

Understanding Leadership Efficacy in K–12 Schools: A Qualitative Study of Educational Leaders' Practice

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines how K–12 educational leaders describe and make sense of their leadership practices related to instructional support, evaluation and improvement strategies, collaborative relationships and trust, and parent and community engagement. Drawing on open-ended survey responses from practicing school and district leaders, the study employs inductive thematic analysis to explore leadership efficacy as enacted through daily practice rather than expressed solely as an abstract belief. Guided by Bandura's self-efficacy theory, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, and transformational leadership theory as interpretive lenses, leaders' narratives are situated within the relational and contextual systems shaping leadership work. Findings reveal a coherent, practice-oriented leadership narrative grounded in collaboration, trust-building, reflective practice, and responsiveness to local context. Instructional leadership and evaluation were consistently framed as growth-oriented, relational processes, while collaborative relationships and trust emerged as foundational conditions enabling leadership practice across domains. Parent and community engagement was described as a reciprocal, boundary-spanning function rooted in communication, visibility, and partnership. Collectively, the findings position leadership efficacy as a relational and contextually embedded practice and highlight implications for leadership preparation and professional learning.

Keywords: educational leadership, leadership efficacy, instructional leadership, relational leadership, school-community partnerships, trust and collaboration

K–12 educational leaders operate at the intersection of instructional improvement, organizational management, relational leadership, and community engagement. Their work requires not only technical knowledge and managerial skill, but also the confidence to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, contextual constraints, and competing demands. Research consistently affirms that school leadership is a critical lever for improving teaching and learning, with principals influencing student outcomes through how they shape instructional priorities, foster a culture of professional responsibility, and align organizational structures to support high-quality teaching and learning (Grissom et al., 2021; Hallinger, 2018). Yet, how leaders understand and enact this work varies considerably across roles and contexts.

Leadership self-efficacy, the belief in one's capacity to organize and execute leadership actions, has been identified as an important factor shaping leaders' motivation, persistence, and effectiveness (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Leaders with stronger efficacy beliefs are more likely to engage in instructional leadership and sustain improvement efforts in the face of challenges. However, leadership efficacy does not develop or operate in isolation. It is influenced by contextual conditions such as school size, socioeconomic composition, geographic location, policy pressures, and the level of organizational support available to leaders. Principals working in rural or under-resourced settings, for example, often face staffing shortages, limited access to professional learning, and heightened community expectations, all of which can shape how leadership confidence is formed and enacted (Klocko & Justis, 2019; Preston et al., 2013).

Although prior research has established connections between leadership efficacy and leadership outcomes, much of this work relies on quantitative measures or focuses on discrete leadership functions. Less attention has been given to how educational leaders themselves describe their leadership practices and make sense of their perceived capacity to lead across interconnected domains of practice. In particular, limited qualitative research has examined how leaders describe these interconnected practices as part of a coherent leadership approach shaped by context.

This study examines how K–12 educational leaders describe and interpret their leadership practices across instructional support, evaluation and improvement strategies, collaborative relationships and trust, and parent and community engagement. By centering leaders' open-ended reflections, the study seeks to show how leadership efficacy is constructed and enacted in daily practice within varied school and district contexts. This study responds to that need by examining how leaders describe and make sense of their leadership practices in context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership Efficacy in Context

Educational leadership research consistently demonstrates that school leaders influence teaching and learning primarily through the conditions they create rather than through direct instructional control (Grissom et al., 2021; Hallinger, 2018). Leadership self-efficacy, defined as leaders' beliefs in their capacity to organize and execute leadership actions (Bandura, 1997), has been linked to instructional leadership behaviors, persistence in the face of challenges, and engagement in improvement efforts (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Leaders who perceive themselves as capable are more likely to initiate change and sustain improvement initiatives.

Increasingly, research emphasizes that leadership efficacy is shaped by context rather than operating solely as an individual psychological attribute. Factors such as school size, socioeconomic composition, geographic location, policy demands, and district-level support influence how leadership confidence is developed and enacted (Hallinger, 2018). Leaders in rural or under-resourced settings often face staffing shortages, limited professional learning opportunities, and heightened community expectations—conditions that can both constrain and strengthen leadership efficacy (Klocko & Justis, 2019; Preston et al., 2013). These findings suggest that leadership efficacy is dynamic and contextually situated rather than uniform across settings.

Instructional Leadership and Teacher Support

Instructional leadership remains a central responsibility of K–12 educational leaders and a primary mechanism through which they influence student learning (Hallinger et al., 2020). Effective instructional leaders articulate a clear vision for teaching and learning, support teacher development, and align instructional practices with organizational goals (Brown et al., 2024). Coaching, feedback, data-informed reflection, and collaborative planning are consistently identified as core instructional leadership practices.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes instructional leadership as a relational and developmental process rather than a supervisory or compliance-driven function. Leaders who frame evaluation and feedback as opportunities for growth contribute to stronger instructional cultures and greater teacher engagement (Knight, 2019; Robinson et al., 2008). However, competing managerial demands, accountability pressures, and time constraints can limit leaders' capacity to prioritize instructional work, particularly in high-need or resource-constrained settings (Jackson et al., 2021).

Relational Leadership, Collaboration, and Trust

Trust and collaboration are widely recognized as foundational to effective school leadership and organizational improvement. Trust supports professional collaboration, risk-taking, and collective responsibility for student learning (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Voelkel et al., 2024). Leaders play a central role in cultivating trust through transparency, consistency, visibility, and respect for professional expertise.

Transformational leadership theory further emphasizes the relational nature of leadership, highlighting practices such as shared vision, individualized consideration, and empowerment as mechanisms for building collective capacity (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Burns, 1978). Empirical studies link transformational leadership behaviors to increased teacher collaboration, collective efficacy, and organizational commitment (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Ninković & Florić, 2016). Together, this

body of research underscores the importance of relational leadership practices in shaping both individual and collective efficacy within schools.

Parent and Community Engagement

School leadership extends beyond internal organizational relationships to include engagement with families and community stakeholders. Effective parent and community engagement has been associated with improved student outcomes, stronger school climate, and increased trust between schools and their communities (Auerbach, 2012; Banks et al., 2023; Ishimaru, 2014). Leaders who engage families through culturally responsive communication and reciprocal partnerships help align school practices with community values and needs.

Engagement practices are particularly important in schools serving historically underserved or marginalized communities, where leaders must navigate barriers such as language differences, transportation, work schedules, and historical mistrust (Mahfouz, 2020). Research suggests that leaders' confidence, adaptability, and relational skills play a critical role in shaping how effectively they engage families and external partners (Baroudi & Hojeij, 2020).

Summary and Gap

Collectively, the literature affirms that instructional leadership, relational trust, and stakeholder engagement are central to effective educational leadership and are shaped by contextual conditions. However, much of the existing research examines these domains separately or relies on external assessments of leadership behavior. Less attention has been given to how educational leaders themselves describe their leadership practices across interconnected domains of work and make sense of their perceived capacity to lead within varied contexts.

By centering leaders' narrative descriptions of practice, this study addresses this gap and contributes a practice-informed understanding of leadership efficacy as a relational construct embedded within specific school and community contexts.

Purpose of the Study

Although existing research has linked leadership efficacy to leadership outcomes, fewer studies examine how educational leaders themselves describe their leadership practices across interconnected domains of work. In particular, limited qualitative attention has been given to how leaders articulate their perceived capacity to lead within the varied and complex contexts in which they operate.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how K–12 educational leaders describe and interpret their leadership practices related to instructional improvement, collaborative relationships and trust, and parent and community engagement across diverse school and district settings. By focusing on leaders' narrative responses, this study seeks to illuminate leadership efficacy as an enacted, relational, and contextually embedded practice rather than a static individual belief.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This qualitative study is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives that together offer a multifaceted understanding of leadership confidence, context, and practice in K–12 education.

Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory defines self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their capacity to plan for and carry out the actions required to achieve specific goals. Within educational leadership, this theory explains how leaders' beliefs about their abilities influence their motivation, persistence, and resilience, all factors essential to sustaining improvement and managing the demands of school leadership. In this study, Bandura's framework provides a psychological foundation for examining how leaders describe their confidence in addressing instructional, organizational, and interpersonal challenges. Participants' open-ended reflections illuminate how efficacy beliefs are enacted in practice.

To situate these beliefs within broader systems, the study also draws on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Bronfenbrenner proposed that human development occurs within nested and interconnected systems, ranging from the immediate microsystem (school, staff relationships) to the exosystem and macrosystem (district policies, societal expectations, and state mandates). Applying this framework to leadership, the study interprets how contextual and environmental factors, such as rurality, access to professional development, and community expectations, shape leaders' confidence and behavior. This perspective highlights how external systems can either reinforce or limit leaders' self-beliefs and actions.

Finally, the study is informed by transformational leadership theory, first articulated by Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bass and Riggio (2006). This theory emphasizes leadership as a relational and values-driven process that inspires growth and shared purpose among followers. The four key components (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration) serve as interpretive lenses for understanding how leaders describe their approaches to collaboration, trust-building, and change management. Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) demonstrated the theory's applicability to educational contexts, linking transformational behaviors to improved school culture and organizational capacity.

Together, these frameworks show leadership as both belief and behavior: a balance between internal conviction and contextual response. Bandura explains why leaders feel capable, Bronfenbrenner situates where these beliefs develop, and transformational leadership describes how these beliefs are enacted to influence others. In analyzing leaders' qualitative reflections, this integrated framework provides a cohesive structure for interpreting how confidence, context, and relationships interact to sustain effective school leadership.

Research Questions

Primary Research Question

RQ1: How do K–12 educational leaders describe their experiences and strategies for leading instructional improvement, cultivating trust, and building school-community partnerships across diverse school settings?

Sub-questions

RQ2: How do leaders describe the ways they support and evaluate teachers' instructional growth?

RQ3: How do leaders foster and sustain collaborative staff relationships, and what role does trust play in that process?

RQ4: How do leaders engage with families and community members to build partnerships that align with and advance the school's goals?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this study analyzed leaders' written responses to open-ended survey items using thematic analysis to capture common patterns and contextual nuances in perceptions of leadership efficacy. A qualitative descriptive approach was selected to prioritize participants' own language and meanings without imposing interpretive structures associated with phenomenological or narrative designs.

Participants and Sampling

Participants included K–12 educational leaders currently serving in schools and districts across varied geographic and socioeconomic contexts. These included assistant principals, principals, district coordinators, assistant superintendents, superintendents, and other administrators with direct school-level or district-level leadership responsibilities. The survey was distributed to a targeted sample of K–12 educational leaders across varied geographic and socioeconomic contexts.

Data Collection Procedures

Data for this qualitative study were collected electronically using Qualtrics. Participants, all of whom were practicing K–12 educational leaders, completed a brief set of demographic questions (e.g., leadership role, years of experience, school or system size, setting, and socioeconomic context) followed by a series of open-ended prompts designed to elicit descriptive accounts of their leadership contexts, practices, and perceptions. These open-ended responses served as the primary data source for the present analysis. The open-ended prompts were intentionally broad to allow leaders to describe practice in their own terms rather than respond to predetermined categories. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and all procedures were approved by the institutional review board (IRB #251672-3).

Participant Characteristics

A total of 51 educational leaders participated in the study, representing a range of school- and district-level leadership roles (see Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	Response Category	Frequency (<i>N</i> = 51)	%
Leadership Position	Principal	29	56.86
	Other Central Office Administrator	7	13.73
	Assistant/Vice Principal	6	11.76
	Superintendent	6	11.76
	Other	2	3.92
	Area/Associate/Assistant/Deputy Superintendent	1	1.96
Gender	Female	30	58.82
	Male	21	41.18
School District	Rural	33	64.71
	Suburban	12	23.53
	Urban	6	11.76
School Type	Public	45	88.24
	Private	3	5.88
	Charter	1	1.96
	Magnet	1	1.96
	Public Specialty	1	1.96
Title I Status	School-wide	43	84.31
	Other	4	7.84
	Targeted Assistance	2	3.92

Intercoder Reliability

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis, intercoder reliability procedures were employed across all open-ended responses. Two coders independently reviewed and coded participants' responses using a shared codebook developed through iterative refinement. Coding followed an inductive approach, with responses segmented into discrete meaning units to capture distinct leadership practices and perspectives (Campbell et al., 2013). Because participants often addressed multiple leadership ideas within a single response, comments could receive more than one code.

Intercoder agreement was calculated for each qualitative prompt using Cohen's kappa to account for chance agreement. Reliability varied across prompts in ways that reflected the conceptual complexity of the questions. For *Teacher Support – Instructional Improvement*, coders reached substantial agreement (85.7%; $\kappa = .71$). Agreement for *Strategies and Evaluation of Instructional Support* was moderate (54.2%; $\kappa = .46$), reflecting the frequent overlap among coaching, collaboration, data use, and evaluation practices described by participants. *Collaborative Relationships and Trust* yielded lower agreement (31.8%; $\kappa = .24$), consistent with the relational and overlapping nature of constructs such as communication, trust-building, shared leadership, and visibility. As Clarke et al. (2023) note, lower kappa values in complex qualitative coding contexts often reflect genuine interpretive complexity rather than analytic weakness, underscoring the importance of methodological transparency and collaborative consensus-building when analyzing relational and overlapping constructs. *Parent and Community Engagement* demonstrated substantial agreement (77.4%; $\kappa = .72$).

Following initial coding and reliability calculation, the coders met to review all discrepancies and reach consensus. These discussions focused on clarifying code boundaries, refining definitions, and resolving differences in emphasis rather than presence or absence of constructs. In several cases, coders identified the same thematic elements but differed in their assessment of relative prominence within a response. Consensus coding decisions were reached for all responses and served as the basis for the final thematic analysis.

Taken together, the reliability outcomes and consensus process support the analytic rigor of the qualitative findings and provide confidence that identified themes reflect consistent patterns in participants' descriptions of leadership practice.

Qualitative Analysis

Initial coding of *Teacher Support – Instructional Improvement* by the first author yielded six distinct categories: Collaborative Coaching and Support, Curriculum Development and Implementation, Instructional Leadership Identity, Reflective Practice and Professional Learning, Data-Informed Decision Making, and Barriers and Enablers to Instructional Leadership. Initial coding of *Strategies and Evaluation of Instructional Support* yielded seven distinct categories: Instructional Coaching and Feedback, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and Collaborative Planning, Data-Informed Decision Making, Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation, Professional Development and Teacher Capacity-Building, Culture of Trust and Support, and Barriers and Enablers to Instructional Leadership. Initial coding of *Collaborative Relationships and Trust* yielded six distinct categories: Trust Building, Open Communication and Transparency, Leader Visibility and Presence, Shared Leadership and Collaborative Structures, Recognition and Appreciation, and Relational Care and Respect. Finally, initial coding of *Parent and Community Engagement* yielded six distinct categories: Transparency and Communication, Visible/Active Presence, Specific Engagement Programs, Involve/Utilize Stakeholders, Dedicated Personnel/Structure, and Addressing Weakness/Need.

In total, *Teacher Support – Instructional Improvement* yielded 41 unique units from responses provided by 29 participants, *Strategies and Evaluation of Instructional Support* yielded 107 unique units from responses provided by 48 participants, *Collaborative Relationships and Trust* yielded 96 unique units from responses provided by 44 participants, and *Parent and Community Engagement* yielded 55 unique units from responses provided by 31 participants. Because responses to each open-ended item were optional, the number of participants contributing to each domain varied. These qualitative insights were used to contextualize and explain patterns in leadership practice across domains.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine how K–12 educational leaders describe their leadership practices across instructional support, evaluation and improvement strategies, collaborative relationships and trust, and parent and community engagement. Findings are organized by qualitative prompt and focus on leaders' descriptions of practice across varied school and district contexts. Interpretation of these patterns is reserved for the discussion section. Table 2 summarizes the alignment between the study's research questions and the key qualitative findings.

Teacher Support – Instructional Improvement

Leaders consistently described teacher support for instructional improvement as a collaborative and growth-oriented process rather than a supervisory function. Instructional support was framed through coaching conversations, co-planning, modeling, and feedback cycles that emphasized shared responsibility for improvement. One principal explained, "I support teachers by offering constructive, nonjudgmental feedback, modeling effective strategies, planning lessons collaboratively, and using student data to inform instructional decisions" (Principal, suburban school). Another leader highlighted "instructional credibility" as foundational to support, noting that "prior classroom experience" enabled more "meaningful guidance aligned to teacher needs" (Principal, rural school).

Leaders also frequently referenced collaboration with instructional coaches and the use of data. They described leveraging student performance data to inform instructional decisions and align support to specific classroom needs. Overall, instructional support was presented as a relational practice dependent on trust, shared expertise, and sustained engagement.

Strategies and Evaluation of Instructional Support

Leaders described evaluation as embedded within ongoing instructional support rather than as a standalone accountability process. Strategies emphasized collaboration, formative feedback, and continuous improvement through data-informed reflection. One leader explained, "We embed research-based strategies, model those strategies, use learning walks to evaluate effectiveness, and focus on data-driven PLCs" (Central office administrator, rural system). Evaluation practices were commonly situated within professional learning communities, observation–feedback cycles, and instructional walkthroughs aligned to instructional goals.

Across responses, instructional coaching and feedback emerged as central evaluative strategies. Leaders emphasized transparency and professional dialogue, framing evaluation as effective only when grounded in trust and aligned to instructional improvement efforts.

Table 2**Alignment of Research Questions with Key Findings**

Research Question	Key Findings	Interpretive Alignment
RQ1. How do K–12 educational leaders describe their experiences and strategies for leading instructional improvement, cultivating trust, and building school-community partnerships across diverse school settings?	Leaders described instructional improvement primarily through collaborative coaching, curriculum-focused guidance, and reflective practice. Instructional leadership was framed as partnership-oriented rather than supervisory, emphasizing support, modeling, and shared responsibility for teacher growth.	Findings indicate that leaders conceptualize instructional efficacy as relational and developmental, grounded in collaboration and professional trust rather than directive control.
RQ2. How do leaders describe the ways they support and evaluate teachers' instructional growth?	Leaders emphasized data-informed decision-making, observation and feedback cycles, and continuous improvement processes. Evaluation was consistently framed as formative and growth-oriented, requiring transparency and professional dialogue.	Results suggest that leaders view evaluative practices as effective only when embedded within trusting relationships and aligned to instructional goals.
RQ3. How do leaders foster and sustain collaborative staff relationships, and what role does trust play in that process?	Trust emerged as a foundational leadership condition cultivated through communication, consistency, presence, and shared leadership. Leaders viewed trust as both a prerequisite for collaboration and an outcome of sustained relational practice.	Findings position trust as central to leadership efficacy, enabling instructional improvement, evaluation, and organizational coherence.
RQ4. How do leaders engage with families and community members to build partnerships that align with and advance the school's goals?	Leaders emphasized communication, relationship-building, and collaboration with families and community partners. Engagement was framed as an ongoing, reciprocal process shaped by accessibility, responsiveness, and shared commitment to student success.	Results highlight engagement as an extension of relational leadership, reinforcing the interconnected nature of internal and external leadership practices.

Collaborative Relationships and Trust

Trust-building emerged as a central leadership responsibility across contexts. Leaders described trust as cultivated through consistent communication, visibility, listening, and relational presence rather than assumed by role or authority. One principal noted, "Trust is the foundation for strong, collaborative relationships. Building relationships with staff is the priority, but trust also depends on clear communication and consistency" (Principal, rural Title I school). Visibility and accessibility were frequently cited as trust-building behaviors, with leaders emphasizing daily interactions and availability to staff.

Shared leadership and empowerment also appeared prominently. Leaders described distributing leadership through teams and collaborative structures to foster ownership and professional voice. Trust was positioned as both a prerequisite for collaboration and an outcome of sustained relational practice.

Parent and Community Engagement

Leaders framed parent and community engagement as relational, reciprocal, and responsive to local context. Engagement was described as ongoing relationship-building rather than episodic outreach. One leader explained, “I maintain open communication through multiple channels so families feel informed and valued, and I actively listen to community input” (Assistant principal, rural district). Leaders also emphasized visibility within the community, particularly when new to a district, as a means of building trust and credibility.

Engagement extended beyond families to include partnerships with community organizations, businesses, and agencies. Leaders highlighted the importance of investing in the community to build authentic relationships and shared commitment to student success.

Summary of Results

Across all domains, participants described leadership as an enacted practice shaped by relationships, collaboration, and responsiveness to context. Participants presented instructional support, evaluation, trust-building, and stakeholder engagement as interconnected aspects of daily leadership work rather than discrete functions. Because responses to each open-ended prompt were optional, the number of participants contributing to each leadership domain varied, and some domains are therefore more robustly represented in the data than others.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how K–12 educational leaders describe their leadership practices across instructional support, evaluation and improvement strategies, collaborative relationships and trust, and parent and community engagement. Participants’ descriptions of their leadership practices were interpreted as indicators of how leadership efficacy was enacted in context, rather than as direct or isolated measures of individual efficacy beliefs. The findings reveal a coherent, practice-oriented leadership narrative in which leadership efficacy is enacted through relationships, collaboration, and responsiveness to context rather than through positional authority or isolated technical tasks.

Interpreted through Bandura’s (1997) self-efficacy theory, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), and transformational leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Burns, 1978), leadership efficacy emerged as both relationally enacted and ecologically situated. Leaders’ narratives suggest that efficacy is shaped through daily interactions within schools, districts, and communities and reinforced through trust, shared purpose, and adaptive practice.

Leadership Efficacy as Enacted and Contextually Situated

Across leadership domains, participants described their work as interconnected rather than compartmentalized. Instructional leadership, evaluation, trust-building, and stakeholder engagement were portrayed as mutually reinforcing practices shaped by relational dynamics and contextual demands. From an ecological perspective, leaders’ efficacy beliefs appeared to develop within nested systems, including school culture, district structures, and community expectations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Leaders described adapting their practices in response to resource availability, staff capacity, and local needs, highlighting leadership efficacy as dynamic rather than fixed.

Consistent with Bandura’s (1997) assertion that efficacy is strengthened through mastery experiences and social persuasion, leaders linked their sense of capability to enacted practice rather than abstract belief. Transformational leadership behaviors, such as individualized consideration, shared vision, and relational influence, were evident in leaders’ descriptions of how they motivated and supported others (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Burns, 1978). These findings position leadership efficacy as something enacted through influence and collaboration rather than authority.

Instructional Leadership and Evaluation as Trust-Dependent Practices

Findings related to instructional support and evaluation underscore the central role of trust in effective leadership practice. Leaders consistently framed instructional improvement as a collaborative and developmental process grounded in

coaching, reflective dialogue, and shared responsibility. Evaluation was described as embedded within ongoing instructional support rather than functioning as a standalone accountability mechanism.

These descriptions align with research emphasizing instructional leadership as capacity-building and relational (Knight, 2019; Robinson et al., 2008). Leaders emphasized that evaluative practices were effective only when teachers perceived leaders as credible, supportive, and consistent, reinforcing trust as a mediating condition between leadership actions and instructional improvement (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Voelkel et al., 2024).

Collaborative Relationships and Trust as Foundational Conditions

Collaborative relationships and trust emerged as foundational conditions underpinning all other leadership practices described by participants. Leaders portrayed trust-building as an intentional and ongoing process enacted through communication, visibility, consistency, and shared leadership. Rather than treating trust as a static organizational attribute, leaders described it as cultivated through daily interactions and reinforced over time.

This relational orientation aligns with transformational leadership theory's emphasis on moral purpose, shared leadership, and relational influence (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Burns, 1978). From an ecological perspective, trust appeared to strengthen connections across systems, supporting coherence between instructional goals, organizational structures, and professional culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Parent and Community Engagement as Boundary-Spanning Leadership

Leaders' descriptions of parent and community engagement further illustrate leadership as boundary-spanning work. Engagement was framed as relational and reciprocal, grounded in communication, visibility, and responsiveness rather than episodic outreach. Leaders emphasized meeting families where they are, addressing barriers to participation, and cultivating partnerships aligned with community values.

These findings are consistent with research positioning school leaders as connectors between schools and their broader social contexts (Auerbach, 2012; Banks et al., 2023; Ishimaru, 2014). Within Bronfenbrenner's framework, parent and community engagement reflects leadership activity within the mesosystem and exosystem, where schools intersect with families, agencies, and community organizations. Leaders' narratives suggest that efficacy in this domain involves navigating complexity and sustaining relationships across system boundaries.

Implications for Leadership Preparation and Practice

The findings suggest several implications for leadership preparation and professional learning. First, preparation programs should prioritize relational competencies, such as trust-building, communication, and collaborative problem-solving, alongside technical and managerial skills. Instructional leadership development should emphasize coaching models, formative evaluation, and data use within relational contexts rather than compliance-oriented supervision.

Second, professional learning for practicing leaders should provide opportunities for reflection, peer collaboration, and contextual problem-solving. Leaders in this study described efficacy as developing through experience and interaction, suggesting that learning structures that mirror these conditions may be particularly effective. Finally, leadership preparation and development should position family and community engagement as a core leadership responsibility requiring adaptive, culturally responsive strategies.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the data were drawn from open-ended survey responses, which allowed for broad participation but limited opportunities for follow-up probing or clarification. As a result, the depth and detail of responses varied across participants, and some leadership practices may be underrepresented.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data from practicing educational leaders. While participants provided reflective accounts of their leadership practices, responses may have been influenced by social desirability or by leaders' perceptions of effective leadership rather than direct observation of practice. The findings therefore reflect leaders' interpretations of their work rather than externally verified behaviors.

Third, participation was voluntary, introducing the possibility of self-selection bias. Leaders who chose to respond may be more reflective, confident, or engaged in leadership development than those who did not participate. Additionally,

although the sample included leaders from multiple roles and contexts, the majority served in public, rural, and school-wide Title I settings, which may limit transferability to other educational environments.

Finally, this qualitative analysis represents a snapshot in time. Leadership efficacy is dynamic and may shift in response to organizational change, policy contexts, or professional experience. Future research using longitudinal designs or multiple data sources could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how leadership efficacy develops and evolves over time.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This qualitative study examined how K–12 educational leaders describe their leadership practices across instructional support, evaluation and improvement strategies, collaborative relationships and trust, and parent and community engagement. Across domains, leaders portrayed leadership efficacy not as a static personal belief, but as an enacted practice shaped through relationships, collaboration, and responsiveness to contextual demands. Leadership was consistently described as work carried out with others and embedded within the daily realities of schools, districts, and communities.

By centering leaders' narrative accounts, this study contributes a practice-informed understanding of leadership efficacy that complements existing quantitative research. The findings highlight the importance of relational leadership practices, such as trust-building, coaching, shared decision-making, and community partnership, as central to how leaders understand and enact their roles. Rather than describing instructional leadership, evaluation, trust, and engagement as discrete functions, leaders framed these practices as integrated aspects of their everyday leadership work, a perspective that represents a key contribution of this study.

These findings have implications for leadership preparation and professional learning. Preparation programs should prioritize relational competencies alongside technical and managerial skills, emphasizing coaching-oriented instructional leadership, formative evaluation, and collaborative problem-solving. Professional learning for practicing leaders should likewise provide opportunities for reflection, peer collaboration, and context-sensitive learning that mirror the relational conditions through which leadership efficacy develops.

Future research could extend this work through longitudinal qualitative designs or mixed-methods approaches to examine how leadership efficacy evolves over time and across roles or contexts. Additional studies might also explore how leadership preparation programs intentionally cultivate the relational practices associated with efficacy in complex educational environments.

As schools and districts continue to face complex instructional, organizational, and community challenges, understanding leadership efficacy as a relational and context-sensitive practice offers a promising direction for both research and practice. By centering leaders' lived experiences, this study underscores the value of practitioner-informed inquiry for strengthening leadership development and supporting effective school administration.

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