THE IMPACT OF STANDARDIZED TESTING ON K12 LEADERSHIP

by

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To:

My Daddy

My Mother My First Teacher

My Grandmother Willia Parker

My Grandmother Alice Roberts

My Cousin Betty Jean Jenkins

My Uncle Charles Turner

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PREFACE

This dissertation investigates the role of educational leadership in shaping the implementation, interpretation, and consequences of standardized testing within contemporary educational systems. Although standardized testing is frequently positioned as a neutral mechanism for accountability and performance measurement, its influence on instructional practice, school culture, and student outcomes is neither uniform nor inevitable. Rather, these outcomes are significantly mediated by leadership decisions, beliefs, and practices at the school and district levels.

The impetus for this study lies in the recognition that educational leaders function as critical intermediaries between policy mandates and classroom realities. Leaders determine how assessment data are communicated, how testing priorities are balanced against curricular and instructional goals, and how educators and students experience the pressures associated with high-stakes testing. Effective leadership has the potential to leverage standardized assessments as tools for reflective practice, data-informed decision-making, and equitable support for diverse learners. In contrast, limited or misaligned leadership approaches may intensify instructional narrowing, exacerbate inequities, and contribute to diminished professional autonomy and student engagement.

By examining leadership within the context of standardized testing, this research seeks to contribute to the scholarly discourse on educational accountability and leadership practice. The study aims to illuminate leadership strategies that promote ethical, instructional, and equity-centered uses of assessment, while also offering implications for policy development, leadership preparation programs, and future

research. Ultimately, this dissertation endeavors to advance a more nuanced understanding of how leadership can shape assessment practices that support both accountability and meaningful learning.

ABSTRACT

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This mixed-methods study examined the relationship between K12 administrators' leadership styles and their perceptions of standardized assessments. Guided by transformational and transactional leadership frameworks, the study explored how leadership behaviors influence decision-making, communication, instructional practices, and school climate in the context of high-stakes testing environments. Quantitative data were collected through a Qualtrics survey administered to 69 K12 administrators, measuring leadership style and perceptions of standardized testing. Descriptive statistics and multiple regression analyses revealed that transformational leadership was positively associated with more adaptive perceptions of standardized assessments, particularly in areas related to instructional leadership, communication, and fostering a positive school climate. Transactional leadership, while present, was less predictive of supportive testing perceptions.

Qualitative data, analyzed through thematic analysis, supported these findings and highlighted three central themes: time**,** decision-making**,** and leadership perceptions. Administrators reported that time demands, district-driven mandates, and accountability pressures shaped their responses to standardized testing; however, transformational

leaders tended to buffer negative impacts by emphasizing collaboration, instructional support, and morale. Integration of quantitative and qualitative results demonstrated that leadership style plays a critical role in shaping how standardized testing is perceived and managed within schools.

The study contributes to the literature by clarifying how leadership approaches can mitigate or exacerbate the challenges associated with standardized assessments, offering implications for leadership preparation, policy, and future research.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Overview

For over half a century, federal educational reform has intended to increase principal effectiveness, student achievement, and teacher quality in K12 public schools in the United States. However, these initiatives have failed to close the achievement gap or produce a more equitable K12 public school system. Greenblatt et al. (2020) claimed that accountability in the sociopolitical context of education should consider various factors including healthcare, employment, transportation to school administration, teacher education, and students. The inception of standardized assessments has increased responsibility, productivity, and accountability criteria for K12 leaders.

Prior research has focused on the impact of standardized testing on students and teachers, however, there is a lack of existing research on the impact of standardized testing on K12 leaders. Addressing academic achievement requires adapting leadership behavior to address the diverse needs of stakeholders (Templeton, et al., 2016). Principals can bring about transformational and sustainable change in their organizations by demonstrating the ability to fluctuate and flex between different and effective leadership styles. This research was designed to explore whether there is a relationship between K12 leadership styles and their perceptions of standardized assessments.

Background of the Study

It is useful, as a basic starting point to a discussion of how leadership styles of school administrators may impact their experiences of standardized testing in the schools, to have the definitions of these three terms that are used throughout the dissertation.

- **Transformational Leadership:** A leadership style that seeks to inspire and elevate followers through shared vision, innovation, and individualized support (Bass, 1985).
- **Transactional Leadership:** A leadership style based on structured roles, task-oriented exchanges, and contingent reinforcement (Bass, 1985).
- **Standardized Assessments:** Uniform tests administered and scored in a consistent manner, often used to evaluate student performance and school accountability.

History of High Stakes Testing in Public Schools

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was signed into law in 1965 by President Lyndon Baines Johnson, who believed that "full educational opportunity" should be "our first national goal." From its inception, ESEA was a civil rights law. ESEA offered new grants to districts serving low-income students, federal grants for textbooks, library books, funding for special education centers, and scholarships for low-income college students. Additionally, the law provided federal grants to state educational agencies to improve the quality of elementary and secondary education.

On January 8, 2002, former president George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The law reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary

Public Education Act of 1964. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 was the most significant educational reform enacted in the United States in decades (Husband, 2015). NCLB has significantly influenced the dialogue surrounding K-12 public education in the United States. The NCLB Act has also had a major effect on the daily operation of administrators, principals, assistant principals, counselors, teachers, and most importantly students. This legislation is intended to hold schools accountable for defined levels of student achievement each year (Husband, 2015). The NCLB Act included government-sponsored Title I provisions that provided additional funding to disadvantaged students enrolled in public schools across the nation. Title I is a program associated with the NCLB Act that provides additional funding to schools with a large population of disadvantaged students. Title I is important because it provides additional funding to schools in low-income communities. Schools usually get their funding from local taxes and more affluent communities pay more in taxes which provides more funding for schools in those communities (Husband, 2015). To what magnitude have these policies impacted K-12 school leaders?

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is the first national standards-based education reform that has increased the federal government's participation in public education. Under the NCLB Act, the federal government imposed new regulations for public school education through annual testing, monitoring academic progress, and evaluating teacher performance standards. The NCLB Act required all public elementary, middle, and high schools receiving federal funding to administer a statewide standardized test annually to all in grades 3-8 and grade 10 students. The rationale for this policy was to promote equity in educational opportunity by measuring how well the public education

system teaches students to master a state's academic standards in these subjects Schools are measured by student test scores and the results determine funding and other administrative measures.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was supposed to reduce the achievement gaps between poor and wealthy students, but data supporting that claim is in dispute (Smith 2007; Kober, 2009; Chapman& Vezzo, 2010). Schools were required to increase all students' reading and math levels to 100% proficient for their grade level by 2014. "NCLB is premised on the notion that schools will be made better by following a yearly testing regime that makes every child proficient in reading, math, and science by 2014 (Meier et al., 2004 p.xii). NCLB represented a significant step forward for our nation's children in many respects, particularly as it highlighted where students were making progress and where they needed additional support. The law was scheduled for revision in 2007, and, over time, NCLB's prescriptive requirements became increasingly difficult to achieve for school leaders, educators, and students. In 2009, the Obama Administration acknowledged this fact and set an agenda in the hope of creating a better law that focused on the clear goal of fully preparing all students for success in college and careers.

In 2010, President Barack Obama introduced the Race to the Top Act (R2T) as a competitive fund to promote school improvement on both a state and local level. According to England (2022), at that time $4.35 billion was pledged in what the White House called the "largest ever federal investment in education reform". Under the (R2T) initiative, state governments were called upon to submit plans for education reform to gain a portion of the funding pledged for the program.

The criteria for R2T funding stressed included 1) improvement of assessments and more rigorous standards for schools; 2) turn-around failing schools through increased emphasis and resources; 3) support that allows teachers and staff to be more effective; and 4) better methods for tracking the progress of both students and teachers. Each state had the opportunity to submit a plan to the U.S. Department of Education for educational reform, focused on these four criteria. Since the program was launched, 46 of 50 states submitted plans while a number of those states have received funding from the program. The funding went directly to implementing the reforms outlined in each state's plans (Scott, 2011). (R2T) advanced the educational reform agenda, particularly around the Common Core and next-generation teacher evaluations.

In 2012, the Center for American Progress (CAP) reported, "Every state has delayed some part of their grant implementation." CAP researchers also reported that a Florida reporter told them, "Only a handful of districts feel like they're prepared to do new teacher evaluations and felt like they were being rushed." As of April 2015, the U.S. Department of Education was still temporarily withholding a final $10 million earmarked for Georgia because officials had quibbles with elements of the state's performance-based compensation system.

In December of 2015, President Obama signed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) This bipartisan measure reauthorized the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the nation's national education law and longstanding commitment to equal opportunity for all students. The previous version of the law, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, was enacted in 2002. ESSA included provisions to ensure success for students and schools and ensures that vital information is provided to

educators, families, students, and communities through annual statewide assessments that measure students' progress toward those high standards.

Under ESSA, states have multiple opportunities to invest in high-quality school leadership, especially in high-needs schools and communities. In Title I, Part A School Improvement states are required to set aside 7% of their Title I, Part A funds to improve low-performing schools by using evidence-based strategies that increase student learning (Every Student Succeeds Act, Section 1003(b)). States and districts have the flexibility to select the mix of evidence-based strategies that best meet their contexts (Every Student Succeeds Act, Section 8101(21)(A)(i)(I)–(III)). According to Gates et al., (2016), multiple school leader interventions demonstrate strong, moderate, and promising levels of evidence under ESSA's evidence-based requirements.

Furthermore, states, districts, and nonprofit organizations could further strengthen school leadership capacity by applying for a competitive federal grant that can be used for a range of activities that support and develop high-quality school leaders. These grants included: 1) Teacher and School Leader Incentive Program: formerly the Teacher Incentive Fund, this program supports state and district investments in performance-based compensation and human capital management systems for principals, other school leaders, and teachers (Every Student Succeeds Act, Section 2212; 2) Supporting Effective Educator Development: for nonprofit organizations and institutions of higher education to support educator recruitment, preparation, certification, and professional learning (Every Student Succeeds Act, Section 2242); and 3) School Leader Recruitment and Support Program: for states and districts to recruit, prepare, place, support, and retain leaders in high-need schools (Every Student Succeeds Act, Section 2243).

Michigan's Experience with High Stakes Testing

During the 2013-14 school year, the MEAP test in Michigan measured proficiency in third-grade reading. Only 70 percent of Michigan's fourth graders were deemed "third grade reading proficient" during the 2013-14 school year, meaning that nearly one-third of our students do not meet that benchmark. In October 2013, House Bill 5111 was introduced, establishing the "Third Grade Reading Guarantee." The House Bill would retain children in third grade until proficiency is reached. At the same time, another Representative introduced House Bill 5144, which provided early interventions to help increase reading proficiency in Michigan, focusing on identifying and intervention for struggling readers in kindergarten through third grade. Price (2014) stated at the time that while 30 percent of Michigan's third graders did not meet the minimum reading proficiency benchmark last year, less than 1 percent of those children were retained. And of those students who cannot proficiently read at a third-grade level, two-thirds of them are not likely to graduate from high school. Both bills were to improve literacy throughout a child's early education and avoid third-grade retention. The current version of HB 5111 allows superintendents to take into consideration alternative assessments, student portfolios, and good cause exemptions for students with an IEP or ESL students.

The M-STEP was administered to third-grade students across Michigan beginning in (2016) under the administration of Governor Rick Synder. The test used to assess reading and trigger the retention process is the third-grade State English Language Arts Assessment. A child whose M-STEP score report includes a reading score that is less than 1-grade level behind will automatically be promoted to fourth grade. A lower

English language arts (ELA) score will trigger automatic retention, and can only be stopped through a successful request for an exemption. The pass/pass/failure cut point will be determined by the Michigan Department of Education, however, the department has yet to describe how 1-grade level behind will be identified on the current reading-test scale. What is challenging is that second graders do not take the test. Kirby (2016) justified this by arguing, that a student will need a performance-level score that is proficient or higher to be determined as less than 1 grade level behind (the four performance-level scores are advanced, proficient, partially proficient, and not proficient). Winke and Zhang (2019) assert, that the law provides two alternative pathways for students who have not achieved a passing score: satisfactory performance on an approved alternative standardized reading assessment (yet to be identified), or through a portfolio that shows the students have demonstrated competency in all third-grade state ELA standards. Both alternatives require the superintendent's approval. It is questionable as to whether the interventions consisted of school leaders looking at the data to make decisions. In March of 2023, Governor Gretchen Whitmer (Mich) signed a bill that strikes from law a requirement to hold back third graders who fail a reading proficiency test.

Concerns about High Stakes Testing

A major concern of high-stakes assessments is that it does not correlate with student learning, Oliveras-Ortiz (2015) explained that the implementation of high-stakes testing negatively affects schools' instructional practices as principals require teachers to be focused on decontextualized teaching materials Phelps (2016) suggests that these tests cannot measure all that students learn, perhaps not even most of, or the best parts of, what

they learn. If true, then teaching only those components of learning that tests can capture neglects other, allegedly important, components of learning. Additionally, principals should support teachers when students are struggling, by providing appropriate interventions, such as specialized student services testing, tutoring, professional development opportunities, mentoring, and other resources. Cobb (2015) asserts that in striving to offer a supportive education program, principals face several challenges, such as fostering collaboration where perspectives diverge, establishing a cohesive school vision of inclusion and practice that offers differentiated learning experiences, and reducing situations involving litigation and teacher attrition. In an era of accountability, successful principals must also establish systems to monitor student performance by collecting various forms of data. Not only should principals analyze the data of standardized test results, but they should also conduct frequent classroom observations. The responsibility of identifying ways to help struggling students should not be the teachers' sole responsibility; as instructional leaders, the principal should support teachers.

These directives from the school leader create numerous issues that affect both the students and the educators as they are forced into compliance with the exam format. In their study, Salinas and Guajardo (2022) examined the complexity of standardized testing, while promoting the inclusion of cultural representation within the present curriculum dynamic through the analysis of past and current evidence-based research. The researchers suggested that there is a lack of appropriate conditions, accommodations, resources, and assessment tools available for culturally diverse students and populations, which places them at an academic disadvantage. They concluded that the use of

standardized testing in the public school system over the years has been accepted in many areas and that school administrators continue to use it as a primary evaluation tool for teachers and students. The researchers also asserted that the goal of standardized assessments is not only to get students situated at a basic level that is appropriate for the federal and state governments but to also promote uniformity within the educational field. Salina and Guajardo's (2022) research is consistent with previous evidence-based research in which findings strongly suggest that the use of standardized exams comes with hardships and frustrations that are not often addressed. Students are compelled to learn fundamental test-taking skills to fill in the proper Educators are also required to adjust their classroom formats by 'narrowing the curriculum' and introducing irrelevant materials that just focus on memorization that teaches to the test. As examined by Pinar et. al. (2014) the instructional repertoire produced by the "scientific" community, from standardized examinations, and bureaucratically imposed instructional models to teacher-proof curricula, "all help to hinder the teacher's ability to utilize or implement a more orchestral perspective on teaching and learning" (p. 1123)

K-12 School Leadership

The role of principals as instructional leaders and the strategies they utilize to address instructional challenges inherent to various school environments lack empirical investigation. These challenges are specific to best practices from research by implementing appropriate interventions. It is noted that teachers at rural schools face challenges that include professional isolation, instructional preparation for multiple subjects and grade levels, and a lack of professional development opportunities (Autio & Deussen, 2017).

Cobb (2015) asserts that in striving to offer a supportive education program, principals face several challenges, such as fostering collaboration where perspectives diverge, establishing a cohesive school vision, cultural sensitivity, and tailored practices that offer differentiated learning experiences. In an era of accountability, successful principals must also establish systems to monitor student performance by collecting various forms of data. Not only should principals analyze the data of standardized test results, but they should also conduct frequent classroom observations. The responsibility of identifying ways to help struggling students should not be the teachers' sole responsibility; as instructional leaders, the principal should support teachers.

Principal as Instructional Leader

The principal as an instructional leader, serves the pivotal role of ensuring teacher instruction is aligned with student outcomes (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2015; McNeill et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2015). In general, principals as instructional leaders should keep track of curriculum alignment by performing frequent classroom visits with triangulation of curriculum, observations, stakeholder feedback, formative assessment data, and other data tools. In addition, professional learning communities (PLCs), and professional development opportunities are other methods a school leader can use to support teachers in planning instruction. Hwa et al., (2020) stated that in such situations, classroom instruction that follows the official curriculum may be aligned only with the learning levels of the most advantaged children who are on par with grade-level expectations, thus widening pre-existing inequities. Related research has shown that high-functioning professional learning communities (PLCs) predict higher levels of collective teacher

efficacy which in turn can contribute to improved student achievement (Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017), teaching quality, and teacher retention.

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and populations, which places them at an academic disadvantage. They concluded that the use of standardized testing in the public school system over the years has been accepted in many areas and that school administrators continue to use it as a primary evaluation tool for teachers and students. The researchers also asserted that the goal of standardized assessments is not only to get students situated at a basic level that is appropriate for the federal and state governments but to also promote uniformity within the educational field. As examined by Pinar et. al. (2014) the instructional repertoire produced by the "scientific" community, from standardized examinations, and bureaucratically imposed instructional models to teacher-proof curricula, "all help to hinder the teacher's ability to utilize or implement a more orchestral perspective on teaching and learning."

A positive data culture requires a sense of trust and collaboration among teachers and leaders, shared responsibility for school improvement, and a clear vision that articulates what types of data must be collected and utilized to drive improvements. Lasater and Bengtson et al. (2020) argued that school leaders can create trusting, collaborative environments for data use, protect teachers' sense of professionalism and agency, and mitigate the pressure passed down to teachers as a result of high-stakes accountability if they are willing to serve in this role. Ultimately, a positive data culture is formed over time by having explicit expectations for data use, supportive systems with adequate resources, and safe environments where teachers can openly share, discuss, and respond to data. It is also formed by consistently and collaboratively using student data to guide decisions related to teaching and learning (Datnow & Park, 2014; Gerzon, 2015)

One element of increased accountability is political mandates that are shaped by results from these assessment efforts. According to Lasater and Bengtson et al. (2020), school leaders can mediate the punitive pressure of accountability mandates largely by how they respond to those mandates. School leaders should possess the ability to create trusting, collaborative environments for data use, protect teachers' sense of professionalism and agency, and mitigate the pressure passed down to teachers because of high-stakes accountability if they are willing to serve in this role. The data culture continuum provides a framework that can assist school leaders in understanding and implementing data factors that support their schools in developing positive data cultures. It also provides a springboard into future quantitative and qualitative studies related to the framework.

Creating a positive data culture includes specific adjustments to the work of teachers to incorporate those processes. According to Datnow & Hubbard (2015) accepting this role involves allocating time for teachers to use data, establishing clear goals for data use (Gerzon, 2015), and providing teachers support and training to feel efficacious and agentic with data-based decisions. It also involves using data collaboratively to create plans to improve student and school performance instead of "blaming and shaming" teachers for unfavorable data (Datnow et al., 2013; Schildkamp & Poortman, 2015). Oliveras-Ortiz (2015) states that although a vital component of instructional leadership is data-driving instructional decision-making, the intensifying focus on student scores appears to require that campus leaders become data managers. The authors imply that the data culture continuum provides a framework that can assist school leaders in understanding and implementing data factors that support their schools

in developing positive data cultures. It also provides a foundation for future quantitative and qualitative studies related to the framework.

Increased testing can also have an impact on the curriculum and instructional practices in a school. According to Hunt et al., (2009), public school teachers complain that the use of assessment in a high-stakes environment makes instruction more test-driven, resulting in an atmosphere where it is difficult to motivate students with the material. The authors suggest that the use of data to inform curricular growth may be intimidating to school leaders and teachers who feel that data are used to judge their performance as educators. Sutcher et al., (2017) propose high-quality programs that train educators to use data and collective inquiry to identify problems and address needs, in collaboration with staff, parents, and community organizations.

In the school accountability system, school leaders use data to assess teacher instruction and student learning to inform decisions on curriculum and instruction (Leithwood, Aitken, & Jantzi, 2001; Luo, 2008; Park, 2018; Rigby, 2016). Wang (2019) defines decision-making as choosing a course of action from a set of options and Data-driven decision-making (DDDM) as highlighting the salient role of data in decision-making. Wang specifically comprised six steps of DM, including (1) collecting and (2) organizing raw data which can be converted into information; (3) analyzing and (4) summarizing information which can be transformed into usable, applicable knowledge; (5) synthesizing and (6) prioritizing the information to develop a set of options from which decision makers select a choice and reach a decision.

Data use for accountability refers to schools using data (e.g., assessment data and results from internal evaluations) in external reports, for example, to present some aspect

of the performance of the school for inspectors (Coburn & Talbert, 2006; Wohlstetter et al., 2008; Young, 2006). High policy pressure for data use, as in the 'No Child Left Behind' act, can lead to schools using data extensively for accountability actions (Wayman, Spikes, & Volonnino, 2013). Using data for accountability actions does not automatically lead to school improvement, however, continuous, and adequate data analysis will gradually lead to positive outcomes.

Previous research points out the potential of data use for instruction to support higher student achievement (Campbell & Levin, 2009; Carlson et al., 2011; Lai, McNaughton, Amituanai-Toloa, Turner, & Hsiao, 2009; McNaughton et al., 2012). Educators can use data in several ways to improve their instruction (see, e.g., Breiter & Light, 2006; Coburn & Talbert, 2006; Wayman & Stringfield, 2006; Wohlstetter et al., 2008; Young, 2006), for example, to differentiate in lessons (Kelly, et al., 2010), to identify student's strengths or weaknesses (McCombs, & Martorell, 2010; Roehrig, et al., 2008), and to track student progress toward standards throughout the year (Hamilton et al., 2009a).

School leaders often experience disadvantageous consequences if external accountability systems evaluate their performance and decision-making. School leaders use the data that indicate poor attendance and enrollment, low standardized test scores, and "Academically Unacceptable" ranking in the state accountability system to justify the decision to close a high school (Khalifa et al., 2014). The District of Columbia Public Schools (2011) statement "Our decisions at all levels must be guided by robust data" (p. 1) was a vocal, unswerving commitment to (DM) espoused by many school leaders. Sutcher et al (2017) proposed high-quality programs to train educators to use data and

collective inquiry to identify problems and address needs, in collaboration with staff, parents, and community organizations. Wang (2019) concluded that when it comes to using data to improve the quality of teaching and learning, it is evident that some of the most important enablers and barriers include data literacy and leadership. Wang's iterative model of data used for school improvement is described, consisting of defining goals for data use, collecting different types of evidence-based research, e.g., informal/formal data, 'big data'), sense-making, taking improvement actions, and evaluation.

This type of school culture requires both increased understanding from teachers and increased focus on using data to make decisions from leaders. Wang (2019) concluded that when it comes to using data to improve the quality of teaching and learning, it is evident that some of the most important enablers and barriers include data literacy and leadership. Further investigation into these important enablers and barriers is worthy of further research. We must understand the full potential of data available and more importantly how to use it to promote effective leadership, improve education, and create sustainable school environments. Roegman et al. (2018) state that enacting strong data leadership in K-12 schools and districts requires integrated efforts of multiple stakeholders at various levels. Understanding the current practices of data leadership from three districts provides administrators, policymakers, and preparation programs insights into the next step to develop alternative narratives around how data can be used to inform instruction and affect students' educational experiences and learning. Marsh et al., (2016) it is a challenging task given the accountability climate that has created intense pressure for administrators and teachers, leading principals to create data walls that cause

comparison and competition around numbers instead of a focus on knowledge and learning. Based on Marsh's claim and due to the lack of research on the subject matter, further investigation is worthy of conducting.

Principal as a Transformational Leader

The K-12 schools are complex, complicated and challenging systems. Even in an era of increased federal and state accountability measures, school leaders are catalyst for innovation, growth, improvement, and decision making which ultimately impacts the school system and its members. Transformational leaders (TL) must have the courage to take risk and be prepared to look at mistakes as learning experiences and not as failures. (TL) acknowledge that it is necessary to remain flexible and open. That is there is never one best theory, philosophy, style or approach in decision making. It is important that I note, that leading K-12 schools require combining and adopting more than one leadership theory and/or style for effective leadership to transpire. However, in comparison to other leadership theoretical frameworks such as instructional, servant, charismatic and transactional, transformational leadership is a valuable theoretical framework to understand and interpret the behavior of principals and teachers as well as the relationship between the two. Also, viewing school leaders from the transformational leadership theory perspective offers an opportunity to conduct and advance future research to the of workplace and learning conditions in K-12 public school sector.

Transformational leadership requires knowledge, skills, characteristics, and practice that are developed over time. According to Hechanova & Olpoc (2013), there are five behaviors of transformational leadership: 1) challenging the process; 2) inspiring a shared vision; 3) enabling others to act; 4) modeling the way; and 5) encouraging the

heart. Each component will be examined and discussed for each is as important as the other, to suggest that leaders and aspiring leaders embrace and develop these principles in their decision-making and in the process of transforming their minds, the education system, educational environments, and each individual they lead. I describe each of these behaviors more thoroughly below.

The first behavior was called “Challenging the Process” (Hechanova & Olpoc, 2013). The role of leader comes with great expectations, increasing responsibilities and different challenges. However, despite these facts every school leader must search for all opportunities, take risk, experiment, consider alternatives and reach out and listen to others. These are steps that they can take to challenging the status quo of processes and practices of a flawed education system. “In other words, the transformation aspect of bullet ideas were looped off and the principles were incorporated into the managerial discourse in we can form, castrated and unavailable to challenge the status quo of organizational norms”. (Fletcher, 2001p.x).

According to Hechanova and Olpoc (2013), the second behavior was “Inspiring a Shared Vision.” To inspire a shared vision, the leader must be confident and have clarity of an ideal future for public education. “The domain of leaders is the future. The work of leaders is change.” The most significant contribution leaders make is not to today's bottom line; it is to the long-term development of people and institutions so they can adapt, change, prosper, and grow.” (Kouzes & Posner, 2006). As leaders describe their characteristics and styles of leadership, it is of utmost important that vision be listed somewhere at the top. Transforming leaders are rarer. Burns (1978), describes them, they evoked their constituents’ better angels and move them toward higher and more universal

needs and purposes. They are visionary leaders whose leadership is inherently symbolic. (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p.368). Effective leaders will make decisions based on the realities of the current state and the vision for the future. “Before you can be a leader of others, you need to know clearly who you are and what your core values are. Once you know that, then you can give your voice to those values and feel comfortable sharing them with others.” (Kouzes & Posner, 2006). (TL) understand that there are achievement gaps, inequity, inequality and disparities in education. their mission and objectives are to fill a void and transform one step at a time. Their optimism will be used as a tool of overcoming challenges, removing obstacles and breaking down barriers to make education more equitable promising and fair for teachers and for students. Also, therefore leaders must then inspire, encourage and welcome others in the pursuit of their future aspirations.

According to Hechanova and Olpoc (2013), the third behavior was Enabling Others to Act. When leadership encourages and allow different perspectives, ideas and experiences of others is an effective way to produce change, innovation, creativity diversity and inclusion. As leaders create cohesion, inspiring others and stakeholder engagement is enabling others to act.

Hechanova and Olpoc (2013), describe the fourth behavior as modeling the way. How many times have we heard, “say what you mean and mean what you say, walk the walk just do not talk the talk, do what I say not what I do.” There is no room for hypocrisy in school leadership. Leaders lead by example. Leaders should not abuse their authority, nor be conceited and obsessed with titles. For it is ethical principle to treat others like you want to be treated. Titles, rank and salary have little if anything to do with

fostering an environment that is respectful, courteous and considerate. “Titles are granted, but it’s your behavior that earns you respect.” (Kouzes & Posner, 2006 p.11). Leaders may think this is a sign of weakness or interpret this as trying to be a friend with staff or students however, on the contrary nothing can be further from the truth. Effective leadership requires ethical behavior especially regarding decision making when it affects the lives of so many others. A simple example of this is if you want others to arrive on time, then ‘leader’ you may want to make it your business to get there before they do.

Finally, Hechanova and Olpoc (2013), describe the fifth behavior as encouraging the heart. As mentioned previously, transformation is a gradual process that is not simple or easy in any way. Educational leaders will face challenges while some may be more complicated than others. As leaders, we will be mindful that we and those around us have personalized and experience all kinds of family, financial, personal, and other domestic struggles. Our actions and our words will set the tone of our environment. Remember it is not what you do, it is in which manner you do it. It is not what you say but instead how you say it. Everyone we interact with will possess the need to know that their individual presence, hard work and contributions matter. Complementing a job well done, instilling confidence and reassurance, giving rewards for accomplishments and publicly celebrating those accomplishments by rewarding others encourages their heart.

The tenets of transformational leadership theory are contributing factors to ensure effective leadership in K-12 public schools. (TL) can result in positive outcomes teacher and student satisfaction, motivation, empowerment, teaching and learning, (TL) can potentially facilitate active engagement of school leaders, students and teachers as it provokes the development of knowledge, skills, critical thinking, and communication.

“The benefits of transformational leadership style of teachers comprise in empowering and increasing student motivation, enhance learning and engagement of students, experiencing success, improving students' performance and achievement, developing quality of relations in classroom etc.” (Jovanovica & Ciricb 2016). Therefore, (TL) requires a high-level commitment of school leaders to increased satisfaction, higher collective efficacy, effectiveness of teaching and learning, and stakeholder collaboration. According to Jovanovica and Ciricb (2016), patterns of transformational leadership are harmonized with the organizational culture and structure of school and their impact on the meeting which people connect with their job and their volition and readiness to take risks of change. Authentic leaders who practice transformational leadership style convince, inspire, and motivate students towards the achievement of excellent results that will not otherwise happen when demonstrating transactional leadership.

In contrast, transactional leaders rely on structured roles, contingent rewards, and corrective actions to maintain performance and compliance. These styles may manifest differently when managing the high-stakes environment of standardized testing, shaping everything from staff morale to the prioritization of instructional time. Transactional leaders operate within established systems and policies, making it a practical model for school leaders navigating high-stakes testing environments and compliance-driven mandates (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985). While sometimes perceived as rigid, transactional leadership provides consistency, goal alignment, and role clarity, which are necessary components in schools facing pressure to meet state or federal performance benchmarks (Marzano et al., 2005). Even though transactional leadership may lack the inspirational

flair of transformational leadership, it plays a crucial role in maintaining order and efficiency, especially when schools must meet external performance demands.

While transactional leadership is sometimes viewed as inflexible, it offers important advantages such as consistency in expectations and procedures, goal alignment across staff and school objectives, and clear roles and responsibilities for educators. These qualities are particularly useful in schools under pressure to meet state or federal performance benchmarks, such as standardized test scores. The structure and predictability of transactional leadership can help ensure compliance and focused efforts toward measurable goals.

Taken together, transformational and transactional leadership offer a dual lens through which to examine how K–12 school leaders in Michigan perceive and respond to standardized testing. These frameworks are particularly relevant for understanding how principals balance visionary leadership with managerial accountability in a system increasingly defined by performance metrics. This study applies these theories to explore how school leaders interpret their roles, motivate staff, and make data-informed decisions under the influence of state and federal assessment policies.

Research Focus

The role of the school principal is changing, and the accountability of the school leader is increasing, Nevertheless, the school principal should create, improve, and sustain an inclusive school environment in which each student is known, valued, supported, and encouraged. The same principles should apply to K12 leaders and subordinates, Inquiry into the perspectives of these school leaders' opinions, practices, and perspectives is worthy due to the lack of research available. This student can be the

basis of advancing research to K12 leadership, closing academic achievement gaps, and improving leader/teacher relationships. How do school leaders create inclusive environments focused on teaching and learning despite the federal and state accountability pressure of children performing 'well' on assessments? Therefore, the following questions guide this research study.

Despite the widespread use of standardized assessments in K12 education, there is limited empirical understanding of how school leaders' leadership styles influence their decision-making processes regarding the youth, interpretation comma and implications of Test data. The problem addressed by this study is the lack of integrated, data informed research that connects leadership theory with actual administrative practices surrounding standardized testing period. This study investigates whether and how transformational the transactional leadership styles affect leaders perceptions of assessments and decisions they make in response to them.

The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to explore the relationship between K12 educational leadership styles, specifically transformational and transactional and decision-making processes regarding standardized assessments. Using quantitative data from a Qualtrics survey and qualitative open-ended responses from K12 leaders across Michigan. This study aims to identify patterns in leadership behavior, priorities and perceived outcomes related to testing.

The questions guiding this study were as follows:

- What is the relationship between transformational leadership style and school leaders' perceptions of standardized testing in areas such as communication, instructional leadership, student placement and school climate?

- What is the relationship between traction actional leadership and school leader perceptions of standardized testing in the same areas?
- How do K12 public school leaders describe their decision-making processes and responses to standardized testing mandates? In what ways do qualitative themes converge, diverge or complement the quantitative findings?

Significance

This study has practical, theoretical, and policy related significance. Practically the findings can inform leadership development programs by identifying the leadership behaviors that best support ethical, equitable, and effective assessment practices. Theoretically, the study contributes to the literature on educational leadership by connecting decision making theory with contemporary accountability demands period from a policy perspective, understanding how leadership styles interact with assessment practices can inform school improvement strategies especially in underserved or high need districts.

Educational reform was intended to improve schools, student achievement, teacher quality, and principal effectiveness. The implementation lacked sufficient data such as; differences in student intelligence, disparities in various school populations, and the insights of K12 leaders. These leaders are front and center every day and experience the complexities and realities of the organizations they lead. The No Child Left Behind initiatives and the reauthorizations to follow were ambitious, however, they have failed to close the achievement gap and promote a more equitable and inclusive school system.

This study aims to showcase the perspectives, priorities, practices, and professional development of K12 leaders in pursuit of narrowing the achievement gap.

Sharing areas of improvement, accomplishments, and challenges amongst these leaders while discovering the components necessary to advance and sustain our educational school system, as well as the elements of effective leadership is second to the classroom. Therefore, this study is groundbreaking in discovering and creating a language and conversation among school leaders about their challenges, accomplishments, and best practices as it relates to accountability when administering standardized assessments.

K12 leadership is complex, challenging, complicated, and even often chaotic. The decision to function in such a capacity is admirable. Input directly linked to the insights of K12 leaders seems to be absent from reform initiatives and research. The mindsets insights and perspectives of K 12 leaders are essential to gauge the principalship core in schools in Michigan. This study is an opportunity for K12 leaders to speak freely, share information, and give an honest account of how their leadership styles may be impacted by administering standardized testing.

These realities include but are not limited to their ability to communicate, plan, implement, and make decisions. Dialogue between leaders is a healthy, conducive, and necessary way to collect and report critical data. It allows us to ask and answer questions like under what circumstances do standardized assessments become high stakes? How do we as leaders justify and define "standardized" knowing what has been learned about multiple intelligences, learning disabilities, language barriers, socioeconomic disparities, critical shortages, and other barriers experienced within the school system? In an era of accountability, assessing how leaders perform and prioritize indicates their effectiveness. According to Michigan's Top 10 Strategic Plan (2020), every learner in Michigan public schools will have an inspiring, engaging, and caring learning environment that fosters

creative and critical thinkers who believe in their ability to positively influence Michigan and the world beyond. This study can serve as a lynchpin in this movement.

There is a lack of research committed to collecting and reporting insights of school principals who are front and center every day in the school system. On top of all the duties, dynamics, and responsibilities of a school leader, the expectations of students achieving 'satisfactory' standardized test scores may complicate the process considering the different events that occur daily in the school building. While the US education system is steadily declining, the threat of dissolving the US Department of Education is imminent, districts are combining, schools are closing, and critical shortages are evident a scope into K12 leadership styles, and their perspectives of standardized assessments is worth the time and effort.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a review of relevant literature to frame the study's exploration of how K12 principals in Michigan perceive and respond to the pressures of standardized testing. As accountability systems become increasingly data-driven, school leaders face unique tensions between instructional leadership and policy compliance. This review begins with the historical evolution of standardized testing and its influence on educational policy and school leadership. Next, the chapter explores the theoretical underpinnings of transformational and transactional leadership and their applications within the context of accountability. The final sections examine how testing impacts school leadership practices and identify gaps in current research that justify the present study.

The Principal's Role in the Accountability Era

School principals function as both instructional leaders and organizational managers, a dual role made more complex by the pressures of high-stakes testing. Principals must ensure compliance with state mandates, coordinate test administration logistics, and interpret data for instructional planning, all while maintaining a healthy school climate (Diamond, 2007; Marsh et al., 2006). The implementation of standardized assessments often places leaders in bureaucratic roles that limit their capacity for visionary leadership (Lavigne & Good, 2019).

Empirical research suggests that principals are frequently overwhelmed by the technical aspects of assessment management, leaving little time for meaningful

instructional improvement (Ryan, 2004; Guerra & Nelson, 2013). A qualitative study by Schildkamp and Kuiper (2010) found that while data use was widespread, its actual influence on teaching practices was minimal without strong instructional leadership. These findings underscore the importance of examining how principals balance external accountability pressures with internal leadership goals.

Accountability and School Leadership

As discussed in Chapter One, one of the shifts that has led to a large increase in the amount of standardized testing conducted in schools has been the increased attention paid to issues of organizational accountability. Accountability is the quality or state of being accountable, especially an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or account for or for one's action (Merriam Dictionary). Researchers have described school accountability in different ways and based on the contexts in which they have conducted their studies. According to Harris and Brown (2013), school accountability is defined as a process of communicating assessment results to parents and the community. In the educational leadership context, the concept carries with it an idea that K-12 school principals are not only responsible for their actions but must also answer for their performance to an outside authority that in turn may impose penalty or failure. Kim (2018) described school accountability as an educational reform that uses standards that students must achieve to assess their achievement and learning outcomes in a scientific way and calls on schools to be accountable for the results. Gustafsson et al. (2015) noted that school accountability is about ensuring quality educational services for all.

The accountability of K-12 school principals has become a principle of either praising or punishing educational outcomes, measured by student test scores. Ebbeler et

al. (2016) described it as a system that uses data to report (e.g. assessment data and internal evaluation results) to external bodies to present some aspect of school performance School accountability is also linked to inspection, where it is used for accountability purposes in school (Penninckx, 2017). However, there is less research-based evidence of how school accountability relates to learning outcomes. There is also confusion in associating school accountability with teacher accountability leading to stress among teachers (Han, 2018; Nathaniel et al., 2016). Hence, this literature review aims to assess how standardized testing impacts K12 leadership in the era of school accountability, how it is practiced, and influences learning outcomes as well as identify the drawbacks. An attempt to provide as many published research articles as possible in this area to fill in these gaps draws lessons from the past and discusses the possible implications for future practice and research.

As discussed in Chapter One, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era has raised questions about the impact of externally imposed federal accountability measures on improving schools. In their study, Heck and Chang (2017) utilized a time-series design and growth mixture modeling with known classes to identify a set of process changes and context indicators that maximally differentiate the classes of schools according to their NCLB restructuring status. The researchers examined the timing of changes of key educational process indicators within three groups of elementary school after NCLB implementation: schools that met adequate yearly progress targets consistently, schools that met adequate yearly progress targets consistently, schools that entered restructuring due to prolonged academic failure but failed to exit, and schools that entered restructuring status but managed to improve sufficiently to return to good standing. They reported two

key findings, e.g., restructuring disrupted entrenched organizational routines, and changes in teacher views regarding the quality of key school processes such as leadership, instructional capacity, and sustained focus on school improvement were associated with corresponding changes in NCLB accountability status. The findings suggest that both external policy interventions and strategic responses of site-level leadership school processes can change intended action.

Research suggests that under the constraints of external accountability environments, school principals are faced with challenges in prioritizing educational goals. In their study, Lee and Lee (2020) conducted a longitudinal study during 1991-2012 to examine the working conditions, challenges, and constraints that public school principals faced under educational reform initiatives. They reported that public school principals experienced difficulties regarding prioritizing educational goals as a result of external accountability policy constraints. The researchers found that although academic goals gained traction over the 1991–2012 period, there were notable issues with personal growth and vocational skills. Although the divergent trends continued to persist after the reauthorization of NCLB, the public school principals that fell short of achieving the requirements of NCLB placed more emphasis on basic skills while private school principals were focused on academic achievement. The author's analysis indicated that public school principal's priorities of academic goals are heavily influenced by test-driven accountability measures. This study implies that the implementation of Every Student Succeeds Act provides an opportunity for educational leaders to redesign accountability systems and incorporate nonacademic measures for whole-child education. The researchers concluded that public school principal's priorities on academic goals

have been shaped by test-driven accountability measures, as other important goals have been deprioritized. A future inquiry as to why there is a significant difference between public, charter, and parochial school principals' ability to prioritize academic goals, or lack thereof, is worth delving further into.

Principal Leadership and Work Conditions

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides opportunities for states to invest in developing and supporting effective school leaders. One such opportunity includes using federal funds to support the recruitment, preparation, and training of high-quality leaders using the optional state set-aside under Title II. Researchers have described various challenges principals face in the era of accountability under educational reform initiatives. In their study, Lee and Lee (2020) examined the working conditions, challenges, and constraints that public school principals faced under educational reform initiatives. They reported that public school principals experienced difficulties regarding prioritizing educational goals as a result of external accountability policy constraints. The researchers found that although academic goals gained traction over the 1991–2012 period, there were notable issues with personal growth and vocational skills. Although the divergent trends continued to persist after the reauthorization of NCLB, the public-school principals that fell short of achieving the requirements of NCLB placed more emphasis on basic skills while private school principals were focused on academic achievement. The author's analysis indicated that public school principal's priorities of academic goals are heavily influenced by test-driven accountability measures. A future inquiry as to why there is a significant difference between public and private school

principals' ability to prioritize academic goals or lack thereof, is worth delving further into.

Working with the results of accountability assessments is one element of a school's working conditions. In their study, Tekleselassie & Choi (2019) confirmed that previous research revealed contextual factors and working conditions can impact principal retention. Principal turnover is also more pronounced in rural districts (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). Like teachers, principals often choose to exit low-achieving schools and schools with high proportions of students of color for higher-achieving schools that serve fewer low-income students of color (Gates et al., 2006; Loeb et al., 2010; Papa et al., 2002). Matthews et al. (2022) stated that turnover in lower-achieving schools and schools that serve high proportions of students of color is especially problematic given the challenges these schools often confront (e.g., increased demands to increase student achievement, racial and economic neighborhood segregation, historic budget shortfalls, higher rates of teacher turnover) and the added accountability pressure from federal, state, and local education agencies. Therefore, principals may opt to exit certain school contexts at higher rates in a phenomenon described as principals using lower-performing schools as "stepping stones" to more desirable and higher-performing schools (Béteille et al., 2012).

Previous research has reported that socioeconomic status to students may contribute to K12 principal turnover rates. Bartanen et al.'s (2019) study applied a difference-in-difference framework to school-level data to measure changes in teacher turnover in the years leading up to and following a principal turnover. The authors found teacher turnover increases during the first year of a principal transition, but effects are

significantly smaller if the principal was promoted, as opposed to demoted, transferred, or exited the K-12 system. The authors suggested the type of principal turnover exit, demotion, transfer, or promotion is likely a proxy for elements of the school context. Principal promotions may suggest perceived positive leadership, while demotions may suggest ineffective leadership. The researchers suggested that replacing an existing principal with a more experienced principal can reduce the negative impacts on achievement, but the authors do not provide examples of the different types of experience profiles, such as, prior experience as an assistant principal, which is usually a popular route to the principalship. Related studies have reached similar conclusions based on statewide data from North Carolina (Miller, 2013), and Tennessee and Missouri (Bartanen et al., 2019).

Likewise, Béteille, et al. (2012) conducted a longitudinal study of the Miami-Dade County Public School district using data from 2003-2009. They found that student socioeconomic status and student achievement are two factors that influence principal turnover, with principals in general moving away from schools with more low-SES and low-achieving students to schools that had more affluent and higher-achieving populations. In terms of how principal turnover influenced students and schools, Béteille et al. determined that principal turnover resulted in higher teacher turnover and lower levels of student achievement. This effect was more pronounced in schools with more low-SES and low achieving students, overall painting a picture in which schools with students who have the highest needs also suffer more powerfully and more frequently due to principal turnover. As with DeAngelis & White (2011), the data analyzed in this study

did not include any information related to the lived experiences of the principals themselves.

Prior research has identified three categories of factors that are associated with a principal's probability of departing a school: principal-level factors, school-level factors, and climate-level factors. The principal-level factors that have been identified as predicting principal turnover are gender, age, race/ethnicity, teaching and/or principal experience, leadership and decision-making, influence, and education (DeAngelis & Young, 2011). The school-level factors that affect a principal's likelihood of exiting a school are school size, student demographics, student socioeconomic status, school grade level, school type (e.g.: public, charter, private, etc.), student achievement, urbanicity, representation under a collective bargaining agreement, and principal salary (Battle & Gruber, 2010).

Under ESSA, states have multiple opportunities to invest in high-quality school leadership, especially in high-need schools and communities. According to Title I, Part A School Improvement requires states to set aside 7% of their Title I, Part A funds to improve low-performing schools by using evidence-based strategies that increase student learning (Every Student Succeeds Act, Section 1003(b)). States and districts have the flexibility to select the mix of evidence-based strategies that best meet their contexts (Every Student Succeeds Act, Section 8101(21)(A)(i)(I)–(III)). According to Gates et al., (2016), multiple school leader interventions demonstrate strong, moderate, and promising levels of evidence under ESSA's evidence-based requirements.

According to Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) state school districts, can further strengthen school leadership capacity by applying for a competitive

federal grant that can be used for a range of activities that support and develop high-quality school leaders. These grants include: 1) Teacher and School Leader Incentive Program: formerly the Teacher Incentive Fund, this program supports state and district investments in performance-based compensation and human capital management systems for principals, other school leaders, and teachers (Every Student Succeeds Act, Section 2212); 2) Supporting Effective Educator Development: for nonprofit organizations and institutions of higher education to support educator recruitment, preparation, certification, and professional learning (Every Student Succeeds Act, Section 2242); and 3) School Leader Recruitment and Support Program: for states and districts to recruit, prepare, place, support, and retain leaders in high-need schools. (Every Student Succeeds Act, Section 2243).

The climate factors related to whether a principal will leave a school are not building positive relationships with teachers, not establishing trust within the school, quality of rapport with students, school orderliness and discipline, conflict with the district office, school boards, and community members, students disrespecting teachers, and parent involvement (Goldring et al., 2014; Luebke, 2013). Climate in this context refers to the human element of schooling as demonstrated through factors such as relationships, morale, connectedness, and trust (Thapa, et al., 2013). This principal turnover literature has identified a great deal of information about factors that can help predict principal turnover.

Prior principal retention research has focused on identifying factors that predict principal turnover. Yet, this research has not focused on understanding the extent to which there may potentially be different subgroups of principals who depart from their

positions. In their study Boyce and Bowers (2016) investigated the extent to which there is a typology of principals who depart from their schools in the US using the 2007–2008 Schools and Staffing Survey and the 2008–2009 Principal Follow-up Survey. This study uses Latent Class Analysis to identify and better understand the types of principals who exit their schools. They found that there is not a single type of principal who exits their schools. The researchers provide evidence for the existence of at least two different types of principals who exit their schools based on their self-perceptions of their degree of influence, school climate, attitudes, and salary dispositions. One group of principals, the satisfied principals, reported significantly higher levels of influence, lower levels of school climate problems, more positive attitudes of the principalship, and more positive attitudes of their salary disposition. Principals who were female, did not attend an aspiring principals' program, led schools with lower parent participation in open houses and back-to school events, and/or worked in schools in cities or towns were more likely to be disaffected principals. Disaffected principals were more likely to leave the principalship for a non-principal school position than satisfied principals.

Boyce and Bowers (2016) offered an effort to frame future research into different types of principals who exit their schools, as their study was consistent with Farley-Ripple et al.'s (2012) conceptual framework of three different types of influences on principals' career transitions: personal, behavioral, and environmental. Johnson's (2005) work examines personal and environmental characteristics relating to different types of principals exiting their schools and Farley-Ripple et al. (2012) touch on all types while focusing mostly on environmental factors. Boyce and Bower's (2016) study incorporated all three types of influences in identifying two groups of principals who exit their

schools. However, like Farley-Ripple et al. (2012), the quantitative analysis of these factors is imperfect at modeling the complexity of school contexts and how these different factors relate to one another. The analysis only describes what the two groups look like but neither the why as to how these two groups emerged within schools nor how the different variables interact to influence principals toward being satisfied or dissatisfied. The researchers maintain that their study is an important addition to the field as the first of its kind to investigate diverse types of exiting principals using a nationally representative sample while also supporting Farley-Ripple et al.'s (2012) call for more in-depth qualitative research to uncover what cannot be easily measured through survey data.

Data-Driven Decision-Making

A central element of schools undergoing standardized assessment is the argument that having access to this kind of information can help all school staff make instructional decisions that are based on empirical information. The term most commonly associated with this process is "Data-Driven Decision-Making,"

or DDDM. A positive data culture requires a sense of trust and collaboration among teachers and leaders, shared responsibility for school improvement, and a clear vision that articulates what types of data must be collected and utilized to drive improvements. Lasater and Bengtson et al. (2020) argued that school leaders can create trusting, collaborative environments for data use, protect teachers' sense of professionalism and agency, and mitigate the pressure passed down to teachers as a result of high-stakes accountability if they are willing to serve in this role. Ultimately, a positive data culture is formed over time by having explicit expectations for data use, supportive

systems with adequate resources, and safe environments where teachers can openly share, discuss, and respond to data. It is also formed by consistently and collaboratively using student data to guide decisions related to teaching and learning (Datnow & Park, 2014; Gerzon, 2015)

One element of increased accountability is political mandates that are shaped by results from these assessment efforts. According to Lasater and Bengtson et al. (2020), school leaders can mediate the punitive pressure of accountability mandates largely by how they respond to those mandates. School leaders should possess the ability to create trusting, collaborative environments for data use, protect teachers' sense of professionalism and agency, and mitigate the pressure passed down to teachers because of high-stakes accountability if they are willing to serve in this role. The data culture continuum provides a framework that can assist school leaders in understanding and implementing data factors that support their schools in developing positive data cultures. It also provides a springboard into future quantitative and qualitative studies related to the framework.

Creating a positive data culture includes specific adjustments to the work of teachers to incorporate those processes. According to Datnow and Hubbard (2015) accepting this role involves allocating time for teachers to use data, establishing clear goals for data use (Gerzon, 2015), and providing teachers support and training to feel efficacious and agentic with data-based decisions. It also involves using data collaboratively to create plans to improve student and school performance instead of "blaming and shaming" teachers for unfavorable data (Datnow et al., 2013; Schildkamp & Poortman, 2015). Oliveras-Ortiz (2015) states that although a vital component of

instructional leadership is data-driving instructional decision-making, the intensifying focus on student scores appears to require that campus leaders become data managers. The authors imply that the data culture continuum provides a framework that can assist school leaders in understanding and implementing data factors that support their schools in developing positive data cultures. It also provides a foundation for future quantitative and qualitative studies related to the framework.

Increased testing can also have an impact on the curriculum and instructional practices in a school. According to Hunt et al., (2009), public school teachers complain that the use of assessment in a high-stakes environment makes instruction more test-driven, resulting in an atmosphere where it is difficult to motivate students with the material. The authors suggest that the use of data to inform curricular growth may be intimidating to school leaders and teachers who feel that data are used to judge their performance as educators. Sutcher et al., (2017) proposed high-quality programs train educators to use data and collective inquiry to identify problems and address needs, in collaboration with staff, parents, and community organizations.

In the school accountability system, school leaders use data to assess teacher instruction and student learning to inform decisions on curriculum and instruction (Leithwoode et al., 2001; Park, 2018; Rigby, 2016). Wang (2019) defines decision making as choosing a course of action from a set of options and Data-driven decision making (DDDM) as highlighting the salient role of data in decision making. Wang specifically comprised six steps of DDDM, including (1) collecting and (2) organizing raw data which can be converted into information; (3) analyzing and (4) summarizing information which can be transformed into usable, applicable knowledge; (5)

synthesizing and (6) prioritizing the information to develop a set of options from which decision makers select a choice and reach a decision.

Data use for accountability refers to schools using data (e.g., assessment data and results from internal evaluations) in external reports, for example, to present some aspect of the performance of the school for inspectors (Coburn & Talbert, 2006; Wohlstetter et al., 2008; Young, 2006). High policy pressure for data use, as in the 'No Child Left Behind' act, can lead to schools using data extensively for accountability actions (Wayman et al., 2013). Using data for accountability actions does not automatically lead to school improvement, however, continuous, and adequate data analysis will gradually lead to positive outcomes.

Previous research points out the potential of data use for instruction to support higher student achievement (Campbell & Levin, 2009; Carlson et al., 2011; Laiet al., 2009; McNaughton et al., 2012). Educators can use data in several ways to improve their instruction (see, e.g., Breiter & Light, 2006; Wayman & Stringfield, 2006; Wohlstetter et al., 2008), for example, to differentiate in lessons (Kelly, et al., 2010), to identify students' strengths or weaknesses (McCombs, & Martorell, 2010; Roehrig, et al., 2008), and to track student progress toward standards throughout the year (Hamilton et al., 2009a).

By contrast, school leaders often experience disadvantageous consequences if external accountability systems evaluate their performance and decision making. School leaders use the data that indicate poor attendance and enrollment, low standardized test scores, and "Academically Unacceptable" ranking in the state accountability system to justify the decision of closing a high school (Khalifa et al., 2014). The District of

Columbia Public Schools (2011) statement "Our decisions at all levels must be guided by robust data" (p. 1) was a vocal, unswerving commitment to DDDM espoused by many school leaders. Sutcher et al (2017) proposed high-quality programs to train educators to use data and collective inquiry to identify problems and address needs, in collaboration with staff, parents, and community organizations. Wang (2019) concluded that when it comes using data to improve the quality of teaching and learning, it is evident that some of the most important enablers and barriers include data literacy and leadership. Wang's iterative model of data used for school improvement is described, consisting of defining goals for data use, collecting different types of evidence-based research, e.g., informal/formal data, 'big data'), sense-making, taking improvement actions and evaluation. Research insights drawn on relevant literature were discussed for each of these components, as well as identification of the research gaps that still exist.

For example, in the above mentioned six-step DDDM process (Mandinach et al., 2006), three concepts were differentiated: data have no meaning in themselves; information connects data to the context; knowledge is the applicable information guiding decision making. Yet DDDM is ambiguous about how data are converted into information, and how the information is transformed into knowledge that guides decision-making. The ambiguity of DDDM can confuse school leaders when they have insufficient skills in (1) knowing which data to consider for the decision at hand, (2) having access to the data in a timely, cost-effective manner, (3) being well-versed in data analytical models, and (4) being capable of interpreting data accurately and then converting data to information and knowledge. In fact, even statisticians sometimes make erroneous decisions using DDDM (Kahneman, 2011), let alone school leaders who might

not know how all the nuances of data collection and analysis influence data interpretation. The ambiguity of DDDM thus poses constraints for school leaders to make wise decisions.

This type of school culture requires both increased understanding from teachers and increased focus on using data to make decisions from leaders. Wang (2019) concluded that when it comes to using data to improve the quality of teaching and learning, it is evident that some of the most important enablers and barriers include data literacy and leadership. Further investigation into these important enablers and barriers is worthy of further research. We must understand the full potential of data available and more importantly how to use it to promote effective leadership, improve education, and create sustainable school environments. Roegman et al. (2018) enacting strong data leadership in K-12 schools and districts requires integrated efforts of multiple stakeholders at different levels. Understanding the current practices of data leadership from three districts provides administrators, policymakers, and preparation programs insights into the next step to develop alternative narratives around how data can be used to inform instruction and affect students' educational experiences and learning. Marsh et al., (2016) it is a challenging task given the accountability climate that has created great pressure for administrators and teachers, leading principals to create data walls that cause comparison and competition around numbers instead of a focus on knowledge and learning.

Data use is best undertaken collaboratively, for example, in professional learning communities (PLCs). A PLC consists of a group of teachers that is focused on collaborative learning by sharing experiences and critical reflections. PLCs focused on

data use may also be called data teams or inquiry teams (Marsh et al., 2015; Nelson, Slavit, Perkins, & Hathorn, 2008). During the last two decades, collaboration was identified as one of the key elements for the professional development of teachers (e.g., Avalos, 2011; Binkhorst et al., 2015; Borko, 2004; Van Veen et al., 2012). Several studies show that collaboration in teams is essential for professional development concerning data use (e.g., Datnow et al., 2013; Wayman et al., 2006). Wayman et al. (2006) reported that professional development in the form of data teams shows promise. Data teams in this study consisted of 4–6 teachers, 1–2 team leaders/school leaders, and in some cases an internal data expert, who collaborated on trying to solve an educational problem within the school. Each data team consisted of members all working in the same school.

School leaders should understand the fact that high-stakes decisions based on a single test score are an ineffective tool used as a primary measure of teacher performance and student progress. A single test can only provide a snapshot of quality teaching and student achievement reflective of an entire school year. The potential problem with the current increased emphasis on testing is not necessarily the test, per se, but the instances when tests have potentially negative consequences for school leaders, which then in turn impact students and teachers. Therefore, school leaders must seek, understand, and utilize various data to transform, sustain, and improve the overall educational system rather than conform to external accountability pressure.

Data-Driven Decision Making and School Culture

Federal and state accountability requirements have K12 leaders searching for ways to make sure students are at a proficient level in reading and math on high-stakes

exams. While research supports the use of data to make informed decisions to improve instruction (Chrispeels, 1992; Earl & Katz, 2002), studies also indicate that there have been some difficulties in implementing DDDM, especially regarding data analysis (Stringfield, Reynolds, & Schaffer, 2001). Data-driven decision-making processes may vary between and within school leaders and school districts which complicates matters even more. In addition, many administrators, teachers, school counselors, and other school personnel lack the training needed to successfully engage in the effective use of data (Kaffenberger & Young, 2007). While DDDM is an essential component of decision-making for K12 leaders, there is very little research on DDDM of K12 leaders regarding administering, monitoring, evaluating, and interpreting data results of high-stakes assessments to drive continuous improvement and sustainability.

DDDM, the process of gathering, analyzing, applying, and sharing data to promote school improvement, has recently become a prominent process in the quest to assist students in attaining educational success and helping schools meet accountability benchmarks (Wayman, 2005; Poynton & Carey, 2006). Effective K12 educational leaders have access to a plethora of informational data to guide their decision-making when administering high-stakes assessments. Effective leaders can use data to meet individual student needs, set goals, provide interventions, evaluate progress, plan professional development, and analyze gaps between teaching and learning as well as other areas of school improvement. It is essential that K12 leaders also become K12 educational data managers and use technology to propel teaching, learning, and academic progress.

Leaders of K12 public schools should understand that developing data analysis skills can serve multiple purposes, for instance, improving quality instruction, identifying

individual student needs, and fulfilling accountability expectations. Organizational learning is the process by which members of an organization, schools in our case, acquire and use information to change and implement action (Dixon 1999). In addition, data is not just test scores, however, data refers to multiple sources and types of information, such as school programs, demographics, social factors, parents, student class work, observations, leader/teacher/student narratives, formative assessments, and student portfolios. Inherent in the effective employment of DDDM is the use of data from multiple sources (Love, 2004). Bernhardt (2004) observed, "If staff want to know if the school is achieving its purpose and how to continually improve all aspects of the school, multiple measures – gathered from varying points of view – must be used" (p. 20). K-12 leaders must develop the knowledge and skill to utilize all sources of data as a catalyst to improve their schools, quality instruction, and student achievement.

Consequential to K12 leaders developing demonstrating data-driven decision-making and demonstrating data-driven analytical skills they may then create data-driven cultures that include teachers, students, parents, policymakers, and professional learning communities. A data-driven culture is about making decisions based on numbers and insights generated using data. Establishing data-driven cultures requires K12 educational leaders to abandon traditional decision-making approaches based on assumptions and intuition, rather encouraging data usage in day-to-day activities, tasks, and ultimately decision making.

Summary

This literature implicates the need to revisit, revamp, redesign, and or reauthorize the current implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in which

educational leaders should seize the opportunity to challenge external accountability systems and federal education reform initiatives by becoming proficiently data literate. Using data is not a new idea but one that K12 school leaders need to embrace and use to think more deeply and strategically about as they lead and impact the entire district/school. While numerous educational reform efforts and external accountability systems continue to be ineffective in narrowing the achievement gap and promoting equity and equality across K12 school systems, school leader's perceptions of these assessments should be examined. What leadership styles inform their practices that drive continuous improvement? What recommendations can be made to policymakers, administrators, and school leaders? Gathering information from these leaders can provide a deeper understanding of the impact of standardized testing on K12 leadership styles.

Having a learning environment that can read and understand data can change the dynamics of an entire school/district. A school leader with the ability to thoroughly read and individualize student data provides a better opportunity to target instruction more effectively and support teacher and student growth. Each educational leader should learn to interpret their own district/school data which can be beneficial in bridging the achievement gap. Data-based decisions are made to help guide instruction and promote continuous improvement. Research on the subject matter is limited, therefore, worthy of further inquiry and future research contributing to the educational leadership field.

Lastly, the relationship of accountability in school is only described in terms of information/data use and motivational activities in school. However, these are not enough to have an impact because the school system is more complex than these studies attempted to show. Other elements need to be included in the accountability relationship,

such as a clear mission/delegation and financial resources focused on learning (Pritchett, 2015). Therefore, I believe that improving learning outcomes in schools requires a new accountability framework coherent with learning outcomes. For example, establishing an accountability relationship with the four design elements including delegation or mission, information/data, and motivation. All these elements should be aligned with teaching and learning outcomes. In addition, collaboration between education stakeholders can be enhanced through the accountability relationship, and this stakeholder coherence is essential to be effective in their work and to reduce the anxiety and stress experienced by school leadership and teachers that arise due to the accountability system. Additionally, it improves teachers' and other stakeholders' notions of accountability (Weddle et al., 2021

Impacts of Standardized Testing on Leadership Behavior

Standardized testing policies shape not only what schools prioritize but also how leaders behave. High-stakes environments can lead to increased stress, burnout, and role conflict among principals (Diamond, 2007). Principals may feel compelled to prioritize test performance over broader educational goals, such as equity, student engagement, and whole-child development (Au, 2007; Young et al., 2021).

In many cases, the pressure to “teach to the test” or to produce year-over-year score increases results in managerial behaviors that conflict with long-term instructional leadership goals (DeBray, 2006; Lavigne & Good, 2019). Furthermore, principals often question the validity of using test scores as the sole measure of effectiveness, particularly in schools serving diverse or high-poverty populations (Participant 8, qualitative data).

Despite these challenges, some research indicates that standardized testing can serve as a catalyst for productive leadership when used to inform professional learning

and collaborative decision-making (Marsh et al., 2006; Schildkamp & Kuiper, 2010). This duality reinforces the need for a balanced leadership approach grounded in both compliance and capacity-building.

Although a growing body of research has examined the impact of standardized testing on teachers and student outcomes, fewer studies have focused specifically on principals' perceptions and leadership practices. Much of the literature assumes that leadership responses to accountability are uniform, overlooking variation based on school type, geographic location, and demographic context.

Furthermore, while transformational and transactional leadership theories are well-established, little empirical research explores how these models operate in test-driven environments, particularly from a mixed-methods perspective. By integrating quantitative data on leadership styles with qualitative insights from practicing principals, this study aims to fill a critical gap in understanding the complex realities of school leadership in the accountability era.

Conclusions

This review of literature implicates the need to revisit, revamp, redesign, and or reauthorize the current implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in which educational leaders should seize the opportunity to challenge external accountability systems and federal education reform initiatives by becoming proficiently data literate. Using data is not a new idea but one that K12 school leaders need to embrace and use to think more deeply and strategically about as they lead and impact the entire district/school. While numerous educational reform efforts and external accountability systems continue to be ineffective in narrowing the achievement gap and

promoting equity and equality across K12 school systems, school leader's perceptions of these assessments should be examined. What leadership styles inform their practices that drive continuous improvement? What recommendations can be made to policymakers, administrators, and school leaders? Gathering information from these leaders can provide a deeper understanding of the impact of standardized testing on K12 leadership styles.

Having a learning environment that can read and understand data can change the dynamics of an entire school/district. A school leader with the ability to thoroughly read and individualize student data provides a better opportunity to target instruction more effectively and support teacher and student growth. Each educational leader should learn to interpret their own district/school data which can be beneficial in bridging the achievement gap. Data-based decisions are made to help guide instruction and promote continuous improvement. Research on the subject matter is limited, and therefore worthy of further inquiry and future research contributing to the educational leadership field.

Lastly, the relationship of accountability in school is only described in terms of information/data use and motivational activities in school. However, these are not enough to have an impact because the school system is more complex than these studies attempted to show. Other elements need to be included in the accountability relationship, such as a clear mission/delegation and financial resources focused on learning (Pritchett, 2015). Therefore, I believe that improving learning outcomes in schools requires a new accountability framework coherent with learning outcomes. For example, establishing an accountability relationship with the four design elements including delegation or mission, information/data, and motivation. All these elements should be aligned with teaching and learning outcomes. In addition, collaboration between education stakeholders can be

enhanced through the accountability relationship, and this stakeholder coherence is essential to be effective in their work and to reduce the anxiety and stress experienced by school leadership and teachers that arise due to the accountability system. Additionally, it improves teachers' and other stakeholders' notions of accountability (Weddle et al., 2021).

The review also underscores the importance of examining leadership in context and addressing the current gap in research related to principals' experiences in test-centric systems. The present study builds upon this literature by investigating how Michigan principals interpret, enact, and negotiate leadership behaviors within a system dominated by standardized testing mandates.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Overview

Chapter Three provides a detailed description of the method employed in this mixed methods study, which examined the relationship between K12 administrators' leadership styles and their perceptions of standardized assessments. The chapter begins by restating the purpose of the study and outlining the research questions guiding the investigation. I then detail the research design, including the rationale for using a convergent parallel mixed methods design. Next, I present a comprehensive profile of the study participants, including both current and past leadership roles, years of administrative experience, and the grade levels represented in their schools. This section establishes the context for interpreting both quantitative and qualitative findings. Following the demographics, I detail the instruments and measures used for data collection, procedures for recruitment and data collection, and strategies for data analysis. Ethical considerations and limitations of the study are also addressed.

By providing a clear and systematic overview of the research methods, Chapter Three lays the foundation for understanding how the study's design, participants, and procedures contribute to the investigation of K12 leadership styles and perceptions of standardized assessments.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to examine the relationship between K12 administrators' leadership styles, specifically, transformational and

transactional leadership, and their perceptions of standardized assessments. The study sought to understand how administrators' leadership approaches influence the use of assessment data, instructional decision-making, and school climate.

To address this purpose, the study focused on a sample of K-12 administrators, including principals, assistant principals, and some participants in similar administrative roles. Participants reported both their current leadership positions and prior administrative experience, providing a comprehensive view of their professional trajectories. This demographic information contextualized the findings and allowed a more nuanced exploration of how leadership style and experience shape perceptions of standardized assessments across varied school environments.

By integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative interview data, the study aimed to provide a holistic understanding of how K12 leaders interpret and apply assessment results, ultimately informing effective leadership practices and data-driven decision-making in schools.

This study was guided by the following research questions, designed to explore the relationship between K12 administrators' leadership styles and their perceptions of standardized assessments:

- What is the relationship between transformational leadership style and school leaders' perceptions of standardized testing in areas such as communication, instructional leadership, student placement and school climate?
- What is the relationship between traction actional leadership and school leader perceptions of standardized testing in the same areas?

- How do K12 public school leaders describe their decision-making processes and responses to standardized testing mandates? In what ways do qualitative themes converge, diverge or complement the quantitative findings?

These questions were developed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how K12 leadership styles, both transformational and transactional, shape administrators' perceptions and practices regarding standardized assessments.

Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed methods design to investigate the relationship between K12 administrators' leadership styles and their perceptions of standardized assessments. The convergent parallel design allows for the simultaneous collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. By integrating both types of data, the study captured not only measurable relationships between leadership styles and assessment perceptions but also the nuanced experiences and perspectives of school leaders.

The quantitative portion of the study utilized a survey instrument administered through Qualtrics. The survey collected data on administrators' leadership styles transformational and transactional and their perceptions of standardized assessments, including areas such as communication, instructional leadership, student placement, and school climate. Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlations, and regression analyses to determine the relationships between leadership styles and assessment-related practices.

The qualitative component included optional open-ended questions with a subset of participants. Interviews provided in-depth insights into administrators' experiences

using standardized assessment data, their decision-making processes, and how leadership styles influence the interpretation and application of assessment results. Data from interviews were analyzed using thematic coding, allowing the identification of patterns and themes that complemented the quantitative findings.

In the convergent parallel design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and analyzed separately. Findings from both strands were then compared and integrated to provide a holistic understanding of the research questions. The integration of data allowed for triangulation, enhancing the validity and credibility of the study by examining whether the qualitative findings supported, explained, or expanded upon the quantitative results.

The convergent parallel mixed methods design was selected because it enables researchers to explore both numerical relationships and lived experiences simultaneously. In the context of K12 leadership, this design is particularly effective because it captures the complexity of administrators' perceptions, which may not be fully understood through quantitative measures alone. By combining survey data with rich qualitative narratives, the study provides a robust framework for understanding how transformational and transactional leadership styles influence the use and perception of standardized assessments in schools.

y and interview data to capture both breadth and depth of understanding.

Participants and Sampling

The participants for this study consisted of 69 K12 administrators, including principals, assistant principals, and other administrative leaders in Michigan schools. The sample was drawn from a variety of school types, including Local Education Agencies

(LEAs) and Public School Academies (PSAs), representing both traditional public schools and charter schools. Participants were selected to provide a diverse representation of administrative experiences, leadership roles, and school contexts.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify participants with administrative roles and experience with standardized assessments. In addition to purposive sampling, a snowball sampling approach was utilized to increase participation. After initial survey invitations were sent, participants were encouraged to share the study information with other K12 administrators in their networks, expanding the pool of potential respondents.

Survey participants were encouraged to share study information with colleagues who met the inclusion criteria, creating a snowball sampling effect. This approach helped expand the participant pool, particularly in districts or school types underrepresented in the EEM list and increased the diversity of leadership experiences included in the study.

To participate, individuals had to:

1. Hold or have recently held a K12 administrative position (principal, assistant principal, or equivalent leadership role).
2. Have experience working with standardized assessments in their schools.

Participant Characteristics

The study included K12 administrators, representing a range of leadership roles, including principals, assistant principals, and other administrative positions. Participants provided information about their current leadership roles as well as any prior administrative experience, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of their

professional trajectories and contextualizing their perspectives on leadership and standardized assessments. A total of 69 participants provided sufficient data for both quantitative analysis (correlations and regression analyses) and qualitative thematic analysis. The combination of EEM-based recruitment, university-wide email solicitation, and snowball sampling (described below as part of the data collection process) ensured a representative, diverse, and purposeful sample.

Participants' current roles were distributed as follows:

- Principal: 44 participants (63.8%)
- Assistant Principal: 9 participants (13.0%)
- Other administrative roles: 16 participants (23.2%)

This distribution demonstrates that the majority of participants held principal positions, with assistant principals and other administrative roles also represented.

Among participants with prior administrative experience, the length of service ranged from 0.5 to 30 years, with a mean of 7.79 years (SD = 6.28). This range indicates that the sample included both early-career administrators and those with extensive leadership experience, providing insights into how varying levels of professional experience may influence leadership practices and perceptions of standardized assessments.

Administrators also indicated the grade levels included in their schools. The distribution was as follows:

- Kindergarten through 5th grade: 23–26% of participants
- 6th through 8th grade: 19–23% of participants
- 9th through 12th grade: 33% of participants

The diversity of grade levels represented reflects a range of school contexts, contributing to the generalizability of findings regarding leadership styles and assessment practices. Distinguishing between current and past leadership roles provides a nuanced understanding of the participants' professional trajectories. The combination of current responsibilities, prior experience, and varied school contexts offers a comprehensive perspective on K12 administrators' leadership styles and their perceptions of standardized assessments. These demographic characteristics establish the foundation for interpreting the study's quantitative and qualitative findings. In general, this sample allowed for meaningful examination of patterns between leadership styles and perceptions of standardized assessments while ensuring diverse perspectives were captured through interviews.

Data Source

Data for this study were collected using the simultaneous collection of quantitative data from close-ended survey items and qualitative data from open-ended survey items. This approach allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how K12 administrators' leadership styles may be related to their perceptions and use of standardized assessments. The combination of these two types of data allowed triangulation, enhancing the validity of the study. Quantitative data provided measurable insights into the relationships between leadership styles and assessment practices, while qualitative data offered rich, contextualized narratives that explained or expanded upon survey findings. This dual approach helped ensure that both the breadth and depth of administrators' experiences were captured.

Quantitative Section of the Survey

Survey research is a quantitative approach that involves collecting data from a sample of individuals using a questionnaire or survey. A quantitative survey design typically focuses on gathering numerical data through closed-ended questions. According to Cresswell (2012), the quantitative technique has some kinds of research design that can be employed in various studies such as experimental design, correlational design, and survey design. Because the focus of this research is to discover if there is a relationship between K12 leadership styles in Michigan and their perceptions of standardized assessments, the data collected will be used to identify trends, attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of the population.

The primary goal of the quantitative portion of this survey was to obtain a general snapshot of trends within the K12 public school leadership community across several school districts. This method is an ideal method for studying this large dataset efficiently. This research design also includes collecting information from a representative population and analyzing that information.

Data were collected using structured close-ended survey items and more open-ended questions about concerns, attitudes, and beliefs administered through Qualtrics. The survey included items measuring transformational and transactional leadership styles, as well as administrators' perceptions and practices related to standardized assessments. Survey questions addressed areas such as communication, instructional leadership, student placement, and school climate.

The questionnaire consisted of these main sections: (1) demographics, (2) assessment of self-reported transformational and or transactional leadership styles, (3)

self-reported perceptions of standardized assessments, and (4) self-reported views of their specific leadership practices that might be impacted by standardized assessments. The demographic section was presented to gather background information about participants such as gender, professional title, years in the position, school type/identity, school size, and primary source/s (the proper name) of standardized assessment they administer as a school leader.

The second portion presented items that asked different questions about leadership styles (transformational and transactional). The background, history, and literature I described in Chapters One and Two were used for constructing questions specific to these two leadership styles. Using a Likert scale5, respondents were asked to rate whether they strongly disagreed (1), disagreed (2), were neutral (3), agreed (4), or strongly agreed (5) with each statement.

The next portion presented questions developed to assess principals' views of standardized testing, and then how they felt it affected their leadership processes. The questions in this final segment emphasized leadership effectiveness, decision-making, and communication regarding administering standardized assessments. One set of items asked administrators about the amount of time they spent engaged in different aspects of standardized assessment: making planning decisions, scheduling, assignment proctors, administering tests, analyzing information and interpreting results. The rest of these items used the same five-point Likert agreement scale as the one used for leadership

Qualitative Section of the Survey

In addition to the quantitative data collected from those survey items described above, there were open-ended questions included in the survey to gather information

about the participants' thoughts and perspectives on different aspects of this topic. Table 3.1 shows these questions, along with a description of where they occurred in the survey.

Table 3.1

Overview of Open-Ended Questions Included in the Survey

Question	Placement in Survey Instrument
Q13: Standardized testing impacts my leadership capacity. Please explain how.	Section II, immediately following Likert-scale items measuring leadership capacity.
Q16a: Please provide any comments or observations about how standardized testing impacts your work as a school leader.	Section III, near the end of the survey to encourage reflective responses.
Q16b: In your opinion, how could standardized testing be improved to better support school leaders and student learning?	Section III, directly following Q16a as the final open-ended item to solicit improvement suggestions.

Data Collection Procedures

Use of the Michigan Education Entity Master

The Michigan Education Entity Master (EEM), maintained by the Michigan Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI), served as the primary source for identifying potential participants. The EEM contains comprehensive information on all public and charter schools in Michigan, including administrators' names, roles, and contact information.

For this study, a refined search within the EEM database identified 123 Local Education Agencies (LEAs**)** and 373 Public School Academies (PSAs). These entities were selected based on active K12 schools with administrators holding leadership positions such as principal, assistant principal, or equivalent roles.

To gather participants via EEM, I used the following process:

1. Accessed the refined EEM list to identify active K12 administrators within the selected LEAs and PSAs.
2. Compiled contact information to create a secure list of potential participants.
3. Sent email invitations via the addresses listed in EEM, including a study description, informed consent information, and a Qualtrics survey link.

To further increase participation, the dissertation chair sent a university-wide email to K12 administrators affiliated with the university. This email invited potential participants to complete the survey and included a link to the study, informed consent details, and instructions for contacting the researcher. This strategy complemented the EEM-based recruitment and provided access to a broader group of administrators who might not have been captured in the database.

Survey Distribution

After obtaining institutional review board (IRB) approval, potential participants were identified using the Michigan Education Entity Master (EEM) database. Invitations were emailed to administrators, and the survey remained open for 12 weeks.

Participants were invited via email, which included a description of the study, informed consent information, and a secure survey link. Informed consent was obtained electronically before surveys. All data were stored securely on password-protected devices, and identifiers were removed to maintain confidentiality.

Responses were collected anonymously to encourage candid reporting and to protect participant confidentiality. The survey remained open from January 5, 2025, to April 5, 2025. Invitations were sent using contact information from the EEM refined

search (123 LEAs, 373 PSAs) and supplemented by a university-wide email. Responses were anonymous.

Protection of Human Subjects

Informed consent was obtained electronically prior to survey completion. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

All survey responses and interview recordings were stored securely on password-protected devices, and only the research team had access to the data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study followed the convergent parallel mixed methods design, with quantitative and qualitative data analyzed separately and then integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of K12 administrators' leadership styles and perceptions of standardized assessments.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics in order to examine patterns, relationships, and predictive effects of leadership styles on perceptions of standardized assessments. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequencies, were calculated to summarize participant characteristics and survey responses.

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to explore relationships between transformational and transactional leadership styles and various dimensions of administrators' perceptions of standardized assessments. Correlation analysis is a statistical method used to examine the strength and direction of the relationship between two or more variables. In this study, correlation analysis was employed to determine

whether a relationship exists between K–12 school leaders' leadership styles and their perceptions of standardized testing and accountability pressures. For this study, Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient (r) was used to assess the degree of linear relationship between continuous variables such as leadership style scores and perceptions of standardized testing impacts. The results of this analysis provided valuable evidence regarding the extent to which leadership style is associated with how school leaders interpret and respond to test-based accountability mandates.

A correlation provides an estimate of the relationship between two variables, testing whether on average a unit change in one variable is consistently related to a change in the other variable. This determination is made by comparing the covariance shared between the two variables in the analysis, as measured by the cross-product of the sum of the distance of each data point to its mean, to the combined sample variances of each variable in the analysis. As such, the correlation can range theoretically from negative one (a perfect inverse relationship) to positive one (a perfect relationship). The test of significance tests the likelihood of observing the given correlation when the actual relationship is zero.

Finally, regression analyses were conducted to examine whether leadership styles predicted administrators' actions related to communication, instructional leadership, student placement, and school climate.

To examine the relationship between measures of leadership style and those of the areas of leadership impacted by standardized assessments, I have used Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis. This analysis builds on the correlational association between these continuous variables, and uses calculus to solve the least-squares-distance

estimation to find the best fitting line minimizing the distance between all observed points. For this set of analyses, each area of impact (communication with stakeholders, instructional leadership decision-making, decisions about student grade-level placement, and decisions about climate and culture) were used as the dependent or outcome measure. For each of these variables, I first examined its relationship with the principal's level of transformational leadership and then its relationship with the principal's level of transactional leadership. In reporting the relationships, I used the standardized coefficient, which indicates the amount of a standard deviation in the outcome that changes as the predictor increased by one standard deviation. This indicator can therefore be compared between different measures, as the units of reporting are all in terms of the standard deviation.

Regression analysis supplies each estimate with an associated significance, to determine the extent to which the observed estimate could have occurred by chance. For this analysis, I used the standard alpha level of .05 to argue for significance. However, I also consider the size of the relationship in an educational context, to consider the "educational" significance in a meaningful way.

All quantitative analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), and assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were evaluated prior to inferential testing to ensure the validity of results.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative component of this study was designed to complement the quantitative findings by providing a deeper understanding of how standardized testing influences the instructional leadership practices of K12 school leaders. Open-ended

survey questions (Q13, Q16a, and Q16b) were included to capture participants' perceptions and experiences in their own words. The responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This flexible yet rigorous method was chosen for its ability to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within qualitative data, offering both a rich descriptive account and interpretive insight into participants' perspectives.

I began by reading and rereading all qualitative responses to achieve immersion in the data. This phase involved active reading to gain a holistic understanding of participants' viewpoints and to note initial impressions. During this process, responses were imported into SPSS to assist with organization and coding consistency.

During each phase of analysis, I composed **analytic memos** to document evolving insights, questions, and interpretive reflections. Memos served as a running commentary on the coding process, helping track how early impressions developed into more refined thematic understandings. For example, when reviewing responses about leadership communication, I noted patterns in how principals linked testing to teacher collaboration, which later informed the development of the theme *"Communication to stakeholders."* These memos created an intellectual audit trail showing how interpretations were grounded in the data rather than imposed by researcher bias.

I maintained a reflexive journal to acknowledge and critically examine my assumptions as a researcher and former educator. This reflective practice helped ensure that interpretations remained sensitive to participants' perspectives rather than influenced by personal experience or bias regarding standardized testing and leadership accountability.

Together, these practices ensured that the analysis was methodically rigorous**,** reflexively grounded**,** and **a**ligned with qualitative research standards for trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Throughout the analytic process, I engaged in several strategies to enhance the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the qualitative findings. These strategies supported systematic reflection and transparency in how meanings were constructed from participants' responses.

After becoming familiar with the data, I systematically generated **initial codes** to identify meaningful segments related to leadership practices, instructional decisions, and the perceived effects of standardized testing. Coding was conducted using both inductive and deductive approaches inductive to allow new patterns to emerge directly from participants' words, and deductive to align findings with the study's theoretical lens of transformational and transactional leadership within accountability systems. Each code represented a discrete unit of meaning connected to the research questions.

For example**,** one principal wrote, *"Standardized testing drives much of our instructional planning and intervention scheduling."* This response was initially coded as **"**Data-Informed Instruction" because it reflected how test results shaped curriculum and instructional decisions. Another participant stated, *"We are required to meet district benchmarks regardless of what our internal data show."* This statement was coded as "Compliance Pressure" and reflected the transactional aspects of leadership tied to external accountability mandates.

Additional examples included coding a statement such as *"I meet with teachers after each testing cycle to discuss results and set growth goals"* as "Collaborative

Reflection"**,** and another saying, *"Teachers feel overwhelmed by testing demands"* as "Staff Morale Impact." These early codes captured distinct aspects of how standardized testing influenced leadership communication, instructional planning, and school climate.

After the initial round of coding, all codes were reviewed for consistency and overlap. Related codes were clustered together (e.g., *"Data-Informed Instruction"* and *"Curriculum Alignment"* were grouped under the broader concept of *"Instructional Planning and Data Utilization"*). This iterative process ensured that each code remained conceptually clear and closely linked to the guiding research questions on how standardized testing pressures shape K12 leadership behavior.

Following the initial coding process, the next step involved examining the codes for recurring patterns, relationships, and overarching meanings across participants' responses. This phase moved beyond labeling data segments to identifying conceptual linkages among them —clustering related codes that addressed similar ideas or experiences. Codes that captured comparable meanings were grouped together to form potential themes that represented broader categories of understanding.

To facilitate this process, all codes were organized and visually mapped within NVivo. Codes were reviewed for frequency, relevance to the research questions, and conceptual alignment with leadership theory. I compared and contrasted how individual codes related to one another, noting where participants' experiences converged (showing shared perceptions) or diverged (revealing differences across leadership styles or school contexts).

For example, several initial codes such as *"Data-Informed Instruction," "Curriculum Alignment,"* and *"Use of Benchmark Assessments"* shared a common focus

on how test data informed classroom decisions. These were clustered together to form the broader theme "Instructional Planning and Data Utilization." Similarly, codes like *"Staff Stress," "Testing Fatigue,"* and *"Student Anxiety"* were combined under the potential theme "School Climate and Morale."

In contrast, the codes *"Compliance Pressure"* and *"District Mandates"* frequently appeared alongside *"Limited Autonomy,"* forming a distinct theme labeled "Stakeholder Pressure and Accountability Demands." This theme captured participants' discussions about balancing district expectations with professional judgment.

Finally, codes such as *"Collaborative Reflection," "Motivating Staff,"* and *"Reframing Testing Results Positively"* aligned with transformational leadership behaviors, whereas *"Monitoring Compliance"* and *"Performance Enforcement"* reflected transactional orientations. Together, these patterns contributed to the cross-cutting theme "Communication Framed by Leadership Style."

This iterative clustering process transformed isolated codes into analytically rich themes that illuminated how school leaders interpret and respond to standardized testing pressures through their communication, decision-making, and leadership behaviors.

In this phase, I reviewed all coded data extracts for each theme to ensure internal consistency, coherence, and distinction from other themes. Each potential theme was examined to verify that the supporting quotations consistently reflected the same underlying concept. Themes were then compared against the entire dataset to confirm that they accurately represented participants' perspectives and aligned with the study's research questions. For example, initial coding revealed two overlapping categories: *"Data-Informed Decision-Making"* and *"Instructional Planning."* During the review

process, it became clear that both codes addressed how leaders used standardized test data to guide instructional interventions and resource allocation. These codes were therefore merged into a single, broader theme, *"Instructional Planning and Data Utilization."* Conversely, the themes *"Communication Framed by Leadership Style"* and *"Stakeholder Pressure and Accountability Demands"* were retained as separate constructs because they captured distinct dimensions of leadership behavior: one focusing on internal communication approaches, and the other on external accountability influences.

This iterative review ensured that each theme was conceptually sound, grounded in the data, and meaningfully contributed to understanding how standardized testing shaped K12 school leadership practices.

Once finalized, each theme was clearly defined and named to capture its essence and analytical scope. This process involved refining the boundaries of each theme to ensure that it represented a distinct and coherent aspect of participants' experiences. Each definition incorporated both descriptive elements summarizing what participants said and analytical components explaining how the theme related to the broader research questions and theoretical framework on transformational and transactional leadership.

For example, one theme was titled *"Communication Framed by Leadership Style."* This theme described how principals' approaches to discussing standardized testing reflected their leadership orientation. Transformational leaders tended to use testing outcomes as opportunities for collaboration and professional growth, while transactional leaders focused on compliance and performance expectations. The

analytical interpretation connected this finding to transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes motivation, shared vision, and empowerment.

Another finalized theme, *"Instructional Planning and Data Utilization,"* was defined as the process by which school leaders analyzed test data to guide curriculum alignment, intervention strategies, and instructional improvement. This theme captured leaders' dual role as instructional coaches and data managers, illustrating how standardized testing shaped their strategic decisions about teaching and learning.

Similarly, *"School Climate and Morale"* was defined to represent the emotional and cultural impact of testing on staff and students. Participants noted increased stress and anxiety during testing cycles, while transformational leaders described efforts to maintain morale through encouragement, empathy, and collective reflection. This theme is directly linked to the research question concerning how leadership style influences responses to accountability pressures.

In the final phase, I synthesized the findings into a comprehensive thematic narrative supported by illustrative quotes from participants. This stage involved moving beyond description to interpretation explaining how the themes related to the study's research questions and how they complemented the quantitative results. The results were organized thematically to highlight recurring patterns and meaningful contrasts in school leaders' perspectives.

For example, under the theme *"Communication Framed by Leadership Style,"* transformational leaders described using test results as a foundation for collaboration and growth. One participant shared, *"I frame test scores as a learning tool an opportunity for teachers to reflect on what's working and where we can grow as a team."* In contrast,

transactional leaders focused on compliance and accountability, as illustrated by another response: *"Our main priority is meeting district targets. Staff know that our performance data must meet expectations."*

Similarly, within the theme *"Instructional Planning and Data Utilization,"* many leaders discussed how standardized test data informed intervention strategies and curriculum decisions. One participant explained, *"After reviewing our test data, I reorganized small-group instruction to address specific skill gaps."* This theme demonstrated how leaders operationalized data-driven decision-making while balancing instructional goals with accountability demands.

In synthesizing these themes, the qualitative narrative revealed how transformational leaders approached standardized testing as a tool for continuous improvement, empowerment, and collaboration, whereas transactional leaders viewed testing primarily as a compliance measure tied to external accountability mandates. These distinctions provided a nuanced understanding of leadership behavior within test-based accountability systems and offered interpretive depth to the quantitative findings, which examined correlations between leadership style and reported actions related to communication, instructional leadership, student placement, and school climate.

Together, the qualitative and quantitative analyses presented a cohesive picture of how K12 school leaders navigate standardized testing pressures balancing the demands of accountability with the values of instructional leadership and school culture.

Table 3.2

Initial Codes Developed from Open-Ended Responses

Code	Definition	Quote
Knowledge of Testing Requirements	Understanding the types, purposes, and mandates of standardized assessments within the educational system.	"Leaders must be knowledgeable about both required and optional tests and understand their impact on the school community."
Data-Informed Decision-Making	Using standardized test data to guide instructional planning and identify student learning needs.	"We use test results to pinpoint gaps and direct resources where they're most needed."
Communication of Purpose	Clearly explaining the role and intent of standardized testing to staff and stakeholders.	"It's essential to communicate to teachers and parents why the testing matters and how it connects to our goals."
Leadership Capacity Building	Developing one's professional competence and confidence in interpreting and applying test data.	"Building leadership capacity means learning how to analyze data and use it to support teachers effectively."
Balancing Compliance and Instruction	Managing the tension between meeting testing mandates and maintaining instructional integrity.	"Sometimes we have to adjust teaching priorities to meet district expectations, even if it takes away from other areas."
Transformational Leadership Orientation	Framing standardized testing constructively to inspire staff and improve school outcomes.	"I try to use test results as a learning opportunity, motivating teachers to see growth rather than just scores."
Transactional Leadership Orientation	Emphasizing accountability and compliance with external standards and performance targets.	"Our focus is ensuring all testing requirements are met and that teachers follow the district's testing protocols."

After coding all the text, the researcher looked for **patterns or clusters** of similar codes and grouped them into broader themes. Themes are higher-level categories that represent larger ideas in the data. For instance, multiple codes about supporting teachers, using data, and guiding instruction might form the theme "Instructional Leadership Practices." The following table shows a list of the themes that I identified from the coding process.

Table 3.3

Themes that Emerged from Open-Ended Responses

Theme	Definition
Communication Framed by Leadership Style	School leaders' communication strategies reflected their leadership orientation transformational leaders used testing results to foster dialogue and collaboration, whereas transactional leaders emphasized compliance and accountability.
Stakeholder Pressure and Accountability Demands	External pressures from districts, parents, and policymakers influenced how leaders communicated about and responded to testing outcomes, often shaping their focus on performance metrics over instructional growth.
Instructional Planning and Data Utilization	Leaders used standardized test data to guide instructional interventions, identify achievement gaps, and align resources to student needs, though time constraints often limited deeper instructional engagement.
Student Placement and Equity Considerations	Test results informed decisions regarding student grouping, intervention placement, and program eligibility, though leaders noted tension between data-driven mandates and equitable curricular practices.
School Climate and Morale	Standardized testing influenced staff and student morale, with some leaders reporting stress and anxiety, while others emphasized fostering resilience and maintaining positive school culture amid accountability pressures.
Transformational vs. Transactional Leadership Responses	Leaders' approaches diverged based on leadership style: transformational leaders sought to inspire collective improvement through data reflection, while transactional leaders prioritized procedural adherence and policy compliance.

I reviewed the themes to make sure they accurately reflect what participants said. This process included refining themes, combining overlapping ones, and selecting quotes from the data to illustrate each theme.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Following separate analyses, quantitative and qualitative results were compared and integrated to identify convergences, divergences, and complementary findings. This process enhanced the study by allowing numerical trends to be interpreted in the context of their experiences. For example, patterns identified in regression analyses were compared with themes from interview narratives to determine whether qualitative data provided explanations or insights into quantitative findings.

Data integration in this study occurred at the interpretation and discussion stage, following the separate analysis of quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data. The purpose of integration was to combine numerical trends with rich, descriptive narratives to provide a comprehensive understanding of how K12 administrators' leadership styles relate to their perceptions and use of standardized assessments.

Quantitative results, including correlations and regression analyses, were compared with qualitative themes derived from interview data. For instance, statistical relationships between transformational leadership and instructional leadership practices were examined alongside administrators' narrative descriptions of how they applied assessment data in their schools. Qualitative data were used to explain, elaborate, or expand upon quantitative results. For example, while regression analysis might indicate a significant relationship between transactional leadership and communication practices, interview data offered explanations regarding why administrators implemented specific communication strategies in response to assessment pressures.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data enhances the trustworthiness, depth, and applicability of study findings. By examining both numerical relationships and participants' lived experiences, the study captures the complexity of K12 leadership in the context of standardized assessments. This approach allows for more nuanced conclusions regarding the influence of leadership styles on administrators' decision-making, instructional practices, and school climate.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This research aims to discover if a relationship exists between K12 leadership styles and their perceptions of standardized testing. A mixed method approach has been developed to provide a deeper understanding of relationships between two variables, K12 leadership styles and perceptions of standardized assessments. The understanding of relationships between variables can best be determined through integration of quantitative and qualitative methods. This combination provides a comprehensive and reinforced understanding of the relationship between the two variables, that is, K12 styles and perceptions as it relates to standardized assessments. This chapter presents the findings derived from the data collected for the study, which explores the relationship between K12 leadership styles and perceptions of standardized assessments. The results are organized around the study's central research questions and are supported by quantitative and qualitative survey data.

Descriptive Results from Survey Items

As described in Chapter Three, the sample consisted of 69 principals or school leaders who met the criteria to participate in this survey. The descriptive information from the survey items offers valuable insights into leadership approaches, attitudes toward accountability, decision making, communication, and views about state and federal standardized assessments.

Although federal education reforms, including *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) and subsequent reauthorizations, were designed to improve student achievement and principal

effectiveness, they often lacked input from the very leaders responsible for implementation. These reforms did not fully account for factors such as disparities in school populations, student needs, or the lived experiences of school leaders.

This study amplifies the voices of 69 Michigan-based K12 principals and administrators (e.g., individuals) who bear the direct impact of standardized testing mandates. Their demographic characteristics, leadership behaviors, and school contexts are considered in the analysis to ensure representation and relevance.

By integrating both quantitative data and qualitative insights, the study reveals how leadership style influences assessment-related decisions and school climate. It also uncovers the practical tensions and ethical dilemmas school leaders face. Their narratives, combined with the statistical trends, offer a grounded understanding of school leadership under pressure.

This study creates a space for school leaders to speak freely, reflect deeply, and contribute to a shared understanding of leadership, accountability, and educational transformation.

Leadership Styles

The initial survey item asked participants about their agreement with different statements about leadership. As described in Chapter Three, these statements reflected either a transactional or a transformational approach to leadership. Table 4.1 shows the results of the participants' responses to the transactional items from this survey question. In this table, the item text is provided in the first column, the mean is given in the second column, and the standard deviation is given in the third column. For each item, the response scale ranged from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (10).

Table 4.1

Average Responses to Transactional Approach to Leadership

Item Text	Mean	Standard Deviation
Teachers need constant direction.	4.86	1.85
Teachers require structure to do their best.	7.25	1.58
I use rewards to get the best out of my team	4.42	2.26
I keep a close eye on teacher activity.	6.39	1.77
Decisions are communicated formally to all teachers.	8.28	1.65
Most information from teachers comes from forms/written requests.	3.63	1.92

In this table, it is interesting to note that the means range from 3.63, which would be in the disagreement level, to 8.28, which would be at the agreement level. The two lowest means were for "Most information from teachers comes from forms/written requests," followed by "I use rewards to get the best out of my team." Administrators disagreed on average with both statements. The two highest means were in response to the statements "Decisions are communicated formally to all teachers" and "Teachers require structure to do their best." These participants agreed on average with both statements. When examining the standard deviations for these items, the most homogeneous response was for the statement " Teachers require structure to do their best," indicating that these leaders had similar responses to these two questions. The most heterogeneous was for "I use rewards to get the best out of my team," suggesting more variation in their responses to this item.

Table 4.2 shows the results of the participants' responses to the transformational items from this survey question. This table is constructed in the same manner as Table 4.1.

Table 4.2

Average Responses to Transformational Style of Leadership

Item Text	Mean	Standard Deviation
Teachers need the freedom to develop their own ideas	7.75	1.68
I ask for input from teachers	8.52	1.56
I have an open-door policy	9.50	0.93
Teachers work best if they are mostly left alone.	4.19	1.93
I encourage teacher innovation.	8.40	1.68
I pay attention to differing viewpoints.	8.60	1.18
I encourage teachers to work together	9.17	1.06
Teachers are active participants in decision-making	7.73	1.52
Communication in my school building is flexible	7.45	1.65

In this table, it is interesting to note that the mean ranged from 4.19 to 9.50. This finding indicates that the highest mean was at least twice the average of the lowest mean. The lowest mean was in response to the statement “Teachers work best if they are left alone.” This question could be either transactional or transformational to K12 leadership styles. Their response suggests that these leaders did not agree with the view that teachers function best without administrative interaction. Another item, K12 leaders on average indicated they encourage teachers to work together, which is a tenet of transformational leadership. When examining the standard deviations for these items, the most homogeneous response was for the statement "I have an open door policy,” while the most heterogeneous was the same as the lowest mean, “Teachers work best if left alone.” This set of results may indicate that K12 leaders put a certain amount of trust in their teachers without micromanaging. On the other hand, it could imply that K12 leaders don’t have the time to collaborate with teachers.

Experiences with Standardized Testing

Another section of the survey asked participants about their experiences with different aspects of standardized testing. The first item in this section asked about how recently they had been actively involved in administering a standardized assessment, with responses ranging from currently involved in the process to 12 weeks or longer. More than half of the respondents reported that within the last eleven weeks or less, they were involved in the standardized testing process, with 48.3% reporting that they were currently involved in the process.

The next set of items asked about the amount of time they spent on different aspects of the process in hours per month. Table 4.3 shows the results of participants' responses to this set of items. This table is structured in the same manner as Table 4.1

Table 4.3

Accountability/Strategic Planning, Time Spent on Preparation and Implementation

Item Text	Mean	Standard Deviation
Making decisions that impact the organization.	4.63	3.04
Scheduling testing (makeup dates, accommodations etc.	3.12	2.39
Assigning Proctors	2.75	2.51
Analyzing and interpreting results	6.14	2.69
Administering the test	4.02	3.46

In this table, it is interesting to note that the means range from 2.75 to 6.14 hours spent per month on the task listed. The two lowest means were Assigning Proctors (2.75) and Scheduling testing (makeup dates, accommodations, etc. (3.12). The highest mean was 6.14 hours that school leaders reported spending per month analyzing and

interpreting results. When examining the standard deviations for these items, the most homogeneous response was for the statement "Scheduling test and making accommodations," while the most heterogeneous analyzing and interpreting test results.

The next set of items in this section asked participants about their agreement with statements starting with the prompt "In my view, standardized test results are a valid measure of…" The list of items provided different endings to that statement. The last row of the table shows the text that participants wrote in under the option of "Other." For this set of items, responses could range from completely disagree (1) to completely agree (10). Table 4.4 shows the results for this set of items. This table is set up in the same manner as Table 4.1

In this table, it is interesting to note that the means range from 3.96, which would be in the disagreement level, to 6.57, which would be at the agreement level. The two lowest means were "student intelligence, and my leadership." Administrators disagreed on average with both statements. The highest mean in response to the statement is other, in response to the "other" option at the end of the list. These leaders specifically describe five views in addition to the item responses listed. These responses are valuable to this research as they provide a deeper understanding of leadership and answer the research questions. When examining the standard deviations for these items, the most homogeneous response was for the statement "Intervention Quality", while the most heterogeneous was for 'Other" as listed above.

Table 4.4

Perceptions of Standardized Testing as a Valid Measure

In my view, standardized test results are a valid measure of...	Mean	Standard Deviation
My leadership	4.09	2.50
Student achievement	5.40	2.37
Student background	4.36	2.85
Student Intelligence	3.96	2.21
School quality	4.51	2.31
Teacher quality	4.87	2.64
Learning resources quality	4.95	2.25
Curriculum quality	5.29	1.98
Intervention quality	5.65	1.94
Nothing at all	5.00	2.85
Other ❖ Personal growth along a learning continuum when compared to previous scores assessing the same skills/ knowledge ❖ Test-taking skills ❖ What the public "thinks" teaching is ❖ Socio-economic Standing of the Community ❖ Mastery of grade-level standards	6.75	3.67

The next set of items in this section asked participants about their agreement with statements about the use of standardized assessment results, starting with the prompt “In my district/school, standardized test results are used to...” The list of items provided different endings to that statement. The last row of the table shows the text that participants wrote in under the option of “Other.” As was the case with the items in Table 4.4, responses could range from completely disagree (1) to completely agree (10). Table 4.5 shows the results for this set of items. This table is set up in the same manner as Table 4.1

Table 4.5

Responses to Use of District/School Test Results

In my district/school, standardized test results are used to...	Mean	Standard Deviation
Measure my leadership effectiveness (by superintendent, central office, board)	6.16	2.58
Reward teachers	4.09	3.21
Identify organizational strengths	6.48	2.28
Identify areas of school improvement.	7.19	1.97
Motivate teachers to improve	4.65	2.47
Penalize teachers.	3.79	2.79
Implement student interventions. (Ex. Multi-Tiered System of Supports)	6.81	2.33
Measure student proficiency	7.38	2.03
Rate individual schools	6.62	2.50
Guide instructional reform	6.37	2.39
Provide feedback to staff.	5.98	2.59
Make curriculum decisions	5.70	2.45
Other (please indicate) ❖ Taking away time from teaching	7.00	5.20

In this table, it is interesting to note that the means range from 3.79, which would be in the disagreement level, to 7.38, which would be in the agreement level regarding district use of standardized assessments. The two lowest means reflect tenets of transactional leadership, namely: "penalize teachers, reward teachers to get the best out of my team." Administrators disagreed on average with both statements. Although the two highest means were in response to the statements "Measure student proficiency, and "Identify areas of school improvement," the 'other' option ranked third at 7.00, whereas "Taking Time Away from Teaching (Instructional Leadership) was specified and should be noted. These participants agreed on average closely with all three statements. When examining the standard deviations for these items, the most homogeneous response was

for the statement "Identify areas of improvement" while the most heterogeneous was 'other', where the standard deviation is more than two times the homogeneous response, whereas the "take away time from teaching is worthy of attention and further reporting.

Impact of Testing on Leadership

The last section of the survey asked participants about their views on the impact of standardized testing on their leadership. The first item in this section asked whether or not they felt it had an impact. The results showed a split decision. Fifty percent of the survey population responded that standardized testing impacted their leadership capacity, while the other half responded that it did not affect their leadership capacity.

The next set of items in this section asked about the specific impact of standardized testing on the participants' communication with different stakeholders. Responses to this set of items could range from "Not at all" (1) to "A great deal" (10). Table 4.6 shows the results for this set of items. This table is set up in the same manner as Table 4.1

Table 4.6

Impact of Standardized Testing on Communication with School Stakeholders

Communication with…	Mean	Standard Deviation
District/Central Office	4.90	2.75
School Administration	5.26	2.92
Teachers/Instructional Staff	6.16	2.81
Students	4.67	2.77
Parents	5.17	2.87
Community Partners	3.96	2.20

In this table, it is interesting to note that the means ranged from 3.96, which would be in the disagreement level, to 6.16, which would be at the agreement level. The two lowest means concerned the impact of standardized testing on communication with "Community Partners, and "Students." Administrators did not agree that communication was impacted in these two areas. The two highest means were in response to the impact of standardized testing on communication with "Teachers/Instructional Staff" and "School Administration." When examining the standard deviations for these items, the most homogeneous response was for the statement School Administration, and the most heterogeneous was Community Partners.

The last set of items in this section asked about the specific impact on the participant's decision-making concerning different aspects of running the school. Like the previous set of items, responses to this set of items could range from "Not at all" (1) to "A great deal" (10). Table 4.7 shows the results for this set of items. This table is set up in the same manner as Table 4.1

In this table, it is interesting to note that the means range from 2.04, which would be in the disagreement level, to 6.93, which would be in the agreement level. The two lowest means were concerning the impact of standardized testing on "Student Demotion," followed by "Student Promotion." Administrators indicated disagreement on average with both statements, suggesting that student placement decisions were not based on this information. The two highest means concerned the impact on decisions concerning "Professional Development" and "Intervention Planning." These participants agreed on average that standardized testing impacted decisions in both of these areas. When examining the standard deviations for these items, the two most homogeneous responses

were for the statement " Human Resource and Curriculum," indicating that these leaders had similar responses to these two questions. The most heterogeneous was for "Student Promotion," suggesting more variation in their responses to this item.

Table 4.7

Impact of Standardized Testing on Specific Decision-Making

Decisions about…	Mean	Standard Deviation
Curriculum	5.84	2.74
Student Promotion	3.56	2.21
Human Resources	4.29	2.78
Student Demotion	2.04	2.25
Strategic Planning	5.90	2.53
Professional Development	6.61	2.60
Climate and Culture	5.22	2.56
Intervention planning	6.93	2.35
Teacher training	6.56	2.42

Relationship Between Leadership Style and Views on Impact of Standardized Testing

A regression analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between principals levels of transactional leadership and their perceptions of the impact of standardized testing on communication with stakeholders. There were eight different regression analyses for this section. For four of these regressions, the predictor variable was the principal's stated level of transactional leadership. For the other four of these regressions, the predictor variable was the principal's stated level of transformational leadership. Each of these predictors was examined in its relationship to the four areas of impact described in Chapter Three: (1) communication with stakeholders, (2)

instructional leadership decision-making, (3) decisions about students' grade level placement, and (4) decisions about school climate and culture. Table 4.8 shows the results of these regression analyses. In this table, the results for the four regressions that used transactional leadership as the predictor are shown in the first row, while the results for the four regressions that used transformational leadership as the predictor are shown in the second row. Each column shows a different impact area that was the outcome for the regression analyses. For each relationship, the standardized coefficient (*beta*) is shown, which indicates the amount of change in by standard deviation of the outcome for every standard deviation increase in the predictor. The significance level of these coefficients is indicated with either NS, for no significance, or with asterisks as indicated below the table.

Table 4.8

Relationship Between Leadership and the Impact of Standardized Testing

	Impact on…			
	Communication with Stakeholders ***Beta***	**Instructional Leadership Decision-Making** ***Beta***	**Decisions about Student Grade Level Placement** ***Beta***	**Decisions about Climate and Culture** ***Beta***
Transactional Views of leadership	0.45***	0.34***	0.18*	0.10^{NS}
Transformational Views of leadership	-0.001^{NS}	-0.11^{NS}	-0.38***	-0.01^{NS}

*** p<.001; * p<.05, ^{NS} p>.05

Neither style of leadership was related to decision about climate and culture of the school. The results for level of transactional leadership indicated a strong positive

relationship between this predictor and three of the four impact areas. The results for level of transformational leadership showed one significant relationship, a strong negative impact on decisions about student grade level placement. These relationships are described more thoroughly below.

Communication with Stakeholders

For communication with stakeholders, principals who exhibited higher levels of transactional leadership were more likely to perceive that standardized testing significantly influenced their communication with stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, students, school boards, and other district officials. In contrast, principals with lower levels of transactional leadership were less likely to view testing as a major factor in how they communicated with others about instructional goals, accountability, or school performance.

On the other hand, the analysis revealed no statistically significant relationship between principals' level of transformational leadership and their communication with stakeholders. In other words principals who demonstrated higher levels of transformational leadership did not perceive standardized testing as having a greater or lesser impact on their communication with stakeholders such as teachers, parents, students, and other district leaders while being compared to those with lower levels of transformational leadership.

Decisions about Instructional Leadership

The regression analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between principal's levels of transactional leadership and their perceptions of the impact of standardized testing on their instructional leadership decision making.

However, the analysis revealed that there is no statistical significant relationship between principals' level of transformational leadership and their expressed impact of standardized testing on instructional decision-making. In other words principals who demonstrated higher levels of transformational leadership were no more or less likely to perceive standardized testing as influencing their instructional decisions than those who embrace lower levels of transformational leadership. Regardless of how transformational a principal's leadership style may be (such as vision collaboration, innovation and teacher empowerment), it did not affect their views of how standardized testing shapes decisions related to curriculum, professional development and most certainly instruction.

Decisions about Students' Grade Level Placement

The regression analysis revealed a weak to moderate positive relationship between participants expressed level of transactional leadership and their perception of the impact of standardized testing on student grade level decision making. In other words, principals who demonstrated higher levels of transactional leadership were somewhat more likely to perceive standardized testing as a factor that influences decisions about promotion and demotion. While the relationship was not strong, it was statistically present, suggesting that transactional leaders may give slightly more consideration to test scores when making decisions about whether students should advance to the next grade level.

Interestingly, the regression analysis for transformational leadership levels revealed a moderate negative relationship between this measure and principals' perceptions of the impact of standardized testing on student grade level placement decisions. This result indicated that as the principals' transformational leadership rates

increased, their perception of standardized testing as having an influence on student placement decisions decreased. In other words, principals who scored higher on transformational leadership (those whose leadership styles inspire, focus, differentiate, and motivate) were less likely to view standardized testing as a major factor in deciding whether students should be promoted, retained, or placed in specific academic tracks.

Decisions about School Culture and Climate

Finally, as mentioned above, the regression analysis revealed there was no statistically significant relationship between transactional leadership level and decisions about school culture and climate. Principals who scored higher in transactional leadership did not differ in their perceptions from those school leaders with lower levels of transactional leadership regarding how standardized testing influences their decisions about maintaining or improving school climate and culture. In other words, transactional leadership style does not appear to influence how principals view the role of standardized testing and shaping the emotional, social, cultural, and relational environment of the school.

Similarly, the analysis between principal levels of transformational leadership and their perceptions of the impact of standardized testing on decision making related to school climate revealed no statistically significant relationship between the two variables. This finding indicates that principals with higher levels of transformational leadership were no more or less likely than their peers to perceive standardized testing as influencing their decisions about school climate, such as staff rail, teacher collaboration, emotional and social background and environment, and student engagement

Findings from Open-Ended Questions

To gain deeper insight into how standardized testing influences school leadership, participants were invited to provide open-ended responses as part of the Qualtrics survey. An open coding approach was used to analyze these qualitative responses, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data. The goal was to capture the authentic voices of K12 leaders and to gain a better understanding of how their perceptions align with transactional or transformational leadership styles. The coding process identified four overarching themes: Time and Resource Burden**,** Equity and Fairness Concerns, Validity Concerns and Data-Driven Decision Making, and Instructional and Leadership Impact. These themes reflect both the logistical and philosophical challenges associated with standardized testing in public education.

Time and Resource Burden

The most prominent theme that emerged was the time and resource burden placed on school leaders by standardized testing. Respondents frequently noted that the preparation, administration, and coordination of assessments consumed a significant portion of their time, often at the expense of instructional leadership. One leader explained, *"The time spent to handle the logistics of assigning proctors, renting furniture, making sure rooms get set up properly, etc., takes away from time helping students and staff."* Another wrote, *"Planning, preparation, and implementation take up a large portion of my time… I'm not able to be as present in the trenches."* These reflections illustrate the shift in leadership focus from instructional guidance to operational management, a hallmark of transactional leadership.

However, many participants expressed frustration with this shift and emphasized a desire to prioritize instructional improvement, collaboration, and student support, which are values central to transformational leadership**.** One respondent noted, *"If administrators had more time to work on instruction rather than logistics, we would see much more growth in student learning and therefore an increase in test scores."* At the heart of this quote is the argument that school leaders, particularly principals, are often pulled away from their core role as an instructional leader because they are overwhelmed with operational demands related to testing. These logistics include coordinating test schedules, managing technology and staffing for test administration, training staff in testing protocols, resolving last minute testing disruptions, ensuring compliance with state and federal mandates.

While these tasks are necessary under current accountability systems, they are administrative in nature and not necessarily educational. The more time school leaders spend on them, the less they are able to focus on providing support for meaningful teaching and learning.

Equity and Fairness Concerns

A second emergent theme centered around equity concerns related to standardized assessments**.** Across the responses, leaders expressed the belief that standardized tests do not fairly or accurately measure student learning, particularly for students from historically marginalized groups. These groups include students experiencing poverty, English language learners, and those with limited access to quality educational resources.

Multiple respondents shared strikingly similar views, underscoring a deep frustration with what they perceive as an inherently inequitable system. For example, one

school leader remarked, *"My student population of mostly students of poverty does not have the background knowledge or vocabulary development needed to be successful on the state test."* This comment illustrates a broader concern that standardized assessments often fail to account for disparities in opportunity, cultural context, and prior educational exposure.

Leaders indicated that these tests may perpetuate structural inequities rather than illuminate true student ability or growth. One respondent wrote:

> *Due to Central office analysis of standardized test results, I am often forced to make decisions I may not otherwise make in terms of teaching and learning. I may have to forego programs that I feel may have been more beneficial than the ones the district is requiring due to test results*.

Many felt constrained by policies that ignore the complex realities of their student populations, and leading to an overemphasis on accountability rather than student development. Another school leader replied, "*Standardized testing is not written or assessed fairly*." These quotes reflect the tensions between policy mandates at the district level and school leaders' professional and moral obligations to the population they serve.

This concern was echoed across multiple responses. This finding suggests a systemic disconnect between the design of standardized tests and the realities of diverse student populations. These perceptions are consistent with transformational leadership, which seeks to challenge unjust systems, advocate for equity, and support the whole child.

Validity Concerns

Many leaders expressed skepticism about how data are analyzed and interpreted by individuals outside the school environment. One participant wrote:

> *How data is being analyzed at the district and state level is useless because the people looking at the data are not in the schools. They are looking at the endpoint or score." This quote suggests that the way data is being analyzed at the district and state levels is fundamentally disconnected from the realities of schools. Another respondent wrote," The results should be used to set department, school, and curriculum goals. It should be used to evaluate pace, scope, and sequence."*

This quote reflects a more formative and instructional approach to data use**,** wherein educators use assessment outcomes to inform curriculum planning, instructional pacing, and goal setting at the local level. Collectively, these perspectives suggest a tension between top-down accountability frameworks and bottom-up instructional utility*,* raising questions about the extent to which data-informed decision-making is truly responsive to the lived experiences of educators and students.

By reducing educational evaluation to numbers alone, these external actors often overlook the processes that lead to those numbers. Standardized testing should be used for the purpose it was intended, which was to be one of several items used to measure student progress and proficiency. It should not be what's used to make most decisions regarding schools, curriculum, and other outcomes. As one participant explained, "*As a result, the data analysis may appear thorough or scientific, but it's incomplete and potentially misleading."*

Instructional and Leadership Impact and Data-Driven Decision Making

The third theme focused on the impact of testing on instructional leadership and decision-making**.** Leaders acknowledged that while data from standardized tests can be useful, their ability to use it effectively is often constrained by district mandates and high-stakes accountability structures. One respondent noted, *"Due to central office analysis of standardized test results, I am often forced to make decisions I may not otherwise make in terms of teaching and learning."* This statement reflects the transactional nature of responding to external pressures rather than internal instructional priorities. Another leader expounded on the subject matter by stating, *"The school district heavily focuses on student performance on standardized tests, especially in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics"*. The leader's observation highlights the narrowing of educational priorities in response to external accountability pressures. *Another participant, when commenting on how standardized testing impacted their leadership capacity, elaborated by writing, "Not necessarily my capacity; however, it affects certain outcomes, thereby affecting my capacity!*" This focus is indicative of high-stakes testing environments, where performance metrics in tested subjects often drive instructional decisions, resource allocation, and policy initiatives (Au, 2007; Hursh, 2005).

However, several leaders described intentional efforts to build teacher capacity by guiding them through data interpretation. One leader explained, *"As a leader, it is my responsibility to not just review data with the teachers but teach them how to use it1'. When I teach them how to analyze the data, I am building their capacity as leaders."* This quote illustrates a capacity-building perspective on leadership, in which the administrator moves beyond simple data dissemination toward developing teachers' data

literacy and analytical skills. By teaching educators how to independently interpret and act on student data, the leader fosters a shared sense of responsibility and agency, aligning models of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) and professional learning communities (DuFour, 2004). The leader positions data analysis as a collaborative and developmental process**,** aiming to cultivate teacher leadership and support sustainable instructional improvement.

Others emphasized that their teams were learning to understand individual student growth, suggesting a shift from compliance to personalized learning, a core value of transformational leadership**.** A participant stated, *"We are learning about the whole child, their educational story, and helping them understand how they learn."* In other words, the leader is focused on understanding students as individuals, not just as test scores. It reflects a more holistic approach to education that values a student's background, experiences, learning style, and emotional needs. The goal is to support not only academic achievement but also personal growth and self-awareness in learning.

Cross-theme analysis revealed that while transactional leadership behaviors are often required to navigate the structural and procedural aspects of standardized testing, many leaders aspire to practice transformational leadership in their day-to-day work. Leaders reported being constrained by time-consuming test preparation duties and top-down mandates yet continued to seek meaningful ways to support teacher development, advocate for student needs, and challenge inequitable systems.

In summary, the qualitative findings demonstrate that standardized testing has a profound impact on the leadership experiences of K12 leaders. While compliance with testing requirements often necessitates transactional leadership practices, the beliefs and

aspirations expressed by participants reflect a strong preference for transformational approaches. These include mentoring teachers, promoting culturally responsive assessment practices, using data for continuous growth, and focusing on individualized student success. This qualitative analysis provides rich contextual evidence that complements the study's quantitative results and supports the conclusion that leadership style plays a significant role in how school leaders perceive and respond to standardized testing.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Overview

Chapter Five provides an overview of the study and presents a discussion of the major findings, conclusions, and implications drawn from the data. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to examine the relationship between K12 administrators' leadership styles, specifically transformational and transactional, and their perceptions of standardized assessments. The study sought to explore how leadership style influenced administrators' attitudes, decision-making processes, and actions related to standardized testing, as well as to identify patterns that contribute to understanding the broader impact of assessment practices on school leadership.

Chapter Five begins with a summary of the study's research questions. It then discusses the major findings in relation to literature and theoretical framework, emphasizing the ways in which transformational and transactional leadership behaviors align or diverge from K12 leaders expressed attitudes toward standardized testing. Finally, the chapter presents implications for practice, policy, and future research, highlighting how leadership style can shape the implementation and perception of standardized assessments within K12 educational environments.

This study was guided by the following research questions, designed to explore the relationship between K12 administrators' leadership styles and their perceptions of standardized assessments:

- What is the relationship between transformational leadership style and school leaders' perceptions of standardized testing in areas such as communication, instructional leadership, student placement and school climate?
- What is the relationship between traction actional leadership and school leader perceptions of standardized testing in the same areas?
- How do K12 public school leaders describe their decision-making processes and responses to standardized testing mandates? In what ways do qualitative themes converge, diverge or complement the quantitative findings?

This study was guided by research questions designed to explore the relationship between K12 administrators' leadership styles and their perceptions of standardized assessments. The mixed methods design allowed both quantitative and qualitative data to address these questions, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. These research questions collectively guided the analysis and interpretation of the data. The integration of both strands provided a nuanced understanding of how leadership style informs administrators' beliefs and decisions concerning standardized testing within the K12 educational context.

Key Findings

This study examined the relationship between K12 administrators' leadership styles—specifically transformational and transactional and their perceptions of standardized assessments. Using a convergent parallel mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed concurrently to develop a comprehensive understanding of how leadership style influences attitudes and actions related to testing. Quantitative findings from the

Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) were complemented by qualitative insights derived from administrators' open-ended responses. Integration of both data sources provided a nuanced perspective on how leadership behaviors shape the ways standardized testing is perceived and implemented in schools.

Quantitative analyses revealed that transformational leadership behaviors were significantly associated with positive perceptions of standardized testing in areas such as communication, instructional leadership, and school climate. Administrators who scored higher on transformational leadership dimensions of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000) were also more likely to view standardized assessments as tools that can inform instruction, guide school improvement, and facilitate stakeholder communication.

Conversely, transactional leadership, which emphasizes contingent reward, performance monitoring, and compliance (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985) showed weaker or more limited relationships with positive perceptions of testing. Administrators with predominantly transactional tendencies often framed standardized assessments in terms of accountability and policy adherence rather than instructional improvement.

Regression analyses indicated that leaders who were higher on transformational leadership aspects also had significantly more favorable perceptions of standardized testing as a means of enhancing communication and improving school climate**.** Those who were higher on transactional leadership elements also higher in their attitudes focused on procedural compliance and performance management. These findings align with previous studies suggesting that transformational leaders are more likely to use data

for reflective improvement and collective efficacy (Hallinger, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008), whereas transactional leaders tend to use data to meet external accountability benchmarks (Marzano et al., 2005).

The qualitative strand provided rich insights into these administrators' lived experiences with standardized assessments. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) revealed five major themes that elaborated on and contextualized the quantitative results: instructional leadership time, communication with stakeholders, data-driven decision-making, equity and validity, and school climate and culture**.**

Many administrators in this study expressed concern that standardized testing consumes valuable time that could otherwise be devoted to instructional leadership and professional collaboration**.** Participants noted that the extensive preparation, administration, and analysis associated with standardized assessments often diverted their attention away from key leadership responsibilities such as observing instruction, supporting teachers, and facilitating data-informed professional learning communities. These activities are central components of transformational leadership**,** which emphasize empowering teachers, fostering collaboration, and promoting continuous instructional improvement (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). Consequently, the increased focus on testing logistics often constrained administrators' capacity to engage in the transformational leadership practices that most directly influence teaching quality and student learning outcomes.

This finding reflects the tension between accountability requirements and instructional priorities in school leadership. Administrators reported that the procedural demands of testing—such as scheduling, compliance monitoring, and reporting

frequently left limited time for activities that nurture school culture and teacher development. As a result, their ability to act as instructional leaders was constrained by the logistical and bureaucratic expectations tied to testing cycles.

These concerns mirror those identified by Jones (2015), who found that the growing emphasis on standardized testing limited school leaders' opportunities to engage in transformational practices, including mentoring teachers, guiding curriculum innovation, and fostering professional reflection. In this study, administrators described how accountability pressures shifted their focus from long-term instructional growth to short-term performance management.

In summary, the findings suggest that the time requirements of standardized testing can hinder transformational leadership behaviors by reducing opportunities for collaboration, instructional leadership, and teacher support. Consequently, while testing is intended to improve educational quality through accountability, it may inadvertently restrict the very leadership practices most associated with instructional improvement as well as a positive school culture.

Administrators in this study emphasized the importance of transparent and ongoing communication with teachers, parents, and district officials about standardized testing expectations, procedures, and results. Many described communications with stakeholders as a vital leadership function that builds trust, reduces anxiety, and promotes clarity across the school community. Their comments affirmed that effective communication ensured that teachers understood how testing data would be used to guide instruction, that parents were informed about student performance, and that district leaders received accurate feedback about local implementation challenges.

Within the framework of transformational leadership, such communication reflects the leader's role in building shared understanding and collective responsibility for student learning (Leithwood et al., 2006). Transformational leaders use open communication not only to convey information but also to inspire collaboration and shared purpose. By engaging multiple stakeholders in dialogue about assessment goals and outcomes, these leaders create a sense of collective ownership and accountability, rather than compliance driven solely by external mandates.

This emphasis on communication aligns with prior research suggesting that effective leaders act as communicators who bridge the gap between policy expectations and classroom practice (Hallinger, 2011; Fullan, 2014). Transparent communication helps ensure that standardized testing is understood as one component of a broader instructional improvement process, rather than as a punitive or isolated measure of success.

The findings in this theme reflect the idea that transformational leaders leverage communication as a relational and motivational tool**,** fostering trust, clarity, and shared commitment among stakeholders. By doing so, they mitigate the stress often associated with testing and transform assessment discussions into opportunities for collective learning and school growth.

Administrators in this study consistently recognized the importance of data-driven decision-making as a key component of effective instructional leadership. Participants noted that standardized assessment data provide valuable insights into student achievement, instructional effectiveness, and curriculum alignment. Many described using test results to identify areas of need, allocate resources, and guide school

improvement planning. However, while acknowledging the necessity of using standardized data, these administrators also cautioned against an overreliance on test scores as the sole measure of student learning or instructional quality.

This balanced perspective reflects an awareness that data must be interpreted within context and complemented by other forms of evidence such as classroom assessments, teacher observations, and student feedback. As Mandinach and Gummer (2016) emphasized, effective data-driven leadership requires both technical proficiency and the ability to analyze and interpret quantitative results and contextual understanding**,** or the professional judgment needed to apply data appropriately to local circumstances. Participants in this study echoed that idea, noting that numbers alone cannot capture the complexity of student growth, motivation, and social-emotional factors that influence learning outcomes.

From a transformational leadership perspective, the use of data extends beyond compliance with accountability requirements. Transformational leaders engage teachers collaboratively in data discussions, using assessment information as a foundation for professional learning, reflective dialogue, and shared goal-setting (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Robinson et al., 2008). In contrast, a purely transactional approach may focus on data as a performance metric tied to external mandates or rewards.

In summary, the findings suggest that administrators value data as an essential tool for informed decision-making but resist reducing complex educational processes to test scores alone. Those exhibiting transformational leadership behaviors use data to empower teachers, promote inquiry, and drive instructional improvement**,** thereby

ensuring that assessment information supports growth rather than merely enforcing accountability.

Administrators in this study consistently expressed concerns regarding the equity and validity of standardized assessments. Participants noted that while these tests are intended to provide objective measures of student achievement, they may not fully capture the diverse learning needs, cultural backgrounds, or unique strengths of all students. Many administrators emphasized that test results could disadvantage certain groups, particularly students from historically underserved populations, English language learners, or those with special education needs.

These concerns align with research highlighting the limitations of standardized assessments in accurately reflecting the full range of student learning. Scholars such as Au (2016) and Popham (2017) have argued that high-stakes tests often perpetuate systemic inequities, as they may favor students with greater access to resources, test preparation, or culturally aligned curricula. Administrators in this study echoed this perspective, noting that overreliance on standardized scores for high-stakes decisions such as student placement, teacher evaluation, or school accountability can inadvertently reinforce inequities and undermine educational fairness.

From a transformational leadership standpoint, equity and validity concerns underscore the importance of leaders who advocate for inclusive practices and critically evaluate assessment data within context. Transformational leaders are more likely to use assessment results as tools to promote equity, guide differentiated instruction, and implement policies that support all learners, rather than accepting test outcomes as absolute measures of ability (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Robinson et al., 2008). In

contrast, a transactional approach may emphasize compliance with testing mandates without critically assessing the fairness or relevance of the results.

These findings suggest that administrators recognize the limitations of standardized testing with respect to equity and validity. Those who demonstrate transformational leadership behaviors actively seek to interpret assessment data responsibly, ensuring that decisions support fair, inclusive, and contextually appropriate practices that advance student learning and school improvement.

Administrators in this study emphasized that high-stakes testing environments can significantly affect school climate and culture. Participants reported that testing pressures often influence teacher morale, increase stress, and create tension within the school community. These conditions can impact not only staff well-being but also collaboration, innovation, and the overall learning environment.

From a transformational leadership perspective, leaders play a critical role in mitigating the negative effects of high-stakes testing. Transformational leaders actively foster a positive school climate by promoting collaboration, encouraging professional growth, and framing assessments as tools for improvement rather than punitive measures. Such leaders emphasize shared goals, collective problem-solving, and continuous learning, which helps maintain motivation and engagement among staff (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000).

In contrast, administrators with transactional leadership tendencies often prioritize procedural compliance and accountability targets over relational or instructional support. While transactional approaches can ensure adherence to testing mandates, they may not

address stress or morale issues and can inadvertently contribute to a more rigid, compliance-driven school culture.

In summary, the findings from this theme suggest that leadership style profoundly shapes the impact of standardized testing on school climate and culture. Transformational leaders are more likely to buffer staff from the pressures of testing and cultivate a supportive environment conducive to instructional improvement, whereas transactional leaders focus primarily on order, accountability, and meeting external mandates.

Integrated Findings

The qualitative findings from this study provided rich insights into K12 administrators' experiences with standardized assessments, complementing the quantitative results and offering a nuanced understanding of how leadership style influences perceptions and practices. Five key themes emerged from the qualitative analysis: instructional leadership time, communication with stakeholders, data-driven decision-making, equity and validity, and school climate and culture. Each theme highlights the complex interplay between leadership behaviors and assessment-related responsibilities, and collectively, they illuminate the ways transformational and transactional leadership styles shape administrators' responses to standardized testing.

Time for engaging in instructional leadership emerged as an important concern, with administrators noting that the extensive preparation, administration, and analysis associated with testing often diverted attention from core leadership tasks such as observing instruction, supporting teachers, and facilitating professional learning communities. These responsibilities are central to transformational leadership, which emphasizes teacher empowerment, collaboration, and instructional improvement (Bass &

Avolio, 1994; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). Quantitative findings reinforced this theme, indicating that transformational leaders perceived testing demands as a factor influencing their ability to engage in instructional leadership more positively than transactional leaders, who focused on compliance and efficiency.

The theme of communication with stakeholders highlighted the importance of transparent, ongoing dialogue with teachers, parents, and district officials regarding testing expectations and results. Transformational leaders used communication strategically to foster shared understanding and collective responsibility, a practice supported by prior research linking open communication to collaborative and effective school leadership (Leithwood et al., 2006; Hallinger, 2011). Quantitative data suggested that transformational leadership predicted stronger perceptions of the effectiveness of stakeholder communication compared to transactional leadership, which was more procedural and compliance-focused.

In the area of data-driven decision-making, administrators recognized the value of standardized test data for informing instruction but emphasized that data should not be used in isolation. Effective leaders interpret assessment results in context, combining technical skills with professional judgment to guide instructional planning (Mandinach & Gummer, 2016). Transformational leaders, in particular, engaged teachers collaboratively in interpreting data to drive improvement, whereas transactional leaders tended to focus on data as a measure of accountability, reinforcing the quantitative finding that transformational leadership is associated with more proactive, growth-oriented uses of assessment data.

Concerns regarding equity and validity reflected administrators' awareness of the limitations of standardized assessments. Participants noted that high-stakes tests may not fully capture student learning, particularly for diverse or underserved populations. Transformational leaders addressed these concerns by advocating for fair and inclusive practices, while transactional leaders focused primarily on compliance with testing policies. This qualitative theme aligns with the quantitative finding that transformational leadership is linked to perceptions of testing as a tool for instructional improvement rather than simply accountability enforcement.

Finally, school climate and culture emerged as a critical theme, with administrators reporting that high-stakes testing pressures can affect teacher morale, stress levels, and overall school climate. Transformational leaders mitigated these negative effects by fostering collaboration, emphasizing growth, and framing assessments as opportunities for improvement (Hallinger & Heck, 2010), whereas transactional leaders prioritized meeting accountability targets, often at the expense of relational and cultural factors. Quantitative results further indicated that transformational leadership positively influenced administrators' perceptions of school climate in the context of standardized testing.

Overall, the integrated findings suggest that leadership style plays a central role in shaping administrators' perceptions and responses to standardized assessments. Transformational leaders consistently emphasized instructional improvement, collaborative problem-solving, equity, and school climate, using standardized assessments as tools to support these goals. In contrast, transactional leaders prioritized compliance, procedural efficiency, and accountability, often limiting opportunities for

instructional innovation and relational leadership. Together, the qualitative and quantitative findings provide a comprehensive picture of how leadership behaviors influence the complex dynamics surrounding standardized testing in K12 schools.

Implications of Findings for Existing Research

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between K12 administrators' leadership styles specifically transformational and transactional, and their perceptions of standardized assessments. By integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative open-ended responses, the study provided a comprehensive understanding of how leadership behaviors influence perceptions, decision-making, and actions related to testing. The findings underscore the significant role that leadership style plays in shaping administrators' responses to the challenges and opportunities presented by standardized assessments, aligning with and extending prior research in educational leadership.

Consistent with the literature, transformational leaders in this study demonstrated a capacity to use standardized assessments as tools for instructional improvement, professional collaboration, and school culture enhancement (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Hallinger, 2011). Quantitative findings revealed that transformational leadership significantly predicted positive perceptions of assessment in areas such as communication, instructional leadership time, and school climate. Qualitative themes further illustrated that transformational leaders engage teachers and stakeholders collaboratively, interpret data contextually, and actively work to mitigate stress or negative morale associated with high-stakes testing. These results corroborate previous studies indicating that transformational leadership supports reflective practice,

teacher empowerment, and school-wide improvement efforts (Robinson et al., 2008; Fullan, 2014).

Administrators exhibiting transactional leadership behaviors were more likely to focus on compliance, accountability, and procedural efficiency, emphasizing adherence to district and state mandates rather than using assessments as instruments for instructional growth. This finding aligns with Bass's (1985) and Burns's (1978) conceptualization of transactional leadership as an exchange-oriented style, which relies on rewards and monitoring to achieve expected outcomes. Quantitative data indicated weaker associations between transactional leadership and perceptions of assessment as a tool for instructional improvement, while qualitative responses suggested that these leaders prioritized order and policy adherence over collaboration and relational practices. These results echo prior research demonstrating that transactional approaches, while effective for maintaining structure, may limit opportunities for innovation and transformational instructional leadership (Marzano et al., 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

The five qualitative themes**;** instructional leadership time, communication with stakeholders, data-driven decision-making, equity, and school climate and culture provide additional nuance in understanding how leadership style shapes responses to standardized assessments. Transformational leaders actively used these domains to foster shared understanding, support teacher growth, and promote equity, demonstrating alignment between theory and practice. For example, in the theme of data-driven decision-making, transformational administrators employed assessment data collaboratively to guide instruction and school improvement, consistent with Mandinach and Gummer's (2016) assertion that effective data use requires both technical skills and contextual knowledge.

Similarly, in the school climate and culture theme, transformational leaders mitigated stress and maintained morale, reinforcing Hallinger and Heck's (2010) finding that leadership style significantly influences school climate in accountability-driven environments.

In contrast, transactional leaders engaged with these same domains primarily from a compliance perspective, limiting their potential to positively influence instructional practices, collaboration, or equity. The findings suggest that while transactional leadership ensures adherence to testing mandates, transformational leadership is more closely associated with practices that support teacher efficacy, student learning, and continuous improvement.

Despite extensive research on leadership in K12 education and the use of standardized assessments, several notable gaps exist that this study sought to address. Much of the existing literature examines either leadership styles or standardized assessments independently, but few studies explicitly explore how transformational and transactional leadership behaviors influence administrators' perceptions and practices regarding standardized testing. While transformational leadership has been associated with improved instructional practices and school culture (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Hallinger, 2011), research seldom investigates how these behaviors intersect with high-stakes accountability environments. Likewise, studies on standardized testing often focus on student outcomes, teacher experiences, or policy implications, without linking findings directly to administrators' leadership approaches.

As described in Chapter Two, the literature indicates that while K12 leadership and standardized testing have been studied extensively, there is a lack of research that:

Integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore leadership style and assessment perceptions simultaneously, Examines contextual factors influencing these perceptions, and Investigates how transformational and transactional leadership behaviors differentially shape practices related to equity, instructional leadership, and school climate in the context of high-stakes testing.

This study addressed these gaps by using a convergent parallel mixed methods design to explore how transformational and transactional leadership styles influence administrators' perceptions of standardized assessments, with particular attention to instructional leadership time, communication, data-driven decision-making, equity, and school climate. This study contributes to the literature by addressing gaps in understanding how leadership style shapes administrators' perceptions and responses to standardized assessments. It demonstrates the value of a mixed methods approach in providing both statistical evidence and rich, contextualized insights, highlighting the importance of considering leadership behaviors in policy and practice decisions related to testing.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have meaningful implications for K12 leadership practice, educational policy, and future research. By examining how transformational and transactional leadership styles shape administrators' perceptions of standardized assessments, this study highlights actionable strategies to support instructional improvement, equitable practice, and positive school climate in high-stakes testing environments.

The study demonstrates that transformational leaders are more likely to use standardized assessments as tools for instructional improvement, collaboration, and equity. Professional development programs for K12 administrators should emphasize skills such as effective communication, collaborative decision-making, and fostering shared responsibility for student learning. Administrators can benefit from training that strengthens transformational behaviors, such as inspiring staff, supporting teacher growth, and interpreting assessment data in ways that promote continuous instructional improvement.

Administrators reported that testing consumes time that could otherwise be spent on instructional leadership and professional collaboration. School leaders should prioritize strategies that protect instructional time, such as delegating testing logistics, using assessment data efficiently, and integrating testing-related tasks into broader instructional improvement plans. Encouraging a leadership approach that balances accountability with instructional support can help mitigate stress and improve school climate.

Findings indicated the importance of using assessment data thoughtfully and contextually, rather than relying solely on test scores for high-stakes decisions. Transformational leaders can foster collaborative data use with teachers to inform instruction, identify gaps, and promote equity. Emphasizing multiple measures of student learning including formative assessments and qualitative indicators can enhance fairness and provide a more comprehensive understanding of student needs.

High-stakes testing can impact teacher morale and overall school culture. Administrators who practice transformational leadership can buffer these effects by

cultivating collaboration, supporting teacher autonomy, and framing assessment as an opportunity for growth rather than a punitive measure. School leaders should intentionally implement strategies that maintain trust, morale, and a culture of continuous learning, particularly in testing-heavy environments.

Policymakers should recognize the critical role leadership style plays in shaping how assessments are implemented and perceived. Leadership preparation and certification programs could integrate transformational leadership competencies with practical strategies for balancing accountability and instructional leadership in testing environments.

School districts and state agencies should consider how high-stakes testing policies impact administrators' time, decision-making, and school climate. Policies that provide flexibility in assessment administration, offer multiple measures of student learning, and support collaborative interpretation of data can help ensure that testing serves as a tool for improvement rather than a source of stress or inequity.

Limitations

A primary limitation involved the sampling method used to recruit participants. The study relied on the Michigan Educational Entity Master (EEM) database as the foundation for identifying and contacting K12 principals and assistant principals statewide. While the EEM offers one of the most comprehensive listings of educational entities and personnel in Michigan, it did not consistently provide accurate or up-to-date email addresses. Many listed contacts were generic district accounts or outdated entries, resulting in undeliverable invitations or messages that did not reach intended participants.

This limitation directly affected participant recruitment and reduced the number of valid responses.

In addition, the study utilized a snowball sampling technique to supplement the EEM outreach. Although snowball sampling can be useful for expanding participation among hard-to-reach populations, it introduces a potential selection bias, as participants often recruit peers within their professional networks who may share similar views or experiences. In the context of Michigan's current accountability era, where standardized testing pressures strongly influence leadership discourse, the use of snowball sampling may have further narrowed the range of perspectives represented. Principals and assistant principals who are more engaged or critical of testing policies may have been more likely to participate or to share the survey with like-minded colleagues. Consequently, the sample may overrepresent leaders with heightened awareness or concern about accountability mandates, while underrepresenting those who are neutral or disengaged from the issue.

Together, these sampling constraints affected both the size and representativeness of the sample. Although approximately 500 potential participants were contacted, only 69 school leaders completed the survey. This small sample limited the statistical power of the quantitative analyses and restricted the generalizability of findings. The qualitative data, derived from open-ended survey responses rather than in-depth interviews, also offered limited opportunity for follow-up or clarification of emerging themes.

Finally, contextual factors such as ongoing policy changes, district testing cycles, and competing administrative demands may have influenced participation rates and response depth. These realities underscore the challenges of conducting leadership

research in a high-accountability climate, where time constraints and policy pressures can affect both access and engagement.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies on this topic may consider investigating how factors such as school size, district resources, student demographics, and policy mandates influence the relationship between leadership style and perceptions of standardized testing. Understanding these moderating variables can provide more targeted guidance for leadership practice in diverse contexts. Every research study faces limitations that shape how its findings can be interpreted and applied. Although this mixed-methods study provided meaningful insights into the relationship between K12 leadership styles and perceptions of standardized assessments, several methodological and contextual constraints must be acknowledged.

Future studies should adopt multi-method recruitment strategies to strengthen participation and ensure a more representative sample. Researchers could supplement the EEM database with updated contact lists from professional organizations such as the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP) or the Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principals Association (MEMSPA). Leveraging multiple outreach methods, including direct district collaboration, regional education service agencies, and professional networks could help reduce reliance on snowball sampling and improve response validity.

To enhance generalizability, future studies might also employ stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation across Michigan's varied district types (urban, suburban, and rural) and governance structures (public, charter, and parochial).

Expanding the sample size of the smaller groups for different criteria would allow for stronger statistical inference and deeper comparative analysis among subgroups of school leaders.

Methodologically, subsequent research could include semi-structured interviews orfocus groups to provide richer, more dynamic perspectives on leadership in accountability contexts. These approaches would allow researchers to examine how leaders interpret, respond to, and evolve within the pressures of standardized assessment policies over time.

Longitudinal research could examine how administrators' leadership behaviors and perceptions of assessments evolve over time, particularly in response to changing policy environments. Continued use of mixed methods designs can further illuminate the complex interplay between leadership behaviors, assessment use, and school outcomes.

Future research could examine additional leadership frameworks beyond transformational and transactional models, such as distributed, instructional, or servant leadership, to determine how different approaches influence assessment perceptions and instructional practices. Comparative studies could identify best practices for balancing accountability with instructional and relational leadership.

Finally, further research could explore the downstream effects of leadership style on teacher efficacy, instructional practices, and student achievement in the context of standardized assessments. Understanding these connections would provide more comprehensive evidence linking leadership behavior to school-wide outcomes and inform both practice and policy. Researchers should continue to investigate leadership development and professional learning strategies that help administrators balance

accountability requirements with transformational leadership principles. By identifying ways to support principals in aligning data-driven decision-making with instructional vision and staff empowerment, future studies can contribute to more sustainable and human-centered leadership practices in K12 education.

Conclusions

This study examined the relationship between K12 administrators' leadership styles specifically transformational and transactional and their perceptions of standardized assessments, employing a convergent parallel mixed methods design. The findings indicate that transformational leadership is associated with more positive perceptions of standardized assessments and more proactive, student-centered approaches to instructional improvement. Transformational administrators emphasized collaborative data use, effective communication with stakeholders, equity, and fostering a positive school climate, using standardized assessments as tools to guide instruction and support teacher growth. In contrast, transactional leadership was linked primarily to compliance, efficiency, and adherence to district or state mandates, with limited emphasis on instructional innovation or relational leadership practices.

Qualitative themes including instructional leadership time, communication with stakeholders, data-driven decision-making, equity and validity, and school climate and culture highlighted the complex ways that leadership behaviors interact with the demands of standardized testing. Administrators expressed concerns about the time-intensive nature of assessments, the need for transparent communication, the importance of contextualized data use, and the potential impact of testing on equity and school climate. Transformational leaders were more likely to navigate these challenges by fostering

collaboration, shared responsibility, and instructional improvement, whereas transactional leaders focused on order, compliance, and meeting accountability requirements.

In conclusion, the findings underscore that leadership style is a critical determinant of how standardized assessments are perceived and enacted in K12 schools. By fostering transformational leadership practices, educational leaders and policymakers can enhance the constructive role of standardized testing, supporting instructional improvement, equity, and a positive school climate. These insights provide actionable guidance for leadership development, policy refinement, and future research aimed at optimizing the use of assessments in ways that promote effective leadership, empower teachers, benefit students, and positively impact the broader educational community.

APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) EXEMPTION LETTER

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board

Date: December 12, 2024

Study #: IRB-FY2025-214

Study Tile: The Impact of Standardized Testing on K12 Leadership

Submission Type: Initial

IRB Decision: Exempt

Research Team:

Alycia Roberts Julia Smith

Based on applicable federal regulations, the above referenced study has been determined to be Exempt, with the following categories:

Category 2.(i). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects;

Notes for Researcher(s):

This submission includes the following approved documents

- Recruitment email
- Date Stamp Approved Research Info sheet_12.12.24
- Survey

Letter and Consent Document:

This letter along with the IRB approved (date-stamped) consent document can be found in Cayuse in the Submission Details page under Letters and Attachments, respectively. Please make sure to use the most recent IRB approved version of the consent form in consenting participants.

Permission from Research Site(s):

Please note the following:

- This IRB exemption determination letter means that this research has met one or more of the federal criteria for exemption per 45 CFR 46.104- Exempt Research.
- Before the research is initiated, permission to conduct research at a given site must be obtained from all research locations listed in the IRB submission. You must keep copies of all such permission letters

for your files.

- It is the responsibility of each researcher to follow all applicable policies and procedures of any outside institution where the research will be conducted.

Modifications:

Any changes to this exempt project must be reviewed by the IRB prior to initiation by submitting a MODIFICATION request. Do not collect data while the changes are being reviewed. Data collected during this time cannot be used in research.

Record Retention:

Exempt projects will be retained by the IRB office for three years after the last action on the project.

You are approved to start the research. Please retain a copy of this notification for your records. If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office.

Thank you.

The Oakland University IRB

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