UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA GRADUATE COLLEGE

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH CONVERSATION: SCHOOL LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS OF MOTIVATIONAL COMMUNICATION WITH TEACHERS

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

By Morgan L. Wood
Norman, Oklahoma
2025

Downloaded from SHAREOK. Persistent Handle URL: https://hdl.handle.net/11244/341726

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH CONVERSATION: SCHOOL LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS OF MOTIVATIONAL COMMUNICATION WITH TEACHERS

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

Dr. Curt Adams, Chair

Dr. Daniel Hamlin

Dr. Elizabeth Zumpe

Dr. Brenda Lloyd-Jones

©Copyright by Morgan Wood 2025
All Rights Reserved

Acknowledgments

My dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Ricky. Thank you for encouraging me, believing in me, and being by my side through this process. I could not have done this without you. I would also like to thank my family and friends for supporting and encouraging me. Thank you to my Nana, who taught me to persevere and to chase my dreams. Tera, thank you for going through this journey with me. Thank you to my chair, Dr. Curt Adams, and my committee for continually supporting me, guiding me, and cheering me on every step of the way.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS……iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS……..……...……v
LIST OF FIGURES……..……...……vi
LIST OF TABLES……..……...……vii
ABSTRACT……...……viii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION……..……...…...1
PURPOSE OF STUDY……..……..15
OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH DESIGN……..……..16
STUDY CONTRIBUTIONS……..……..17
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE……..……..18
SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY…….....……..18
TEACHER AUTONOMOUS MOTIVATION …….....……..20
PRINCIPALS SUPPORT FOR AUTONOMOUS MOTIVATION…….....……22
PRINCIPALS THWARTING AUTONOMOUS MOTIVATION.....25
PRINCIPAL'S CONVERSATION TECHNIQUES……..……27
SUMMARY OF THE EVIDENCE…….....……30
CHAPTER 3: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK……..……..31
THE ROLE OF CONVERSATIONS IN LEADERSHIP…….....…31
CONVERSATION PURPOSE…….....34
CONVERSATION STRUCTURE.....37
SDT AND CONVERSATION APPROACHES.....39
SUMMARY…….....41
CHAPTER 4: METHODS…….....……42
INTRODUCTION…….....……..42
STUDY SETTING…….....……44
PARTICIPANTS AND SAMPLING…….....……44
INTERVIEW PROCEDURES…….....……49
DATA ANALYSIS.....51
LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS.....54
CHAPTER 5: RESULTS……...…56
INTRODUCTION.....56
FOUR THEMES…….....58
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS.....80
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION…….....……82
IMPLICATION OF THEMES…….....82

CONCEPTUAL IMPLICATIONS……..…...85
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE…….....87
FUTURE RESEARCH……..…..……88
CONCLUSION……..……88
REFERENCES……..…..……89
APPENDICES……...……...104

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 3.1.....33
TABLE 4.1.....45
TABLE 4.2.....47

ABSTRACT

One of the core roles of principals is to support teachers in carrying out school improvement initiatives. Yet, research suggests that principals often struggle to motivate teachers to implement school programs and policies effectively. Theoretical reasoning indicates that principals' conversation strategies, such as Transformative Leadership Conversation, may be an important factor to motivating teachers. However, there is very little empirical work that has studied how principal-teacher conversation is used as a motivational tool. This qualitative study proposed to examine how leaders used conversations with teachers as a motivational strategy when seeking to change their behaviors and practices. Semi-structured interviews were administered with 26 public school principals across Northeast Oklahoma. Four themes emerged from the data, suggesting that conversations are essential to how principals build relationships, motivate growth, and navigate change with teachers. The proposed study contributes to the literature by undertaking an in-depth analysis of leaders' approaches to conversation.

CHAPTER 1
Introduction

In many schools, principals carry the responsibility of improving teaching and learning practices (Darling-Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2017; Hallinger, 2011). As Darling-Hammond and Carver-Thomas point out, their work extends beyond oversight of instruction to shaping the overall climate in which teachers develop professionally (Darling-Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2017). Other researchers go further, describing principals as the main drivers in sustaining teacher motivation and well-being (Fernet et al., 2016). Across the United States, funding for instructional initiatives is in the billions each year (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). These investments support everything from instructional initiatives, coaching and mentoring, to collaborative learning communities and other teaching and learning programs (Boudreaux, 2017; Desimone & Garet, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Principals are tasked with making these initiatives work by using frequent professional development sessions, one-time training, and continuing education mandates (Leithwood et al., 2020; Marzano et al., 2005). Yet, evidence suggests that many of these instructional initiatives are costly, time-consuming, and ineffective in the long term (Kim & Youngs, 2023; Munawaroh & Ruskandar, 2024; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). As initiatives grow and pressure builds, principals could face greater tension that often undermines their ability to drive instructional change with teachers.

Some researchers describe principals as facilitators who help teachers connect with outside resources, such as high-quality instruction, participation in professional learning communities, and access to feedback (Kraft & Papay, 2014; Vugt & Gallagher, 2025). However, these external initiatives often come with major challenges. Misalignment between policy and the realities of schools is common, as well as insufficient support for

teachers and inadequate time for schools to adapt to new requirements or initiatives (Backstrom, 2019; Fullan, 2009; Kahne, Sporte, & de la Torre, 2006). Despite their best efforts, principals are tasked with these external initiatives that frequently fall short of expectations, which can decrease autonomous teacher motivation for instructional practices (McKay, 2018).

For principals, igniting and sustaining teacher motivation starts with understanding motivation and its common sources of support. Research on what motivates teachers has expanded over the years, drawing on different views from educational, psychological, and social theories. Early approaches, such as Herzberg's, distinguish hygiene factors like job security, salary, and performance evaluations (Herzberg, 1966). More recently, attention has turned to what drives teachers from within. Self-Determination Theory has shifted the focus toward intrinsic motivators that prioritize autonomy, personal values or beliefs, and relationships as drivers of teacher commitment and job performance (Deci & Ryan, 2020). Research keeps coming back to the importance of relationships between principals and teachers. Principals can add to teacher stress or help boost motivation, job satisfaction, and instructional effectiveness (Klassen et al., 2010).

Principals have tried a number of approaches to motivate teachers with strategies including symbolic gestures, disciplinary action, and inspirational appeals (Kim & Youngs, 2023). Studies suggest that while these tactics might get compliance in the moment, they usually do not lead to lasting change in how teachers work or think (Kim & Youngs, 2023; McDonnell, 1994; Schneider & Ingram, 1990). Incentives like bonuses or promotions can spark short-lived motivation, but the effects tend to fade quickly (Moreno, 2012). Long-lasting autonomous motivation can have a persistent influence on instructional

improvement (Moreno, 2012). Approaches used by principals that have a strong emotional appeal, such as public recognition and prioritizing shared values or goals, may play a significant role in shaping school culture. Oftentimes, however, these approaches are usually based on the wrong reasons, like performative measures. When principals implement these strategies without genuine meaning, they can become superficial and unsustainable, lowering teachers' autonomous motivation (Helgøy & Homme, 2004).

In addition, punitive measures can inadvertently undermine a school environment by reducing morale, undermining performance, and increasing burnout (Schneider & Ingram, 2014). When schools rely on "sticks and carrots" punishment and rewards, they can end up creating resistance and increasing stress in teachers (Taylor, 2003). These pressures could make it hard for bigger, long-term changes to happen (Taylor, 2003). Some studies point in a different direction, suggesting that open conversations between principals and teachers may be a more effective way to encourage professional growth (Adams, Adigun, & Fiegner, 2023; Szeto & Cheng, 2018). When principals participate in reflective discussions, provide feedback, and foster a culture of dialogue, they can create relationships that support autonomous motivation and initiate sustainable instructional changes for teachers (Adams et al., 2022; Kraft & Papay, 2014).

An often overlooked, but potentially critical factor for teacher motivation and instructional improvement, is the principal-teacher relationship of conversation (Adams & Adigun, 2024; Tschannen, 2014). Real change within classrooms and schools can be challenging without meaningful conversations between principals and teachers (Adams et al., 2022). Transformative Leadership Conversation (TLC) is a discursive structure that aims to boost teachers' autonomous motivation and encourage positive action in

transforming relational conditions (Adams et al., 2022). Unlike traditional top-down communication methods, TLC focuses on sensemaking and learning dialogue in which principals and teachers rethink their assumptions and work together to create meaning through conversation (Adams & Adigun, 2024).

Adams et al. (2022) described how TLC works through teacher autonomous motivation and actions (Adams et al., 2022). Principals who engage teachers in reflective, open-ended conversations about a desired reality can support autonomous ownership and innovation by satisfying teacher psychological needs (Adams & Adigun, 2024). While decades of research have explored how leaders' communication influences school performance, few studies have examined how the role of dynamic, supportive conversation strategies used by principals can improve teacher motivation and instructional improvement (Adams et al., 2025; Day & Sammons, 2016; Marsh & Farrell, 2015). What remains largely unknown is how principals' conversational strategies specifically support teachers' motivation and instructional change.

Some studies have explored how principals leverage conversations to retain teachers, increase motivation, and provide coaching opportunities by using methods such as surveys, observations, and interviews (Cruikshank, 2024). These studies suggest that principals see these kinds of conversations as an opportunity to increase student achievement (Kraft & Papay, 2014). Reviews of different studies also highlight that teachers tend to value principals who take the time for genuine coaching or one-on-one discussions, rather than those who do not (Adams & Adigun, 2024; Ford et al., 2019). A recent mixed-methods study found that two factors with the greatest influence on teacher motivation were the principal's instructional feedback and rapport-building (Cruikshank,

2024). The empirical work on Transformative Leadership Conversation has examined the relationship between the conversation strategies of TLC, teacher psychological needs, and vitality (Adams et al., 2022; Adams et al., 2024). However, this research did not include detailed accounts of how principals may use elements of Transformative Leadership Conversation with teachers to change instruction.

This study is framed by two key problems. First, national trends indicate that teachers are experiencing high levels of burnout, declining job satisfaction, and high levels of attrition (Farmer, 2020; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020). Research suggests that when teachers feel a sense of autonomy in their work, have leaders who engage in meaningful feedback, and feel heard by their principal, their autonomous motivation increases (Power & Goodnough, 2019). Second, there is limited evidence on how principals structure conversations with teachers to support instructional change. While many studies focus on student outcomes or external incentives or accountability systems, few have examined the relational dynamics of principal-teacher dialogue (Eyal & Roth, 2011; Richardson & Watt, 2006; Quilabert & Moschetti, 2024).

Perhaps a self-actualizing tool, such as Transformative Leadership Conversation, is needed to create meaningful and more sustainable motivation among teachers. When principals nurture autonomous motivation instead of focusing on using outside controls, they can help create the kind of motivation that leads to real instructional change (Liu et al., 2009; Prickett-Armstrong, 2025). Authentic, ongoing dialogue gives teachers more say in what happens, encourages them to reflect, and helps them feel truly engaged in their work. These conversations do not just support autonomy, they may also build teachers' confidence and foster a stronger sense of trust with principals (Adams & Adigun, 2024).

The conversations go beyond managerial functions, where they can be a tool that cultivates teachers' psychological well-being, reinforces teachers' professional purpose, and sustains instructional growth. Thus, understanding how principals use conversations with teachers can have much value for school leadership. What is still unclear is how principals' structure and apply conversations in their daily practice to foster sustained teacher motivation for instructional change.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore how principals use conversation strategies with teachers to create autonomous motivation that supports instructional change. Despite a growing emphasis on teacher motivation, little is known about how principals structure conversations with teachers to support their inner motivation to bring about instructional change. Over time, the way principals try to motivate teachers has shifted from external to internal factors (Deci, 2009). Many principals today stress the importance of autonomous motivation as critical to teacher well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2020). Studies have also shown that the nature of principal-teacher relationships can either intensify stress or strengthen autonomous motivation (Eyal & Roth, 2011; Klassen et al., 2012). However, much of instructional change is still driven by professional development and policy mandates, which largely situates control over instruction and instructional change outside of teachers (Helgoy & Homme, 2004; Smith, 2014). Principals are in a position to switch the source of teacher motivation for instructional change from external factors to internal resources. Despite the large body of research on instructional leadership and teacher motivation, little attention has been given to how principals use conversations as a strategy to support teacher autonomous motivation for instructional change.

Research Question:

How do principals use conversation strategies to motivate teachers to support instructional change?

Overview of Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design anchored in Transformative Leadership Conversation and Self-Determination Theory, which combined, provided a lens to better understand principal-teacher conversation in the context of instructional change (Adams et al, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 1980). Some research has focused on leadership strategies in broad terms, but very few studies have explored how principals themselves describe their role in shaping motivation that brings instructional changes through everyday conversations. This qualitative study was centered on the perceptions and reflections of public school principals across the state of Oklahoma. Through semi-structured interviews, this research explores how twenty-six school leaders describe their communication strategies to motivate teachers to influence instructional change. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to identify participants with a wide range of leadership experiences.

Scholarly Contributions

This study offers some contributions to the field of education. First, this research offers new insights into how principals utilize their conversations to motivate teachers. It goes further than other research by moving principal-teacher conversation from managerial talk to autonomy, trust, and professional growth (Gronn, 1983; Lowenhaupt, 2014). While previous research has addressed instructional leadership and teacher motivation, they have been discussed separately. This study looked at both motivation and instructional growth as

connected by conversation. This research brings the concept of TLC into the school setting. Some of the current literature on TLC is theoretical in nature. This study demonstrates how the core components of deep listening, autonomy support, affirming language, and shared reflection can be applied in real school contexts. Principals were not just applying leadership frameworks, they were incorporating relational leadership in authentic and adaptive ways. The findings of this study also deepen the understanding of how conversations between the principal and teachers can change instruction. This research expands Self-Determination Theory through principal-teacher communication. SDT is well established in terms of student or teacher motivation, but the application of conversations by leaders has been minimally researched.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. Chapter one introduces the research problem and research question. Chapter two presents the literature review, consisting of four sections that examine the empirical research on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) on teacher motivation. The first section examines existing scholarship on teachers' autonomous motivation and the importance of teachers' thriving. The second section delves into the factors of principal support for motivation. Next, the third section of the literature review transitions to principal conversation techniques with teachers. The chapter summarizes the findings from the study. Chapter Three details the conceptual framework, while Chapter Four explains the research design and methods. Chapters Five and Six share this study's findings and discussion of the implications and future research.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

Introduction

This chapter reviews literature on teacher motivation and principal-teacher interactions. It is organized into five key headings. The literature review begins by exploring Self-Determination Theory, followed by teacher autonomous motivation and the conditions that support or hinder it. This review of research then looks at the role of principal support and leadership, with the last section specifically analyzing principal-teacher conversation strategies. The chapter concludes by discussing the gap that the current literature presents for this study.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory, developed by Ryan and Deci in the 1980s, explores what helps people to stay motivated and feel fulfilled (Deci et al., 1985). As a psychological framework, SDT focuses on how social and personal factors can either support or undermine motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985). People may be more engaged and productive when they are motivated from within, known as autonomous motivation (Ryan et al., 2000). Even though autonomous motivation is natural, it does require supportive conditions to flourish.

Self-Determination Theory has three basic psychological needs that must be met for people to feel autonomously motivated: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Autonomy involves feeling in control of one's actions, and competence is the sense of effectiveness and positive reinforcement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Relatedness refers

to feeling connected and having a sense of belonging with others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Supporting these needs can improve autonomous motivation and well-being, while neglecting them usually means motivation is controlled, leading to a decline in creativity, engagement, and mental health (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Teachers are more likely to be motivated and resilient in their environment if it supports autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Whether or not those needs are supported depends on the school setting, leadership style, and how relationships are built (Ryan et al., 2000). For example, teachers who can make choices, get constructive feedback, and feel connected to their principal and colleagues often experience higher autonomous motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Without these factors, autonomous motivation can diminish and lower quality teaching performance.

A large body of research has applied SDT to education, mostly looking at student motivation, teacher burnout, and different reform efforts (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In one article, Deci (2009) critiqued school reform efforts that relied on top-down mandates, arguing that lasting change does not happen unless teachers feel supported in their basic psychological needs (Deci, 2009). Instead of these rigid, compliance-focused reforms, SDT suggests a need for more supportive environments where teachers are autonomously motivated (Deci, 2009).

There is still little research on how principal-teacher conversations fit into the SDT framework. Some scholars have noted that regular, trusting conversation between leaders and teachers plays a big role in shaping motivation and change (Spillane & Healey, 2010). Conversations are how principals can help teachers feel heard, clarify expectations, and align efforts towards shared goals (Bryk et al., 2010). Yet, many studies that touch on SDT

in schools have not taken a closer look at how principals actually use conversation strategies to build that kind of environment. As Fernet et al suggested, there is often debate about the school conditions that affect autonomous motivation but overlook the leader's role in creating those conditions (Fernet et al., 2012). Self-Determination Theory also gives insight into teacher burnout. When teachers feel like they have no say, feel unsupported, or feel disconnected from others, they are more likely to burn out (Evers et al., 2002). Research indicates that autonomy, feeling competent, and being included within a supportive environment can help reduce burnout (Fernet et al., 2012). Positive relationships with students, colleagues, and principals have the potential to make a difference as well (Klassen et al., 2012). Principals who actively support teachers' psychological needs can create greater autonomous motivation and deeper engagement in their work (Liu et al., 2025).

Teacher Autonomous Motivation Versus Amotivation

Teacher motivation exists along a continuum. At the positive end, autonomous motivation in teachers develops from an internal sense of drive rooted in their professional beliefs, personal values, and an overall sense of purpose (Lyu & Yin, 2025). Teachers motivated this way tend to feel empowered, take initiative, and stay engaged in practice (Fiegener & Adams, 2022; Lyu & Yin, 2025). Research has highlighted that autonomous motivation enhances both teacher well-being and instructional effectiveness (Sikes, 2024). Strong relationships with principals and school communities could further reinforce these effects (Sikes, 2024).

In SDT, motivation is not a simple contrast between autonomy and amotivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). At the low end of the spectrum, amotivation happens when people no

longer see the value or purpose in their actions and feel disconnected from their goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Moving upward on the continuum are several forms of controlled motivation. External regulation occurs when teachers comply mainly to avoid sanctions or to obtain rewards (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Introjected regulation happens from internal pressures, such as acting out of obligation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Identified regulation occurs when someone sees personal value in a task, even if it was externally assigned. Integrated regulation means that external demands align with personal values (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). The highest form is autonomous motivation, where actions are driven by genuine interest and self-endorsed commitment (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Understanding this continuum is useful for grasping how principals' conversations might influence teacher motivation.

One longitudinal mixed-methods study combined interviews and survey data to understand what helped teachers to stay autonomously motivated through different challenges (Kraft & Grace, 2020). This body of research found that when teachers were offered choice in their work, they showed higher levels of resilience and autonomous motivation (Kraft & Grace, 2020). Teachers reported feeling trusted and energized when principals allowed them to contribute in ways that felt genuine (Kraft & Grace, 2020). These supportive actions often happened in collaborative conversations or settings that respected teacher input, such as goal-setting meetings, professional learning communities, and check-ins (Kraft & Grace, 2020). Similarly, Eyal and Roth (2011) found that principals who supported autonomy positively affected teachers' autonomous motivation (Eyal & Roth, 2011). Teachers in these environments felt greater ownership of their roles and were more likely to feel inspired in their work (Eyal & Roth, 2011). This study also indicated

that autonomous motivation was especially strong when teachers felt like their principals made an effort to understand their perspective and had open-ended conversations (Eyal & Roth, 2011). A recent mixed-methods study used interviews and surveys to examine how principal leadership strategies influenced autonomous motivation (Torres et al., 2024). Principals in this study emphasized that when staff relationships were strong and collaboration happened often, teachers were noticeably more satisfied and willing to grow (Torres et al., 2024). Similarly, another study also noted that teachers felt more motivated when their principals engaged with them regularly and felt more collaborative versus directive (Latif & Khan, 2025). Together, these studies suggest how autonomy-supportive environments created by the principal can influence a teacher's autonomous motivation. When principals focus on building trust, working with their teachers, and keeping the bigger picture in mind, principals create the type of environment where teachers feel supported and can give their best work.

Some leadership strategies can undermine autonomous motivation, leading to teacher attrition or burnout. Amotivation can happen when teachers feel emotionally unsafe with their principal (Ryan & Deci, 2017). When principals relied heavily on top-down leadership, teachers frequently described feeling isolated or dismissed (Johnson et al., 2001). In some cases, micromanagement without any explanation eroded teachers' sense of professional purpose, reducing their commitment (Latif & Khan, 2025). Another study found that teachers became frustrated and close to burnout when their ideas were ignored or lacked the flexibility to adapt their teaching style (Chain, Gaines, & Mosley, 2022). These patterns explain the connection between principal communication and teacher well-being.

Principals' Support for Autonomous Motivation

Extending SDT, this section looks at how principals can either foster or hinder teacher autonomous motivation through relationships and communication. Many internal and external factors can influence whether teachers feel motivated from within or pushed towards compliance (West & Stanley, 2022). Intrinsic motivation grows from a sense of purpose, while external pressures may be driven by compliance or performance goals may also play a role (West & Stanley, 2022). Autonomous motivation thrives when teachers feel trusted in their role and included in decision-making (Ryan & Deci, 2016). By contrast, in environments dominated by mandates, test-driven outcomes, or limited chances to be heard, teachers can experience extrinsic motivation out of obligation, fear, or pressure (Ryan & Deci, 2016). Teachers do not experience autonomous motivation in a vacuum. The actions and communication styles of principals can either support or hinder autonomous motivation over time (Eyal & Roth, 2011). Studies have suggested that principals play a major role in forming the level of autonomous motivation in their school through relationships and structural moves (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). These leadership strategies can be nurtured by actively supporting teachers' psychological needs or thwarted when limiting their sense of control, belonging, or self-efficacy (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

Several studies have explored these supportive conditions. A qualitative study by Fernet et al (2012) found that teachers felt more autonomously motivated when they had supportive administrators, access to professional development, and classroom resources (Fernet et al., 2012). Additional research discovered that when teachers felt empowered to make instructional choices and had strong relationships with their colleagues, they were

more likely to feel autonomously motivated and satisfied at work (Bogler & Nir, 2012; Collie et al., 2012). Similarly, a different theoretical review emphasized that teachers felt more likely to experience autonomous motivation when they got useful feedback and had the freedom to make choices about their teaching (Nunez & Leon, 2015). Collectively, these studies suggest that when teachers feel supported and have a sense of ownership in their work, they are more likely to stay autonomously motivated and engaged.

Principals who support autonomy and create emotionally supportive environments where teachers can thrive are able to create higher job satisfaction (Zhou et al., 2024). On the other hand, rigid directive leadership can create stress and diminish the autonomous motivation teachers need to make their work sustainable (Zhou et al., 2024). Research by Turney (2024) discovered that principals who made space for teacher decision-making and treated them as professionals saw a rise in teacher autonomous motivation (Turney, 2024). A quantitative correlational study explained that giving teachers room to make decisions about their practice supported their commitment to teaching and reduced burnout (Collie et al., 2012). Similarly, another study explained that when teachers had control over how they taught, they were more autonomously motivated and confident in their work (Alsubaie, 2024). Other studies also examined that principals who initiate peer learning, reflect with their teachers, and support professional growth can increase autonomous motivation (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). These strategies could build a collaborative culture where teachers feel like their contributions matter. Leadership styles and communication are not just about getting tasks done, they help shape the motivational climate of a school.

Transformational leadership is another style connected to autonomous motivation. One study explained that transformational leaders motivate others by asking reflective

questions, encouraging growth, and aligning others toward shared goals (Eyal & Roth, 2011). Even though this type of leadership is more directive in its structure, it does focus on personal growth and discovery over compliance (Eyal & Roth, 2011). Bush (2015) describes these leaders as inspiring and vision-driven, helping teachers feel connected to a larger purpose. Some researchers believe transformational leadership and SDT are connected because they both support autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are critical in reducing burnout and increasing motivation (Eyal & Roth, 2011). Other studies have also shown that even in systems of heavy accountability, principals can still act in ways that buffer those pressures. A study discovered that when principals made time for teacher voice, acknowledged the stress of external mandates, and created trusting environments, motivation improved even when schools had intense policy measures (Mohammadi et al., 2014). These actions suggest that principals can soften the effects of external pressures on their school by focusing on teacher needs and relationships.

Principals Thwarting Autonomous Motivation

While principals can nurture autonomous motivation, they can also undermine it when managerial pressures dominate the school. Teachers can experience motivation as extrinsic when they are overloaded with mandates, limited decision-making, or feel that their input is not valued (Ryan & Deci, 2016). When this happens, motivation is created by compliance instead of purpose, which can quickly lead to stress or burnout. One study found that when principals operated through controlling behaviors where the expectations were rigid with minimal feedback, teachers experienced emotional exhaustion (Germani, 2024). A similar study showed that when autonomy was missing from leadership and school climate, teachers were more likely to take on demotivating instructional styles,

which could undermine growth and engagement (Huic & Balasko, 2024). These studies highlight the possible consequences of organizations where teachers' psychological needs are not being met.

High-stakes accountability can often contribute to these conditions as well. Scholars have noted that standardized testing and performance mandates can cause schools to prioritize compliance over creativity, and management over support (Hout & Elliott, 2011; Smith, 2014). When accountability pressures are high, principals sometimes lean on more unilateral leadership that aligns more with external requirements than personal values (Finnigan, 2020; Smith, 2014). One study called this the "terrors of performativity", where the push for results can undermine relationships and morale in schools (Ball, 2003). Other studies have also noted that when principals operate the majority of the time as managers of accountability, their ability to build trust and motivate teachers diminished (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

There is more current research that adds to this understanding of principal leadership, policy, and pressures. One study found that principals who internalized accountability pressures were more likely to centralize decision-making, which reduced teacher trust and risk-taking (Weiner, 2016). Building on Weiner's study, DeMatthews and Serafini (2021) observed that high-stakes mandates frequently pushed principals into a compliance mindset (DeMatthews & Serafini, 2021). In these situations, the actions of principals affected teacher behavior: meetings were around test outcomes, classroom visits were assessed against standard metrics, and feedback often centered around performance indicators (DeMatthews & Serafini, 2021; Finnigan, 2020; Smith, 2014). The focus shifted toward oversight and accountability, missing opportunities for collaboration or professional

growth. As a result, genuine teacher autonomy and shared vision were diminished, leading teachers to feel increasingly constrained and disconnected from their purpose.

Researchers have discovered that when district mandates limit a principal's decision-making power, it can negatively affect their relationship with staff (Price, 2012). If principals do not feel empowered to lead collaboratively, teachers may feel that there is a lack of autonomy in their roles, too (Price, 2012). These pressures can filter down to the classroom, reinforcing patterns of teacher disengagement and burnout. One study explored how teachers working under high-pressure mandates reported feeling discouraged, especially when they had little to say in how they ran their classrooms (Mohammadi et al., 2024). Teachers in these situations can often struggle to maintain their motivation because they feel that their voices are not heard and that they lack autonomy in their roles (Mohammadi et al., 2024). This reveals an important tension with how certain leadership strategies that are made to be supportive can fall short when they are formed by system-level control over trust between teachers and principals (Mohammadi et al., 2024). When principals overlook teachers' psychological needs, autonomous motivation can decline, instructional quality can suffer, and burnout risks increase (Price, 2012). Principals who recognize these dynamics may be better prepared to adopt supportive strategies that nurture teacher growth and well-being.

Principals' Conversation Techniques

Recent research showcases the importance of principal-teacher conversations. These interactions have the opportunity to either build or break teachers' autonomous motivation and well-being. Evidence suggests that the way principals talk with teachers affects how teachers feel, how they teach, and how they can grow in the profession (Adams

et al., 2022; Lee & Mayo, 2023). Studies have used different methods to look at this relationship, such as interviews, case studies, surveys, and mixed methods approaches that have found principal-teacher conversations influence autonomous motivation and instructional improvement (Adams et al., 2022; Eyal & Roth, 2011; Ford et al., 2019; Lee & Mayo, 2023). Eyal and Roth (2011) used a survey to discover that when principals utilized autonomy-supportive practices such as encouraging teacher voice and professional judgement, teachers reported higher levels of well-being and autonomous motivation (Eyal & Roth, 2011). This finding aligns with the SDT framework that focuses on autonomy being a psychological need for sustained motivation and resilience (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Similarly, Ford et al. (2019), analyzed data from over 1,500 teachers and found that the quality of communication between principals and teachers had a significant effect on teacher outcomes and classroom practice (Ford et al., 2019). Their study discovered that when principals participated in frequent, open, and supportive conversations, teachers demonstrated greater engagement and instructional effectiveness (Ford et al., 2019). While this quantitative approach demonstrated clear relationships, it did not capture the detailed, real-time ways that principals actually communicated with teachers.

Principals can use conversations in different ways. Sometimes they offer emotional support, provide feedback, or move instructional practice forward. These conversations can also be used to control or regulate teacher behavior. Segal & Lefstein (2021), in an ethnography, found that some principals used conversation protocols to steer teachers towards certain goals (Segal & Lefstein, 2021). These conversations can sometimes feel like forms of control rather than collaboration (Segal & Lefstein, 2021). The study focused on a single protocol and context, however, it provided limited insight into the broader range

of conversational practices principals draw on in daily leadership. When conversations are focused on compliance, checklists, or directive supervision, they risk undermining the motivational conditions principals are trying to improve (Segal & Lefstein, 2021). In contrast, a different study using open-ended questionnaires from around 800 teachers, found that principals who held supportive and respectful conversations with teachers created a sense of empowerment with their teachers (Blase & Blase, 2000). These principals built environments where teachers felt affirmed and trusted, which are components of Self-Determination Theory (Blase & Blase, 2000). Yet, the study relied on teacher reports rather than principals' own accounts. It highlighted how conversations were experienced by teachers but not how principals themselves made choices about dialogue.

Newer research explains conversations as a way to meet teachers' psychological needs. Olsen (2017) highlighted how reflective talk and collaboration can be used by principals to support autonomy and motivation (Olsen, 2017). Another study found that professional development that includes meaningful, supportive conversations can help teachers stay motivated and engaged in their work (Power & Goodnough, 2019). In addition to collaboration, instructional feedback is another important area. Some principals use conversations to focus on student data and coaching (Sun et al., 2016). One study explored how one-to-one conversations were more effective than general feedback (Sun et al., 2016). A review of over 60 studies found that principals who coached through conversation made a bigger difference on instructional changes than those who gave generic advice (Lee & Mao, 2023). One study looked at informal conversations and how they affected teacher motivation (Cruikshank, 2024). By using surveys, interviews, and observations, the study discovered that principals who used informal conversations to build

relationships and give feedback to teachers increased autonomous motivation (Cruikshank, 2024). These findings could support the idea that conversations are a valuable tool for principals to utilize with teachers. However, most research focuses on teachers' experiences, with much less work on how principals themselves describe the way they use conversations to lead their buildings.

TLC builds on the idea of principals using conversations with teachers for autonomous motivation. Instead of focusing on directive or unilateral exchanges, TLC focuses on reflective questioning, shared meaning-making, and values-based inquiry (Adams et al., 2022). According to researchers, these conversations can create the psychological safety and trust needed for continuous growth (Adams et al., 2024). Adams and colleagues also found that teachers who experienced principal conversations as relying on TLC structures reported higher vitality and epistemic curiosity (Adams et al., 2024). These studies suggest that when conversations are intentionally framed to support autonomy and a sense of belonging, they may serve as a powerful leadership tool for fostering autonomous teacher motivation and commitment.

Summary

This literature review examined Self-Determination Theory, teacher motivation, principal support, and conversational leadership strategies. Research indicates that leadership style and school climate could influence teacher outcomes. While extrinsic motivators such as evaluations or mandates may work in the short term, they are often unsustainable (Fernet, 2016). Other current approaches rely on top-down strategies such as

professional development, policy mandates, and accountability tools, which do not always meet teachers' motivational needs (Bernhardt, 2015; Fullan, 2007). Much of the existing research on conversations between principals and teachers has also relied on surveys or broad case descriptions, which identify patterns but provide limited insight into the day-to-day practices of dialogue. For example, while some studies show links between leadership style and teacher outcomes, they do not show how principals actually communicate with teachers in ways that can feel supportive, directive, or even controlling. Others describe leadership approaches in very general terms, often overlooking the nuances of what influences principal-teacher conversations. What the literature is missing is a deeper understanding of how the nuances of these conversations show up between principals and teachers. This dissertation addresses that gap by analyzing principals' own accounts of communication strategies, providing a more situated understanding of how conversations support or hinder autonomous motivation and instructional growth.

CHAPTER 3

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Role of Conversations in Leadership

Conversation plays a central role in the everyday life of schools. Scribner et al. (2007) describe it as the process through which learning is shaped, relationships are developed, and organizational culture is formed (Scribner et al., 2007). Leadership communication is sometimes described as a process of shared sensemaking, where care and concern support professional efficacy (Ford et al., 2019). While principals can use talk to clarify expectations, the focus of this study is on dialogue that fosters trust, surfaces teacher thinking, and supports growth (Adams et al., 2022). When principals take time to talk with their teachers, they can communicate goals more clearly and make sure that everyone is working towards the same vision (Adams et al., 2023).

Conversations between principals and teachers can influence motivation and address psychological needs (Adams, 2021). Using intentional conversation strategies can help align school goals and support lasting change, while more transactional interactions can undermine autonomy over time (Adams & Olsen, 2017). Recent research has shown that when principals default to compliance-based communication, teacher engagement in complex instructional change can suffer (Weiner, 2016). Because those kinds of conversations align closely with the Command-and-Control approach, they receive more attention in the following section. In this dissertation, a conversation is a purposeful verbal exchange that is not just one-way instruction (Scribner et al., 2007). This chapter frames

two very different ways principals talk with teachers. The first is a direct, compliance-driven method called Command-and-Control (Covey, 2022). It is a top-down way of leading that prioritizes completing tasks instead of building relationships. When viewed through the lens of SDT, this type of talk is more likely to embody controlled forms of motivation such as external or introjected regulation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). These types of motivation may lead to short-term compliance, but they often undermine teachers' deeper psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017). TLC is the second type of principal-teacher conversation. In contrast to Command-and-Control, it relies on trust, connection, and relational support to stimulate sensemaking and learning within teachers (Adams, 2023). This style aligns with intrinsic and autonomous motivation in Self-Determination Theory, fostering meaningful dialogue and recognition for teachers (Adams, 2023).

This chapter frames and compares differences between Command-and-Control and it links these conversational approaches to SDT's motivation continuum. It concludes with an explanation for how these conversation approaches guided the study's examination of principal-teacher conversations and instructional change. As seen in Table 3.1, Command-and-Control Conversation and TLC can be compared by their purpose and structure. Purpose defines the type of talk between principals and teachers and its functionality. Structure defines how the conversational processes of questioning, listening, and affirming language are used.

Table 3.1. Principal-Teacher Conversation Approaches

Conversation Components	Transformative Leadership Conversation	Command & Control Conversation
Conversation Purpose	Sensemaking and Learning Dialogue: collaborative meaning-making; open inquiry and reflection	Top-down communication with little input; used to coordinate and direct intentional actions
Conversation Structure: Use of Questioning Strategies	Imaginative, investigative, and integrative questions to explore ideas and goals	Closed questions about compliance or outcomes
Conversation Structure: Use of Listening	Deep listening that attends to tone, emotion, and unspoken meaning	Superficial listening or procedural feedback
Conversation Structure: Use of Affirming Language	Recognizing strengths, validating experiences, and boosting confidence	Deficit-focused talk that focuses on errors or gaps

Conversation Purpose

TLC is defined as "a form of dialogue that relies on shared meaning-making to activate the motivational energy within people to transform social structures that impede aspirational realities" (Adams et al., 2022). Unlike traditional communication, TLC encourages reflection and engagement between principals and teachers (Adams et al., 2023). This approach enables principals and teachers to reflect together on their work and responses to challenges. Strategies such as thoughtful framing, open-ended questioning, and deep listening can play an important role, along with affirming language to facilitate constructive dialogue (Adams, 2023). By raising awareness around the thought patterns and routines that often go unquestioned in schools, TLC may provide shared inquiry,

collaborative learning, and genuine dialogue between principals and teachers (Adams et al., 2022).

Dialogue, as described by David Bohm (1991), serves as a way to better understand the challenges and tensions people face (Bohm, 1991). He viewed dialogue as a tool for inquiry that allows people to reflect and uncover a deeper meaning together (Bohm, 1991). True dialogue was explained as offering a space for reflective thinking where people can explore both of their ideas and the underlying patterns that shape them (Bohm, 1991). Dialogue was described as a kind of “collective proprioception” where individuals become aware of the content, as well as the less visible structures that drive those thoughts (Bohm, 1991).

Studies have shown that when dialogue is structured with care in educational settings, it can open the door to more honest communication that leads to innovation and change (Schein, 1993). The researchers describe learning as putting dialogue and sensemaking into action by examining the delicate intricacies of a school environment and bringing dreams to fruition (Adams et al., 2022). Leadership conversation can require the creation of shared meaning. In the article "Transformative Leadership Conversation: Toward a Conceptualization and Theory of Action for Educational Leaders," the authors define sensemaking as making dialogue purposeful and creating mental representations of one's social reality (Adams et al., 2022). Sensemaking creates a foundation for conversation. Learning then moves dialogue into action, helping principals and teachers work together to foster motivation (Adams et al., 2022). For TLC, sensemaking serves two different purposes: first, it serves as a tool to create a framework that envisions a common

goal. The second purpose is to align people in the organization with a shared vision of how to shape their work environment to achieve desired outcomes (Adams, 2023).

A compliance-focused communication style that emphasizes authority, compliance, and micromanagement, known as Command-and-Control Conversation, can leave little room for collaboration (Tschannen-Moran, 2009). It relies more on formal authority than on relationships. In these cases, accountability often comes from fear of being punished rather than personal growth (Tschannen-Moran, 2009). Furthermore, this style can be viewed by teachers as behavior regulating and appears to have a set agenda from the principal (Gronn, 1983). Some research suggests that these conversations may be effective in the short term. Relying too heavily on this approach tends to erode autonomy and weaken long-term motivation (Groysberg & Slind, 2012). A case study from 2014 discovered that these conversations drive compliance instead of shared meaning-making between principals and teachers (Lowenhaupt, 2014). In this study, such directive interactions are still considered conversations because they involve verbal exchanges between principals and teachers. However, they represent one end of the spectrum, where talk functions less as dialogue and more as compliance enforcement. Overall, Command-and-Control Conversations risk stifling relationships, limiting collaboration, and diminishing teacher autonomous motivation.

Command-and-Control approaches replace dialogue with more directive talk. Research suggests that when school leaders use authoritarian language, sensemaking becomes limited to top-down compliance narratives (Spillane et al., 2004). Principals who define goals and procedures independently can reduce teacher agency (Klar & Brewer, 2013). Viewing teachers mainly as implementers instead of an active partner in school

change can make it harder for sensemaking conversations to truly motivate them (Kellchtermans, 2005). This method tends to focus on efficiency and control, but it can also chip away at trust and teacher engagement.

Conversation Structure: Questioning and Listening

Effective dialogue and sensemaking depend on how conversation topics are framed and guided. Adams (2022) highlights the use of meaningful questions to support transformation (Adams et al., 2022). Principals can use specific types of questions to guide conversations and help teachers make sense of their work through imaginative, investigative, and integrative questioning (Adams et al., 2022). Investigative questions focus on the present with words like “what”, “how”, or “why” to help uncover what is currently happening (Adams et al., 2023). Imaginative questions often begin with “what if” or “how might”. They push others to consider other possibilities and think creatively (Adams et al., 2023). Integrative questions help connect ideas together, asking how certain actions align with bigger goals (Adams et al., 2023). When leaders use these thoughtful, open-ended questions, they can create more engaging conversations and help move toward shared understanding (Adams et al., 2023).

Another important element of Transformative Leadership Conversation includes deep listening. Marshak states that deep listening is more than hearing someone speak (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). It requires full engagement with what a person is saying, their emotions (non-verbal cues and tone), and the underlying messages (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). Current research does not fully explore how conversations can become a tool for principals to use that supports sustainable instructional growth by asking questions. In practice, communication between principals and teachers sometimes slips into checking

boxes. When principals ask open-ended questions and listen, those conversations can create an environment where teachers feel valued, understood, and empowered in their work.

In Command-and-Control settings, questioning is usually limited to evaluation and monitoring instead of exploration (Weiner, 2016). Principals may ask closed questions focused on test alignment, lesson pacing, or following standards, such as: “Did you follow the rubric? Or “Why are your scores lower this time?” Such questioning patterns have been associated with performance surveillance and micromanagement, which can increase teacher stress and diminish trust (Blase & Blase, 2000; Segal et al., 2018). When principals rely mainly on directive questioning, teachers can feel pushed towards compliance at the expense of reflection and autonomy, ultimately weakening autonomous motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2016).

Conversation Structure: Use of Affirming Language

The language principals can shape the tone and outcomes of communication. Affirming language, used to recognize, validate, or encourage the people they are speaking with, can build trust, confidence, and create a supportive environment (Adams & Adigun, 2024). Adams describes affirming language as principals recognizing teachers’ strengths and contributions, constructive and supportive feedback, reflection, and validating teachers’ experiences or perspectives (Adams et al., 2023). This component of TLC aligns with Self-Determination Theory by creating an autonomy-supportive environment where teachers feel valued and motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Affirming language is also a component of TLC that principals can use with teachers to create a sense of trust and well-being during conversations (Lui & Hallinger, 2018).

In Command-and-Control approaches, affirming language often gives way to compliance-focused communication that centers on correcting, instructing, or issuing reminders (Finnigan, 2010). Instead of recognizing teacher strengths, principals may focus on teacher deficits and results (Finnigan, 2010). This type of controlling language is connected to accountability pressures and a fixed mindset towards teachers (Ball, 2003; Price, 2012). These interactions can erode teacher confidence and autonomy, especially when affirming language is entirely absent from any feedback (Ford et al., 2019). Table 3.1 compares TLC to Command-and-Control Conversation components of conversations.

Self-Determination Theory and Conversational Approaches

Self-Determination Theory provides a lens for better understanding how principal communication efforts can support or undermine teacher motivation. SDT identifies different types of motivation that range from external to autonomous motivation. It offers a way to analyze how different kinds of conversations may influence where teachers fall on the continuum. Command-and-Control conversations, for example, are often driven by pressure or fear. In contrast, Transformative Leadership Conversation aligns with supporting teachers' psychological needs by fostering autonomy through open-ended and collaborative dialogue. TLC can also build competence through thoughtful feedback and reflection and create a sense of belonging through deep listening and affirming language. This study expands this understanding by exploring how principals can use conversation strategies to autonomously motivate teachers and inspire instructional change. While models like Lewin's change framework offer a macro-level view of organizational change, they do not attend to the interpersonal and psychological processes that occur in day-to-day leadership (Lewin, 1947). TLC fills that gap by positioning conversation as both a

leadership tool and a relational act that nurtures the conditions for lasting motivation and change.

Navigating Complex Contexts

Conversations between a principal and teacher are embedded within larger organizational, district, and state policy contexts that form what is said, how it is said, and what is allowed. The way principals use, or avoid conversations, affirming language, or questioning techniques are often influenced by performance mandates, staff constraints, scripted curriculum, and evaluation systems. For example, high-stakes accountability frameworks may lead principals to favor compliance-focused conversations simply to meet documentation or oversight requirements (Ball, 2003; Hout & Elliott, 2011). District pacing guides or evaluation rubrics may discourage more open-ended dialogue in favor of checklist observations or quick-fix coaching cycles. Principals operating under-resourced schools may face additional pressure to document effectiveness instead of developing long-term trust-building communication. Understanding how principals navigate these layered structures is critical for expanding the concept and application of TLC.

Summary

In summary, this chapter examines contrasting approaches to principal-teacher communication. One is focused on compliance, and the other on relationship-building and dialogue. (Adams et al., 2023). TLC is rooted in Self-Determination Theory, which supports teachers' need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness to stay motivated and grow professionally. This study used Transformative Leadership Conversation as the

framework to explore how principals' conversations can become intentional, motivating tools that help drive real instructional change.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH METHODS

Introduction

Principals in public schools often have to juggle competing demands, making it hard to fully support teachers' instructional practices (Bourgeois, 2024). They face a lot of pressure to comply with mandates from upper administration while attempting to roll out large-scale initiatives with their staff (Honig, 2006; Spillane & Coldron, 2011). New programs or directives can sometimes create more tension than meaningful change in daily practice (Spillane & Coldron, 2011). Most of the existing research has focused on top-down policies, formal professional development, and expensive teacher motivation strategies to improve instruction (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). However, limited scholarship has explored the role principals play when using conversation strategies with teachers to support autonomous motivation for instruction. This study explored how principals use conversational strategies to autonomously motivate teachers and their instruction. A qualitative research design was used, consisting of twenty-six public school principals in Oklahoma. A series of open-ended questions with probes was implemented by the researcher and is listed in the Appendix. The interview questions helped shape the discussion by two main perspectives: Transformative Leadership Conversation and Self-Determination Theory. The goal was to understand how these conversations influence teacher motivation and create instructional change. The following research question guided this study:

Research Question:

How do principals use conversation strategies to motivate teachers to support instructional change?

Research Paradigm and Methodology

This study was looked at through the lens of critical realism. It is the idea that there is a real world out there, but we all interpret it through our individual and social experiences (Bhaskar, 1975; Maxwell, 2012). In this study's context, conversations between principals and teachers frequently did not happen in isolation. District expectations, policies, and cultural norms all played a part in forming what was said and how it is received. These influences can often set the stage for each conversation and affect the way principals make sense of and react to the systems around them. Although principals in this study faced similar external pressures, each approached conversations in a manner that reflected their own beliefs, values, and leadership styles. Conversation can then become both a product of the environment and a personal leadership tool that can motivate teachers. A qualitative descriptive approach was utilized for this study. This approach examined how principals describe their conversation strategies for autonomously motivating teachers to change their instructional practices. Sandelowski (2000) stated that descriptive qualitative research is especially useful when researchers want to capture participants' experiences in ways that are clear, accurate, and expressed in their actual language, which is what this study aimed to do (Sandelowski, 2000).

Study Setting

This study took place in Oklahoma, which includes 512 public school districts and 1,795 schools across suburban, urban, and rural areas (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2025). According to recent national data, the state's average student-to-teacher ratio is 16 to 1, while the principal-to-teacher ratio stands at 72 to 1 (NCES, 2023). Public schools continue to face difficulties with teacher retention, low salaries, heavy accountability demands, and restricted autonomy (Castro, 2023; Johnston, 2021). Even with these difficulties, principals can play a critical role in both helping teachers stay in the profession and the quality of their experience in the classroom.

In this context, Oklahoma provides a meaningful setting to explore how principal-teacher interactions influence teacher motivation and retention. Ongoing challenges with teacher retention and morale, formed by a mix of both policy demands and the daily reality of school, could make the nature of communication between principals and teachers crucial (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020; OSDE, 2022). Focusing on one state also strengthened the methodological design by providing a consistent policy backdrop for all participants, while also allowing attention to variation in how principals approach conversations on an individual basis.

Participants and Sampling

Participants in this study included twenty-six public school principals from across Oklahoma. They were selected based on a variety of years of experience and school in urban, suburban, rural, and town settings. The rationale behind this selection was to provide a broad range of interpretations on how conversations are used with teachers. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling method. This helped ensure a range of school

settings and leadership contexts were represented, instead of limiting the study to just one type of school or context. As interviews progressed, snowball sampling was used by having participants recommend other principals whom they thought might be interested in sharing their experience. This approach helped surface additional voices that were previously inaccessible through the formal outreach process. Initial recruitment for interviewing the twenty-six principals was carried out by calling or emailing the school principal to ask about their participation in this study. The number of certified teachers in a building influenced the nature or style of principal-teacher conversations, the variable was documented and reflected in Table 1 according to the National Center for Education Statistics database (NCES, 2025). In addition, Table 2 provides a summary of participants' ranges by experience level and school setting, highlighting the range of leadership contexts represented in the study.

Confidentiality was maintained throughout this research process. Knowing their responses would remain confidential helped the participants speak honestly and give more in-depth responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher removed any identifiable information about the participants during transcription, including their names, school, or district. To maintain confidentiality, participants were assigned a certain participant number, which is listed in Table 4.1 within this chapter, sourced from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2025).

Table 4.1

Participant ID	School Setting	Number of Classroom Teachers	Years as Principal

Participant 1	Rural	15	4
Participant 2	Town	22	12
Participant 3	Rural	14	2
Participant 4	Urban	26	6
Participant 5	Rural	23	7
Participant 6	Rural	45	9
Participant 7	Urban	33	14
Participant 8	Urban	63	3
Participant 9	Rural	15	2
Participant 10	Town	61	3
Participant 11	Town	30	2
Participant 12	Suburban	37	16
Participant 13	Rural	26	5
Participant 14	Suburban	34	8
Participant 15	Rural	20	3
Participant 16	Town	26	10
Participant 17	Rural	36	13

Participant	Rural	17	8
Participant 19	Rural	22	2
Participant 20	Suburban	12	2
Participant 21	Suburban	43	7
Participant 22	Town	33	20
Participant 23	Urban	48	8
Participant 24	Town	49	3
Participant 25	Urban	29	3
Participant 26	Suburban	91	13

Table 4.2

Category	**Number of Participants (N=26)**
School setting	
Urban	5
Suburban	5
Town	6
Rural	10

Number of Classroom Teachers	
0-25	9
26-50	14
51-75	2
76+	1

Years of Experience as Principal	
0-5 Years	12
6-10 Years	8
11-15 Years	4
16+ Years	2

The main focus of this study was to identify common patterns in how principals described their conversation strategies with teachers. For example, principals in larger schools may rely more on structured conversations due to time constraints, versus principals in smaller schools may have more opportunities for informal dialogue with their teachers. Similarly, principals with extensive leadership experience might show more confidence in using different questioning techniques, while a newer principal may use a

more direct approach in conversations. While the research does not include formal comparisons between subgroups, it does consider how varying contexts and levels of experience might inform the choices principals make in their conversations with teachers.

Interview Procedures

Given the limited research on how principals use everyday conversation strategies to support teacher motivation and instructional change, an interview-based design was well-suited to this study. While much of the existing literature on teacher motivation focuses on external structures such as evaluation systems or incentive programs, far fewer studies have explored the internal and relational aspects of leadership through the role of conversation. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the method for data collection because they allowed for meaningful responses and offered participants the flexibility to describe their own experiences of conversations with teachers. This approach aligned closely with the research question, which sought to understand how principals use conversation strategies to influence teacher motivation that changes instruction. Interviews made it possible to access the nuanced decision-making, tone, and intent behind these principal conversations, shedding light on practices that are often more informal, adaptive, and under-documented in policy or leadership frameworks.

The questionnaire used for this study was developed based on a prior pilot study on principals' communication with teachers. The pilot study aimed to explore how leaders had conversations with teaching staff. The pilot study used semi-structured interviews with school principals (n=3) from three public elementary schools, and the questionnaire provided similar codes from participant responses during the data analysis. Furthermore, the three principals from the pilot study answered the interview questions based on the

concept of Transformative Leadership Conversation. These attributes from the questionnaire were essential because both the pilot study and this current research bring attention to principal-teacher relationships that utilized conversation. The researcher refined the questionnaire to reflect the current reserach question on principals' use of conversations with teachers to create instructional change through autonomous motivation. The interview protocol used in this study is presented in Appendix A.

From this dataset, emails and phone calls were used to ask for participation from school-level leaders throughout Oklahoma. This research focused specifically on public school principals, making purposive sampling an appropriate approach. In addition, purposive sampling appeared stagnant during the last five interviews for data collection, during which participants were solicited through more informal protocols such as snowball and convenience sampling. Before starting the interviews, the protocol was tested with a colleague to ensure the questions were clear and aligned with the study. The interviews were conducted either in person (n=5) or virtually on Google Meet (n=21). Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes. The interviews provided insight into how principals described their conversation practices and strategies they used, as well as how these conversations were intended to support instructional change. All participants provided oral consent prior to participation, and the Institutional Review Board approved the study at the University of Oklahoma.

The researcher has nine years of experience in both classroom teaching and administration. This background offered direct insight into the dynamics of principal-teacher relationships and how those dynamics influence teacher morale, professional growth, and instructional change. The interest in this research was developed

from previous teaching experiences with different leadership styles. One principal was very collaborative and supportive of teachers' psychological needs, where conversations felt empowering, while the other principal relied on top-down directives with minimal dialogue. These opposite experiences led to the research question of how principals use conversations to support autonomous teacher motivation and instructional change. Given the researcher's background in public school, careful attention was given to the potential influence of personal bias in this study. To mitigate this, the researcher maintained analytic memos with ATLAS.ti to pause and reflect during the coding process. Throughout the analysis, the main goal was to keep the participants' perspectives and make sure their voices were central, rather than the researcher allowing assumptions to shape the findings.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with the participant's consent using Otter.ai. They were then imported into ATLAS.ti for a systematic analysis. Transcripts were labeled 1 through 26 to align with data reporting. The data analysis involved a combination of deductive and inductive coding to examine how principals described their use of conversation to support teacher motivation and instructional change.

A set of 20 a priori codes- 5 parent codes with 15 child codes- was initially developed through the existing literature and can be found in Appendix B of this study. During the coding process, five additional inductive codes emerged from close reading of transcripts. These codes added depth and reflected participants' understanding and experiences of conversations with teachers. For example, Autonomous Motivation was applied when principals described teachers initiating changes based on internal goals or values instead of external compliance. In contrast, Command and Control Feedback was

used when principals shared top-down directives that involved little teacher input. An example of one of the emergent codes is the emotional labor of leadership. Principals shared the effort required to support others while still managing their own well-being, which was often described through experiences of monitoring staff morale or check-ins with teachers during difficult times.

To conduct a thematic analysis, similar codes were initially grouped together to create common clusters. For example, Teacher Burnout combined with Teacher Stress and then clustered with Psychological Needs. Both the initial and second rounds of coding were done through ATLAS.ti. Codes that appeared frequently and clustered together due to similar concepts or emotions were then grouped into broader themes. For example, codes such as emotional labor of leadership, teacher burnout and stress, and psychological needs were all grouped together under the theme Principal Psychological Support for Teachers. Other codes, such as TLC, supportive feedback, and professional growth, created the theme Principals' Adaptations of Conversations to Meet Teachers' Needs. Analytic memos written during each coding cycle helped catch patterns, contradictions, and gain a solid understanding of the interpretations.

To consider variations between participants, the data were disaggregated based on contextual factors such as school size (number of certified teachers), principal years of experience, and school location. During coding and memoing, careful attention was given to whether principals who had different school sizes fell into similar groups on the conversation strategies they used with teachers. Differences in years of leadership were also noted to compare groups of principals who might be more confident during dialogue versus those who were still unsure of how to hold these conversations. The core themes

emerged consistently across a range of school contexts, indicating that the conversation strategies described by principals were not confined to any single subgroup. This pattern of consistency supported the themes in Chapter 5. Disconfirming evidence was also sought out throughout the analysis to challenge emerging patterns. For example, when principals described relationship-building conversations, other interviews were examined to look for patterns that did not use this approach. Identifying these outliers helped make sure that the themes were not overgeneralized and were grounded in a balanced interpretation of the data. After multiple rounds of coding and clustering, four themes emerged, which are presented and analyzed in Chapter 5.

Validity and Trustworthiness

This study utilized some of Maxwell's validity strategies in the research design (Maxwell, 2012). The researcher collected rich data through a thorough interview process with detailed transcriptions used for the study. There are sub-themes that emerged within the findings, which included the differing opinions on conversation strategies. This study also incorporated a comparison, noting differences between geographical and contextual settings of the participants, such as rural, urban, suburban, years of experience, and school size. The researcher also quantified the prevalence of the themes that stated the number of principals who talked about certain codes and strategies.

A few of Maxwell's strategies, such as long-term involvement and respondent validation, were not utilized in this study. This study did not use member checks or share findings with participants for feedback. This could be seen as a limitation in confirming the accuracy of the interpretations from the participant's perspective. The researcher conducted interviews for this study, rather than using observations or other methods. Long-term

involvement could be utilized as a potential future research direction based on the findings and discussion in Chapter 6.

Limitations

This research has limitations that are important to acknowledge, which fall into the contextual and conceptual categories. First, the data came entirely from the principals' perspectives. This means the study reflects how principals describe their use of conversation strategies instead of the teachers' experiences or interpretations of those conversations. There may be a gap between intention and the outcome. Teacher perceptions were not included in this research due to the large number of studies that used teacher perspectives instead of those of the principal. In future studies, including both sides of the conversation would give a more complete picture. The interview process itself has limitations. These were self-reported experiences, which means there is always a chance of social desirability bias where principals might present themselves in a specific light. The research question attempted to mitigate this by using open-ended questions and asking for specific experiences, but it is still a factor worth mentioning. Without observation or follow-up with their staff, there is always the possibility of social desirability bias. The researcher is also in the field of education and has their own experiences as a school leader, so positionality is also possible. That lens could have shaped how the coding and analysis were interpreted. The researcher used memos, checked for disconfirming information, and revisited transcripts multiple times to help reduce these assumptions, but personal bias is always a consideration in qualitative research. Additionally, this study was coded by one researcher. Although several rounds of coding were conducted to ensure consistency, no

second coder was used to cross-check the analysis. However, this study was overseen by the researchers commitee for validity and reliability.

Strengths

This research was grounded in the Transformative Leadership Conversation and the Self-Determination Theory framework. This research builds upon previous work in educational leadership and teacher motivation by exploring how principals may use conversation strategies to build teacher autonomous motivation and instructional change. A framework like TLC can be used by principals to potentially autonomously motivate teachers and their instructional practices. This research provides an opportunity for future work to extend these findings to further explore Transformative Leadership Conversation.

Chapter 5
Findings

This chapter examines how principals use everyday conversation strategies to motivate teachers and facilitate instructional change. While much of the existing research on principals focuses on policies, general leadership strategies, and external accountability measures, very few studies have looked closely at the nuances of principal-teacher dialogue (Adams et al., 2022; Segal et al., 2021). In Oklahoma, where principals often work in a conflicting position between policy and practice, they are widely viewed as the leading change agents in their buildings. Through semi-structured interviews with 26 Oklahoma public school principals, this research investigates how leaders described and used conversation strategies to support autonomous teacher motivation and instructional change.

The central focus of this research uses the framework of Transformative Leadership Conversation, which is a model of principal-teacher communication grounded in Self-Determination Theory. TLC moves away from top-down, compliance-driven talk and focuses on the relationship dynamics within conversation. Command-and-Control Conversation was also a component of principal-teacher dialogue examined throughout this study, which focuses on directive, top-down communication. In this study, several principals described using affirming language, asking questions, and making sure teachers felt heard. They talked about moments when connection with a teacher made a difference, which grew trust. Teachers felt more comfortable taking risks, and deeper conversations about instruction became possible. Through informal hallway chats, tough discussions, moments when emotions were high, or even coaching conversations, participants spoke on the importance of dialogue in their leadership practice.

The above practices did not just show up in one type of school or within a certain level of experience in the role, suggesting that conversations play an important role regardless of district size or years of leadership experience. Some principals saw conversations as the main way of keeping morale strong and shaping their school culture. Others were more direct about the limitations of current policies, describing how talking with their teachers was still the most effective way to support instructional change. Principals often noted how and when conversations happened, such as the timing, tone, and intent behind these interactions, which could influence how teachers responded to feedback or instructional change.

As principals shared their experiences, four themes came through that reflected how they use conversations to build relationships, support teachers in their practice, grow professionally with teachers, and address outside pressures that affect the work within their schools. While these themes primarily highlight principals' use of TLC, principals also described moments when they relied on Command-and-Control approaches that were more direct or compliance-driven. These instances surfaced within each theme, often as counterpoints that reveal the complexity of everyday leadership conversations.

Theme 1: Principal Psychological Support for Teachers
Theme 2: Principals' Adaptations of Conversations to Meet Teachers' Needs
Theme 3: Conversations For Principal and Teacher Growth
Theme 4: Principals' Conversations Shaped by Navigating External Pressures

Together, these four themes summarize the different ways principals thought about and use conversations with teachers. For many of the principals, conversations with

teachers closely reflected their growth and leadership style. They also spoke about how these conversations served as a connection point between teacher morale, motivation, and instructional growth. There were times when principals also expressed their frustrations when the system policies or mandates conflicted with their vision, yet they still acknowledged the value of dialogue in moving instructional practices forward. The following sections explore each of these themes in greater depth, focusing on the actual experiences and reflections of Oklahoma principals that offer insight into how everyday conversations with teachers function in schools.

Principal Psychological Support for Teachers

Twenty-four out of twenty-six principals reported that they prioritized psychological support focused on emotional safety, relationships, and trust with teachers as a way to motivate instructional growth. Psychologically supportive conversations were not limited to formal evaluation meetings, but occurred in ongoing interactions before, during, and after instructional observations. For instance, Participant 19, a principal in their second year, explained how these conversations usually come about: *"I feel like those [conversations about instruction] are pretty common conversations…I would say they are usually informal based upon walk throughs and observations." -Participant 19*

Psychological support functioned not as a general leadership philosophy, but as a conversation strategy that set the stage for deeper dialogue. The 24 principals all mentioned how critical it was for teachers and principals to have a relationship built around trust, competence, and relatedness before jumping into instructional conversations. Importantly, this pattern cut across contexts by not varying from school size, type, or years of leadership experience, suggesting that principals viewed psychological support as universally

important. However, principals approached this support differently depending on whether they were aiming to create autonomous motivation or use more command-and-control strategies. Principals repeatedly framed this proactive relationship-building dialogue as the foundation that made later conversations about instructional change possible.

In line with existing literature on psychological needs support, 24 out of 26 principals emphasized that building relationships and trust with teachers was foundational for instructional conversations. These principals did not limit interaction to formal evaluation, instead, they focused on supporting teachers so they felt capable, connected, and appreciated. Participant 8, a principal with three years of experience stated: *"I think it's important to just constantly have those lines of communication open so that way you're building that relationship so further down the line, if we need to pull on that we've already built that it's not like in the moment, we just have to have this conversation about instruction that we never even talked about. I want them to have that trust that I may not know all of your content or whatever, but we're in this together."-Participant 8* This illustrated how autonomy, competence, and relatedness create leadership practices in schools (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For instance, one principal with eight years of experience in a suburban school described a focus on supporting teachers when discussing the purpose of their conversations: *"They [teachers] just need the support, and that is my job is to make sure they have that support where they can lean on someone." -Participant 14*
Similarly, Participant 24, a principal in their third year of leadership, highlighted how consistent communication created the foundation for later instructional dialogue to be more productive in supporting positive mental states: *"Honestly, it usually comes about, I never lead with instruction. I always end up talking to them about their overall well-being and*

their job satisfaction. Then the instruction ends up happening naturally. Because I think if I went in with that initial, 'Hey, I want to talk about instruction', they're not really going to open up"-Participant 24

These examples show how principals used ongoing, supportive conversations to establish trust and psychological safety, which in turn made later instructional conversations less evaluative and more collaborative. This perspective also illustrates a pattern across the interviews of principals who actively nurtured ongoing communication as a prerequisite of having instructional conversations through establishing trust. With six years as a middle school principal, Participant 6 explained how meeting these psychological needs with teachers are prerequisites for instructional conversations. Together, twenty-three other principals stressed that teachers respond to feedback and new ideas when they feel genuinely supported. When asked specifically about how conversations around instruction unfold, Participant 6 explained: *"I think you have to have a relationship with the teacher. She has to know that you care. They want to know that you care and love them before they're going to learn and listen to you."-Participant 6* This perspective reflects a broader theme in the data of principals who intentionally built personal connections first to have successful instructional conversations, which foster emotional safety. For these principals, emotional safety was not an afterthought but a strategic, ongoing part of leadership that made later conversations more effective.

Twenty-one out of twenty-six participants explicitly described using strategies that supported teacher autonomy, self-direction, or autonomous motivation as the base of their conversations. These principals frequently connected their approach to nurturing a teacher's internal drive rather than relying on external accountability. These principals

mentioned not wanting conversations with teachers to feel formal, wanting dialogue and opportunities for teachers to organically arrive at their own conclusions or changes. For example, Participant 26, a principal with thirteen years of experience, explained that their goal in these conversations was to help teachers take ownership of their growth rather than feel evaluated: *"The most rewarding part is seeing someone accomplish something they didn't think they could do… to know I played some small part in that- as a coach, encouragement, or even a thought partner, that's the best part."-Participant 26.* Participant 13, a principal with five years of experience, explained how they try to support teacher independence in their school when it comes to changing instruction: *"My staff is pretty open to express their ideas and opinions, and they do so I think they feel comfortable sharing what they like and don't like, and they know there's no judgment. For me, that's really meaningful, though. Whenever you know you can collaborate in that way."-Participant 13*

While this theme was present in the overwhelming majority of interviews, two principals more frequently relied on a different approach. Participant 5 and Participant 2, while noting aspects of psychological needs support, framed their conversations as being more direct. For example, Participant 5, a principal with seven years of experience, explained how they sometimes talk with teachers to change instruction by stating: "*I put enough pressure on you to the point where I may be in and out of your room three or four times a day, and I'm asking the questions, Why is __ not working? Why is this? You know, I make you uncomfortable"-Participant 5*. Participant 2 emphasized that conversations were mainly opportunities to ensure teachers were following through on expectations, offering less attention to relationships, and more attention on data or results. Overall, these findings

suggest that many principals in this study perceive that it is challenging to instill genuine motivation or effect change by giving directive orders. When principals focus on strong relationships, this type of support helps teachers grow and develop over time. This reinforces how principal-teacher relationships set the stage for instructional change conversations to happen.

The Emotional Labor of Leadership

Building on the emphasis principals placed on psychological support for teachers, many principals also reflected on the personal demands this work created for them emerged as a sub theme. Sixteen out of 26 principals shared that attending to staff well-being, morale, and emotional needs had become a consistent and expected aspect of their leadership. These conversations, while building trust and motivation with teachers, also required considerable emotional energy from principals. They described their leadership as being accountable for both instructional growth and the emotional climate of the school. This work extended well beyond simple check-ins. These sixteen principals noted that they quietly carried the weight of teachers' stress, frustration, and potential burnout as part of their daily responsibilities.

An example came from Participant 24, the principal of a large town elementary school that had faced significant turnover in recent years. Reflecting on a difficult conversation with a teacher who seemed both discouraged and close to burnout, the principal explained that leadership involved consistent follow-up to provide meaningful emotional support: *"As the leader, I felt like it was my responsibility to go back and follow up with her and not just leave, leave her in the low spot, I guess. And in that, in that hard conversation, I gave her permission to do whatever she needed to do to be able to get that*

passion back."-Participant 24. By sharing this, Participant 24 highlighted that emotional labor was not a one-time act but a process of temperature checks. It also showcases the responsibility principals feel they should carry in regard to their teachers. For the other fifteen principals, these emotional responsibilities extended beyond instructional topics into conversations about work-life balance and self-care. They noted that their ability to support instructional change had to start with psychological support for teachers. They described serving as emotional anchors for staff, creating conditions for teachers to feel safe enough to change their practice. In other words, the labor of caring for teachers' emotional well-being was inseparable from the work of instructional leadership. Participant 13 explained this by saying: *"She needed encouragement more than anything… I tried to give her the tiniest of pointers just to keep her confidence up."-Participant 13*

Another example of the emotional labor principals take on is the emphasis they want teachers to feel when having conversations. When teachers feel safe enough to receive feedback, that shows the principal has created an environment of psychological safety so that teachers can risk vulnerability. The principal carries the burden of framing feedback as encouragement rather than judgment, knowing that growth depends on teachers feeling supported and not attacked. Participant 26, an elementary school principal with thirteen years of experience showcased these emotions by stating: *"I think it's the teacher's willingness to take a risk and say…to hear this feedback and not feel like it was criticism. I think that's one of the first steps in really having a productive change in someone's practice, right? That you're able to hear feedback as something other than criticism"-Participant 26*

Principals' Adaptations of Conversations to Meet Teachers' Needs

Principals in this study used a spectrum of conversation strategies to motivate instructional change, ranging from highly collaborative, reflective dialogue to more directive, task-oriented exchanges. Twenty-two out of 26 principals described using communication strategies that were intentionally autonomy supportive and centered on teacher growth, while four described instances of command-and-control feedback as necessary in specific contexts. Overall, most principals framed their conversations as opportunities to guide teacher growth, build reflective practice, and improve teachers' instructional capacity. Four distinct sub-patterns emerged within this range of strategies: Conversations that supported autonomous motivation, conversations that leaned on command-and-control strategies, peer leadership between teachers, and adaptations of conversations from principals to meet teachers' needs.

Conversations Supporting Autonomous Motivation

Twenty-two out of 26 principals emphasized conversational strategies that aligned with autonomous motivation by encouraging teacher self-reflection, taking ownership of their own learning and growth, and intrinsic motivation to change. These principals described themselves as partners in the learning process rather than only authority figures. These conversations aligned with Transformative Leadership Conversations, particularly the elements of framing, listening, and reflective questions (Adams, 2022).

Framing and Affirming Language

One component of TLC is framing, which is used to help determine the purpose of a conversation. This is how principals can create more reflective dialogue with teachers. Another aspect within Transformative Leadership Conversation is the use of affirming language when talking to teachers. It is designed to nurture teachers' psychological needs. The 22 principals who used autonomous motivation conversation strategies stressed the

importance of setting up conversations about instructional growth as a collaborative effort with teachers. This created a feeling of shared responsibility between the principals and their teachers. Participant 17, an elementary school principal with thirteen years of experience, compared their leadership to teamwork, saying that real support when having conversations meant starting by saying they are working with their teachers rather than directing them: *"I'm in this boat too. Both rowing, sometimes you row, sometimes I row. So how do we tackle the problem together?"-Participant 17*

Participant 10 explained how they framed conversations with teachers by starting out with the purpose of the conversation: *"I always tell them at the beginning, I'm not here to try to get you on anything... but just know that my heart and spirit coming into it is about trying to grow you so that you can have the greatest amount of influence on your students. I feel like under normal conditions, I think all human beings trend toward growth like we want to get better, we want to improve. It's when we have stressful stuff going on, it's when we have trauma, those things shut down our ability to do that. So I try to make it about growth"-Participant 10*

An example of principals emphasizing affirming language when talking to their teachers was well said by Participant 15: *"Always, always start with a praise. Does not matter. I always call it my bookends. We start with something positive, and then we talk about areas to grow, and we end with something encouraging too." — Participant 15.* When principals framed their conversations this way, it helped them support psychological safety and teachers' confidence with instruction. Treating it as shared problem-solving and giving positive feedback during the process gave teachers a sense of ownership, which often led to stronger autonomous motivation to grow and improve instruction.

Listening and asking Reflective Questions

A second key strategy for motivating instructional change involved active listening combined with reflective questioning. Twenty-two principals described deliberately asking open-ended questions to allow teachers to surface their own insights instead of having a directive. For example, Participant 1, a principal with four years of experience, described how they structured conversations with teachers to change instruction: *"I tell them, I'm going to listen to what you say and actually do listen. I think that's what some administrators that I could tell were actually listening and then follow up. I think that's another thing that is very important, is people want to know that you are going to follow up with them and ask questions. I ask a lot of questions."-Participant 1.* When asked what stood out about specific conversations with their teachers, Participant 7, an elementary principal in an urban setting with fourteen years of experience, said: *"It's usually me getting into almost like a Socratic method of questioning her about, well, what she does know, what she does feel confident about, and how can we, how can we leverage the things that she does feel confident into the things that she does not."-Participant 7*

Other principals used similar explanations of questioning and listening techniques they used with teachers to change instruction. Participant 19, an elementary principal with two years of experience, also mentioned using active listening as an important conversation strategy when talking about how these conversations unfold with teachers. Principals such as Participant 25 described questioning as a tool for reflection and buy-in for changing teachers' instruction:

"So in that conversation, it's a lot of relationship building that has to do with instruction. Because, again, you can't coach will. You can only coach skills. So it's having them willing to make that change. I mean, I can make them do it or I can include them in the

conversation and my decision. So I feel like you leave more skin on the bone when you can include them in your conversation and your thinking."-Participant 25

These open-ended, reflective conversations encouraged teachers to examine their practice, surface their own insights, and take ownership of their instructional growth. They also shift the focus from evaluation to reflection, building autonomous motivation with the teacher.

Sensemaking and Learning Dialogue

The 22 principals who supported teacher autonomous motivation described their conversation as a collaborative back-and-forth to make sense of instructional practices. Through this strategy, principals could guide improvement while still giving teachers a sense of ownership and creating internal motivation to grow. Participant 10, a high school principal with three years of experience, explained their approach as a learning process with teachers: *"My biggest responsibility, I feel like, is just to hold up a mirror and to try to give you a clear picture of what your practice is like and how it relates to what we know about best practices in teaching and learning, and then to try to fill in the gap between where you are and where we think you can be. And so I try to make it very much about growth and support."-Participant 10*

Principals who used this approach consistently framed their role as a collaborative partner instead of an authority figure. Twenty-two of the participants talked about shared dialogue instead of a one-way line of feedback with teachers. They were not just giving directives, they were participating in shared thinking about instruction with their teachers. According to Participant 23, a high school principal with eight years of experience, described instructional growth requiring continuous dialogue and multiple follow-up

conversations: *"I think it's important to continue to give them feedback, so that they continue to improve their craft. And you have to, it has to be something that's continual, because if it's not, then it, then it feels, it doesn't feel like it's coaching."- Participant 23*

One veteran principal with nearly twenty years of experience explained how they had conversations with teachers to restructure and analyze their practice. Participant 22 said: "*Just having them [teachers] reflect a lot and voice it like, Take me back to that lesson and tell me exactly what was happening. You know, were you able to do a small group whenever your other kiddos are working over here and those kinds of things. So really, I like to try to get them as part of the conversation, and me not dictating."-Participant 22*

Principals described conversations in a way that was consistent with sensemaking and learning dialogue. They used words like ongoing, reflective, fostering trust and professional capacity. Rather than entering classrooms with a checklist of what to fix, principals worked as thinking partners, engaging with teachers to create shared understanding of instructional practice. This shift from authority figure to collaborator not only supported immediate improvement but also created teachers' autonomous motivation to grow. For example, Participant 16, a middle school principal with ten years of experience reflected on this approach by saying: *"I think everyone's got to teach in their own skin, and you got to step back and let them teach and not, you know, micromanage…the purpose always is to help and empower them and support them."* By emphasizing reflection, active listening, and joint problem-solving, these conversations laid the groundwork for long-lasting instructional change. The result was a school culture focused on continuous learning, extending beyond individual classrooms. Participant 18, an elementary principal in their eighth year of the role, talked about how sometimes the best

thing for themselves and the teacher is to go home and think about things, then come back and share their thoughts and create a plan of what they should do. While most of the principals favored autonomy-supportive conversations, four acknowledged that certain situations required a more directive, command-and-control approach to driving instructional change in their building.

Command and Control Feedback

Four out of 26 principals described moments where their communication leaned toward command-and-control feedback. These conversations occupied the directive end of the conversation spectrum, where principals prioritized immediate compliance and task completion over teacher reflection or dialogue. For example, Participant 3, a principal in a rural setting with fourteen years of experience, when reflecting on how conversations take place, explained this approach when repeated coaching failed to create change: *"We had the same conversation just about every week. No growth. So again, it was one of those things where I've listed things that I need from you, and you're not meeting those expectations. So we're going to have to continue forward with keeping you on this plan of improvement until you can show me and produce the things I'm asking you to produce."-Participant 3*

Two principals who typically favored reflective dialogue admitted that they sometimes shifted to more pointed questions or direct advice, particularly when expectations were not being met. Participant 16, a middle school principal with ten years of experience, described this pivot in conversations: *"The purpose of these conversations might shift…sometimes that purpose is to fix the problem. When you put [a teacher] on a plan of improvement…that's hard to do, depending on what that plan is for"-Participant*

16. Similarly, Participant 9, a principal with two years of experience emphasized that at times direct expectations were unavoidable when classroom management concerns interfered with instruction: *"It was a heart to heart conversation of, look, you're going to have to do this, and they [students] have to be accountable because you can't get through your instruction without being interrupted. So we are going to come up with a system and then they're going to get a consequence, be consistent*"*-Participant 9*

These accounts illustrate how even autonomy-supportive leaders occasionally relied on directive strategies when student learning was at risk or when repeated issues persisted. Within this subset of principals who used a spectrum of command-and-control feedback, one principal appeared to use a directive approach the majority of the time with teachers. Participant 5, a principal with seven years of experience, reflected on the challenging aspect of conversations about instruction with teachers: *"I have never had a teacher say they are a poor teacher. So you have to train them to evaluate themselves open mindedly. So you know that part the purpose of that discussion is to open their eyes to what they're missing."-Participant 5*

Overall, these findings indicate how principals described command-and-control conversations as often uncomfortable but, in their eyes, necessary in certain contexts to ensure that instructional expectations were being met. Deadlines, repeated issues, and high-stakes policies often pushed conversations into directive territory, even for leaders who preferred reflective dialogue. An example of this would be from Participant 9, a principal with two years of experience, when talking about a challenging conversation with a teacher about curriculum said: *"You're bound by your professional duty to use what your district has purchased. So you're gonna have to use it".* In this subtheme,

command-and-control feedback did not stand apart from other strategies, but functioned as part of a continuum that principals navigated depending on urgency, teacher responsiveness, and external pressures. While most participants expressed that dialogue created the greatest link to instructional growth, they acknowledged that some situations left little room for collaboration.

Peer Leadership

Seventeen out of 26 principals, all of whom were part of the autonomy-supportive dialogue subset, discussed leveraging peer-to-peer influence through strategies like modeling, collaboration, or mini professional development sessions that played an important role in shifting practice. One striking pattern that prior literature did not anticipate was that principals were not only thinking about and engaging in their own conversations with teachers, but also intentionally enabling teachers to have these conversations with one another. Instead of taking on full responsibility for teaching and learning, these principals created systems where teachers could teach and learn from each other to make it more sustainable.

Participant 6, a rural elementary principal with nine years of experience, explained how they frame the purpose of conversations with some of their teachers as being a peer leader:

"I need you to be the example… I need you to help me with what I did. You think you could help your other teachers in your grade level?"-Participant 6 This approach moved away from command-and-control directives and leaned into autonomy-supportive feedback, where teachers are given ownership of professional growth and positioned as experts among their peers. By moving the conversation out of the principal's office and into

teacher-to-teacher exchanges, principals redistributed authority and created a culture where dialogue became collective instead of top-down.

Sixteen other principals shared similar strategies. Participant 2, a middle school principal in a suburban setting, explained that oftentimes they seek out other teachers who are excelling with what a different teacher needs to grow and have them help mentor or observe each other. Likewise, Participant 8, a middle school principal in an urban setting with three years of experience, explained how conversations unfold to create instructional growth within their school: *"To help teachers to see the value in looking at how their fellow colleagues have done, because we can learn from everyone. And so even seasoned teachers are learning that they can learn from new teachers, because new teachers may come in with different ideas and practices that they haven't seen and so, but some of those have been sensitive conversations about trying to develop that trust, that this is about students and student growth and learning, and that whatever I can learn from someone else is only going to increase how my students learn and grow."-Participant 8.* This comment explains how trust is the foundation for peer leadership.

Principals fostered collaboration and framed peer learning as a shared commitment to professional growth, which helped teachers accept feedback from colleagues at all different levels of experience. Across all seventeen participants, peer leadership strategies included structured collaboration, informal mentoring, and opportunities for teachers to observe one another's classrooms. This suggests that principals were not only motivating teachers directly but also created a culture where shared expertise and dialogue became driving forces for instructional change. This finding may extend Self-Determination Theory by showing how principals supported relatedness and competence not just through their

own dialogue, but by structuring peer-to-peer interactions that amplified autonomous motivation.

Adaptation of Conversations Between Principals and Teachers

Another dimension was how principals adjusted their conversation strategies based on the individual teacher. Eighteen out of 26 principals, who were both subsets of autonomy supportive conversations and command-and-control, talked about how important it was to really know their teachers by understanding what kind of feedback they respond to, how they typically take criticism, and how open they are to instructional conversations. Each of these 18 principals said they adjusted their approach on a case-by-case basis. For some teachers, a straightforward and direct conversation was most effective, while other teachers needed a more gentle approach when having conversations around instruction. Participant 1 captured this adaptive approach by saying: *"I have those that you know how I go about it makes a big difference. And then I have those teachers that I could just walk in there and say, Hey, and not good, okay. And so all people are different."-Participant 1*

All 18 principals also noted that veteran teachers often required special consideration when having conversations. These principals talked about how experienced teachers could be more resistant to change, which made conversations challenging. These conversations often started by recognizing the teacher's experience before guiding them toward new practices. Participant 22, a school leader with nearly twenty years as a principal, noted that the hardest discussions were often with veteran teachers. *"Sometimes it's harder to have conversations with veteran teachers. They're used to doing things this way, and it's been working this way and getting them to change their paradigm, and sometimes it's hard."-Participant 22*

Participant 21 added on to this thought of veteran teacher conversations typically being challenging or difficult to hold but seemed surprised when the conversation went better than expected: *"I had a lot of conversations with this teacher about maybe how to interact with __ graders. I think what stood out the most to me is this veteran teacher took it really well. You would think an experienced upper-level teacher is not going to really want to be corrected, but she agreed with me. She took the advice-one of those tough conversations that went better than you think it may."-Participant 21*

These examples show how principals with a wide range of experiences felt that conversations with experienced teachers were challenging. For veteran teachers, especially, meaningful conversations often start with respect and recognition of their experience while still encouraging change and providing feedback. The principals in this study brought attention to knowing how to read a situation and respond to different personalities as a key part of their work around instruction.

Conversations For Principal and Teacher Growth

A third theme that emerged from the findings was how principals used conversations to not just support teacher growth but also grow themselves as leaders. Twenty-one out of 26 principals expressed that part of their role was learning from their teachers to help them grow as leaders. These principals looked at instructional conversations as equally beneficial with teachers because they provide chances to learn from each other. This dialogue shifted the perception that principals are supposed to have all the answers. Participant 6, when asked how conversations unfold with teachers, said: *"Sometimes it's me going to them and asking for their input or for their help on how I can make things better."-Participant 6*

Participant 4 reinforced this by saying the conversations they have with teachers are the reason they have grown over time. These were not just feedback sessions, they were more like professional learning in action: *"The purpose is for us to grow. And I think two things happen in this conversation. I think one, it's helping build and sharpen the tools of the teacher and what they're able to provide to students. But I also think it sharpens me too, because through listening to what their needs are, listening to what their ideas are like."-Participant 4*

This mutual growth was repeatedly mentioned throughout the interview process. These 21 principals explained how talking through different challenges or even brainstorming chats gave principals real-time insight into practice. Participant 15 gave a clear example of this by saying: *" It's kind of a reinvigoration for someone who might be more settled…and it's bringing more ideas and scaffolding to someone younger in their career…I think sometimes it is helping them rediscover their' why'- and honestly, it helps me refocus too."* In addition, Participant 19, an elementary principal who is in their third year of the role, talked about how enlightening an experience was with a veteran teacher because it shed light on the fact that experienced teachers still need support too. The findings also pointed towards conversations as a catalyst for teacher growth. These participants mentioned elements of autonomous motivation when describing both teacher and personal growth. They said that improvement cannot be forced, or it will not last.

Participant 12, a suburban elementary principal with sixteen years of experience noted:

"I think the purpose is we all should want to get better all the time. I should want to be a better principal every day, every year. I should learn just like a classroom teacher, to learn

how to meet the needs of their students. So really, that purpose is to become better. Because if we ever get complacent and just say, well, this is just how I do it, period, that can be a dangerous trap to get into. You might not ever get out of that trap."-Participant 12. This view shaped how they led. Instead of pushing change through compliance or force, they used conversations to reflect, take ownership, and provide choice.

Principals in this study talked about how this kind of dialogue not only supports teachers' development, but also shows they are still learning and that growth is the shared expectation for everyone in the building. For example, Participant 15, an elementary principal with three years of experience said: *"I try not to make it my suggestion…I try to flip the language by saying 'I've seen in another classroom where a teacher did___.' They're much more open to that piece of advice, rather than, 'when I was in the classroom." -Participant 15.* Participant 21, a middle school principal with seven years of experience, added to this theme by saying: *"My goal is always to get better. I'm never after people at all. I want them to know this is for growth. I want you to do well."-Participant 21*

These findings suggest that principal-teacher conversations are not only a tool for teacher growth but also a way for principals to continue their own professional learning and adaptive leadership. This approach to leadership as a shared learning experience moves away from the typical role of principals only leading instruction through authority. This idea aligns with Self-Determination Theory, as it fosters autonomy and relatedness for teachers and principals. This also could expand the Transformative Leadership Conversation framework by illustrating that growth-oriented dialogue can simultaneously strengthen teacher practice and principal resilience. The emergence of shared growth as a

dominant theme was not initially predicted, indicating that conversations can operate as reciprocal professional learning rather than one-directional coaching.

In contrast, the five principals who did not discuss mutual learning framed conversations around solely teacher improvement rather than shared growth. Their approaches were not necessarily command-and-control, but they did not describe themselves as learners in the process. These conversation strategies were still supportive but one-directional, with the principal positioned as the facilitator of improvement versus a co-learner. For example, Participant 3, a principal with two years of experience, talked about how the purpose of most instructional conversations with teachers is to help them get better at something or notice how they might be lacking in an area. Participant 2, while providing teachers with other outlets to improve their instruction, mostly described their conversations as supportive but focused on how the teacher can improve instead of shared learning. This distinction highlights that, while all principals in this study described promoting teacher growth, 21 of them framed conversations as a collective process, whereas a small subset saw it primarily as teacher centered.

Principals' Conversations Shaped by Navigating External Pressures

A big part of what principals do is filter the constant noise of shifting expectations, changing standards, and initiatives that seem to come and go with every new trend in education. Eighteen out of 26 principals mentioned either a type of school initiative they have to carry out that came from the district administration, or other policies they were constantly having to adjust to, so their teachers could stay focused on instruction. These pressures primarily stemmed from state accountability and testing requirements, district-driven initiatives, shifting priorities, and mandates tied to performance metrics.

Participant 20, a suburban elementary principal with two years of experience, mentioned these challenges that feel like a revolving door when asked about a current school initiative that was taking place: The principal said: *"We always have initiatives. And unfortunately, you know, I feel like public schools, we change so often because of trends, and we change this, we change that."-Participant 20.* That constant sense of "initiative fatigue" can create tension for teachers who are trying to keep up with the ever-changing demands of outside policy and mandates. Participant 17 described how this pressure showed up in conversations about instructions with two of their teachers: *"They didn't do well on state test scores… and their speed of instruction was like, 'I've got to get everything in. I've got to make sure I cover everything. I am not covering enough of the book.' I had to sit them down and say, when have I ever told you that you need to teach the entire book? Or why do you think that you need to do that? And they're [teachers] like, 'I think that I'm not going to hit on everything that the state, you know, all of the things that it requires for this subject' And I said, what I'm finding out is that your students have information that's a mile wide and an inch deep. I'd rather you cover fewer standards with greater depth, even if you can't master all twenty"-Participant 17.* This example shows how outside pressures, such as accountability measures, can change the mood of instructional conversations. Teachers often came into these conversations feeling anxious about performance measures and requirements. Principals used these conversations to reframe expectations, reduce pressure, and emphasize deeper learning. Rather than simply directing teachers to change, the principal worked to motivate them by challenging assumptions and creating space for instructional risk-taking.

Across these interviews, principals spoke about using conversations to mediate these policy pressures. The policy context itself was not uniform, even among the 18 principals who spoke most about external demands. Within this group, some principals consistently adopted autonomy-supportive strategies of encouraging collaboration and problem-solving, while others relied on command-and-control approaches of directing teachers toward compliance with mandates. For example, Participant 15, an elementary principal with three years of experience, talked about how they go about instructional conversations with teachers by saying: *"I try to really make those conversations more light and airy and super positive, because every day they're killing it, doing great things. I always start with a praise…then if there's an improvement needed, I sandwich that in the middle."-Participant 15*

No clear pattern emerged that linked a specific conversation style to the intensity or type of policy pressure. Each school context was unique, and principals' conversational approaches reflected their individual leadership style rather than a uniform response to the policy environment. The eight principals who did not emphasize external pressures spoke more about internally driven instructional initiatives from the district. When describing their current work, these principals did not express frustration or negative emotion toward district expectations, suggesting that while external demands did exist, they were not central to how these principals framed their work or led conversations. An example is participant 15, who stated that while the focus on student growth is district-wide, they can run that initiative however they see fit. Ultimately, leadership conversations functioned as a bridge. Furthermore, Participant 9 also spoke about their school initiative for instructional growth that was decided on by the district. It was even chosen before they had become the

principal, and now they were left to carry out the initiative. They filtered external noise, sustained teacher focus, and reinforced a shared commitment to teaching and learning. This theme aligns with institutional and instructional leadership theories, which describe how leaders help schools navigate external expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Summary of Findings

Overall, these themes suggest that most of the principals used conversations as a bridge to relationships, trust, teacher motivation, and instructional change. Across the four themes, principals used conversations to encourage growth and support psychological needs with teachers. Productive dialogue usually starts by establishing trust and a sense of safety, especially when supporting experienced or hesitant teachers. Principals discussed that respectful, personalized conversations made teachers more willing to reflect and engage in professional growth. Adapting conversation strategies to individual teachers highlighted the importance of knowing which teachers could handle direct feedback versus which required a softer approach. Mutual learning and shared growth emerged as central to principal-teacher conversations. Twenty-one principals saw these interactions as chances to learn with teachers, not just to give feedback. The other five principals maintained a traditional stance, focusing mainly on teacher growth.

When dealing with external demands, principals acted as bridges, helping staff navigate district policy or new initiatives by making them more manageable. For 18 principals, this meant acknowledging and mitigating teacher stress tied to state testing, performance metrics, and the revolving door of initiatives. In contrast, the remaining eight principals still managed district expectations, but did not describe these pressures as

emotionally burdensome for themselves or their staff. The degree of external pressure did not determine whether principals utilized autonomy-supportive or command-and-control strategies. Both approaches were present among the 18 principals facing policy demands. Instead, policy context shaped the need for conversation as a mediating tool, while a principal's leadership style influenced the form of the conversation. Conversations then served as a bridge between institutional constraints and classroom practice, helping teachers focus on what they could control and keep the purpose of teaching and learning at the forefront.

Taken together, these themes reveal that principals in this study viewed and used conversations as a primary mechanism to motivate instructional change and cultivate teacher engagement. Most principals leveraged dialogue to support autonomy, reflection, and ownership of practice, while others had a spectrum of compliance or directive control. At the same time, the findings highlight the degree to which external pressure and the principal's own orientation toward growth can shape how these conversations unfold. While the literature anticipated that conversations would promote teacher reflection and growth, this study surfaced a new layer of how conversations can be a leadership strategy and learning opportunity for the principal. These findings are examined through the lens of Self-Determination Theory and Transformative Leadership conversation within Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION

This study set out to investigate how principals use conversation strategies to motivate teachers in ways that support instructional change. Across the four themes, the data suggest that conversations are essential to how principals support teacher psychological needs, motivate growth, and navigate change. In conversations across all 26 interviews, principals talked about using dialogue not just to guide instructional practices, but also to support teacher morale, offer emotional support, and engage in shared meaning-making with teachers. These interactions often created space for psychological safety and professional learning.

The research question of this study asked how principals use conversation strategies to autonomously motivate teachers to change instruction. The findings suggest that motivation was often built through subtle, consistent, and intentional strategies by the principal. They used questioning techniques, affirming language, active listening, and shared problem-solving. These practices closely align with Transformative Leadership Conversation and Self-Determination Theory, which help explain how dialogue can support autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Across all four themes, this study may align with and expand upon prior research on teacher motivation and principal leadership.

Implication of Themes

Theme one, Principal Psychological Support for Teachers, may confirm what earlier studies have said about the importance of psychological support, trust, and connection in teacher motivation. Research from Self-Determination Theory has long held that when supports such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met, teachers are

more likely to be engaged and resilient (Lyu et al., 2025; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Findings from Fernet and Klassen also support this, showing that when teachers feel emotionally and relationally supported, they can avoid burnout and show efficacy in their work (Fernet et al., 2012; Klassen et. al., 2012). What this study could expand on is the specifics of how that support shows up in conversations between teachers and principals. Rather than just stating that support matters in general terms, principals in this study described what it looks like and shared their experiences of how these conversations with teachers play out daily. These are not broad strategies, they are personal and relational. So, while this theme could support what prior research has shown, it also can extend the literature by offering insight into the emotional labor that principals do, which often goes unnoticed.

Theme two, Principals' Adaptations of Conversations to Meet Teachers' Needs, has the potential to add to the existing literature on instructional feedback and leadership strategies. Previous research has discussed that principals who engage in reflective conversations and use coaching strategies tend to have more motivated teachers (Lee & Mao, 2023; Sun et al., 2016). Other studies also explained the importance of feedback that respects teacher autonomy and encourages growth (Olsen, 2017; Power & Goodnough, 2019) The findings from this study potentially expand on that by showing how daily conversations can be more informal, such as hallway talks, quick chats before or after meetings, or even during planning time. Principals described asking reflective questions, listening first, and offering feedback that came from collaboration with the teacher instead of an evaluative talk. These kinds of interactions were not labeled as coaching, but they did still support teacher reflection and professional growth. This theme indicates building upon

existing ideas in the literature, broadening them to include a more relational aspect of leadership.

Theme three, Conversations for Principal and Teacher Growth, may both expand and somewhat challenge the literature around conversations. This theme could contribute to the concept of the principal as an instructional leader. Current research has suggested leadership that supports teacher growth and autonomy is linked to higher morale and retention (Alsubaie, 2024; Deci, 2009). This aligns with what many principals from this study shared on how they often framed their role as a think partner, not just a supervisor. Principals in this study did more than just monitor instruction. They asked thoughtful questions, listened carefully, offered encouragement, and worked alongside teachers to work through what improvements needed to happen (Adams et al., 2023). This theme potentially pushed back against the top-down leadership models that focused on accountability and compliance (Leithwood et al., 2020). Some research has explained structured walkthroughs and formal evaluations as the main tools for instructional growth (Marzano et al, 2005). The principals in this study often described those structures as limiting and stress-inducing to teachers. Their conversations were more about growth than oversight. This theme could challenge older models of conversation strategies by suggesting that real instructional change comes from dialogue and collaboration, not checklist-driven management.

Theme four, Principals' Conversations Shaped by Navigating External Pressures, could add to this literature by explaining how conversation can be used as a tool to navigate these tensions. Rather than passing on the pressures, many principals used dialogue to reframe policies, lessening their intensity and helping teachers understand the change in a

way that did not thwart their motivation. Existing research has already explored the challenges principals face when navigating mandates and district expectations (Hout & Elliott, 2011; Mohammadi et al., 2014; Price, 2012). The literature has also suggested that rigid policies can actually undermine teacher motivation, and principals struggle to balance top-down directives with staff needs. The reality of this came through in this study. Principals spoke candidly about initiatives decided by upper administration and requirements from different policies. These findings described a closer look at the human-centered view of how principals handle systemic pressures.

Conceptual Implications

The conceptual framework of this study explored contrasting command-and-control conversation with TLC. The findings potentially support this framework in a few different ways. The first claim connects closely with Theme One, by supporting the concepts of Self-Determination Theory of relatedness, which refers to the feeling of connection and belonging (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this study, principals frequently described strong relationships as the groundwork for any real changes in instructional practices to happen. As Adams et al explained in their TLC framework, deep listening and affirming language are core strategies that build relational trust by making teachers feel seen, heard, and valued (Adams et al., 2022).

Many principals explained how they use open-ended questions and reflective dialogue to help teachers come to their own conclusions about their practice, which could support claim number two. These strategies reflect the Transformative Leader Conversation framework, which focuses on three different types of questions (Adams, 2023). However, some principals mentioned relying on top-down approaches when faced with urgent

situations or pressed for time. This could point to a slight gap between what the TLC model encourages and what principals can realistically do within the school system.

The third claim indicates adaptive conversations demonstrate TLC's relational flexibility but challenge the binary between command and control and TLC. Principals in this study often adjusted how they communicated to teachers based on their experience and personality. This part of TLC highlights the importance of personalizing dialogue to build shared understanding (Adams et al., 2022). However, the use of both directive and reflective strategies complicates the clean separation between command-and-control, as well as Transformative Leadership Conversation. Instead of operating within a fixed model, many principals moved between the two more fluidly depending on the situation. This was not something the framework fully predicted. The findings suggested that leadership conversations do not fit into two opposing categories. Instead, principals described moving along a continuum, adapting their approach as situations unfolded. This viewpoint highlights that it could be more useful to think of conversation strategies existing on a spectrum rather than placing them into a strict either-or framework.

The fourth claim may explain how conversations serve as a tool for sensemaking and motivation, somewhat challenging SDT's assumption of internal drive when external mandates dominate. Many principals described using conversations as a way to help teachers make sense of expectations or mandates while keeping the focus on instruction. This reflects a key element of TLC of using dialogue to build a shared sense of purpose (Adams et al., 2022). These moments also support Self-Determination Theory by providing clarity and direction that promote teacher autonomy and intrinsic motivation. However, these findings indicated that some conversations became more compliance-driven

depending on certain situations. What emerged here that the framework did not anticipate was the nuance in how principals balanced supportive dialogue with compliance pressures. Rather than simply supporting or thwarting motivation, conversations sometimes held both dynamics at once. This potentially challenges SDT's assumption that intrinsic motivation can be easily activated when broader institutional pressures impose limitations on what is possible within the school setting.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study suggests some practical steps principals can take to strengthen motivation with their teachers and improve instruction in their school. One of the biggest takeaways is that conversations, and how they happen, really do matter. When they are more intentional, they can help build relationships, support professional growth for both the principal and the teachers and autonomously motivate change in instructional practices. Another implication that stands out is making time for these conversations. With so many demands on principals, it can be really easy to let relationship-building fall to the wayside. When principals made time to connect with teachers through conversation, it often shaped how supported and motivated those teachers felt. In this study, principals relied on open-ended questions and intentional listening to build a culture where teachers would reflect on their own practice and grow professionally. The findings also suggested that principals who approached their teachers with humility, curiosity, and respect helped change the dynamic of the conversation to one of collaboration. There is limited professional development for principals on how to have meaningful conversations with teachers. Having coaching options for principals could help them reflect on their leadership

approach and learn how to adapt conversations based on the different needs of their teachers. Also, leadership programs could incorporate frameworks such as TLC to support principals.

Future Research

There are several ways future studies could expand on this work. First, this research relied on the principal perception of these conversations. To further extend this work, including teacher perspectives to examine whether teachers interpret these conversations in the same way as principals do. Other studies could also expand on how specific elements of Transformative Leadership Conversation manifest in real-time through various methods, such as peer observation or a longitudinal study. These methods could show how conversations evolve or influence sustained instructional change. It would also be interesting to compare a state with less turmoil in education to see how those conversations compare to the study's participants, who face daily external pressures. Expanding this research across different environments could help show which conditions make Transformative Leadership Conversations more likely to take hold and become a sustainable leadership practice.

Conclusion

This study suggests how leadership is not just about checking boxes to reach goals, it is about how those goals are communicated and made meaningful through everyday interactions between principals and their teachers. In a time when educators are facing more pressure and fewer resources, a thoughtful, well-timed conversation with their principal could make a difference. What this research indicates is that conversations are, in fact, leadership in motion. They are the starting point for trust and where real professional

growth often begins. When principals move away from compliance communication and toward a more collaborative, supportive style of dialogue, they can help create the conditions for lasting instructional change. These findings propose that conversations are not just part of the job, they are powerful opportunities for principals to build relationships and drive meaningful change with teachers.

References

Adams, C. M., Adigun, O. B., & Fiegener, A. (2023). *The School Principal, Teacher Burnout,*
and Need-Supportive Conversation. Leadership and Policy in Schools, 1–15.

Adams, C. M., Adigun, O., Fiegener, A. M., & Olsen, J. J. (2022). *Transformative Leadership Conversation: Toward a Conceptualization and Theory of Action for Educationa Leaders. Journal of Transformative Education.*

Adams, C., & Olsen, J. (2017). *Principal support for student psychological needs. Journal of Educational Administration*. 55(5), 510–525.

Adams, C. M., Olsen, J. J., & Ware, J. K. (2017). *The school principal and Student Learning Capacity.* Educational Administration Quarterly. 53(4), 556–584.

Adams, Curt, & Adigun, Olajumoke, & Fiegener, Ashlyn. (2023). *From Crisis to Adaptation: The Function of Transformative Leadership Conversation.* Journal of School Administration Research and Development. 8, 117–122.

Adams, C., Adigun, O. B., & Fiegener, A. (2025). *Teacher epistemic curiosity: How principal–teacher conversation supports it.* Journal of Educational Administration.

Adams, C., & Adigun, O. B. (2024). *The structure of principal-teacher conversation: Why it matters for school leadership.* International Journal of Educational Management.

Alsubaie, A. S. S. (2024). *Exploring the experience of using the Madrasati platform to deliver instruction* (Doctoral dissertation).

Backstrom, B. (2019). *School turnaround efforts: What's been tried, why those efforts failed, and what to do now*. Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government.

Ball, S. J. (2003). *The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. Journal of Education Policy.* 18(2), 215–228.

Beausaert, S., Froehlich, D. E., & Devos, C. (2016). *Effects of support on stress and burnout in school principals.* Educational Review, Taylor & Francis.

Bernhardt, V. L. (2015). *Data, data everywhere: Bringing all the data together for continuous school improvement.* Routledge.

Bibi, S., Abbasi, H., & Ghazal, I. (2024). *Navigating the complexities: Key challenges faced by school principals in managing teaching practices.* Research Journal of Social Sciences & Economics Review.

Bhaskar, R. (1975). *A Realist Theory of Science.* Leeds: Leeds Books.

Blase, J., & Blase, J. (2000). *Effective instructional leadership: Teachers' perspectives on how principals promote teaching and learning in schools. Journal of Educational Administration*. 38(2), 130–141.

Bohm, D. (1991) *Dialogue: A proposal*. In D. Bohm, D. Factor, & P. Garrett (Eds.), Dialogue: A proposal (pp.1-10). Foundation for 2000.

Bogler, R., & Nir, A. E. (2012). *The importance of teachers' perceived organizational support to job satisfaction: What's empowerment got to do with it?* Journal of Educational Administration, 50(3), 287–306.

Boudreaux, M. K. (2017). *Principals' dispositions regarding their autonomy in site-based school management.* National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision Journal, 35(4), 1–11.

Bourgeois, M. (2024). *Voices of Transformation: A Qualitative Inquiry Into the Implementation of New Instructional Coaching Programs.* (Doctoral dissertation).

Bush, T. (2015). *Understanding instructional leadership.* Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 43(4), 487–489.

Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. Q. (2010). Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago. University of Chicago Press.

Castro, A.J. (2023). *Why teachers stay: Understanding resilience and commitment in challenging schools.* Teachers College Press.

Chang, M.-L., Gaines, R.E., & Mosley, K.C. (2022). *Effects of autonomy support and emotional regulation on teacher burnout in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic*. Frontiers in Psychology, 13, 846290.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.

Cruikshank, E. G. (2024). *Principal feedback: A mixed methods study on how teachers respond to informal feedback* [Doctoral dissertation, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing].

Collie, R. J., Shapka, J. D., & Perry, N. E. (2012). *School climate and social–emotional learning: Predicting teacher stress, job satisfaction, and teaching efficacy.* Journal of Educational Psychology, 104(4), 1189–1204.

Covey, S. M. R. (2022). Trust and Inspire: How Truly Great Leaders Unleash Greatness in Others. Simon & Schuster.

Darling-Hammond, L. & Carver-Thomas, D. (2017). *The Role of Principals in Teacher Retention and Instructional Support.*

Day & Sammons (2016). *The impact of leadership on student outcomes: How successful school leaders use transformational and instructional strategies to make a difference.* Educational Administration Quarterly, 52(2), 221–258.

Deci, E. L. (2009). *Large-scale school reform as viewed from the self-determination theory perspective.* Theory and Research in Education, 7(2), 244–252.

Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R.M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior.* New York: Plenum.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). *The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior.* Psychological Inquiry, 11, 227–268.

DeMatthews, D. E., & Serafini, A. (2021). *Principal leadership for school inclusion: A social justice perspective.* Educational Administration Quarterly, 57(2), 272–304.

Desimone, L. M., & Garet, M. S. (2015). *Best practices in teachers' professional development in the United States.* Psychology, Society & Education, 7(3), 252–263.

DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). *The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields*. American Sociological Review, 48(2), 147–160.

Evers, W. J. G., Brouwers, A., & Tomic, W. (2002). *Burnout and self-efficacy: A study on teachers' beliefs when implementing an innovative educational system in the Netherlands.* British Journal of Educational Psychology, 72(2), 227–243.

Eyal, O., & Roth, G. (2011). *Principals' leadership and teachers' motivation: Self-determination theory analysis.* Journal of Educational Administration, 49(3), 256–275.

Fairhurst, G. T. (2008). Discursive leadership. Management Communication Quarterly, 21(4), 510–521.

Farmer, D. (2020). *Teacher attrition: The impacts of stress.* Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin.

Fennimore, B. S. (2000). Talk Matters: Refocusing the Language of Public Schooling. Teachers College Press.

Fiegener, A. M., & Adams, C. M. (2022). *Instructional Program Coherence, Teacher Intent to Leave, and the Mediating Role of Teacher Psychological Needs.* Leadership and Policy in Schools, 22, 765-786.

Fernet, C., Guay, F., Senécal, C., & Austin, S. (2012). *Predicting intraindividual changes in teacher burnout: The role of perceived school environment and motivational factors.* Teaching and Teacher Education, 28(4), 514–525.

Fernet, C., Trépanier, S. G., & Austin, S. (2016). *Committed, inspiring, and healthy teachers: How do the school environment and motivational factors facilitate optimal functioning at the start of a career?* Teaching and Teacher Education, 59, 481–491.

Finnigan, K. S. (2010). *Principal leadership and teacher motivation under high-stakes accountability policies.* Leadership and Policy in Schools, 9(2), 161–189.

Finnigan, K. S., Daly, A. J., & Che, J. (2020). *Systemic leadership and relational trust: A longitudinal analysis of improvement networks.* American Journal of Education, 126(3), 367–397.

Ford, T. G., Olsen, J., Khojasteh, J., Ware, J., & Urick, A. (2019). *The effects of leader support for teacher psychological needs on teacher burnout, commitment, and intent to leave.* Journal of Educational Administration, 57(6), 615-634.

Ford, T. G., Van Sickle, M., Clark, L. V., & Fazio-Brunson, M. (2019). *The role of dialogue in principal–teacher relationships: Fostering instructional leadership.* Journal of Educational Administration, 57(3), 240–257.

Fullan, M. (2009). Large-scale reform comes of age. Journal of Educational Change, 10(1), 101–113.

Germani, S. (2024). *Supporting students' motivation: A key factor to reduce intentions to drop out of high school.* Scuola Democratica: Education and Social Change.

Goldring, E., Huff, J., May, H., & Camburn, E. (2009). *School context and individual characteristics: What influences principal practice?* Journal of Educational Administration, 46(3), 332–352.

Gronn, P.C. (1983), *Talk as the work: The accomplishment of school administration*, Administrative Science Quarterly, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp.1-21.

Groysberg, B., & Slind, M. (2012). *Talk, Inc.: How trusted leaders use conversation to power their organizations*. Harvard Business Review Press.

Hallinger (2011). *Leadership for learning: Lessons from 40 years of empirical research.* Journal of Educational Administration, 49 (2), 125-142.

Hallinger, P., & Murphy, J. (1985). *Assessing the instructional management behavior of principals.* The Elementary School Journal, 86(2), 217–247.

Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Helgøy, I., & Homme, A. (2004). *Governance in primary and lower secondary education.* Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/download/42198131/N16-04_1_.pdf

Herzberg, F. (1966). Work and the nature of man. Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Company.

Hout, M. & Elliott, S. W. (2011). *Incentives and Test-Based Accountability in Education.* National Academies Press.

Honig, M.I. (2006). *Complexity and policy implementation: Challenges for district leadership.* Educational Administration Quarterly, 42(1), 43-75.

Huić, A., & Balaško, L. (2024). *The importance of teacher's basic psychological needs and their self-efficacy being the determinants of teacher's (de)motivating behaviors.*

Johnson, S. M., Kardos, S. M., Kauffman, D., Liu, E., & Donaldson, M. L. (2001). *Counting on colleagues: New teachers encounter the professional cultures of their schools.* Educational Administration Quarterly, 37(2), 250–290.

Johnston, W. R. (2021). *Teacher retention in high-poverty schools: Current challenges and policy responses.* RAND Corporation.

Kahne, J. E., Sporte, S. E., & de la Torre, M. (2006). *Small High Schools on a Larger Scale: The First Three Years of the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative*

Kelchtermans, G. (2005). *Teachers' emotions in educational reforms: Self-understanding, vulnerable commitment and micropolitical literacy.* Teaching and Teacher Education, 21(8), 995–1006

Kim, J., & Youngs, P. (2023). *How policy instruments explain implementation of teacher evaluation policies under local control.* Leadership and Policy in Schools

Klar, H. W., & Brewer, C. A. (2013). *Successful leadership in high-needs schools: An examination of core leadership practices enacted in challenging contexts*. Educational Administration Quarterly, 49(5), 768–808

Klassen, R. M., Usher, E. L., & Bong, M. (2010). *Teachers' collective efficacy, job satisfaction, and job stress in cross-cultural context.* Journal of Experimental Education, 78(4), 464–486.

Koerber, N., Marquez-Mendez, M., & Mensah, A. (2023). *Sustaining teacher needs: A systematic narrative review exploring teacher retention, attrition, and motivation.* Literature Reviews in Education.

Kraft, M.A., & Grace, S (2020). *The influence of teacher autonomy and professional growth opportunities on teachers' sustained motivation: A longitudinal study*. Educational Leadership, 78(4), 42-49.

Kraft, M. A., & Papay, J. P. (2014). C*an professional environments in schools promote teacher development? Explaining heterogeneity in returns to teaching experience.* Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 36(4), 476–500.

Latif, N., & Khan, U. A. (2025). *Exploring the impact of servant leadership on faculty motivation and empowerment in Pakistani higher education institutions.* Journal of Social Signs Review.

Lee, W. J., & Mao, Z. (2023). *The impact of leadership styles on teachers' motivation and job satisfaction: A meta-analysis.* Journal of Educational Administration, 61(3), 345-369.

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). *Seven strong claims about successful school leadership (Revisited).* School Leadership & Management, 40(1), 5–22.

Lewin, K. (1947). *Frontiers in group dynamics: Concept, method and reality in social science; social equilibria and social change*. Human Relations, 1(1), 5–41.

Liyadi, M., & Lubis, N. S. (2025). *Fostering teachers and educational staff work to improve competence at Nurul Iman Private Junior High School.* Journal of Practice and Leadership in Education.

Lui, S. K., & Hallinger, P. (2018). *Principal instructional leadership and teacher motivation: A moderated mediation analysis of teacher self-efficacy and autonomy.* Educational Administration Quarterly, 54(4), 501–528.

Liu, W. C., Wang, C. K. J., Tan, O. S., Koh, C., & Ee, J. (2009). *Understanding teacher development and motivation from teachers' point of view.* Journal of Education for Teaching, 35(3), 269–285.

Lowenhaupt, R. (2014). *The Language of Leadership: Principal Autonomy and Accountability in the New Policy Context.* Journal of Educational Administration, 52(6), 731–748.

Lyu, H., Liu, Y., & Yin, H. (2025). *The antecedents and outcomes of teachers' autonomy satisfaction: A meta-analytic investigation.* Frontiers in Psychology, 16, Article 1643653

Marshak, R. J. (2009). *Organizational change: Views from the inside and outside leaders.* Academy of Management Proceedings, 2009(1), 1-6.

Marsh, J. A., & Farrell, C. C. (2015). *How leaders can support teachers with data-driven decision making: A framework for understanding capacity building.* Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 43(2), 256–278.

Martinez, J., & McAbee, S. (2020). *School administrator support of teachers: A systematic review (2000-2019).* Education Leadership Review, 21(1), 1-15.

Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. A. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results.* ASCD.

Maxwell, J. A. (2012). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach (3rd ed.)*. SAGE Publications

Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). *Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony.* American Journal of Sociology, 83(2), 340–363.

McDonnell, L. M. (1994). *Assessment policy as persuasion and regulation.* American Journal of Education, 102(4), 394-420.

McKay, A. (2018). *Power and the 'autonomous' principal: Autonomy, teacher development, and school leaders' work.* Journal of Educational Administration and History, 50(2), 101–116.

Mohammadi, B. S., Naami, A., & Zarei, E. (2014). *A model of job calling in teachers.* The Journal of New Thoughts on Education, 20(2), 61-73.

Moreno, C. I. (2012). *Monetary incentives and organizational change in Mexican higher education* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Chicago). ProQuest Dissertationa & Theses Global.

Munawaroh, C., & Ruskandar, A. (2024). *Effectiveness of Developing Teacher Competencies Through School Principals' Transformational Leadership*. Proceeding of International Conference on Education, Society and Humanity, 2(1), 483.

Ndebele, D., Phiri, I., Kufahakurotwi, R., & Tirivanhu, T. S. (2025). *Motivation as a tool for sustainability in education.* International Journal of Reserach and Innovation in Social Science, 9(01), 4148-4154.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2025). Digest of Education Statistics, 2025.

Núñez, J. L., & León, J. (2015). *Autonomy support in the classroom: A review from self-determination theory.* European Psychologist, 20(3), 180–193. Oklahoma State Department of Education. (2022). Annual report on teacher retention and recruitment.

Olsen, J. (2017). *Principal support of teacher psychological needs: The conceptualization and measurement of a new construct* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oklahoma). CORE.

Power, K., & Goodnough, K. (2019). *Fostering teachers' autonomous motivation during professional learning: A self-determination theory perspective.* Teaching Education, 30(3), 278–295.

Price, H. E. (2012). *Principal–teacher interactions: How affective relationships shape principal and teacher attitudes.* Educational Administration Quarterly, 48(1), 39-85.

Prickett-Armstrong, R. A. (2025). *Commitment to the profession: Elementary teacher perceptions of self-determination and professional retention in Tennessee* (Doctoral dissertation, East Tennessee State University). Digital Commons @ ETSU.

Quilabert, E., Verger, A., & Moschetti, M. C. (2024). *The obstacle race to educational improvement: Governance, policies, and practices in disadvantaged schools.* British Journal of Sociology of Education. Taylor & Francis.

Richardson, P. W., & Watt, H. M. G. (2006). *Who chooses teaching and why? Profiling characteristics and motivations across three Australian universities.* Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 34(1), 27-56

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2020). *Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation from a self-determination theory perspective: Definitions, theory, practices, and future directions.* Contemporary Educational Psychology, 61, 101860.

Ortega-Sánchez, D., & Sanz de la Cal, E. (2025). *Teaching controversial issues in secondary education: Rethinking the role of school leadership in curriculum transformation.* Frontiers in Education, 10, Article 1574469.

Quilabert, E., & Moschetti, M. C. (2024). *Most likely you go your way (and I'll go mine): School-level enactment of an educational innovation policy in Barcelona.* European Educational Research Journal.

Sandelowski, M. (2000). *Whatever happened to qualitative description?* Research in Nursing & Health, 23(4), 334–340.

Scribner, J. P., Sawyer, R. K., Watson, S. T., & Myers, V. L. (2007). *Teacher teams and distributed leadership: A study of group discourse and collaboration.* Educational Administration Quarterly, 43(1), 67–100.

Segal, L., & Lefstein, A. (2021). *Excellence, professional learning and performativity: An ethnographic study of an English secondary school.* Teaching and Teacher Education, 105, 103414.

Sikes, B. J. (2024). *Effects of elementary principal traits on teacher perceptions of competence, relatedness, and autonomy* (Doctoral dissertation).

Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2020). *Teacher burnout: Relations between dimensions of burnout, perceived school context, job satisfaction, and motivation for teaching. A longitudinal study.* Teachers and Teaching, 27(2), 99-116.

Schein, E. H. (1993). *Organizational culture and leadership*. In Organizational Culture and Leadership (2nd ed., pp. 1–14)

Schneider, A., & Ingram, H. (1990). *Behavioral assumptions of policy tools.* The Journal of Politics, 52(2), 510-529.

Schneider, A. L., & Ingram, H. (2014). *Democratic policy design: Social construction of target populations.* In Theories of the Policy Process. Routledge.

Smith, W. C. (2014). *The global transformation toward testing for accountability.* Education Policy Analysis Archives, 22(116).

Spillane, J. P., & Healey, K. (2009). *Managing and leading elementary schools: Attending formal and informal organisation.* International Studies in Educational Administration, 37(1), 5-28.

Sun, J., et al. (2016). *Teacher professional development and its impact on student achievement in China: Evidence from a national panel dataset*. Educational Researcher, 45(2).

Szeto, E., & Cheng, A. Y. N. (2018). *Principal–teacher interactions and teacher leadership development: Beginning teachers' perspectives.* International Journal of Leadership in Education, 21(3), 363–379.

Taylor, J. (2003). *Sticks and carrots: The effectiveness of government policy on higher education in England since 1979.* Higher Education Management and Policy, 15(1), 91-110.

Tschannen-Moran, M. (2009). *Fostering teacher professionalism in schools: The role of leadership orientation and trust.* Educational Administration Quarterly, 45(2), 217–247.

Tschannen-Moran, M. (2014). Trust matters: Leadership for successful schools (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Turney, J. (2024). *Elementary teachers' perceptions of teacher retention* (Doctoral dissertation). Walden University.

Ulviani, M. (2025). *From Classroom Practice to National Policy: Unpacking the Multifaceted Impact of ICT on Education.*

U.S. Department of Education (2023). Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Summary.

Van Vugt, S. J. H., & Gallagher, S. E. (2025). *Staff development in higher education interinstitutional collaborations: An exploratory literature review*. Innovations in Education and Teaching International.

Weiner, J. M. (2016). *Under my thumb: Principals' difficulty releasing decision-making to their instructional leadership team*. Journal of School Leadership, 26(2), 334-364.

West, J. J., & Stanley, A. M. (2022). *Exogenous shocks and teachers' motivation to learn: Pandemic and professional development in the United States*. International Journal for Research in Education, 46(2), 261-308.

Williams, W. E. (2018). *Principal leadership style, teacher motivation, and teacher retention* (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University). ScholarWorks.

Zhou, S., Slemp, G. R., & Vella-Brodrick, D. A. (2024). *Factors associated with teacher wellbeing: A meta-analysis.* Educational Psychology Review, 36-63.

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Warm Up questions:

1. Can you tell me about your background?
2. What did you do before becoming a principal?
3. What motivated you to become a principal?
4. How many years have you been a principal?
5. What are your favorite things about the job?

Interview Questions:

1. Is there a particular school initiative right now that focuses on curriculum or instruction?

Probe: Could you walk me through what the initiative is about?
Probe: How was this initiative developed or chosen?
Probe if no: (Think about any initiative that they have led around instructional change, even if it is not a current one)

2. Recently, have you had the opportunity to talk with one or more teachers about their instruction?

Probe: Could you walk me through one of those conversations?
Probe: What was the purpose of this conversation?
Probe: How did the conversation unfold (What was talked about, how did it start. how did it end, components)
Probe: Is there anything you would do differently if you had this conversation again?

3. When you find yourself talking with a teacher about instruction, how does that usually come about?

Probe: Is there a conversation that stands out to you? If so, could you explain it to me?

4. What do you see as the purpose of conversations about instructional practices with teachers?

Probe: Does this purpose ever shift depending on the situation or the teacher?

5. Can you tell me about a time when a conversation with a teacher led to a change in their instructional practices?

Probe: What stands out most about that experience?

6. Is there any part of having conversations with teachers about their instruction you find rewarding? Most challenging?

Appendix B: Codebook

Parent Codes	Child Codes	Descriptions	Quotes
Motivation & Psychological Needs	Autonomous Motivation	Driven by internal goals, values and interests that promote deep engagement or ownership.	*"As a principal, I think the purpose would be to support them and empower them in their classroom." Participant 15* *"I think you have to have a relationship with the teacher. She has to know that you care. They want to know that you care and love them before they're going to learn and listen to you."-Participant 6*
	Psychological needs	Based on SDT: Autonomy, competence, and relatedness.	*"They [teachers] just need the support, and that is my job is to make sure they have that support where they can lean on someone." -Participant 14* *"I feel like those [conversations about instruction] are pretty common conversations…I would say they are usually informal based upon walk throughs and observations." -Participant 19* *I'm in this boat too. Both rowing, sometimes you row, sometimes I row. So how do we tackle the problem together?"-Participant 17* *"I think everyone's got to teach in their own skin, and you got to step back and let them teach and not, you know, micromanage…the purpose always*

			is to help and empower them and support them."-Participant 16
	Teacher Burnout	Emotional exhaustion and disengagement from unmet needs or lack of support.	*"I see phenomenal teachers and school staff members as a whole, from all the different roles we have in school building sometimes start to burn themselves out. And it's not because they're doing a bad job, it's they're not managing their time well, and they're not rewarding themselves with things outside of the school…but I have had a number of conversations with teachers, probably more of those type conversations in the last couple of years than I ever had previously."-Principal 12*
	Teacher Stress	Pressure overload experienced by teachers from conflicting demands.	*"The main issue was I did not go about incorporating them into the conversation and getting that buy in, and then still expecting them to do it and love it"-Participant 18*
	Emotional Labor of Leadership	Principals' invisible effort to absorb staff emotions for the sake of morale and building relationships and trust	*"She needed encouragement more than anything… I tried to give her the tiniest of pointers just to keep her confidence up."-Participant 13* *"As the leader, I felt like it was my responsibility to go back and follow up with her and not just leave, leave her in the low spot, I guess. And in that, in that hard conversation, I gave her permission to do whatever she needed to do to be able to get that passion back."-Participant 24*

			"I have those that you know how I go about it makes a big difference. And then I have those teachers that I could just walk in there and say, Hey, and not good, okay. And so all people are different."-Participant 1 *"Sometimes it's harder to have conversations with veteran teachers. They're used to doing things this way, and it's been working this way and getting them to change their paradigm, and sometimes it's hard."-Participant 22*
Instructional Leadership	Instructional Change	Shifts or improvements in classroom practice.	*"I think it's important to just constantly have those lines of communication open so that way you're building that relationship so further down the line, if we if we need to pull on that we've already built that it's not like in the moment, we just have to have this conversation about instruction that we never even talked about. I want them to have that trust that I may not know all of your content or whatever, but we're in this together."-Participant 8* *"Let's work with these two things. Am I going to get them additional mentor training where they need to go watch a teacher that's rocking at it. Am I going to let them watch a video that I found that would help them? Is there something they could read so offering different types of professional development to them so that they can actually put good techniques into actual place"-Participant 2*

	Reflective Practices	Opportunities for teachers to examine and improve their practice through retrospective dialogue.	*"My biggest responsibility, I feel like, is just to hold up a mirror and to try to give you a clear picture of what your practice is like and how it relates to what we know about best practices in teaching and learning, and then to try to fill in the gap between where you are and where we think you can be. And so I try to make it very much about growth and support"-Participant 10* *"I always tell them at the beginning, I'm not here to try to get you on anything... but just know that my heart and spirit coming into it is about trying to grow you so that you can have the greatest amount of influence on your students. I feel like under normal conditions, I think all human beings trend toward growth like we want to get better, we want to improve. It's when we have stressful stuff going on, it's when we have trauma, those things shut down our ability to do that. So I try to make it about growth"-Participant 10*
	Observation/Evaluation conversation	Conversations that sparked from formal evaluations	
	Data Driven Practices	Use of data to guide instruction and foster reflection.	
Communication Practices	Affirming Language	Language used by principals that validates and encourages teachers' efforts to boost motivation and self-worth.	*"Always, always start with a praise. Does not matter. I always call it my bookends. We start with something positive, and then we talk about areas to grow, and we end with something encouraging too." — Participant 15*

	Supportive Feedback	Feedback that builds on trust and motivation between the teacher and principal.	*"I would rather coach someone up and work really hard with them, and if they leave, it be okay, than me avoid coaching someone up and then I have them stay"-Participant 14* *"All of the formal conversations we have about these things are really supported and buffered by the informal conversations we have about how their personal lives are, how their kids are, what it's like being a teacher in that classroom at that point… That relationship has to be in place. That's always the hard part with feedback… getting that established."-Participant 10* *"So in that conversation, it's a lot of relationship building that has to do with instruction. Because, again, you can't coach will. You can only coach skills. So it's having them willing to make that change. I mean, I can make them do it or I can include them in the conversation and my decision. So I feel like you leave more skin on the bone when you can include them in your conversation and your thinking."-Participant 25* *"I think it's important to continue to give them feedback, so that they continue to improve their craft. And you have to, it has to be something that's continual, because if it's not, then it, then it feels, it doesn't feel like it's coaching."-Participant 23*

	Neutral Feedback	Feedback that is task-focused and professional but doesn't lead to empowerment or autonomous motivation.	*"When we talk through their lessons, I try to ask questions that get them thinking differently—'What if you flipped this? What would that look like?' It's not about fixing something—it's about curiosity."-Participant 7* *"It was a heart to heart conversation of, look, you're going to have to do this, and they [students] have to be accountable because you can't get through your instruction without being interrupted. So we are going to come up with a system and then they're going to get a consequence, be consistent"-Participant 9*
	Command and Control Feedback	Top-down communication focused on directives and compliance/authority over collaboration.	*"I put enough pressure on you to the point where I may be in and out of your room three or four times a day, and I'm asking the questions, Why is __ not working? Why is this? You know, I make you uncomfortable"-Participant 5* *"We had the same conversation just about every week. No growth. So again, it was one of those things where I've listed things that I need from you, and you're not meeting those expectations. So we're going to have to continue forward with keeping you on this plan of improvement until you can show me and produce the things I'm asking you to produce."-Participant 3* *"The purpose of these conversations might shift…sometimes that purpose is to fix the problem. When you put [a teacher] on a plan of*

			improvement…that's hard to do, depending on what that plan is for"-Participant 16 *"So you have to train them to evaluate themselves open mindedly. So you know that part the purpose of that discussion is to open their eyes to what they're missing."-Participant 5*
	Listening	Intentional effort to hear and understand teachers' perspectives	*"I think it is really important. It's really important to keep it positive and just to listen to them also, because they have the way they feel, and you know, it's their classroom, so I think it's important to have that active listening piece a part of it also"- Participant 19* *"I tell them, I'm going to listen to what you say and actually do listen. I think that's what some administrators that I could tell were actually listening and then follow up."-Participant 1*
	Questioning	Use of open-ended or reflective questions to prompt teacher thinking and shared-problem solving	*"I think that's another thing that is very important. It's that people want to know that you are going to follow up with them and you are asking questions. I ask a lot of questions.-Participant 1* *"It's usually me getting into almost like a Socratic method of questioning her about, well, what she does know, what she does feel confident about, and how can we, how can we leverage the things that she does feel confident into the things that she does not."-Participant 7*

Relational Leadership	Principal-Teacher Relationship	Trusting, supportive relationships between principals and teachers	*"My job is to care about them as a person more than I do as a teacher." Participant 12* *If you create the relationship, that allows you to be able to have conversations about instruction"-Participant 25* *"Honestly, it usually comes about, I never lead with instruction. I always end up talking to them about their overall well-being and their job satisfaction. Then the instruction ends up happening naturally. Because I think if I went in with that initial, 'Hey, I want to talk about instruction', they're not really going to open up"-Participant 24*
	Collaborative Dialogue	Two-way conversations focused on co-constructing meaning	*"I never want a teacher to feel like it's just a compliance conversation. I want them to feel like we're partners in figuring out how to do this better. That's when the conversation actually leads to change in the classroom."-Participant 11* *"The most rewarding part is seeing someone accomplish something they didn't think they could do… to know I played some small part in that- as a coach, encouragement, or even a thought partner, that's the best part."-Participant 26*

			“I think it's important to continue to give them feedback, so that they continue to improve their craft. And you have to, it has to be something that's continual, because if it's not, then it, then it feels, it doesn't feel like it's coaching.”- Participant 23 *“My staff is pretty open to express their ideas and opinions, and they do so I think they feel comfortable sharing what they like and don't like, and they know there's no judgment. For me, that's really meaningful, though. Whenever you know you can collaborate in that way.”-Participant 13* “*Just having them [teachers] reflect a lot and voice it like, Take me back to that lesson and tell me exactly what was happening. You know, were you able to do a small group whenever your other kiddos are working over here and those kinds of things. So really, I like to try to get them as part of the conversation, and me not dictating.”-Participant 22*
	Professional Growth	Teachers or leaders learn from each other through dialogue.	*“Sometimes it's me going to them and asking for their input or for their help on how I can make things better.”-Participant 6*

			I try to go, Hey, I'm in this boat too, right? Both rowing, sometimes you row, sometimes I row. But to me, this direct instruction to students is you and I. So how do we tackle the problem? -Participant 13 *"The purpose is for us to grow. And I think two things happen in this conversation. I think one, it's helping build and sharpen the tools of the teacher and what they're able to provide to students. But I also think it sharpens me too, because through listening to what their needs are, listening to what their ideas are like."-Participant 4* *I think it's the teacher's willingness to take a risk and say…to hear this feedback and not feel like it was criticism. I think that's one of the first steps in really having a productive change in someone's practice, right? That you're able to hear feedback as something other than criticism"-Participant 26* *"I think the purpose is we all should want to get better all the time. I should want to be a better principal every day, every year. I should learn just like a classroom teacher, to learn how to meet the needs of their students. So really, that purpose is*

			to become better. Because if we ever get complacent and just say, well, this is just how I do it, period, that can be a dangerous trap to get into. You might not ever get out of that trap."-Participant 12
	Peer Leadership	Leadership and support provided from colleague to colleague.	*"What's really unique to my team is that, you know, not only am I, like providing guidance at the end the leadership, but we've really built the capacity as a team where we're helping each other respond to needs and questions, and we're building everyone's capacity together."-Participant 4* *"I need you to be the example… I need you to help me with what I did. You think you could help your other teachers in your grade level?"-Participant 6*
Systemic Constraints	Policy Pressures	External mandates and accountability demands that constrain autonomy.	*We always have initiatives. And unfortunately, you know, I feel like public schools, we change so often because of trends, and we change this, we change that.-Particiapnt20* *"You're bound by your professional duty to use what your district has purchased. So you're gonna have to use it" -Participant 9* *"And they're [teachers] like, Well, I think that I'm not going to hit on everything that the state, you*

			know, all of the things that it requires for this subject, and all of the standards I'm not going to hit them if I don't cover all these things."-Participant 17

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: May 01, 2025 **IRB#:** 18483

Principal Investigator: Morgan Elliott

Approval Date: 05/01/2025

Exempt Category: 1 & 2

Study Title: TRANSFORMATION THROUGH CONVERSATION: SCHOOL LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS OF MOTIVATIONAL COMMUNICATION WITH TEACHERS

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Aimee Franklin, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board