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Principal Talk Viewed Through the Motivating Language Theory Lens: A Qualitative Study

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The interview protocol is available upon request from the corresponding author.

Abstract: *his qualitative study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of principal practice through the voices of principal talk gathered from principals through the lens of Motivating Language Theory (MLT). A qualitative methodology was utilized to gain a deeper understanding from eight principals – four elementary and four middle level. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews based upon questions modified from Motivating Language Theory-based quantitative protocols. The data analysis was based on observed MLT patterns and open and axial coding leading to themes. The findings of this study provide a voice to the field of MLT and illustrate principal talk as a medium of administrative practice. The findings of this study were the importance principals placed upon the communication of expectations (direction-giving language), providing encouragement and praise (empathetic language), building school culture (meaning-making language and motivating language outcome), and stressing the importance of the principal-teacher interaction (motivating language) in their work. This study extends the field of Motivating Language Theory as well as extending the field of educational leadership and principal talk.*

Keywords: Motivating Language Theory, Principal Talk, Principal Communication, Leadership Communication, Principal Practice.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to investigate the words and actions of elementary and middle school principals through Motivating Language Theory (MLT). Motivating Language Theory is a motivation and persuasion-centered leadership communications theory (Holmes et al., 2021; Mayfield et al., 2020). A sub-purpose of the study was to increase the understanding of how principals accomplish their work by talking (Holmes & Parker, 2018; Bezzina et al., 2017; Gaziel, 1995). We acknowledge that other forms of communication are involved in the principalship, such as listening, writing, and American Sign Language (ASL).

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However, we place our emphasis on verbal, in-person principal talk, which is under-researched and an often taken-for-granted area of leadership preparation (Kowalski, 1998). It is impossible to imagine principals accomplishing the work of the principalship without talking: for example, reviewing data during a PLC meeting, holding a meeting with parents, providing feedback to teachers, or interacting with students. Internationally (Gaziel, 1995) and in the US (Bredeson, 1987; Kmetz & Willower, 1982), principals spend more than 70% of their time leading through talk. Pulling from Lowenhaupt's (2021, p. 137) work, "school leaders use language both to describe and enact practice, as talk is often the medium through which key actions occur within schools." Thus, as researchers, we agree with Houston and Sokolow (2006) that a principal's action reflects their intentionality and attention, provides a window into their thoughts, and is signaled by their talk. Furthermore, we know that principals do many things in their work as principals ranging from engaging teachers as instructional leaders and coaches, listening to internal and external stakeholders, and collaborating with others, but what is key to us is the next step. For example:

- After observing a teacher in the classroom – providing feedback,
- Coaching a teacher – providing encouragement,
- Listening to parent concerns – responding with empathy and consideration,
- Collaborating with teachers – building consensus.

All of these actions require the follow-up of communication in the form of principal talk. It is the connection of action and talk that is critical, and it is talk that serves as the critical medium of practice that delivers administrator intent, interactivity, and action (Lowenhaupt, 2014, 2021), which is the connection to Motivating Language Theory.

Bredeson, in a study of US principals (1987) and in another study discussing principals working as instructional leaders (2000), asserted that principals exercised influence and leadership primarily by talking, reinforcing the claim by Gronn (1983) that talk was the work of school administration. Gaziel (1995, p. 192) in a study of Israeli principals and Bezzina et al. (2017, p. 18) in a study of Italian principals stated the exact same phrase twenty-two years apart, "the core element of the principal's work is primarily verbal communication [talk]." These two assertions directly support Johnson and Hackman's (2018) definition of leadership, "Leadership is human (symbolic) communication that modifies the attitudes and behaviors of others in order to meet shared group goals and needs" (p. 12). Thus, this study's research question was to explore how principals' reported communication and actions reflect the Motivating Language Theory Model and the ML Constructs within it. The Motivating Language Theory Model is illustrated in Figure 1. The findings of this study will be situated within Motivating Language Theory, as discussed below.

The importance of being an effective communicator as part of the principal role is evident. Davis (1998) and Davila et al. (2012) indicated that the number one reason principals lose their jobs is due to a failure to communicate appropriately. Kowalski and Brunner (2011) stated that most administrators do not complete a course in leadership communications during their leadership preparation programs. While leadership communications encompass the entire spectrum of communications (listening, speaking, nonverbal, and writing), within the field of educational leadership, Lowenhaupt (2014) noted a dearth of research and knowledge regarding principal talk and its application. Yildiz (2016) indicated in the field of educational leadership that researchers should study leadership speech, talk, discourse, and interaction through the lens of Motivating

Language Theory (MLT) as MLT focuses directly on leader speech and its impact on employee and organizational outcomes (Sullivan, 1988).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION AND PRINCIPAL TALK

Gronn (1983) contended that leader communication and principal talk were central to the work of school leadership. Bogotch and Roy (1997) stressed that the ability of school administrators to talk was a vital competency and key to the accomplishment of organizational goals. Positively, principal talk has significant impacts on school climate and culture (Halawah, 2005; Hollingworth et al., 2017), instruction (DuFour et al., 2016), vision (Lashway, 2006), trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015), and school/organizational improvement (Arlestig, 2008). On the other hand, ineffective, abusive, and destructive principal talk negatively impacts principal instructional leadership and credibility (Kowalski et al., 2007), trust (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015), school morale and climate (Green, 2010), and teacher commitment (Blase & Kirby, 2009).

While the expectation for principals to be communicators and oral communicators, in particular, is supported by research, the reality is entirely different. Kowalski (1998) noted that among principals new to the principalship, a vast majority underestimated the amount of time needed to be devoted to communication. Ng and Szeto (2015) found that among assistant principals and newly appointed principals in Hong Kong, the significant need for training and support in communication with teachers and parents was warranted. In a study of principal communication connected to school performance in the UAE, Ibrahim and Mahmoud (2017) concluded that principals should further refine their oral communications to strategically communicate with greater precision in group communications and be more supportive and precise when talking to teachers and staff so that school performance would improve. This call for strategic improvements in communication is congruent with Lowenhaupt's (2014) call for principal preparation programs to implement explicit instruction in principal talk as the medium of practice and principal talk as a strategic and purposeful part of principal daily practice. Holmes and Parker (2018) called for principals and principal preparation programs to move towards this more strategic and purposeful stance through the implementation of Motivating Language Theory in the principalship in support of and in line with the Hollingworth et al. (2017) finding that effective principals engage in explicit and purposeful communication.

MOTIVATING LANGUAGE THEORY

Motivating Language Theory is a strategic and intentional form of leadership communication in which principals shape and influence the outcomes of their employees and school organizations (Holmes, 2012; Holmes & Parker, 2017, 2018). Graphically, the model of Motivating Language Theory is illustrated in Figure 1 (Holmes, 2012; Holmes & Parker, 2018; Holmes et al., 2021). As principals shape and influence the outcomes of employees and their schools, they do so through the components of Motivating Language Theory: the ML Antecedents, ML Ability (the utilization of Motivating Language and the ML Constructs), and the ML Outcomes. The work of principals shaping and influencing outcomes through Motivating Language (ML) has been studied within the US and internationally as illustrated in Table 1.

Figure 1.
The Motivating Language Theory Model

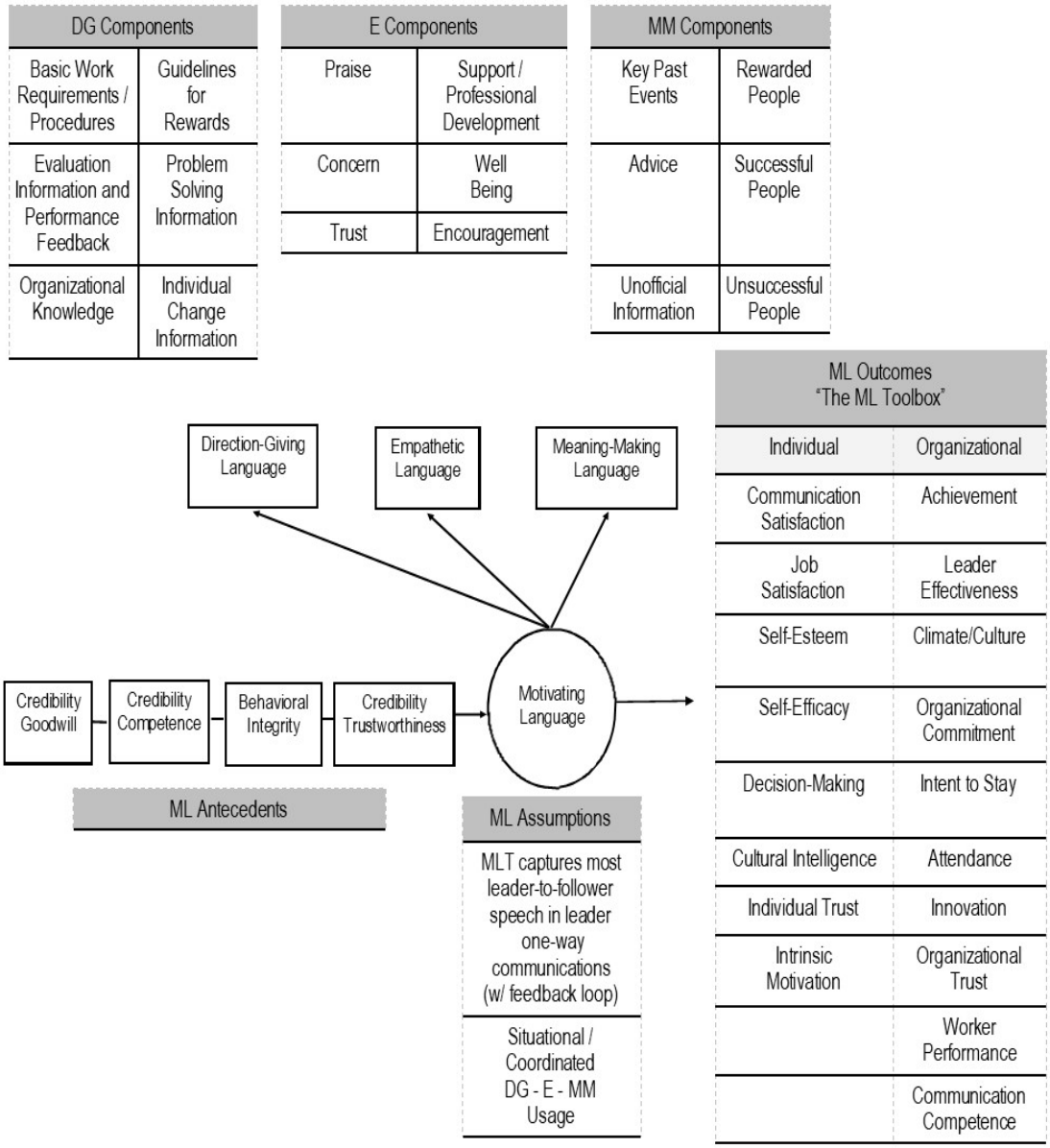


Table 1
Principal Focused Motivating Language Theory Research Studies

Author(s)	Location	MLT or MLT Construct Impact on Outcome		Outcome
Holmes (2012)	USA	ML		Communication Competence, Communication Satisfaction, Job Satisfaction, Worker Performance
		DG	*Quan*	Communication Competence
		E		Communication Competence
			Qual	Strategic Use of Praise, Talk and Media Connection
				High Level of Administrative Expectations
				Collaborative Practices and Distributed Leadership
				School Culture
Alqahtani (2015)	Kuwait	DG		Academic Expectations, Collaboration, School Climate
		E		Collaboration, School Climate, Academic Expectations
		MM		Academic Expectations, School Climate, Collaboration
Sabir (2018)	Pakistan	ML		School Climate
Sabir and Bhutta (2018)	Pakistan	ML		Organizational Commitment, Organizational Climate
		MM		Organizational Commitment
		E		Organizational Commitment
		DG		Organizational Commitment
Ozeren, Arslan, Yener, and Appolloni (2020)	Turkey	ML		Self-efficacy, Cultural Context

Motivating Language Theory is grounded in two assumptions. First, principals strategically and intentionally utilize their talk within Motivating Language by leveraging the ML Constructs, which are direction-giving language (DG), empathetic language (E), and meaning-making language (MM), in a coordinated manner that is best suited to the situational and environmental conditions present as they communicate with individuals or groups [small or large] (Holmes & Parker, 2018). Second, principals' utilization of Motivating Language Theory centers on one-way communication from principal-to-teacher(s), including feedback (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). The implementation of Motivating Language Theory should also reflect the adjustment process inherent in all interpersonal communication (DeVito, 2007) and be inclusive in most forms of leader communication (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). The assumptions support teachers' accurate perception of Motivating Language (Holmes & Parker, 2018).

So how is Motivating Language Theory motivating? First, according to Mayfield et al. (2020, p. 151), "This theory offers a framework to elicit follower motivation through leader-to-subordinate communications which then translates into desirable organizational and employee outcomes." Additionally, according to Mayfield and Mayfield (2018), "We expect that motivating language has a more complicated relationship with intrinsic motivation than extrinsic motivation" (p. 138). Specifically, they felt that motivating language can create intrinsically rich environments that support achieving tasks and goals accordingly. Motivating language works extrinsically by creating and strengthening the link between a person's actions and rewards (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). We believe, as researchers and as leaders, that Motivating Language Theory works as a motivator in the following ways:

- A leader provides direction to an employee/follower through communication that moves the employee from quicksand to concrete, from uncertainty to clarity, from hesitation to action, from pause to confidence, and from in-action to effective action.
- A leader engages an employee with courtesy, civility, consideration, concern, compassion, and caring in a personalized and individualized communication that makes the employee feel and believe that they belong, that they are recognized as someone and not as something, and as a result not only does the employee feel like they are part of a family at work they feel a deeper commitment to their work than otherwise possible if treated as a replaceable and invisible member of the organization.
- A leader takes the time to learn an employee's values, aspirations, and interests and communicates with the employee to show how their values, aspirations, and interests connect with and support the organization's values, goals, and outcomes, creating a connection and deeper level of buy-in by the employee as they aligning their interests with those of the organization.

Finally, when a leader can move in and out of these three motivating spaces and places – these leadership languages with situational awareness and intentionality we believe the leader is more effective and rises to the highest level of Motivating Language Theory – motivating language (ML).

ML ANTECEDENTS

The ML Antecedents are the precursors to principal Motivating Language use and increase or decrease the believability and reliability of principal talk. Holmes and Parker (2017, 2018) found that the ML Antecedents can shape, magnify, and increase the power of principal talk. Behavioral

Integrity (BI) Simons (2008) and Source Credibility (McCroskey and Teven, 1999) combine to make up the ML Antecedents (Holmes & Parker 2017, 2018, 2019). Behavioral Integrity comprises two components (a) walk-and-talk alignment and (b) promise-keeping. Source Credibility is comprised of the dimensions of (a) goodwill, (b) competency, and (c) trustworthiness. Together, the antecedents deepen trust (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015), strengthen culture (Green, 2010), enhance instructional leadership (Kowalski et al., 2007), and support the leading of change (Reeves, 2009) as the principal connects the antecedents to ML as part of their administrative practice.

ML CONSTRUCTS

Motivating language is a latent variable composed of the three ML Constructs; empathetic language, direction-giving language, and meaning-making language. These three constructs function as manifest variables and are directly observable, measurable, and teachable (see e.g., Mayfield & Mayfield [2015] for more information on this relationship). As principals use the ML Constructs, they link specific types of words to actions (known as Forms) to accomplish the work of the principalship (see e.g., Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018, and Holmes & Scull, 2019, for more information on this linkage between words and actions within each of the ML Constructs). Therefore, it is essential to understand the nature and construction of each of the ML Constructs.

Empathetic Language (E) is principal talk that emphasizes teachers and staff before the organization and values the importance of being uniquely human instead of a replaceable or interchangeable object (Holmes, 2012; Mayfield, 2009). Leaders with high levels of empathetic language skills lead with empathic qualities, seek to understand before being understood, work to ease employee suffering and discomfort through compassionate and caring administrative practices, work to engage the "whole employee" not just the professional one, and act with civility and politeness to their employees building both employee loyalty and commitment (Holmes, 2012; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). This type of leadership generates positive energy and openness and channels it into the organization (Houston & Sokolow, 2006; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). For example, principals use empathetic language in the forms of encouragement and praise, celebrating success, setting a positive tone, and creating systems of support, thereby strengthening collaboration and reducing teacher silos and feelings of isolation (Holmes, 2012).

Direction-giving Language (DG) is principal talk that reduces uncertainty, orients teachers towards goals and objectives, clarifies expectations and evaluation metrics, increases teacher and staff knowledge and information, and provides feedback and rewards (Holmes, 2012; Mayfield et al., 2015). Highly effective direction-giving leaders are transparent, information-giving not information-hoarding oriented, focused on goal-setting administrative practices, sources of rich and frequent feedback, ethical, and focused on sharing power and leadership (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). Principals use direction-giving language to clarify administrative expectations, align resources with instructional goals and priorities, ask questions during post-observation conversations with teachers to clarify teaching expectations, provide suggestions for improvement, and deliver instructional feedback and guidance during group settings supporting PLC decision-making (Holmes, 2012).

Meaning-making Language (MM) is the least used and the most organizationally focused of the three ML constructs (Holmes, 2012). As the principal strategically implements meaning-making language, he/she intentionally focuses teacher energy while simultaneously reducing teacher stress, thereby improving teacher motivation (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018) through stories, metaphors, symbols, and rituals. As principals focus attention, demonstrate gratitude, assist in understanding the observed and unobserved rules of school culture, and share their life's lessons

with their teachers; they concentrate time and resources around a cohesive set of core understandings; channel received support into a mindset of support; and lead their teams into seeing opportunities within problems, for instance (Houston & Sokolow, 2006; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). As part of administrative practice, principals use meaning-making language, for example, to advocate for teachers, recognize exemplar teacher behaviors within the school, and communicate misaligned staff behavior as a means to improve quality (Holmes, 2012).
See Holmes and Parker (2018, 2019), Holmes and Scull (2019), and Holmes et al. (2021) for further insights on how Motivating Language Theory works with school and district administrators.

MOTIVATING LANGUAGE AND ML ABILITY

According to seminal authors Sullivan (1988), Mayfield and Mayfield (2018), and Holmes (2012), in the field of Motivating Language Theory, most leaders do not use language strategically or to the full range of language available to them. Leaders who fall into these categories fail to fully utilize ML Ability and combine all three ML Constructs to achieve Motivating Language. According to Holmes (2022), this results in a range of leaders who:

- are highly ineffective communicators and have little to no positive impact on ML Outcomes and could negatively impact ML Outcomes (These leaders may occasionally use the ML Constructs with effect but have no ML Ability and do not use Motivating Language.);
- use the ML Constructs positively but not well enough to give rise to ML and only positively impact ML Outcomes due to the individual effects of the ML Constructs (These leaders use some of the ML Constructs with effect and others with no or inconsistent effect but have no ML Ability and do not use Motivating Language.);
- use the ML Constructs with significance and strategic coordination to give rise to low levels of ML and therefore positively impact the ML Outcomes due to the combined effects of the ML Constructs and low levels of ML (These leaders use all of the ML Constructs with effect, have low ML Ability, and use low levels of Motivating Language.); or
- use the ML Constructs with significance and strategic coordination to give rise to high levels of ML that positively impact the ML Outcomes due to the combined effects of the ML Constructs and high levels of ML that result in the diffusion of ML downward through layers of the organization (These leaders use all of the ML Constructs with higher levels of effect, have high ML Ability, and use high levels of Motivating Language.) (p. 3).

Thus, a leader's capacity to use the ML Constructs with significance combined with their ability to coordinate the use of the ML Constructs and not contradict themselves across ML Constructs by using situational awareness, active listening, and mindfulness/intentionality help the leader to make the most of their ML Ability resulting in their language use rising to the level of Motivating Language. The rise to Motivating Language has a greater influence and impact on organizational and employee outcomes than just the ML Constructs do individually (see Holmes, 2022, for more information on ML Ability).

ML OUTCOMES

The ML Outcomes are items or components that are affected by the ML Antecedents, ML Constructs, and Motivating Language at the employee and organizational levels. The more significantly a leader implements the ML Antecedents, ML Constructs, and Motivating Language, the more cumulative influence, impact, and effect on outcomes the leader will have. As illustrated in Figure 1, a wide variety of outcomes have been examined through the Motivating Language Model, with an infinite possibility of additional outcomes to be examined in the future (see Mayfield and Mayfield, 2018, for a detailed discussion on ML Outcomes).

In this study, the authors focused on the ML Constructs and Motivating Language portions of the model, examining the voice of elementary and middle school principals to provide greater insights into how Motivating Language Theory as the medium of administrative practice (principal talk and actions) (Holmes & Parker, 2018) could be gained.

METHOD

QUALITATIVE STUDY

A qualitative methodology (Creswell, 2013) was utilized to guide inquiry, from positing the purpose and research question, to considering from whom to collect data, what types of data to collect, how to analyze said data, and writing up the results. The concentration was placed on elementary and middle school principals who confronted everyday issues within the context of Motivating Language Theory, taking a "holistic view of the situation" (Merriam, p. 11, 1988).

Given the purpose and goal, a qualitative methodology provided the framework necessary to guide our qualitative endeavor into the anecdotes of elementary and middle school principals' everyday interactions with their teachers within the context of Motivating Language Theory (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The qualitative methodology allows researchers an opportunity to explore an area in-depth and achieve a better understanding of a topic (Creswell, 2013). The study sought to understand each principal's intentionality and their thinking. As researchers, we purposefully sampled eight principals–four elementary and four middle school principals to facilitate a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. All schools were characterized as at-risk and underserved. Interview transcripts framed in the context of what each principal did correctly and incorrectly in order to illuminate actions both in accordance and contrary to Motivating Language Theory. In addition, we have adopted a qualitative methodology in order to achieve a deeper understanding of how principals engage in Motivating Language Theory.

PARTICIPANTS

Eight principals were purposefully chosen to elicit holistic anecdotal accounts of naturalistic interactions with elementary and middle school teachers. The criteria for selection of participants included a desire for a diverse mix of principals with multiple years in administration in line with a typical sample as defined by Frankel and Wallen (2009). Principals were also employed at schools characterized as at-risk and underserved. Hour-long, semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) were scheduled with each of the eight principals; however, actual interview lengths ranged from 15 minutes (Susan) to 90 minutes (Alice). Four principals were from the southeastern region of the US, and four were from the western region of the US. Participants were asked to complete a demographic form. The form asked questions such as years in education, years as principal, age range, etc. Summary biographical information on each participant can be found in Table 2. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Table 2
Principal Demographic Information

Principal	Sex	Race	Age	Years in K-12	Years in current district	Years at current school	Highest degree
Alice	Female	Other	46-50	27	16	10	M.A.
Kathy	Female	Hispanic	51-55	20	11	10	Ed.D.
Susan	Female	Black	46-50	27	18	5	M.A.
Betty	Female	Black	41-45	25	11	3	Ed.D.
Christopher	Male	Black	41-45	19	16	9	Ed.S.
Dan	Male	White	56-60	26	26	3	Ed.D.
Emily	Female	White	41-45	22	22	2	Ed.D.
Mitch	Male	White	51-55	27	27	8	Ed.S.

ALICE

Alice is female and self-identified her race as other. She is bilingual, speaking a middle-eastern language [self-identified during interview]. She is between 46-50 years of age with 27 years in education. She has served 16 years as an administrator within the large urban school district with ten years as a principal. She has been the principal of an elementary school for the last ten years and described herself as "I am always optimistic."

KATHY

Kathy is female, self-identified her race as Hispanic, and is bilingual. She is between 51-55 years of age with 20 in education. She has served 11 years as an administrator within the large urban school district with ten years as a principal. She has been principal of an elementary school for the last ten years. Kathy is a nationally recognized Principal of the Year award winner.

SUSAN

Susan is an African American female. She is between 46-50 years of age with 27 years in education. She has served 18 years as an administrator within the large urban school district with ten years as a principal. She has been principal of an elementary school for the last five years.

BETTY

Betty is an African American female and has a doctorate in educational leadership. She is between 41-45 years of age with 25 years in education. She has served 11 years as an administrator within the large urban school district with three years as a principal. She has been principal of an elementary school for the last three years and was an assistant principal before her appointment to Principal.

CHRISTOPHER

Christopher, the principal of a middle school, is a black male between the ages of 41-45. He has a total of 19 years of experience in K-12 education. The majority of Christopher's years of experience in K-12 education occurred in his current district. He has 16 years of experience in his current district. Christopher has been the principal for nine years.

DAN

Dan, a middle school principal, is a white male between the ages of 56-60. He had a total of 26 years of experience in K-12 education, all of which occurred in the same school district. He had a total of 3 years of experience as the principal. This was Dan's first assignment as a principal. Prior to becoming a principal, Dan obtained leadership experience by functioning as the head football coach. He also functioned in the capacity of a high school athletic director.

EMILY

Emily, the principal of a middle school, is a white female between the ages of 41-45. She has a total of twenty-two years of experience in K-12 education, all of which occurred in the same county. Emily has functioned in the capacity of principal at her current school for two years. Emily was the principal of an elementary school prior to working as a middle school principal.

MITCH

Mitch was the principal of a middle school; he served in this capacity for a total of nine years. He is a white male between the ages of 51-55. Mitch had 27 years of experience in K-12 education. Mitch was the principal of an elementary school prior to his current role.

CONTEXT

The four elementary school principals were from a large, inner-city, urban area in the western part of the United States. The four middle-school principals were from a large, rural area in the southeast region of the United States. All principals were at schools characterized as at-risk and underserved, i.e., large minority populations with most students on free/reduced lunch.

INTERVIEWS

Before being interviewed, each principal was emailed a structured list of questions to be asked during the face-to-face interview. The interview questions were developed by modifying the Motivating Language Scale (Mayfield et al., 1995) plus a literature review, and vetted by the first author's dissertation committee, which included Mayfield and Mayfield. The principals were encouraged to reflect on and take brief notes on each question before the interview to elicit a more thoughtful and well-reasoned response during the formal interview.

During the sit-down interview, the principals were asked to respond to a set of interview questions designed to prompt reflection on myriad principal-teacher interactions in order to better understand the various manifestations of Motivating Language Theory in the principal-teacher relationship. The interviews are characterized as semi-structured (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), as deviation from the script was allowed and encouraged in order to probe more deeply into serendipitous ruminations. However, for the most part, strong adherence to the script did occur.

DATA ANALYSIS

All eight interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researchers and returned to the participants for member checking to enhance the trustworthiness of the study results (Creswell &

Poth, 2018). Transcriptions are returned to participants to check for accuracy (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). True to Stake (1995), we adopted the stance that, "Analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations" (p. 71). We observed patterns that were known in advanced, based on our theoretical framework of Motivating Language Theory, specific and broad themes were generated (Stake, 1995). Motivating Language Theory guided all aspects of this study's design, which also remained true in the analysis phase. We coded interviews via the lens of MLT and remained open to concepts outside our predetermined framework. Open and axial coding were applied (Charmaz, 2014) in accordance with the emergent nature of qualitative research. This approach afforded us the opportunity to engage with the data in a deeper, coherent, and more informed way (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We used QSR International's NVivo 11 software to aid in data organization, querying, and analysis.

In the end, we sought naturalistic generalization (Stake, 1995), which has been described in different ways by different scholars: Hamilton (1981) called them understandings that are "private," Polanyi (1962) called them "ineffable," whereas Scriven (1972) called them a "quantitative subjectivity." We take naturalistic generalizations to be what the reader takes away from the current study within the context in which he or she is trying to apply the results.

FINDINGS

There were four main themes with five sub-themes. The four main themes were Empathetic Language, Direction-giving Language, Meaning-making Language, and Motivating Language Ability. Under the Empathetic Language theme, there were two sub-themes: Encouragement and Praise. There was one sub-theme under Direction-giving Language: Expectations. School Culture was the sub-heading under the theme Meaning-making Language. Motivating Language Ability contains the sub-theme principal-teacher interaction.

EMPATHETIC LANGUAGE

ENCOURAGEMENT

The various principals demonstrate encouragement toward their teachers in varying ways. For example, Betty tries to always "state the positives," which sometimes leads to "no affect" and "depends on the person." Alice and Dan take similar approaches, but they also speak of ways to negotiate the negative actions a teacher might be engaging in. An extreme case would be when Dan states, "I think you never embarrass the teacher in front of the students unless it's an extreme situation." The major component in each of the principal's interviews is the overarching concern for a teacher's success in the classroom–most of the principals' focus on how they can best support their teachers through workshops and walkthroughs in order to strengthen the teachers' skills. The principals in this study combined the empathetic nature of encouragement with the direction-giving language focus of instructional feedback, instructions, and explanations to create mediums of practice that were instructionally focused in nature and teacher-centered. These principals maintained a focus on instructional leadership running counter to the Carraway and Young (2015) recommendation for the transference of instructional leadership to someone other than the principal due to the demands of the principalship.

PRAISE

In terms of principals praising their teachers, most were on the same page with how this manifest. Issues of concern with teacher job satisfaction (Betty) came to the forefront. Principals

seemed to have an inherent need to say express their appreciation for their teachers. "I always say thank you," always, for their efforts (Betty). Christopher is sure to demonstrate his appreciation verbally or via email after he observes classroom teaching: "Every time I have an observation, I remind them that they are good and doing well." Praise is sometimes given indirectly as well. For example, when the principal is aware of a teacher who is instructing in an exemplary way, Christopher will bring other teachers into that classroom to show the excellent work of other teachers. Kathy describes this as a nurturing process–when teachers demonstrate model performance, she tells them they are doing a fabulous job while also assigning leadership roles to teachers. The strategic use of praise by the principals in this study is two-fold in terms of recognizing individual teachers and their outstanding efforts and organizationally setting performance standards for other teachers to model their behavior after. While praise is part of empathetic language and plays a vital role in the demonstration of job concern and consideration towards teachers by principals, in this case, the effect of praise additionally bleeds into the meaning-making language construct where it assists in establishing cultural practices of those employees within the organization who are successful and as such sets cultural standards for professional behavior.

DIRECTION-GIVING LANGUAGE

EXPECTATIONS

Clear within each participant is how the principals' communicated expectations toward their teachers. Susan focused on clarity of expectations in order to reinforce teacher accountability in the area of written lesson plans and follow-through implementation in classroom instruction using a combination of observation notes and one-to-one conferencing. Dan additionally focused on expectations within the classroom as standards and the work of the day in the form of lesson plans and classroom management. Betty utilized reflection and open-ended questioning techniques with teachers to ensure their understanding of her expectations. Alice stressed the importance of modeling her expectations to teachers so that teachers could in turn replicate the expected behavior either within teams (PLC data analysis for example) or within the classroom (small group differentiated instruction for instance). Kathy emphasized the importance of teachers understanding the why behind her expectations and not just the expectation itself in order to increase the depth of teacher understanding as well as the level of teacher buy-in. Mitch felt expectations were important to communicate at the beginning of the year, focusing on academic excellence and social equity reducing teacher uncertainty in these areas. Christopher stressed the need for rubrics, guidelines, and procedures to help reinforce expectations and clarity.

MEANING-MAKING LANGUAGE

SCHOOL CULTURE

School culture presented a wide array of conversations among the principals, ranging from student background to ways of teacher interacting in the classroom to mindfulness and achievement expectations. In general, across participants, principals spoke of seeking to create or maintain a positive "family atmosphere" (Alice, Christopher, and Kathy). While many principals emphasized the strong desire for their teachers to feel comfortable in their environment (empathetic language), the expectation of high standards was also made clear (direction-giving language): "I want rigor. I don't want downtime in my classroom" (Kathy) and "The culture should be about learning" and "growth" (Dan). What is of deeper interest is the principals' focus on "family" culture. This

discussion of teachers and principals co-existing within a school as a family and the principal taking on a parental role is exciting.

MOTIVATING LANGUAGE AND ML ABILITY

PRINCIPAL-TEACHER INTERACTION

Most of the principals stressed in some way or another the desire to appear "human" in the eyes of their teachers. This is achieved partly through the use of stories and metaphors in their communication with teachers as well as connecting emotionally. Mitch understands the importance of the principal-teacher relationship by stating, "We need each other." Most of the other principals expressed similar sentiments. In terms of fostering effective interaction, Christopher explains the need to ensure he understands what his teachers are saying–he believes mutual understanding is the key to a successful relationship. Emily describes this as "intentional listening." Issues of trust and honesty emerged from conversations with principals as well. Dan and Kathy both stressed the importance of truth-telling and candor–Dan: "When they trust you...they know you are telling the truth." Kathy: "They don't want you to be wishy-washy." Kathy made a statement that captures the views of the other principals: "Not everybody processes things the same way." Others talk about self-reflection (Betty), drawing diagrams (Susan), and showing versus telling (Alice). This mix of empathetic and meaning-making languages speaks to the expansive nature of principal-teacher communication beyond just direction-giving language.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are highly significant to the field of Motivating Language Theory, the study of Motivating Language Theory in educational leadership, and the understanding of principal talk as the medium of administrative practice and action. First, qualitative studies are extremely rare in the field of Motivating Language Theory. Previous to this study, the only qualitative studies in the Motivating Language Theory field were either qualitative dissertations (Aionaaka, 2017; Mull, 2020; Steeter, 2021) or mixed-methods dissertations (McMeans, 2001; Holmes, 2012; Hill, 2017; Williams, 2017). Thus, this study addresses a frequent call by researchers for qualitative methods. Second, this is the first study of any kind within the field of Motivating Language Theory (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods) to identify encouragement and interaction as findings. Holmes (2012) previously identified strategic praise, clear administrative expectations and a climate/culture of high expectations, and a family-oriented school culture as findings, and Alqahtani (2015) and Sabir (2018) have previously studied school culture quantitatively. Third, this study is significant as it provides language and think-aloud examples to the educational leadership field as insights into how principal talk is the medium of administrative practice and why it is essential for those who prepare and train educational leaders to emphasize talk and leadership communications as key components of initial preparation and ongoing leadership development.

ENCOURAGEMENT

A leader's encouragement (a form/component of empathetic language) is critical for employees to hear and feel at work. Encouragement fosters persistence, diligence, grit, and commitment. In the face of failure, encouragement helps employees learn from failure, gain momentum, acquire new knowledge, and take risks (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). According to Johnson and Hackman (2018, pp 183-184), supportive (empathetic) leaders can sustain hope in

their organizations and boost the performance of their employees to high levels by '…showing genuine concern for others [their employees] by listening to their problems, offering words of encouragement, fostering relationships between coworkers, and nurturing a sense of community.' Holmes (2012) noted that principals intentionally used encouragement to improve teacher self-esteem and credibility, thus indicating the strategic and robust nature of principal talk and Motivating Language.

PRAISE

Praise (a form/component of empathetic language) is often missing from an employee's work-life or is provided at a superficial level. Deep, meaningful praise that is genuine and specific is a powerful motivator. According to Mayfield and Mayfield (2018), "The benefits of earnest praise are enormous" (p. 43). These benefits include improvements in physical and mental health as well as deeper levels of commitment, performance, resilience, and work engagement (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). According to Johnson and Hackman (2018), when leaders recognize members of their team for excellent performance, significant contributions, or noteworthy achievements by providing praise and appreciation for them, they build and strengthen relationships (p. 52) that form stronger human and family-like bonds in the workplace. Holmes (2012) noted principals used strategic praise to emphasize best practices and strategically improve individual teacher's feelings of value, motivation, and performance. In this way, strategic praise can transition from a form of empathetic language to a position as an outcome (i.e., as a measure of effectiveness/influence).

EXPECTATIONS

Expectations (a form/component of direction-giving Language) for employees at work are wide-ranging, from basic work procedures to role expectations, including priorities, goals, and feedback. The key to expectations for employees is clarity, and the greater clarity an employee has on their expectations with less uncertainty and ambiguity, the more effective that employee will be – plain and simple. Through the communication of tasks and procedures, role clarification and specification of job duties, the creation of SMART goals, the establishment of job priorities, and the delivery of timely and specific feedback, it is crucial for the leader to provide information, create an environment of trust and security, and help the employee feel connected to the organization (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). According to Johnson and Hackman (2018, p. 236), "Successful teams have high expectations regarding outcomes. These standards of excellence define acceptable performance. High standards mean hard work, and top-performing teams spend a great deal of time preparing and practicing." Thus, it is critical that employees must be clear on their expectations for organizations to be high functioning. Holmes (2012) noted principals who took the time in high-achieving schools to explain to teachers their expectations for positive teacher behavior and improvement, teacher collaboration, and teacher leadership (high-quality adult actions) as well as clear administrative expectations for school improvement and operations [as opposed to principals in schools that were not high-achieving who did not do this]. Thus, not only did administrators establish a culture of high expectations they used direction-giving language to create clarity around expectations as well.

SCHOOL CULTURE

Alqahtani (2015) and Sabir (2018) have examined school culture quantitatively. Alqahtani examined the relationship between Motivating Language Theory and the Collaborative for Social Emotional Learning (CASEL) measure for school climate. He examined the ML Constructs (direction-giving language, empathetic language, and meaning-making language) in relation to the

CASEL variables of collaboration, academic expectations, and school climate (collaboration plus academic expectations). He did not look at the Motivating Language variable. Alqahtani found that meaning-making language was most likely to predict and influence school climate. Sabir (2018) studied the relationship between the Motivating Language and the School Climate Index in private and public schools. She found private school principals had higher levels of Motivating Language and healthier school cultures than public schools, which were impacted by the positive relationship between Motivating Language, direction-giving language, and school climate (collegial leadership, teacher professionalism, and academic press).

Mayfield and Mayfield (2018) speak to culture in each of the three ML Constructs, indicating the importance of culture and its broad connections to leadership. Mayfield and Mayfield assert that as leaders clarify work roles and expectations (direction-giving language), employees better understand how they fit into the organization and its culture and collaborative structure. Additionally, when leaders help employees feel emotionally connected to work (empathetic language), their level of engagement and commitment to the workplace are elevated because they feel valued as individuals, thus increasing the effectiveness of direction-giving language and meaning-making language components (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018, p. 69). Finally, as leaders communicate with employees using meaning-making language, they provide employees with the specific ins and outs of workplace culture, helping employees not only understand the what and how of workplace culture but also the why of workplace culture (see Holmes (2020) for more on MLT and why). According to Johnson and Hackman (2018), each organization develops its own language, customs, symbols, artifacts, rituals, ceremonies, and beliefs – this is, in a nutshell, meaning-making language. Similarly, Holmes and Scull (2019) connected meaning-making language to the symbolic frame of Bolman and Deal's Four Frame Model for Reframing Organizations as a way for leaders to concretely move from the symbolic work of culture to words and actions. Additionally, Holmes (2012) found that effective principals worked towards establishing "family-like" school cultures in which teachers and staff categorized the school as a family with non-negotiable collaborative, supportive, student-centered, and highly professional climates. Ultimately, while school culture takes on components from each of the three ML Constructs positionally, it is best situated as an outcome influenced and impacted by leadership *and* language.

PRINCIPAL-TEACHER INTERACTION

Principals and teachers are an interdependent, symbiotic unit that cannot be separated in a school (Holmes and Young, 2018). Each role is vital to the other and, in combination, to the mission, vision, and goals of the school. With regards to leaders, Mayfield and Mayfield (2018) note that as leaders use Motivating Language, they provide information and transparency, emotional support, connection to higher purposes, and personal fulfillment at work (p. 142). It is the leader's Motivating Language Ability (ML Ability) to read the terrain and tea leaves correctly and use situational awareness/leadership to know which of the ML Constructs (direction-giving language, empathetic language, or meaning-making language) to use when and for the greatest impact and influence (see Holmes and Parker (2019), Holmes et al. (2021), and Holmes (2022) for more information on ML Ability). Johnson and Hackman (2018) discussed that the most effective leaders do not avoid interaction with their employees but seek out their employees, communicate with them, and increase their effectiveness due to their efforts. Holmes (2012) found that highly-effective principals used all three of the ML Constructs and Motivating Language in their interactions with teachers. Principals emphasize culture building by focusing on personal, emotional, and family-centered principal-teacher interactions rather than directive or authoritative

interactions. Thus, the intervening and the quality of the intervening in the form of interaction determines the level of ML Ability.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

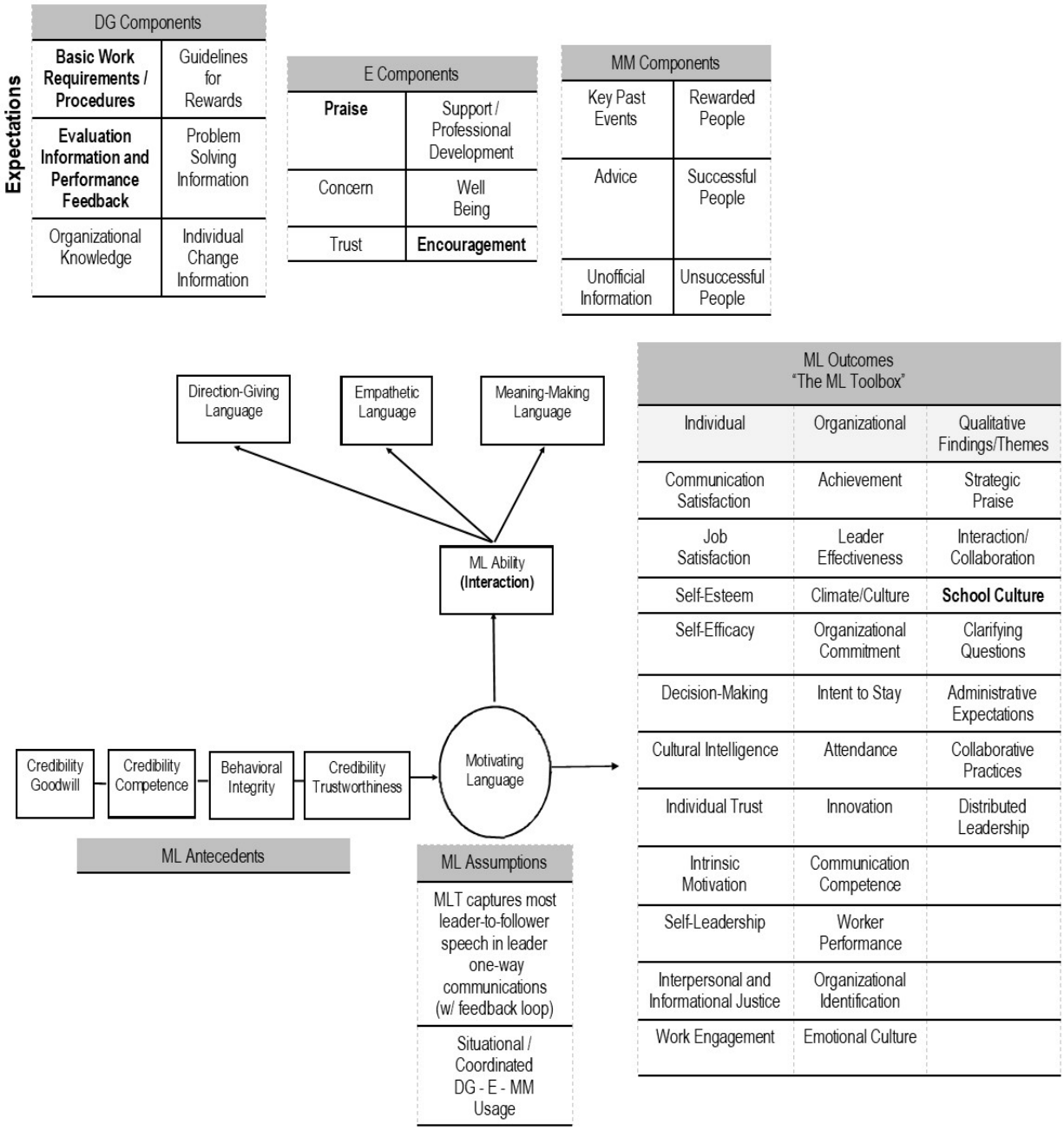
These findings help illuminate principal leadership thinking and action and clarify components of Motivating Language Theory directly addressing the research question. The findings of this study provide a "voice" to the field of Motivating Language Theory, insight into principal talk as the medium of administrative practice, and actual examples of how a principal's work is done primarily through leadership communications.

The eight principals in this study come from both urban and rural backgrounds, are a mix of gender and race, and have a wide variety of experiences at the elementary and secondary levels lending support to the transferability of findings in this study to the fields of Motivating Language Theory and educational leadership. Encouragement and praise map directly to empathetic language and administrative expectations align clearly to direction-giving language. School culture connects to all three ML Constructs and is a measurable outcome. Interaction brings all three ML Constructs together into Motivating Language reflecting ML Ability (Holmes 2012; Holmes & Parker, 2019; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018; Holmes, 2022). This study looks at educational leadership through the lens of Motivating Language Theory in a qualitative manner, and as a result, the study extends the field of Motivating Language Theory and the Motivating Language Theory Model as illustrated in Figure 2.

Additionally, this study sheds a great deal of illustrative light on principal talk as the medium of practice (Lowenhaupt, 2014), supports the definition of leadership provided by Johnson and Hackman (2018), and adds depth to the description of a principal's work as verbal communication as noted by Gaziel (1995) and Bezzina et al. (2017).

A limitation of this study is the absence of high school principals and principals from the midwest, northeast, northwest US, and international locations as participants. Additionally, the four elementary principals were interviewed as part of the first author's dissertation and participated in face-to-face interviews with follow-up questions followed by on-site observation. The four middle school principals were interviewed as part of the third author's dissertation (Hill, 2017), which replicated the first author's dissertation (Holmes, 2012) minus the on-site observation. This narrowed the available data to principal interview transcripts, memo notes, and feedback from member-checked transcripts. We believe these data are important as principals self-reflected and indicated both positive and negative actions in their principal talk and principal actions. Finally, the selection of participants was based on school-based student achievement from the first author's dissertation and third author's dissertation, thus providing principals who came from high-achieving schools and principals who did not.

Figure 2.
The Updated Motivating Language Theory Model with Qualitative Findings
(The Qualitative Findings Include Holmes 2012 Dissertation Findings)



The implications for this study regarding practitioners are in the form of concrete examples constituting "mediums of practice" and foundational content for administrative professional development. For those in academic positions, this study reinforces the call by Kowalski and Brunner (2011) for preservice coursework in leadership communications and the ongoing call by (Holmes, 2012; Holmes & Parker, 2018, 2019) for preservice leadership communications coursework for educational administrators to be inclusive of Motivating Language Theory. Finally, in the future, researchers should continue exploring administrative talk through the lens of Motivating Language Theory at the superintendent, central office, principal, and assistant principal levels across the US and internationally to fully understand the medium of practice throughout the spectrum of educational administration. Future researchers should also continue to explore Motivating Language Theory by observing the interaction between teachers and principals beyond the work of Holmes (2012). This could entail observing school meetings, teacher evaluations, and daily communication between teachers and principals (written and spoken). Lastly, researchers should qualitatively examine the elements of Motivating Language Theory, paying particular attention to the ML Antecedents, ML Ability, and the expansion of the ML Outcomes.

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