlight student learning. A wide range of artifacts also supported this theme, as artifacts noting connections to students included school websites, introduction letters to new students, letters to the community, principal messages, weekly communications to stakeholders, online social media platforms, personal letters to teachers, targeted student population meeting agendas, school site council minutes, and mission and vision statements. For instance, one principal added a leadership team meeting agenda item that followed up on a school wide push to increase student voice and participation through carefully designed class lessons to be delivered by all teachers. Another school produced a video that was posted on their school website that included student comments on the importance of feeling connected, comfortable, and loved by their school's teachers and staff.

Listening creates closeness and engages stakeholders. This theme surfaced in 14 sources with 56 references, representing 12.5% of the coded content for intimacy. When principals listened to members of their organization, they created closeness as conversations began to resemble dialogue between friends. Numerous authors supported that close, intimate relationships were formed when leaders listened attentively to others' opinions, feedback, and reflections (Bennis, 2009; Block, 2008; Senge, 1990). Within the middle school principals studied, 100% provided content to support the theme.

One principal shared, "A lot of my conversations are about listening and learning from them, from the teacher, and I think that that helps to have kind of a welcoming

environment." Another participant stated, "I'm going to have a conversation to listen…to engage in a conversation to get to understand how you feel on a topic." An additional principal discussed her desire to be a good listener, saying making "those connections with [staff] so that they know that I'm interested in them as a person, and that translates into how they should be working and building connections with their kids." Finally, another principal shared listening was about "not jumping to conclusions. I'm going to have a conversation to listen, when I have a conversation to engage in it to get an understanding about how you feel about a topic."

This theme was also evident in multiple observations as principals paused during their interactions with staff and allowed for the conversation to develop instead of immediately providing a response. For instance, the researcher observed a principal in a one-on-one feedback session with a teacher listening deeply to information shared about a site level union concern regarding benchmark testing. Another principal was observed in a leadership team meeting paying close attention to the dialogue between staff, and they even referenced a time when the principal created listening sessions with staff.

Recognition of stakeholders builds community. This theme was found in 25 sources with 48 references, representing 10.7% of coded content for intimacy. When leaders created joyful environments through celebrated accomplishments, connections between members of the organization were strengthened as stakeholders felt valued, that their work mattered, and their work made a difference (Cavanaugh, 2015; Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Marzano et al., 2005). These principals recognized members of the organization and celebrated both individual and collective accomplishments, so the entire school community was enhanced through increased

connections and belongingness to each other. Seven of the 10 principals in this study provided data that supported this theme.

Participants identified this theme with stories of both individual and public recognition of individuals and teams. One principal shared a time she recognized the leadership potential of a normally quiet staff member in one-on-one conversation, explaining "I see something in you that you can't see. I see that you have this amazing potential to be a leader." Multiple principals also identified their use of recognition in written form as they left notes to staff after seeing them during a lesson, after a professional development opportunity, or after managing a difficult situation. One principal shared "That personal touch makes them feel important. It takes time, but do you think that the teacher appreciated the value of getting that? It's meaningful."

Principals also indicated they publicly recognized accomplishments by members of their organization through schoolwide celebrations and social media, and accepted nominations by students for teachers who made positive impacts on their lives. In the review of artifacts, highlighted accomplishments of stakeholders were shared leadership and staff agendas. It was also observed that principals allocated specific time during staff meetings for stakeholder celebrations, and individually applauded members for their work in daily tasks.

Keeping commitments. This theme came from 14 sources with 27 references representing 6.0% of coded content for intimacy. When these principals assured staff they took action, ownership, and responsibility for their communicated commitments, they built trust. According to multiple authors, leaders created emotional connections

and supported intimacy when they ensured their words aligned with their actions (Brown & Hurley, 2009; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Paull & McGrevin, 1996).

Multiple participants shared stories of how they followed through on their commitments to stakeholders, such as organizing staff-directed collaboration opportunities outside of school hours, addressing concerns raised by staff members in open meetings about leadership decisions, and empowering teachers to try new metacognitive strategies with students. These principals reported this built trust. One principal stated:

> My biggest thing I think is follow through. I think that I follow through really well with things. So, if there's a question and somebody needs an answer I will get back to them and follow through. That builds trust because when you follow through with whatever it was, it even could be the tinniest little thing that they needed you to check on, it could be super important to building trust with people.

Another participant expressed:

> To follow through and prove that your word is good, you know they say – walk the talk. Now if you are going to say that you are going to do something, you better make sure you do it at all costs. So that's why as a leader it is very, very important not to make promises that you could not potentially keep. I've also learned that that builds trust and intimacy with your staff.

This theme was succinctly boiled down by a participant who said she "makes her words meet her actions. Some staff members are shocked when you follow-up with

something right away. When you can address issues, follow-up with them if you say you're going to."

This theme was evident in observations of principals during leadership and staff meetings where principals pledged to act on an agreed area of need. This was the result of a conversation where it was determined action needed to be taken by the principal and all meeting participants as part of an ongoing shared-leadership process. In another observation, a principal met with a teacher representative who noted the successful action of the principal on a commitment from an earlier meeting. Another participant provided a personal letter written to a teacher following a conversation regarding yearly goals. This artifact demonstrated follow-up and support for items during the meeting.

Storytelling demonstrates vulnerability. This theme appeared in 12 sources with 27 references, representing 6.0% of the coded content for intimacy. The leadership behavior of storytelling won the hearts and minds of staff as it showed vulnerability. Storytelling demonstrated they were more than a talking head in an ivory tower (Crowley, 2011; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Scott, 2011). When the principals shared both personal and professional stories, they demonstrated vulnerability and humanized themselves.

Principals shared their experiences of storytelling during interviews. One participants noted telling stories "humanizes me" and another used stories "to make me real. It's really positive and people appreciate that we're not perfect either." One participant shared a specific example of storytelling, noting:

> I always tell people the story about my biggest epic fail. I tell them this because it's important that we stand up and go, we had the courage to try

> something, and the best part about learning is that when you fail, you learn about what you will never do again, but you also learn what you'll do differently the next time.

Another participant received positive feedback when she opened up to staff through stories, commenting:

> I'll talk about my hobbies so that right at the very beginning my staff knows a little bit about me. We can start building connections because someone's a gardener or someone has kids the same age and make that connection. I think that is the way that they get to know you as a person, you're not just the boss, and you build those connections and relationships.

Observations found participants used storytelling frequently to show their comfort level with stakeholders. For instance, one principal told four personal stories in an hour-long meeting, which demonstrated an ease with being vulnerable and open with members of the organization.

Interactivity

Interactivity was defined as the bilateral or multilateral exchange of comments and ideas, a back-and-forth process (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). The coding process yielded five themes in the conversational element of interactivity, with 320 references across all data sources representing 23.6% of all data coded. Table 3 identifies the five themes related to the conversational element of interactivity.

Table 3

Interactivity Themes

Themes	Interviews	Observations	Artifacts	Total	Frequency
Support structures facilitate interactions	10	3	17	30	99
Back-and-forth conversational process	10	5	8	23	83
Collaboration through multiple mediums promotes conversations	10	1	9	20	52
Social technology encourages conversations	9	2	14	25	52
Feedback creates connections and strengthens community	10	2	2	14	34

Note. Sources came from transcribed interviews, observations, and artifacts.

Support structures facilitate interactions. This theme occurred in 30 data sources with 99 references representing 30.9% of the coded content for interactivity. The principals from this study were purposeful in creating support structures, including physical and digital space, that facilitated collaborative and two-way interactions at all levels of the organization. This theme aligned with the review of literature, where multiple authors agreed leaders were conversational architects building thoughtful support structures to increase the amount and quality of interactions among staff (Glaser, 2014; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Scott, 2011). Within this study, this theme was evident in every data source.

Participants said they used support structures in their organization to foster interactions, including professional learning communities, leadership teams, staff meetings, focus groups and committees, school community meetings, professional development planning teams, stakeholder meetings, and individual face-to-face meetings.

One principal shared group meetings, such as leadership meetings or professional learning communities, were "where a lot of two-way communication happens, because people will always share thoughts or insights. Then they go back to their team and follow-up and report any issues or concerns." Another principal shared her school had dedicated monthly professional learning time and "for it to truly be a two-way exchange of ideas and information," she uses Google Classroom to facilitate interactions outside of meeting times.

Support structures also ensured when the interactions occurred, they used and followed processes that created rich interactions, such as norms, live agendas, Socratic seminars, and interest-based bargaining tools. One principal shared, "We have strategies in place…norms are taken care of and we ensure that everyone's voice is heard." Another talked about the interest-based bargaining strategy and described, "It's a lot of throwing out of ideas…to get the full story. It's really heavily based in the interest-based bargaining process. It's ingrained in me now because it just works for my personality." Numerous participants also used consistent and frequent communication to staff and the community to prompt interactions. One principal indicated these communications created a "healthy conversation. The families have a respect for the process and the system and structure."

This theme was evident in observations of principals and artifacts collected. For instance, one principal during a leadership meeting brought together thought leaders on campus to dialogue after school about a wide range of current organizational topics. The group agreed to take the information back to their colleagues, report out meeting information, collect information, and bring it back to the smaller group setting. This

theme was also represented in artifacts collected, including school meeting minutes, leadership meeting agendas, staff meeting agendas, and internal Google Docs. One principal letter to families highlighted support structures for parents that included the Parent Teacher Association, the School Site Council, and an open invitation to "become involved and connected to the school culture. Opportunities to volunteer are available each week." Other artifacts included weekly messages home to the school community, one of which highlighted two different assemblies in one week for students to build social-emotional skills.

Back-and-forth conversational process. This theme emerged from 23 data sources with 83 references, representing 25.9% of coded content for interactivity. According to multiple authors, conversational leaders managed organizational conversations across all sectors of the organization by encouraging the sharing of feedback and opinions through a facilitated and interactive process (Bennis, 2009; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Lencioni, 2002; Senge, 1990). When the principals in this study provided information to a wide range of stakeholders, then waited for and expect a response, the rich back-and-forth process strengthened their school community.

Principals told multiple stories of a back-and-forth process to demonstrate the importance of information flowing in all directions, not just from the top down. For instance, a participant shared importance of two-way communication as "not having a set end destination, just being open minded to how to evolve somewhere," and another principal also agreed "the process of having stakeholders provide their input" enabled rich dialogue. Another principal expressed his leadership was "really about how you lead people to shift their perspective so that they can be able to have the conversation. It's a

two-way thing." A fellow participant noted the ability to bring her staff together by means of the back-and-forth process had a strong impact on the overall organization, and really "nothing changed other than the conversation." A participant also shared:

> There's a lot of back-and-forth. We have lots of ways of engaging in conversations that are two-way because we're looking at our data number one, or we're looking at a program, and we are asking ourselves what's working and what's not working. What are we going to fix? What do we need to adjust? When we need to and what do we need to take away, whatever it is.

Principals also allowed for two-way communication with all those in the organization, including students and families. For instance, one principal shared "I feel like our parents and kids deserve a voice" and so a two-way interaction was created at Coffee with the Principal events to share "topics on social-emotional development, and tips on supporting their children. This is a great way to interact with the school's families."

In five of the seven observations conducted, this theme was present as principals engaged in back-and-forth communications with a variety of stakeholders. One principal demonstrated the commitment to this process as he masterfully communicated with three school employees who held different roles. He demonstrated the importance of allowing for thoughtful contributions and providing a response which allowed the dialogue to continue until both parties expressed all ideas freely. Artifacts collected indicated the importance of the back-and-forth conversational process, as one noted, "Based on overwhelmingly positive feedback from our students, parents, and staff" the school

published they would continue an important staff development program. Another principal explicitly listed "Brainstorming Topics to Dig Deeper" as an item on a leadership meeting agenda. As one principal stated, "there's no reason not to communicate."

Collaboration through multiple mediums promotes conversations. This theme emerged from 20 data sources with 52 references and represented 16.3% of coded content for interactivity. The dialogue created by leaders through conversational interactivity, following the review of literature, was maintained by stakeholder collaborations through numerous communication mediums (Cox & McLeod, 2014; Galloway, 2005; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Scott, 2011; Whitaker et al., 2015). Principals promoted conversations about school related activities through a variety of mediums, including print, electronic, and face-to-face collaborative opportunities. All participants provided content to support this theme.

A participant shared, "As an administrator, you always think that you're an active communicator. I've got a weekly newsletter that goes out, I've got emails, but it's never enough." This administration and staff gave focus to how the physical environment of common areas needed to be updated to allow the "walls to talk." Live agendas were printed and posted, chart paper from staff collaboration were put up, and the room was decorated around the year's theme for the school year. This ensured all employees, classified and certificated, were given the opportunity to interact with common goals and provide input. Electronic collaborative mediums were also used, as one principal said:

> I'll throw out an online survey to the staff with three or four questions. It's really easy. Sometimes it's just a Likert scale and then there's always

a comments section if they want to go deeper. I share that information and it just gives us a pulse of where we are as a group to drive our next steps.

Multiple principals published articles in their local school news publication, which one principal called "a way to memorialize what we are doing here." Another principal wrote an article that "spurred conversations with families" that were previously unfamiliar with the topic.

One principal noted using Socratic seminars with staff to provide input on upcoming student-related outcomes teachers needed to address. She shared:

> It was a new thing I was trying to get everyone to talk. It just turned into open dialogue. I didn't have anybody sitting there on their hands, it would just turn into people chiming in. It was like a family dinner table.

Another example of this theme was provided by a principal who noted staff interviewed students, shared out information gathered, and were "blown away by what kids had to say. It was a meaningful process."

The observations indicated principals promoted collaboration through a variety of mediums, including school leadership teams, a classified staff meeting that drew out recent celebrations and concerns, and a comprehensive school survey. A variety of artifacts collected also supported this theme as weekly newsletters, school websites, news articles, and principal messages demonstrated the promotion of conversations. Other principals wrote articles published in a local school news outlet that promoted conversations in the local community about their middle schools. Recent articles shared news about awards received for behavior programs, another discussed a new program for the use of drones, and another highlighted aspects of the school's socio-emotional

development program. Principals noted during interviews these articles were the catalyst for many conversations among stakeholders.

Use of social technology encourages conversations. This theme emerged from 25 sources with 52 references, representing 16.3% of coded content for interactivity. The exemplary middle school principals in this study used social technology as an informal passageway to transmit information to create, nurture, and maintain conversations. According to multiple authors, this promotion of dialogue through social technology enhanced and enabled organizational conversations that explored all perspectives (Cox & McLeod, 2014; Glaser, 2014; Whitaker et al., 2015).

Multiple principals used online social technology such as Google Drive, Google Classroom, and Google Forms to enable stakeholders to interact. One participant described his use of social technology to actively promote conversations in a truly interactive manner:

> We have a Google Doc where we take notes from leadership and then everyone has access to it whether they're on leadership or not. Then the people who are on leadership have until noon the next day to make any changes to the Google Doc. If anyone misrepresented comments that you made or anything was mispresented. Sometimes something comes up during the leadership meeting when you don't know the answer, and then you have time by noon the next day to fill in the answer. Then they make a PDF of the document and share it out with their whole department.

Conversations via social media, according to multiple principals, allowed access to stakeholders outside the normal school day. One principal added, "There's no excuse

for people not to communicate. We have Instagram, we have Twitter, we have it all." Another participant added:

> I do my principals weekly on Google Docs and if I push it out on Friday, before the end of the day, I'll get feedback on it, and I make changes right there because it's a live document for whoever picks it up.

Numerous principals also echoed social media was a great support system for interactions. One principal who actively used social technology supported the use of these online passageways; however, he also indicated, "Important conversations are never going to happen via text, email, or social media platforms. I ask the teachers, although I don't really have to, because I model it, but let's just sit down and talk." Another participant added:

> I think that we have to be careful because there is nothing that beats the human interaction. I think that as social media and other pieces come out, those have to complement the core, and the core is human interaction and the relationship building. And it's really hard to build a relationship through an online message.

Although participants were not observed using social technology, numerous artifacts indicated active use of platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. The use of invitation-only social technology forums, such as the Google applications (Documents, Drive, Surveys) and Remind, showed the widespread use of interactions created by principals through an online format. In examining school Twitter feeds, one principal promoted an upcoming garage sale at the school, and another encouraged comments about a recent student leadership summit.

Feedback creates connections and strengthens community. This theme surfaced in 14 sources with 34 references and represented 10.6% of coded content for interactivity. According to numerous authors, leaders considered feedback gathered through interactions an important component for drawing connections between stakeholders because it allowed for people to express their opinions freely, which improved the overall climate within a community (Brown & Hurley, 2009; Clifton, 2012b; Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). When the principals provided and expected to receive ongoing and reflective feedback in an interactive environment, there was increased capacity for connections and school community was strengthened.

One principal stated many times he was just a member of a meeting and gathered feedback from stakeholders because "your ideas are worth something to me." He continued saying, "All of our conversations are really feedback." Many times, participants needed to manage both negative and positive feedback from stakeholders. One principal shared, "You have to listen to the feedback and you can't negate the feedback. All feedback is important." Another principal added feedback was a tool that "inspires them, which supports making them feel empowered." These principals also shared their experiences of giving feedback and the positive impact it had on the entire school community. For instance, one participant shared:

> One of the most important things about being a leader is making sure that your teachers have support and the support that they're getting through a change. I mean it can come from you with encouragement and giving them time, giving them resources, you know giving them feedback.

She also expressed staff could receive the feedback because trusting connections were previously forged, so "the results are phenomenal." Another principal shared that she "writes individual letters to each staff member reflecting on their goals and made the feedback meaningful. I got a lot of really positive feedback."

The observations yielded numerous instances of principals providing feedback to stakeholders that appeared to strengthen the bonds already present. For example, one participant provided feedback on student-produced videos that would be released to the community during a school leadership meeting. The principal noted her excitement for the quality and outcome of the content and gave some slight suggestions to ensure the rollout was meaningful. The collection of artifacts also represented this theme as a principal wrote "Without question, our middle school's Parent Teacher Organization is at the heart of collaboration. Our PTO serves as a positive forum to address our school's needs and concerns." The principal then went on to praise the organization with feedback that their work "provided our students extended enrichment opportunities through elective classes, state-of-the-art students technology, and expanded our student recognition programs."

Inclusion

Inclusion referred to the commitment to the process of engaging stakeholders to share ideas and participate in the development of the organization (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Hurley & Brown, 2009). The coding process established five themes in the conversational element of interactivity, with 383 references, which represented 28.2% of all data coded. Table 4 identifies the five themes of the conversational element of inclusion.

Table 4

Inclusion Themes

Themes	Interviews	Observations	Artifacts	Total	Frequency
Commitment to engage stakeholders through conversations	10	4	25	39	125
Support for stakeholder-generated organizational content	10	2	7	19	97
Creating opportunities for open sharing of ideas by stakeholders	10	3	6	19	81
Leadership by stakeholder encouraged and supported	9	0	2	11	44
Active listening, purposeful questions promote an open sharing of ideas	10	2	2	14	36

Note. Sources came from transcribed interviews, observations, and artifacts.

Commitment to engage stakeholders through conversations. This theme emerged from 39 sources with 125 references, representing 30.2% of coded content for inclusion. These exemplary middle school principals made a full commitment to engage members of their organization through conversations, as access to information communicated importance and inclusion to stakeholders. Numerous authors agreed that when leaders gave up a certain level of control and committed to include members of the organization in dialogue, they tapped into stakeholders' full potential (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Kouzes & Posner, 2016; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2017; Scott, 2004).

Each time these principals decided to have a conversation and interact with others in the organization, they created an inclusive environment that raised stakeholder voices. One participant shared, "I think that everyone has something that they need to contribute, but not everybody is comfortable with that. So, I try very hard to connect." Another

principal expressed drawing in more people to the conversation "engages your community to see what their expectations are," and another principal added people had to know "it's always a safe space for them to open up how they feel." One participant believed through his conversations, "they know I'm committed to them and they see me consistently doing it." Another principal described the need to "empower people through conversations to build trust, because the conversation means they know you trust them."

The participants held people accountable for their commitment to conversations as part of group norms and staff agreements. One principal discussed the importance of conversations and transparency as his stakeholders "made a commitment that every member has to publish their agenda and all their ideas." This demonstrated a collective commitment, modeled by the principal, as stakeholders would "follow you if they know where you're going and they know why they're going there. The clarity for them comes when they know I'm committed." Another participant shared an experience of the impact of her commitment to engage stakeholders as she proactively started conversations with staff who would be going through major changes due to a district decision. She articulated her interactions:

> What I did that next morning [after the decision was made], I went to every single teacher and talked to them and shared with them of the decision. I just made the personal connection to be face-to-face with somebody and not hiding behind anything. I said, 'You know what, we're going to work through this.' They appreciated this immensely, just to have someone tell them about it and talk about it.

The observations provided further evidence in support of this theme. During a campus tour, the principal was actively involved with nearly every person she came in contact. In one case, the principal decided to return to a classroom visited earlier in the campus tour to ensure the teacher's lesson could be observed by the researcher. The principal stated she did this to keep her promise to the teacher to show off the interactive science lab lesson. Another principal actively participated in a round table dialogue about next steps of a planned parent-focused program. Artifacts collected also demonstrated a strong commitment to engage in communication with stakeholders through written communication such as emails, school website messages, personal communications, interactive meeting agendas, and published articles. One principal provided a leadership meeting document where she responded to a teacher's question on the online document to ensure clarification and allow for rich discussion when the actual staff meeting occurred.

Support for stakeholder-generated organizational content. This theme was found in 19 sources with 97 references and represented 25.3% of coded content for inclusion. The principals in this study recognized the importance of empowering stakeholders to be involved in the construction and maintenance of organizational content. These principals kept stakeholders involved and supported school community members to contribute toward organizational content. This theme was congruent with literature as leaders who shared control of organizational messaging enriched the content and allowed stakeholders to become thought leaders and brand ambassadors for the organization (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Mintzberg, 2013; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2017; Scott, 2011; Sinek, 2011).

One principal said, “I think setting up people to be included in messaging is critical.” Another principal noted “the more you engage, I think the more honest and trustworthy the relationship is with your community.” A third principal agreed the community conversation made all stakeholders “feel valued for their commitment for purposeful messages.” These conversations developed when the participants equipped their stakeholders with “tools so they could talk to one another.” She continued saying, “Throughout the conversation, they were able to value one another’s thoughts and ideas.”

An example of a release of control of organizational messaging was described by a participant when she empowered subject-specific departments to create their own brand. She stated, “To me, that really needs to come from them. So, they are tasked with branding their departments. This year they are going to market us.” This inclusion in organizational messaging sent a clear message that stakeholders participated in and took ownership of important content for the school.

The observations yielded examples of this theme as one leader created an opportunity for staff members to provide input on the direction of the school through a survey. This survey would give valuable input to the principal and School Site Council on the school budget and goals. Artifacts collected also supported the theme in the form of leadership meeting agendas, school site council minutes, published articles co-created with staff, and social media feeds. One artifact provided information to the neighboring community about the school’s motto that stated, “[School] Motto: ‘If it doesn’t work, change it.’ We promise never to wait until the end of a school year if something is not working to improve our school and student learning.” This clear evidence of

conversational inclusion demonstrated that when stakeholders offered their input, it would be received and acted upon.

Creating opportunities for open sharing of ideas by stakeholders. This theme occurred in 19 sources with 81 references and represented 21.2% of coded content for inclusion. The principals tapped into the human potential of stakeholders by encouraging them to share their ideas freely during structured conversational opportunities. This was consistent with the review of literature as such opportunities allowed and empowered stakeholders to raise the collective intelligence of the organization through an inclusive process giving equal right to stakeholders to manage meaning and assess organizational reality (Clifton, 2012b; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2017; Scott, 2004).

Principals indicated a common practice of scheduling one-on-one meetings with stakeholders provided a relaxed atmosphere for all parties to express their thoughts, opinions, and ideas about the organization. One principal noted he set up these meetings and "some people tend to clam up a bit because for some people it has not been a natural interaction in the past. But for two-thirds of the staff, I think it was good." Another principal noted she structured a variety of informational input meetings to give people a chance to "explore, collaborate, and reflect, and they get a chance to talk in groups about our purpose." By giving stakeholder a forum for expressing their opinions and ideas, a principal shared "part of our norms is being open and honest and we always talk about being hard on the issue and soft on the person." One principal cautioned to carefully consider the size of the group giving input to ensure a smooth process as "it's tough to have open dialogue with 30 some odd people in the room."

Leadership by stakeholders encouraged and supported. This theme emerged from 11 sources with 44 references, representing 11.5% of coded content for inclusion. As noted by several authors, leaders hold high expectations of stakeholders to take on leadership roles. Multiple authors indicated shared leadership enrichened the community culture when leaders provided support and encouragement (Glaser, 2014; Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Mautz, 2015). When principals encouraged others to contribute to the organization through an equal right to manage meaning and assess organizational reality, they became leaders themselves. Staff had input and some control over funds, facilities, people, and time, and as a result, these empowered stakeholders tried new ideas, combinations, and approaches to how the organization functioned.

Principals in this study actively supported stakeholders to be leaders through leadership teams, professional learning communities, curriculum coaches, parent teacher organizations, school safety committees, and school activities and athletics. However, principals noted some of the best stakeholder leaders were cultivated from previously built relationships, as one principal shared, "I like the teachers to be a part of what we're doing because sometimes when it comes from them, then they are going to be receptive." Her strategy was, "plant the seed and help them grow" into leaders.

During the review of artifacts collected, one principal provided a weekly newsletter sent to the school community. This communique contained multiple stories about staff-run school programs that included an astronomy night, a student-led dress up day, and a wintertime choral concert. These events demonstrated how shared leadership was encouraged and supported by the principal.

Active listening, purposeful questions promote an open sharing of ideas. This theme was found in 14 sources with 36 references, representing 9.4% of coded content for inclusion. The principals engaged stakeholders in conversations by listening actively and responding with thoughtful questions to spur open sharing of ideas. This aligned with the literature review as numerous authors noted when leaders asked good questions and attended to responses, it demonstrated respect for all ideas in an open, inclusive environment (Berson & Stieglitz, 2013; Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2012). One principal shared:

> Whether you're having one-on-one conversations, or conversations at a staff meeting, it's not just about being a listener. It's about being a good interviewer. You have to have the right questioning to be able to ask back. While it's really easy for me to tell people how to do it, it's much more productive, I think, to allow them to get to that place.

Other participants agreed reflective, purposeful questions drawn from active listening were a catalyst to encourage increased interactions and engagement across the campus. One principal described a conversation with a teacher attempting to draw deeper connections to students, but she was unable to step outside of her own point of view. Through a series of open-ended, reflective, and purposeful questioning stemming from active listening, the principal guided the teacher toward a new way of thinking. She stated, "It's really about the art of asking the right questions to be able to get people to think in ways they might not have ever thought before." Another principal indicated "you need to pay attention and be prepared to respond" because questions created an effective and meaningful conversational process. Reflective questions created positive

conversations when the principals actively considered stepping back from possessing sole control of the conversation.

An artifact that supported this theme was a leadership meeting agenda that asked staff to provide their reflections on creating intentional learning environments in their classrooms. The team members were prompted to answer how the group would work differently with different student populations. This leadership meeting agenda also contained the revised school vision statement. The principal indicated that after numerous rounds of questions and reflections on school practice, the staff trusted her to finalize and publish the vision statement. This document therefore was an example of the active listening and purposeful questioning process the entire staff embraced.

Intentionality

Intentionality referred to ensuring clarity of purpose that includes goals and direction to create order and meaning (Barge, 1985, 1986; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Men, 2012). The coding process generated three themes in the conversational element of interactivity, with 208 references, which represented 15.3% of all data coded. Table 5 identifies the three themes for the conversational element of intentionality.

Table 5

Intentionality Themes

Themes	Interviews	Observations	Artifacts	Total	Frequency
Intentional, goal-oriented dialogue leads stakeholders	10	2	20	32	94
Clear organizational expectations are set and modeled through behaviors	10	2	19	31	85
Use of literature supports organizational goals	7	1	3	11	29

Note. Sources come from transcribed interviews, observations, and artifacts.

Intentional, goal-oriented dialogue leads stakeholders. This theme appeared in 32 sources with 94 references, representing 45.2% of coded content for intentionality. According to multiple authors, leaders who intentionally engaged in goal-oriented dialogue could lead stakeholders during turbulent times as conversational direction and meaning ensured clear expectations (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Nichols, 2012; Senge, 1990; Sinek, 2011). When these exemplary middle school principals took steps to orient the flow of conversation to support organizational goals, they moved stakeholders toward a desired destination. These principals aligned their intentions to achieve conversational closure and ensure all stakeholders were headed in a common direction.

One principal shared a main school goal was to empower students. Therefore, she shared that as a site and district:

> We want to talk with kids about their learning and figure out what's going on at all district middle schools. Do we all have the same issues with getting kids where they need to be or is it just some of us. Then we work together in our teams to say, 'What can we do as a district to make sure all middle school children have access to this or that." So that's what we did. That's a time when I effectively promoted a conversation, kind of with a little push.

Another principal used intentional dialogue in the live agenda of her meetings to ensure she could "carve away time for what's important." A principal who used a similar strategy shared:

> We need to know where we're going, and we need to look at what kids are doing and data… I try to publish the agenda a couple days before the

meeting so that everyone has opportunity to share. They login and they can put the nuts and bolts in and if I can answer them, I put it in red in the other column. But if it's a point of discussion, then that's something we know we have to go through and we'll discuss it.

Strong support from artifacts demonstrated principals' focus on clear, consistent, goal-oriented conversations in social interactions. For instance, one principal highlighted prompts in a numbered format the staff would discuss at the meeting. Observations revealed the principals made a concerted effort to carry common school goals to all stakeholders. An observed classified staff meeting contained the same language and message shared to certificated staff. Another observation provided an example of a principal who used her leadership team to address schoolwide goals then brought that information back to their peers for implementation.

Clear organizational expectations are set and modeled through behaviors. This theme appeared in 31 sources with 85 references and represented 40.9% of coded content for intentionality. The principals ensured their actions and behaviors were consistent with organizational priorities so employees knew what was expected of them. This was congruent with the review of literature as effective leaders used conversations to ensure a clarity of purpose aligned with organizational expectations in both their words and how they modeled expectations to stakeholders (Brown & Hurley, 2009; Clifton, 2012b; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b).

One principal shared "organizational goals or mission just need to be put into your agendas all the time so they see the same words." Another principal elaborated on this as she recently worked with a teacher not trained in the behavior support program at

the school, noting "She's fabulous, but she just never was trained in some of the techniques of positive behavior interventions and support, so I follow through with her to make sure she is supported." This support for staff was mirrored by another participant who guided her staff to write four behaviors that would make them a better professional learning community member. Multiple principals also noted they modeled organizational expectations to ensure their words met their actions.

The artifacts collected demonstrated that leaders set clear organizational expectations as evidenced by leadership team meetings agendas, school site council agendas and minutes, and weekly newsletters. These artifacts contained consistent messaging of the school mission and vision statements in addition to school mottos. Another document collected honored student achievement in a press release to the school community, and yet another included the school expectations in a principal's welcome message on the website. The researcher also confirmed this theme by observing these principals' in their leadership capacity. For instance, during one observation as the researcher sat in the front office, one school had its mission clearly posted near the principal's office in both English and Spanish. This demonstrated the desire for not only promotion of school goals, but also of community as modeled in messaging in school community target languages. The principal also referenced this philosophy and the importance of messaging to the school community in both languages to engage families. In addition, during another observation a community liaison came into the principal's office and dialogued about her conversation with a family in Spanish that was difficult but needed.

Use of literature supports organizational goals. This theme surfaced in 11 data sources collected with 29 references and represented 13.9% of coded content for intentionality. The exemplary middle school principals used relevant literature purposefully aligned with organizational goals to provide outside perspectives on internal agreements.

References to outside sources such as books, articles, TED Talks, and research-based practices brought energy to sometimes the unknown. One principal stated, "so many great ideas are from the books that we read." Another mentioned, "If I'm looking at installing a new idea, I have to look to those outside people, and I bring their ideas aboard individual conversations… I have little mini pockets of research going on."

In numerous principal offices, books and articles adorned the walls, shelves, and tables in the room. In one case, the principal placed a book recently read by all staff in a prominent location in her office, which she referenced during the interview as the basis of the school's theme for the year. In addition, multiple agendas included hyperlinks to articles or drew attention to books read schoolwide. For instance, one staff meeting agenda displayed the cover a Richard DuFour book, *Learning by Doing*, which directly related to the school's focus for its professional learning communities.

Key Findings

The eight key findings of this study addressed the research questions for each conversational element. To select the key findings, it was determined only those themes that gathered data from all 10 exemplary middle school principals, represented a minimum of 20% of all data coded within the theme, and accounted for at least 6.75% of

all data coded within the study were selected. These key findings yielded 781 references, representing 57.5% of all data coded.

Key Findings: Intimacy

1. Exemplary middle school principals use *open conversations to promote trusting relationships and connections*. This theme represented 22.4% of data coded for intimacy, 7.4% of all data coded in the study, and was highlighted by all of those interviewed.
2. Exemplary middle school principals demonstrate *accessibility* to their stakeholders through the mental, emotional, and physical proximity they create to allow for closeness and familiarity. This theme represented 21.9% of the data coded for intimacy, 7.2% of all data coded in the study, and was supported by content in all interviews conducted.

Key Finding: Interactivity

3. Exemplary middle school principals utilize *support structures to facilitate interactions*. This represented 30.9% of the data coded for interactivity, 7.3% of all data coded in the study, and all those interviewed shared information that supported the theme.
4. Exemplary middle school principals enable a *back-and-forth conversational process* to flourish in their schools through an interactive sharing of feedback and opinions with members of the school community. This represented 25.9% of the data coded for interactivity, 6.1% of all data coded in the study, and emerged in all 10 interviews conducted with principals.

Key Finding: Inclusion

5. Exemplary middle school principals consciously, and purposefully, have an unwavering *commitment to engage stakeholders*. This theme represented 32.6% of the data coded for inclusion, 9.2% of all data coded in the study, and all study participants provided content that reinforced the importance of this theme.
6. Exemplary middle school principals provide continuous *support for stakeholder-generated content*. This theme represented 25.3% of the data coded for inclusion, 7.1% of all data coded in the study, and was supported with content from all those interviewed.

Key Finding: Intentionality

7. Exemplary middle school principals engage in *intentional goal-oriented dialogue* with stakeholders. This represented 45.2% of the data coded for intentionality, 6.9% of all data coded in the study, and all participants interviewed gave supporting content for this theme.
8. Exemplary middle school principals ensure that *clear organizational expectations are set and modeled through behaviors*. This theme represented 40.9% of all data coded for intentionality, 6.3% of all data coded in the study, and was found in all 10 interviews conducted.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to describe the behaviors exemplary middle school principals practiced to lead their organizations through conversation using Groysberg and Slind's (2012b) four elements of

conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality. This chapter covered the purpose of the study, methodology, and presented a summary of data collected. This data showed 20 major themes emerged from the 10 semi-structured interviews, 7 observations, and 34 artifacts. Eight key findings describing the behaviors of exemplary middle school principals were identified from the 20 themes.

Chapter V provides a final summary of the study's findings, unexpected findings, conclusions, implications for action, and recommendations for further research. It concludes with final remarks and reflections from the researcher.

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

This phenomenological qualitative research study described the lived experiences of exemplary middle school principals who lead their organizations through conversation using Groysberg and Slind's (2012b) four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality. An extensive and thoughtful analysis of data collected from interviews, observations, and artifacts led to 20 conversational leadership themes and 8 major findings. The following conclusions were the culmination of extensive research, data collection, and analysis that produced important implications for action and recommendations for future research.

Chapter V gives a final summary of the research study and includes: the purpose statement, research questions and sub-questions, methodology, population, and sample. The major findings, unexpected findings, conclusions, implications for action, and recommendations for further research are also presented. Chapter V ends with the researcher's concluding remarks and reflections.

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to describe the behaviors that exemplary middle school principals practice to lead their organizations through conversation using Groysberg and Slind's (2012b) four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality. The central research question for this study was: What are the behaviors that exemplary middle school principals practice to lead their organizations through conversation using Groysberg and Slind's four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality? The four sub-questions for this study were:

1. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of intimacy?
2. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of interactivity?
3. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of inclusion?
4. How do exemplary middle school principals lead their organizations through the conversational element of intentionality?

Ten interviews were conducted with exemplary middle school principals in Orange County, California to identify and describe their lived experiences related to the four elements of conversational leadership. The 12-member thematic dissertation team, guided by four faculty advisors, created the Thematic Interview Protocol Template (Appendix C) through collaboration that drew on the foundational research of conversational leadership from the literature review. All interviews were conducted face-to-face at each participant's school site. These participants were selected from the target population of 88 middle school principals in Orange County, California. The 12 peer researchers agreed 10 members of the target population would be chosen for the study based on the agreed upon criteria. Exemplary middle school principals exhibited at least 4 of the 6 agreed upon criteria created by the 12 members of the thematic dissertation team. The criteria for exemplary leaders were:

- Evidence of successful relationships with followers
- Evidence of leading a successful organization
- A minimum of five years of experience in the profession

- Articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings
- Recognition by peers
- Membership in professional associations in their field

Target populations for this thematic study comprised of the following: unified school district superintendents, elementary district superintendents, assistant superintendents of educational services, elementary school principals, middle school principals, high school principals, regional directors of migrant education, community college presidents, chief nursing officers, municipal police chiefs and sheriffs, non-profit executive directors, and city managers.

Major Findings

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to describe the behaviors that exemplary middle school principals practice to lead their organizations through conversation using Groysberg and Slind's (2012b) four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality. The central research question was answered through analysis of the sub-questions. Chapter IV presented the key research findings and results of the coding of themes, which included the frequencies from the interviews, observations, and artifacts.

Intimacy

1. **Open conversations that promote trusting relationships and connections are vital to creating intimacy**. This theme represented 22.37% of the coded data for intimacy, 7.36% of all coded data, and was mentioned by all 10 exemplary middle school principals interviewed. It yielded the highest

number of references for intimacy. The exemplary middle school principals in this study agreed the behavior of having open conversations to promote trusting relationships was necessary to establish the conversational leadership element of intimacy. This finding was congruent with the work of Groysberg and Slind (2012b), as open conversations were a foundational piece to create intimacy with trusting relationships and connections, and intimacy was the foundational building block of conversational leadership. These trusting relationships built by the middle school principals through open conversations enabled the organization to be flexible and responsive. Effective leaders used trust and connections to harness the energy of students, teachers, staff, and the school community (Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Mautz, 2015).

2. **Accessibility is a critical element of intimacy**. This theme represented 21.92% of the coded data for intimacy, 7.22% of all coded data, and was cited by all 10 exemplary middle school principals interviewed. It yielded the second highest references for intimacy. The exemplary middle school principals in this study also agreed accessibility through mental, emotional, and physical proximity was an important conversational leadership behavior of intimacy as these environments encouraged relationship building with all school stakeholders. Relationships with employees therefore had less to do with "projecting an aura of authority than it does with carving out opportunities for dialogue" (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b, p. 14). Leaders of the modern era are tasked with extending trust to others first, then building

connections through environments that create closeness between all members of the organization (Cavanaugh, 2015; Crowley, 2015; Glaser, 2014).

Interactivity

3. **Support structures that facilitate interactions are critical within the element of interactivity**. This theme represented 30.94% of the coded data for interactivity, 7.29% of all coded data, was mentioned by all 10 exemplary middle school principals interviewed. It yielded the highest number of references for interactivity. All exemplary middle school principals in this study behaved in a manner consistent with the conversational leadership element of interactivity as they created and used support structures that facilitated interactions between members of their school. These findings were consistent with literature as Peter Block, as referenced by Marzano et al. (2005), suggested "effective leaders are social architects that create a 'social space' that enhances or inhibits the effectiveness of an organization" (p. 19). Leaders who create and utilize support structures facilitate collaborative, two-way connections at all levels of the organization that develop a rich back-and-forth conversational process (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b).
4. **Back-and-forth conversational process is necessary for conversational interactivity**. This theme represented 25.94% of the data coded for interactivity, 6.11% of all data coded in the study, and emerged in all 10 interviews conducted with principals. It was confirmed by all exemplary middle school principals that a key conversational leadership behavior was the ability to engage stakeholders in a back-and-forth conversational process

where principals provided a wide range of information, then wait for, and expect responses, to create rich two-way interactions. This is consistent with literature as conversational leaders encourage feedback, questions, and opinions by sharing a continuous flow of information to stakeholders which creates connections and community (Block, 2008; Glaser, 2013; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Harvey & Drolet, 2004).

Inclusion

5. **Commitment to engage stakeholders is an essential element of inclusion**. This theme represented 32.64% of the coded data for inclusion, 9.20% of all coded data, and data emerged in all 10 interviews conducted with exemplary middle school principals. This theme received the highest number of references for inclusion and the highest number of references across all coded themes. The conversational leadership behavior of having a strong commitment to engage stakeholders in dialogue was used to "get close" to members of the school community to produce positive outcomes for all. The crucial leadership decision of commitment to engage with organization members created closeness and familiarity based on trust and relationships (Cavanaugh, 2015; Glaser, 2014; Mintzberg, 2013). Granting members of an organization access to information historically held by leaders communicated importance and inclusion, and was considered a new requirement of leadership (Harvey & Drolet, 2004).
6. **Support for stakeholder-generated organizational content is important for inclusion**. This theme represented 25.33% of the coded data for inclusion,

7.14% of all coded data, and was referenced by all 10 exemplary middle school principals interviewed. It yielded the second highest frequency for inclusion. Exemplary middle school principals released a level of control over organizational messaging to include school members through this conversational leadership behavior. This theme was congruent with the review of literature as team members felt included and connected intimately through inclusive interactions when leaders provided access not only to information, but to the creation of organizational content (Clifton, 2012). Members at all levels of the organization became thought leaders and brand ambassadors as leader relinquished control and engaged stakeholders in generating content relevant to the organization (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Mintzberg, 2013; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2017; Scott, 2011; Sinek, 2011).

Intentionality

7. **Intentional, goal-oriented dialogue addresses the importance of purposeful conversations leaders engaged in with all stakeholders**. The ability of an exemplary middle school principal to intentionally align their talk and dialogue to school-related goals in a strategic manner allowed all stakeholders to participate in the school and urged commitment to carrying out goals. It also shrunk the gap between their intentions and their actual impact, which was critical to conversational intentionality. This was congruent with the review of literature as the best communicators intentionally aligned their talk and dialogue with the desired impact in a strategic manner to increase the level of trust between leaders and followers

(Barge, 2014; Glaser, 2016; Groysberg & Slind, 2012a; Hurley & Brown, 2009; Jorgensen, 2010). A requirement of leaders of the modern era is to monitor and align their intentions and impacts toward organizational goals (Glaser, 2013).

8. **Clear organizational expectations are set and modeled through behaviors by exemplary middle school principals**. This represented 40.87% of all data coded for intentionality, 6.26% of all data coded in the study, and was mentioned in all 10 interviews. The exemplary middle school principals in this study intentionally focused on importance of the people in their schools to carry out key actions and initiatives by ensuring clear organizational expectations were set and modeled through their own behaviors. Although principals had different expectations for their schools, these leaders provided clarity through intentional conversations that created collaboration and focused on school supported outcomes. According to Harvey and Drolet (2004), any organizational structure can be effective if team members and leaders understand, value, and accept their responsibility in the organization.

Unexpected Findings

The first unexpected finding, *shared belief in creating strong connections with students*, emerged 38 times across all interviews, observations, and artifacts. This theme drew data from the greatest number of sources across all themes and received the highest number of references, six, among all data coded within the seven observations conducted. This theme had a frequency of 91 and represented 20.36% of the coded content for intimacy. The literature, while discussing ancillary areas such as "shared experiences,

meaningful exchanges, and shared knowledge," did not overtly call out having a shared belief as an important conversational leadership strategy. In addition, literature noted the importance of middle school principals remaining loyal to students and positive interactions with students built school culture, but did not explicitly delineate how a shared belief to develop deep connections with students was a significant conversational leadership behavior.

The second unexpected finding, *social technology encourages conversations*, arose 25 times across all interviews, observations, and artifacts. This theme had a frequency of 52 and represented 16.25% of the coded content for interactivity. Although it accumulated 14 references among artifacts collected, it only appeared 31 times during the interviews and was mentioned by 90% of principals. Exemplary middle school principals in this study indicated they used social technology to promote interactions to create, nurture, and maintain dynamic conversations. However, multiple principals indicated the gold standard for leadership was still face-to-face interactions. As a result there was an unexpected inconsistency of the use of social technology by principals and the power in its use to produce rich back-and-forth conversational exchanges in an organization (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Nichols, 2012).

The last unexpected finding, *use of literature supports organizational goals*, emerged in 11 sources across all interviews, observations, and artifacts, and 70% of participants interviewed provided data for this theme. Some of the participants indicated a strong reliance on using literature such as books, articles, and TED talks strengthened the dialogue within intentionality, whereas others used it sporadically. Exemplary middle school principals intentionally created dialogue focused on improvement and growth, and

utilized literature to provide outside perspectives on school-related goals. Examples included using seminal research found in books, articles, TED talks, and educationally related sources. The use of literature ultimately was a strategy exemplary middle school principals leaned on to inspire and move their staff toward a desired future state.

Conclusions

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to describe the behaviors that exemplary middle school principals practice to lead their organizations through conversation using Groysberg and Slind's (2012b) four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality. The following conclusions stemmed from the data analysis in Chapter IV and describe the lived experiences of exemplary middle school principals as they lead their organizations through conversation.

Conclusion 1: Middle school principals must fully commit themselves to engage members of their organization through conversations that build relationships with stakeholders.

Gone are the days when leaders relied solely on their title to engage members of their organization. Today's middle school principals must fully commit to engaging stakeholders through inclusive, two-way interactions that "talk the organization into being"(Clifton, 2012; Harvey & Drolet, 2004). The control aspect of leadership is shifting as the talk that occurs between all levels of an organization determines whether something will happen in the organization and what won't (Scott, 2004). The ability of stakeholders from all levels of an organization to access information provided in conversations communicates importance and inclusion (Harvey & Drolet, 2004).

Therefore, middle school principals are relinquishing control of the organizational conversation to actively include others as the development of the "people infrastructure," the most precious organizational resource, requires committed attention (Crowley, 2011; Harvey & Drolet, 2004; Sinek, 2011). The personal connection middle school principals cultivate through discursive social interactions with employees allows them to engage members of their organization and develop relationships (Glaser, 2013).

A key conversational leadership strategy is to ensure the words a leader uses aligns with his or her actions. When this occurs, leaders and stakeholder create personal connections through trust, which fuels belongingness to the overarching organizational community (Cavanaugh, 2015; Glaser, 2013; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). These relationships enable an organization to possess the flexibility and responsiveness to all situations as these connections harness the energy of stakeholders (Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Mautz, 2015). Harvey and Drolet (2004) succinctly expressed this concept stating, "When in doubt, include" (p. 25).

Conclusion 2: Middle school principals must promote open conversations in an accessible, interactive environment.

When middle school principals have open conversations with members of the organization, they shrink the distance between themselves and their stakeholders. It allows all participants in the conversation to understand what drives people in the organization, which allows both short and long-term school goals to be addressed effectively and collaboratively. Middle school principals who purposefully have open conversations with stakeholders create and sustain accessibility that allows them to survive in a volatile, unpredictable educational time period as they receive information

from all directions and stakeholders (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2012; Harvey & Drolet, 2004).

To achieve transformational results, middle school principals understand they must make themselves accessible to understand a person's passion, drive, enthusiasm, and energy (Crowley, 2011; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Harvey & Drolet, 2004). Therefore, today's middle school principals cannot be closed off to input or communication from stakeholders. They make themselves accessible by considering the environments where conversational interactions can occur and provide institutional supports to increase input and collaboration through a back-and-forth process (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b; Scott, 2011). This accessibility ensures and promotes purposeful interactions grounded in the trusting relationships created through back-and-forth conversations (Brown & Hurley, 2009).

Conclusion 3: Middle school principals must create support structures to ensure a clear direction of the organization through responsive, purposeful, and well-designed dialogue with all stakeholders.

The conversational leaders in this study understand conversations are vehicles for strategy and therefore thoughtfully design and use support structures to engage stakeholders in purposeful conversations geared toward organizational goals. These structures allow the middle school principal to become a "social space" architect and positively affect the organization through rich, well-designed, back-and-forth interactions that afford members of the organization multiple opportunities to engage (Groysberg & Slind, 2012b). When both stakeholders and leaders remain committed to stay on the same page through these varied and ongoing opportunities, the increased connections

enhance the overall community (Block, 2008; Brown & Hurley, 2009; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Mintzberg, 2013).

Conclusion 4: Middle school principals must communicate and model clear expectations to lead stakeholders and ensure clarity of organizational purpose.

The best communicators intentionally align their talk and dialogue with their desired impact in a strategic manner to increase the level of commitment among stakeholders through clearly communicated expectations (Barge, 2014; Brown & Hurley, 2009; Glaser, 2016; Groysberg & Slind, 2012a). The ability of these principals to intentionally align their dialogue and appropriately model their own behavior to organizational expectations urges others in the organization to do the same. This moves the organization and stakeholders toward a desired future state as the expectations ensure common organizational direction. These clearly communicated expectations also allow for conversational closure (Brown & Hurley, 2009; Clifton, 2012; Groysberg & Slind, 2012b).

This research showed exemplary middle school principals led through conversations by utilizing behaviors that support the four conversational leadership elements of intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality. In addition, the use of all four elements of conversational leadership by leaders is critical to engaging all stakeholders in an organization. The key findings and themes from this study provide ample content to advance the field of conversational leadership and specifically address how leaders create accessibility for open conversations, develop clear organizational goals through collaboration, provide support structures to support conversation within the school, and ensure conversations focus on and model the use of organizational

expectations. The following sections detail a variety of implications that should be acted upon to ensure middle school principals effectively lead their schools and school communities through conversations.

Implications for Action

Implication 1. Brandman University's Doctorate in Organizational Leadership program should include conversational leadership and the behaviors conversational leaders use, as delineated in this study, as part of its required curriculum for doctoral candidates. A proposal should be made to the Brandman University Course Lead Professors of the following Brandman University courses to the implicitly include the content from this research study: EDOL 705 – Organizational Communication and Conflict, EDOL 707 – Organizational Theory and Development, and EDOL 708 – Strategic Thinking. In addition, the findings of this research should be specifically included in Module 2 in EDOL 707 where focus is currently placed on how leadership facilitates rich conversations to address organizational development.

Implication 2. The Leadership Coaching and California Network of School Leadership Coaches (CNET) training programs offered by the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA), and the National Principal Mentor Training and Certification Program offered by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), should include the findings of this study in their curriculum. As these programs support the credentialing of new and aspiring administrators for both the Preliminary Administrative Service Credential and the Clear Administrative Service Credential, qualified coaches must be trained in and knowledgeable about the behaviors practiced by exemplary principals. This training would then require new and aspiring

middle school principals to develop conversational leadership behaviors associated with intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality found in this study with guidance from a qualified mentor or coach. The mentor should observe the middle school principal to gauge his or her ability to use intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality in a leadership capacity. The middle school principal and mentor should analyze conversational interactions with all stakeholders, including students, teachers, staff, families, and the greater school community. The mentor and middle school principal should then identify conversational leadership strengths and areas of growth for all stakeholder groups and develop both short- and long-term plans to ensure continued conversational leadership growth.

Implication 3. ACSA should include the four elements of conversational leadership as a specific theme in its professional learning programs such as the Principal's Academy, Principal's Summer Institute, and Institute for New and Aspiring Principals. The key findings and conclusions of this study should be included in the following specific themes of the Principal's Academy: communication, principal leadership, and school climate and culture. In addition, the findings of this research should be incorporated in one-day ACSA workshops such as *Having Hard Conversations*. In addition, the ACSA Middle School Counsel must incorporate conversational leadership implicitly into conferences and professional development utilizing the research from this study. Proposals should be submitted by the conversational leadership thematic team of peer researchers and four guiding faculty members to include this content in the above programs and conferences.

Implication 4. The California League of Schools (CLS) and California League of Middle Schools (CLMS) should include the key findings of this study and conversational leadership in their professional learning programs in their annual conference, summer institutes, and the School Climate and Culture Conference (SCCC). The SCCC specifically focuses on creating a welcoming environment for all stakeholders to participate in and provide insight on the direction of a school's organizational goals. Middle school principals and middle school community members would benefit from learning the importance of conversational leadership and subsequent conversational leadership behaviors. A proposal should therefore be made to the CLS Board of Directors by the researcher to include this important content on conversational leadership and conversational leadership behaviors.

Implication 5. The Orange County Department of Education (OCDE) needs to include conversational leadership and its four elements (intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, intentionality) as universal concepts in the California Administrator Performance Expectations (CAPE) required for completion of a Preliminary Administrative Services Credential Program and the Clear Administrative Services Credential Program. Specific CAPE modules that would benefit from adding conversational leadership to their strands are visionary leadership, school improvement leadership, professional learning and growth leadership, organizational leadership, and community leadership. A proposal should therefore be submitted to OCDE superintendents and associate superintendents, and the Orange County Board of Education, to include content in the administrative credential programs.

Implication 6. The three thematic researchers who studied exemplary principals at elementary, middle, and high schools should pool their collective knowledge to create professional learning opportunities for current and aspiring principals that cover the conversational leadership behaviors of exemplary public school K-12 principals. Proposals should be submitted to speak and provide content at the following specific conferences or professional learning forums: the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) conferences including the Institute for Middle Level Leadership and their annual conference; the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) annual conference, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) annual conference, and the Center for Principal Leadership.

Implication 7. The three thematic researchers who studied the exemplary principals at elementary, middle, and high schools should collaborate and publish scholarly articles for submission to K-12 educational publications including *Leadership* (ACSA), *EdCAL* (ACSA), *Middle School Journal* (AMLE), and *Principal* (NAESP).

Recommendations for Further Research

Conversational leadership is an emerging field primed for further research. Although the researcher and thematic team extends the base of knowledge of conversational leadership across multiple fields, it is still relatively uncharted territory. The specific research conducted on exemplary middle school principals who lead through conversations also provides new opportunities for future research studies. The following future research on conversational leadership is recommended:

1. As the methodology of this study did not explicitly examine demographics of exemplary middle school principals by design, a phenomenological research

study should be conducted that further narrows the focus on conversational leadership by studying only female or male exemplary middle school principals. Following the criteria of an exemplary leader established by the thematic research team, the study identified, by chance, included five male and five female exemplary middle school principals. However, when coding the data, participant gender of the participant was not attached to the code. A future study would afford the researcher the opportunity to elucidate similarities and differences of conversational leadership behaviors between males and females.

2. A phenomenological study should be conducted isolating specific age ranges in the selection criteria of exemplary middle school principals. This study did not consider establishing criteria to purposefully focus on the age of exemplary principals and therefore no generational data were collected. As such, the themes in this study did not consider the years of experience a principal had that afforded them the experiences to effectively communicate with stakeholders through conversations. The data collected from multiple studies of middle school principals would provide more breadth to the data collected in this study. Specific age ranges that should be studied are middle school principals between the ages of 30 and 40 years old, 40 and 50 years old, 50 and 60 years old, and over 60 years old.
3. Multiple phenomenological studies of exemplary middle school principals should be conducted to investigate the use of conversational leadership in various settings, including: in small schools (less than 750 students), large

schools (more than 750 students), schools with high minority populations, and schools in high and low socioeconomic communities. This research did not identify the population by school demographics such as school size, student demographics, or socioeconomics of the school community. The data collected from these future studies would provide a rich description of the similarities and differences of the lived experiences and conversational leadership behaviors of exemplary middle school principals in a variety of school settings.

4. A mixed-methods research design collecting both qualitative and quantitative data would provide further insight into the use of conversational leadership by exemplary middle school principals. The thematic research team, consisting of 12 research peers and four guiding faculty, considered a phenomenological and mixed-methods research design for this study of the conversational leadership behaviors of exemplary leaders. The team ultimately decided to use the phenomenological design to describe the behaviors practiced by exemplary leaders. Therefore, a mixed-methods research study could follow the same phenomenological approach of this study and then deliver a survey to all middle school principals to collect relevant quantitative data.
5. Three peer researchers in the conversational leadership thematic dissertation team focused on the behaviors of exemplary principals at public elementary, middle, and high school levels. A meta-analysis of all three research studies on exemplary K-12 public school principals who practice conversational

leadership would provide a deeper understanding of common conversational leadership behaviors across the spectrum of the public education system.

6. This study should be replicated focusing on the use of social media technology by exemplary middle school principals leading through conversation. This study would investigate the unexpected finding of this study, *social technology encourages conversation,* by specifically focusing on conversational leadership behaviors of principals using social media through the lens of conversational intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality.
7. The scholarly work completed by the Brandman University conversational leadership thematic research team significantly advances the research currently available in this emerging field. The findings from all these studies on the use of conversational intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality should be examined to better understand the summation of conversational leadership data collected through a meta-analysis.

Concluding Remarks and Reflections

Conversational leadership is an exhausting, but also regenerative, leadership process that enrichens the lives of middle school principals and school communities they serve. However, middle school principals must fully commit themselves to engage all stakeholders in their school community through conversations. Without full commitment, the impact of conversational intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality by middle school principals will be diminished. In addition, middle school principals who understand and use conversational leadership empower and foster connections with all members of their school community to truly create a community that

embraces intimate, interactive, inclusive, and intentional conversations. All middle school principals should examine the impact their conversations have on their school community and learn to apply the four conversational leadership elements to their daily service to all stakeholders.

As a middle school principal, I must actively consider my own application of these research findings in my daily service to my school community. I am proud this research process inspired me to push my own professional boundaries as I attempt to apply my learning of exemplary conversational leadership behaviors my colleagues employ. I, therefore, must actively consider my own professional conversations to ensure healthy relationships are developed with all people connected to my school community. Consequently, I began studying and analyzing my own conversational leadership behaviors to become more attune to the way my school community is affected through conversations, words, and organizational messages that pass between school community stakeholders.

As a human being, I commit to actively releasing control of conversations while simultaneously slowing down my reactions during them. I want to ensure I create, build, and sustain healthy relationships as a school leader, but also as a father, husband, son, brother, and friend.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A - SUPERINTENDENTS NOMINATION EMAIL

Dear Superintendent _____,

I am an active middle school principal in Orange County and an active doctoral student at Brandman University. I would greatly appreciate your assistance. I am part of a thematic dissertation group of 12 peer researchers guided by four faculty members that is studying exemplary leaders who lead through conversations. The purpose of my phenomenological research study was to describe behaviors that exemplary middles school principals practice to lead their organizations through conversations using Groysberg and Slind's (2012) four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality. Participants may experience minimal risk during the in-person interview and all personal and professional information including school site and district will be kept confidential.

To complete the study, I need your help identify potential candidates to participate in one one-hour interview, be observed in the workplace, and provide artifacts of their exemplary leadership. To be eligible for participation candidates need to meet four of the following six exemplary criteria:

- Evidence of successful relationships with followers;
- Evidence of leading a successful organization;
- A minimum of five years of experience in the profession;
- Articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings;
- Recognition by peers;
- Membership in professional associations in their field.

If you could respond with a list of middle school principal names, emails, and phone numbers, or even send a quick email introducing me to the potential candidates I would be very grateful. I am contacting all District Superintendents in Orange County and would like to include exemplary middle school principals from your district in this study.

Thanks, in advance, for your time and consideration.

Kind regards,

John Ashby
Doctoral Candidate, Brandman University
Principal, Sowers Middle School (Huntington Beach City School District)

APPENDIX B – INVITATION EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

Dear Principal _____,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study on *Exemplary Middle School Principals Leading through Conversation*. You are receiving this email because you were nominated by your superintendent to participate as an exemplary school leader. Your participation consists of one 60-minute audio recorded interview of 12 questions that were developed collaboratively by 12 peer researchers. These questions are based on Groysberg and Slind's four elements of organizational conversation: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality. If possible I would like to observe you in the workplace prior to or after the interview and also collect any relevant artifacts available for data triangulation.

The purpose of my phenomenological research study was to describe behaviors that exemplary middles school principals practice to lead their organizations through conversations using Groysberg and Slind's (2012) four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion, and intentionality. Please know that your privacy and confidentiality is taken very seriously. I have attached the Brandman Unversity Research Participants Bill of Rights for your review in addition to an "Informed Consent and Audio Recording" document. There is minimal risk involved that may occur during the in-person interview.

Please contact me at your earliest convenience to schedule the one-hour interview. I look forward to hearing about your experiences, perceptions, knowledge, and lived experiences to better inform the understanding of the behaviors of exemplary middle school principals.

Kind regards,

John Ashby
Doctoral Candidate, Brandman University
Principal, Sowers Middle School (Huntington Beach City School District)

APPENDIX C – THEMATIC INTERVIEW PROTOCOL TEMPLATE

"My name is John Ashby and I am the *Principal of Isaac L. Sowers Middle School in the Huntington Beach City School District.* I'm a doctoral candidate at Brandman University in the area of Organizational Leadership. I'm a part of a team conducting research to determine what strategies are used by exemplary leaders practice to lead their organization through conversation. The four elements of conversation used in this study are depicted by Groysberg and Slind's framework of conversational leadership, intimacy, interactivity, inclusion and intentionality. Conversation as used in this research applies to the full range of patterns and processes by which information circulates through an organization. It is all the ideas, images, and other forms of organizational content that passes between leaders and all members of the organization including personal, interpersonal, group and organization. This is study is about what behaviors you use to lead the organization through conversation.

Our team is conducting approximately 120 interviews with leaders like yourself. The information you give, along with the others, hopefully will provide a clear picture of the thoughts and behaviors that exemplary leaders use conversation to create quality in their organizations and will add to the body of research currently available.

Incidentally, even though it appears a bit awkward, I will be reading most of what I say. The reason for this to guarantee, as much as possible, that my interviews with all participating exemplary leaders will be conducted pretty much in the same manner.

Informed Consent

I would like to remind you any information that is obtained in connection to this study will remain confidential. All of the data will be reported without reference to any individual(s) or any institution(s). After I record and transcribe the data, I will send it to you via electronic mail so that you can check to make sure that I have accurately captured your thoughts and ideas.

Did you receive the Informed Consent and Brandman Bill of Rights I sent you via email? Do you have any questions or need clarification about either document?

We have scheduled an hour for the interview. At any point during the interview you may ask that I skip a particular question or stop the interview altogether. For ease of our discussion and accuracy I will record our conversation as indicated in the Informed Consent.

Do you have any questions before we begin? Okay, let's get started, and thanks so much for your time.

Interview Questions

Intimacy. The closeness, trust and familiarity created between people through shared experiences, meaningful exchanges, and shared knowledge (Schwarz, 2011; Groysberg & Slind, 2012; Glaser, 2014).

1. How do you create conversations that promote trust between you and members of your organization?
    - Optional probe: What would you identify as the most important factor in establishing trust with your team members?
2. Research indicates that a leader can use personal stories that show vulnerability to build trust and authenticity with members of their organization. Please share with me an example of a time when you disclosed a personal story that showed your vulnerability in an effort to build trust and authenticity with members of your organization.
    - Optional probe: Tell me about the outcome from that disclosure
3. Tell mem about a time when you listened attentively to members of your organization to engage them in honest and authentic conversations.
    - Optional probe: Tell me about the impact of that conversation on the members of your organization.

Interactivity. Bilateral or multilateral exchange of comments and ideas; a back-and-forth process (Groysberg & Slind, 2012).

1. How do you engage members of your organization in conversations that are two way exchanges of ideas and information about your organization?
    - Optional probe: What tools and institutional supports do you utilize to encourage the process of this back-and-forth conversation?
2. How would you describe the strategies you use to cultivate a culture of open dialogue?
    - Optional probe: What role does social technology (such as blogs, wikis, online communities, twitter, social networks, web-enabled video chat, video sharing, etc.) play in supporting this culture of dialogue?
3. Tell me about a time in which you effectively promoted conversation with members of your organization that incorporated an exchange of ideas around a difficult issue or topic.
    - Optional probe: How do you provide the risk free space that encourages people to participate in the exchange of ideas?

Inclusion. The commitment to the process of engaging stakeholders to share ideas and participate in the development of the organization (Groysberg & Slind, 2012; Hurley, T. & Brown, J. 2009).

1. What conversational strategies do you find effective to ensure members of the organization remain committed to and included in the organization's goals and or mission?

- Optional probe: Why do you feel that these strategies encourage more commitment to organizational goals?

2. What strategies do you use to encourage all members to become active contributors and spokespersons for the organization?
   - Optional probe: What are the ways that you gauge the impact of members' contributions?
3. Please share a story about a time when you allowed the members of your organization to generate the content for an important message.
   - Optional probe: How did that work out for you and what was the impact of that?

- **Intentionality**. Ensuring clarity of purpose that includes goals and direction to create order and meaning (Barge, 1985; Groysberg & Slind, 2012; Men, 2012).
  1. Can you share some examples of when you used conversation to create clarity around your organization's purpose?
     - Optional probe: What do you think you did that created that clarity?
  2. How do you use conversation to elicit feedback on the goals and direction of your organization?
     - Optional probe: How have others responded to that?
  3. What strategies do you use to give focus and direction to what otherwise might be a scattered set of communication activities?
     - Optional probe: Why do you think that the strategies you use help to provide focus?

- **"Thank you very much for your time. If you like, when the results of our research are known, we will send you a copy of our findings.**"

  General Probes:
  May be used during the interview when you want to get more information and/or expand the conversation with them. These are not questions to share with interviewee. It is best to be very familiar with them and use in a conversational way, when appropriate, to extend their answers.
  1. "What did you mean by …"
  2. "Do you have more to add?"
  3. "Would you expand upon that a bit?"
  4. "Why do you that was the case?"
  5. "Could you please tell me more about …"
  6. "Can you give me an example of …"
  7. "How did you feel about that?"

APPENDIX D – FIELD TEST PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK QUESTIONS

While conducting the interview you should take notes of their clarification request or comments about not being clear about the question. After you complete the interview ask your field test interviewee the following clarifying questions. Try not to make it another interview; just have a friendly conversation. Either script or record their feedback so you can compare with the other two members of your team to develop your feedback report on how to improve the interview questions.

1. How did you feel about the interview? Do you think you had ample opportunities to describe what you do as a leader when working with your team or staff?

2. Did you feel the amount of time for the interview was ok?

3. Were the questions by and large clear or were there places where you were uncertain what was being asked?

4. Can you recall any words or terms being asked about during the interview that were confusing?

5. And finally, did I appear comfortable during the interview…

APPENDIX E – FIELD TEST OBSERVER FEEDBACK QUESTIONS

Conducting interviews is a learned skill set/experience. Gaining valuable insight about your interview skills and affect with the interview will support your data gathering when interviewing the actual participants. As the researcher you should reflect on the questions below after completing the interview. You should also discuss the following reflection questions with your 'observer' after completing the interview field test. The questions are written from your prospective as the interviewer. However, you can verbalize your thoughts with the observer and they can add valuable insight from their observation.

1. How long did the interview take? _____ Did the time seem to be appropriate?
2. How did you feel during the interview? Comfortable? Nervous?
3. Going into it, did you feel prepared to conduct the interview? Is there something you could have done to be better prepared?
4. What parts of the interview went the most smoothly and why do you think that was the case?
5. What parts of the interview seemed to struggle and why do you think that was the case?
6. If you were to change any part of the interview, what would that part be and how would you change it?
7. What suggestions do you have for improving the overall process?

APPENDIX F

National Institutes of Health Certificate of Completion

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **John Ashby** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 05/21/2016.

Certification Number: 2077229.

APPENDIX G

BRANDMAN University

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Research Participant's Bill of Rights

Any person who is requested to consent to participate as a subject in an experiment, or who is requested to consent on behalf of another, has the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.
2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.
3. To be told about the risks, side effects or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.
4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.
5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.
6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study.
7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.
8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.
9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.
10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

If at any time you have questions regarding a research study, you should ask the researchers to answer them. You also may contact the Brandman University Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. The Brandman University Institutional Review Board may be contacted either by telephoning the Office of Academic Affairs at (949) 341-9937 or by writing to the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA, 92618.

Brandman University IRB Adopted November 2013

APPENDIX H

INFORMED CONSENT AND AUDIO RECORDING RELEASE

INFORMATION ABOUT: The behaviors that exemplary leaders practice to lead their organizations through conversation using the four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion and intentionality.

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: John Ashby, M.Ed.

PURPOSE OF STUDY*:*
You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by John Ashby, M.Ed., a doctoral student from the School of Education at Brandman University. The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to describe behaviors that exemplary Middle School Principals practice to lead their organizations through conversation using the principles as depicted by Groysberg and Slind's (2012) four elements of conversational leadership: intimacy, interactivity, inclusion and intentionality.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and will include an interview with the identified student investigator. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes to complete and will be scheduled at a time and location of your convenience. The interview questions will pertain to your perceptions and your responses will be confidential. Each participant will have an identifying code and names will not be used in data analysis. The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes only.

I understand that:

a) The researcher will protect my confidentiality by keeping the identifying codes safe-guarded in a locked file drawer or password protected digital file to which the researcher will have sole access.
b) My participation in this research study is voluntary. You may decide to not participate in the study and I can withdraw at any time. I can also decide not to answer particular questions during the interview if you so choose. Also, the Investigator may stop the study at any time.
c) I understand that the interview will be audio recorded. The recordings will be available only to the researcher and the professional transcriptionist. The audio recordings will be used to capture the interview dialogue and to ensure the accuracy of information collected during the interview. All information will be identifier-redacted and my confidentiality will be maintained. Upon completion of the study, all recordings, transcripts, and notes taken by the researcher and transcriptionist from the interview will be destroyed.
d) If I have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact John Ashby, M.Ed. at [redacted] or by phone at [redacted]; or Dr. Cindy Petersen (Committee Chair) at [redacted].
e) No information that identifies you will be released without your separate consent and all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If

the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, you will be so informed and consent re-obtained. There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research.

f) If I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, at 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the "Research Participant's Bill of Rights." I have read the above and understand it and hereby consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

_____ Date: _____

Signature of Participant or Responsible Party

_____ Date: _____

Signature of Principal Investigator