Elementary school and middle school principals' theories of action in two rural school districts

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Elementary School and Middle School Principals’ Theories of Action in Two Rural School Districts

by

Lynn Lisy-Macan

A Dissertation
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Abstract

This dissertation was designed to answer the following question. What are elementary and middle school principals' theories of action in two rural school districts? Sub-questions included the superintendent-principal relationship and its influence on the principal’s theories of action and the extent to which rural context impacts principals’ theories of action.

The design was a two-site case study with multiple methods and with a purposive sample of two rural school districts. Methods included a fixed-response survey, individual interviews with superintendents and principals, focus groups with teachers, student support professionals, and support staff and document reviews.

This study found important differences between the two districts, named District A and District B. In District A, the superintendent’s theory of action is influential in the principals’ theories of action, in part because this superintendent emphasizes alignment mechanisms and also because these principals were handpicked by this superintendent. The superintendent dismisses the rural context as a key factor and thus can be viewed as a cosmopolitan leader.

District B, in contrast, is influenced by the rural context, in part because its superintendent hails from rural background and emphasizes it. Also in contrast, District B’s superintendent is less directive and specific with his principals. One consequence is that the theories of action of B’s principals vary.

Six conclusions were derived from the findings. First: the Superintendent’s theory of action is pivotal in the development of their principals’ theories of action. Second, teachers’ view of principals’ biography, especially the principal’s teaching experience, influences their expectations for, and relations with, their principals. Third, rural classification of a school and district is not as influential on principals’ theories of action as initially assumed. Fourth, state education department policy has become the de facto theory of action for principals as mediated by their superintendent. Fifth, principals’ theories of action are developed and amended in policy and practice crosscurrents, reflecting the influence of diverse constituencies with competing goals. Finally, principals’ underspecified and underdeveloped theories of action make them vulnerable to external actors and influences, especially state policy requirements.
Dedication

I dedicate this publication to my husband, Ronald D. Macan, Sr. It is with his unwavering support, belief, and encouragement that I reach this monumental accomplishment within my life and academic career. It would not have been possible without him.
Acknowledgements

First, I send my heartfelt thanks to Dr. Hal Lawson, my Committee Chair, my mentor, my motivator, and the person without whom I never would have finished this degree. Thank you for all you have taught me, and for your extraordinary dedication and caring for all students and colleagues.

Next, a sincere expression of gratitude to my Dissertation Committee: Dr. Jim Butterworth, Dr. Laura Hopson, and my invaluable reader, Dr. Alan Wagner. I appreciate all of your time, insightful input and suggestions, and your support throughout this process.

Significantly, I thank my colleagues in Districts A and B for their participation in the study. My data were collected during a time of extraordinary demands and stress. The mere fact that these colleagues agreed to participate and invested the time in my study is indicative of their professionalism.

Finally, I express my appreciation to my father, Bert J. Lisy, who along with my mother, instilled within me from an early age the importance of scholarship, honesty, integrity and hard work. His lessons and example continue to resonate.
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Chapter 1

Introducing and Framing the Study

What are elementary and middle school principals’ theories of action in two rural school districts? This dissertation study was designed to address this important question. It was structured to yield much-needed knowledge and understanding about rural principals’ orientations, commitments, roles, responsibilities, actions and competencies in their somewhat unique school and district contexts.

For purposes of this study, rural schools are defined as ones wherein the total number of students in average daily attendance at all of the schools served by the LEA (Local Education Agency) is less than 2000; an each county in which a school served by the LEA is located has a population density of fewer than 10 persons per square mile. In addition rural schools are described by New York State as districts that lack the personnel and resources to compete effectively for Federal competitive grants and that receive grant allocations in amounts that are too small to be effective in meeting their intended purposes.

This study was timely. To begin with, much attention is being paid to the identifiable factors existing in schools that are viewed as “effective”. Typically, effectiveness is defined as consistently strong and measurable student achievement levels. Alternatively, schools that are consistently improving the achievement of their students are deemed “effective.”

In all such “effective” schools and districts, important questions need to be addressed. For example, how do they maintain and improve their student achievement
outcome profiles? How do they improve them? If they have previously struggled, what factors account for their improvement?

There is no question that principal leadership matters. For example, The Wallace Foundation Report (Leithwood, et. al., 2004) identified that leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn and how they perform at school. The Foundation estimated that the total (direct and indirect) effects of leadership on student learning account for about a quarter of total school effects. The same 2004 study found that leadership effects are usually largest where and when they are needed most – in urban and rural schools.

Such generalizable conclusions reinforce the importance of principal leadership. At the same time, they give rise to other important questions, which require alternative theoretical frameworks. For instance, knowing that leadership is important, and knowing what principals know and do in somewhat unique school and district contexts are very different prospects. After all, rural schools are not identical, and their district office dynamics vary, including the relationship between the superintendent and other district-level leaders and principals.

In the same vein, principals in diverse rural schools and districts are not clones. Typically, they begin with somewhat unique orientations, propensities and personalities, and they learn and develop additional somewhat unique expertise as they practice (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000.) Moreover, questions abound regarding how principals’ leadership changes over time, especially as their schools begin an improvement trajectory exemplified in better outcomes for students.
Knowledge about principals in effective rural schools is a special priority, as partially indicated by both federal and state grant funds more frequently than expected being made available specifically to rural schools. What is not readily found is research related to principals’ theories of action and how they impact the effectiveness of a school, or how those theories of action are specifically important in principals of rural schools.

Theories of action are pragmatic and instrumental. They refer to the master programs, patterns, designs, sets of rules, or propositions that people use to design and carry out their actions. Their structural components include the governing variables, values, knowledge, beliefs, concepts, rules, attitudes, routines, policies, practices, norms, and skills that underlie actions. Moreover, theories of action are influenced by the contexts in which they are constructed, enacted, and perhaps revised. Rural schools and districts in other words, provide special contexts for the development of theories of action and research focused on them.

More fundamentally, a need exists for a companion, alternative theoretical framework for empirical studies of principals in effective schools. Arguably, the vast majority of the research to date has been descriptive-explanatory. This invaluable line of inquiry has focused on “types” or “styles” of leadership (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004), the role of the principal (IEL, 2000), the characteristics of effective schools (Hess & Kelly, 2007), the importance of the professional development and the relative lack of same for principals (NSDC, 2000) and a myriad of other related topics such as leadership in times of change (Fullan, 2007) as well as strengths-based leadership (Rath & Conchie, 2008.)
Partially as a result of this body of research, standards for principals and their preparation programs have been developed. Foremost among these standards are those offered by the Interstate School Licensure Consortium (ISSLC). ISSLC’s standards are organized in six areas of competence with the assumption that all are needed for principals to be effective (Council of Chief School Officers, 2008.) The six categories for these standards are:

Standard 1: An education leader promotes the success of every student by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders.

Standard 2: An education leader promotes the success of every student by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.

Standard 3: An education leader promotes the success of every student by ensuring management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.

Standard 4: An education leader promotes the success of every student by collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.

Standard 5: An education leader promotes the success of every student by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.

Standard 6: An education leader promotes the success of every student by understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.
ISSLC’s standards and the body of descriptive-explanatory research that informs and supports them are invaluable contributions to the knowledge base about principals. Even so, important knowledge gaps remain, including a significant gap involving principals’ theories of action as integrated manifestations of these standards.

Role of the Principal and Principal Responsibilities

The role and expectations for the role of the principal have evolved over the past several decades. The 1980s brought three waves of school reform (Boyer, 1997). The calls for reform which were driven by fiscal crises and by Japan’s financial success gave rise to strong influences from business and industry and to the expectation that the schools’ function was to promote the economy (Beck & Murphy, 1992). The consensus of the literature was that the principal was the agent of school reform, and the metaphors used in the 1980s reflect this image of change: instructional leader, problem solver and resource provider, visionary, change agent (Beck & Murphy, 1993).

The first wave of reform identified by Boyer began with the publication, “A Nation at Risk” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) which called for increased achievement and accountability. The second wave began with the publication, “A Nation Prepared” (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986) that called for more teacher empowerment and the restructuring of school governance. The third wave, which Boyer (1997) identified as beginning in 1988 and continuing into the 1990s, emphasized the involvement not only of teachers, but of parents, students and community members in site-based management. The increase in involvement in all aspects of decision-making was the beginnings of the expectation
that “principals become facilitators who help others identify and solve problems collaboratively” (Boyer, 1997, p.4).

Two additional studies published in the late 1990s brought forward similar information regarding changes in the principalship (Wulff, 1996; Williams & Portin, 1997). Causes for the changes were attributed to social forces (family structure and expectations, lessening in personal responsibility, a growing sense of entitlement, increased diversity, external relations) and policy issues (state reform legislation, site-based management, school choice legislation, attendance legislation, special education). Portin, et al., 1998 suggest that the negative effect of changes in the principalship brought about leadership issues including layering of additional responsibility without corresponding authority, an imbalance between management and leadership despite the expansion of the work week, increasing ambiguity and complexity, and declining morale and enthusiasm.

The National Association of Secondary Schools Principals (NASSP) has developed what they term “21st Century School Administrator Skills”, based on the extensive research on school reform within “Breaking Ranks I” and “Breaking Ranks II”. While the work focuses on what is necessary to transform high schools across the nation, it could be argued that the School Administrator Skills that have been identified are applicable to a school principal at any level. The Domains include: Instructional Leadership, Setting Instructional Direction, Teamwork, Sensitivity, Resolving Complex Problems, Judgment, Results Orientation, Organizational Ability, Oral Communication, Written Communication, Development of Self and Others, and Understanding Own Strengths and Weaknesses.
The “tool” developed to measure the skills utilizes a principal self-assessment, and the assessment of an observer, both rating each skill utilizing a scale of never; rarely; occasionally; frequently; almost always; or not applicable. Once again, conclusions are drawn on self-perceptions that may or may not be based on analysis of time spent (action) on each component or domain. There has yet to be additional research published with a compilation of information gained from principals’ use of the tools.

The 2008 National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) Handbook and Standards for Principals states, “Traditional leaders may have considered their jobs to be solely the managers of schools, ensuring that daily operations run smoothly. But the current social and educational context—which combines high-stakes accountability with the high ideals of supporting the vision, courage and skill to lead and advocate for effective learning communities in which all students reach their highest potential.” (p.11) The suggestion is that leadership, to be effective, in the current societal and educational climate and era must be transformational. Thus, NAESP refined their standards in a manner that takes into account the most recent research on emerging knowledge and trends affecting education.

According to NAESP, effective leaders of learning communities:

- Lead schools in a way that places student and adult learning at the center
- Set high expectations for the academic, social, emotional and physical development of all students
• Demand content and instruction that ensure student achievement of agreed-upon standards

• Create a culture of continuous learning for adults tied to learning and other school goals

• Manage data and knowledge to inform decisions and measure progress of all student, adult and school performance

• Actively engage the community to create shared responsibility for student performance and development. (p.13)

Convergent knowledge and indicators of need derive from the preceding review of the advocacy-oriented and standards-driven “popular literature” of the last quarter century. Clearly, the principals’ role is increasingly complex including pressing management demands associated with schools-as-they are and, and the same time, imperatives to implement transformational leadership in service of the schools of the future.

Moreover, “effectiveness” is a loaded construct. For example, it is entirely possible for an individual to be a superior building manager, but not strongly if at all grounded in instructional expertise and the ability to build instructional capacity within the faculty and staff. Even without these key instructional leadership orientations and abilities, this person can still be judged a “good principal”, either by subordinates and/or supervisors. However, the literature would also suggest that the highest performing, effective and truly “great” schools are led by principals who understand the varying roles and responsibilities. These principals are “lead learners” who continue to learn and develop both their knowledge and skills within the different “domains.”
Questions remain, however, about the extent to which rural principals in schools deemed effective conform to the “competencies” or “standards” that are outlined by various professional associations and consortiums, if not the popular literature.

Michael Fullan (2009) offered the same perspective. He suggested that it is not the development and revision of standards that is going to make for effective leaders and principals; it is getting people with the ability to deal with change, complexity, and a recognition that continual learning is necessary to effectively lead a school. This view suggests that the various standards and frameworks cited to this point potentially can provide a “gauge” for analyzing the “stages” of knowledge and learning within principals, yet there also needs to be an analysis of each individual’s actions related to individual as well as organizational learning, the oversight of instructional processes, the management and organization of the school, and their demonstration of moral and ethical leadership are translating to high achievement from all students in the school. Arguably, the dominant approaches to research on principals will not remedy these knowledge gaps. Alternative frameworks are needed.

A report from the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University (2010) profiles 15 public high schools that have demonstrated their instructional value added over multiple years. The report provides specific leadership strategies to be employed in pursuit of improved student achievement levels. The five implications for leadership within the study include: Responsibility to lead the change process, mission statements and focused priorities, strategies and plans for high quality adult learning, clear and usable criteria for judging quality work, and skillful and relentless implementation. This
study operationalizes many of the perspectives suggested by Fullan, whose suggestions support the framework of this dissertation study.

The Import of the Theory of Action Framework

One such framework is designed to yield action-oriented knowledge. It is called a theory of action framework. Although it takes into consideration recommended standards, lists of desired and recommended competencies, and descriptive-explanatory research findings about leadership typologies and behaviors, this alternative framework starts with a different set of theoretical assumptions. It also repositions the role of the researcher. Above all, researchers view principals as active agents involved in the social construction of their respective school realities. Researchers thus are tasked with gaining knowledge and understanding about these constructed realities and the action theories that manifest their agency.

These theories of action have special import. Drawing upon what they know, intuit, perceive, think and believe, principals craft and implement behaviors, strategies and tactics in pursuit of their goals. These strategies and tactics have three important properties. They are influenced, and indeed even structured by, principals’ school and district contexts. They are action-oriented. And, they manifest an inherent, cause-and-effect logic.

Owing in part to the pioneering work of Argyris and Schön (1996) and also to the research of social cognitive scientists, these action-oriented, causally driven strategies and tactics have become known as “theories of action” and “action theories.” They are called theories of action because they have comparable properties and functions as conventional scientific theories.
Principals’ orientations, cognitions, perceptions and actions, once made explicit, organized, and formalized, are like the causal propositions in scientific theories. “If this, then that...” and “when this, then that...” causal logic is embedded in principals’ theories of action. In short, principals’ theories of action are the organizing and mobilizing mechanisms for the achievement of their targets and goals. More concretely, principals’ theories of action provide the social cognitive mechanisms for organizing and mobilizing their competencies, integrating them with their personalities and leadership styles, and adjusting them as needed in response to contextual demands and situational constraints.

For many reasons principals’ theories of action tend to be implicit. Three reasons are especially relevant to this study. The first is that the principal preparation programs have not emphasized personal-professional theories of action. The second is inseparable from the first: Standards such as ISLCC’s and competency lists have not emphasized the action-oriented integration of relevant knowledge, values, sensitivities and skills. The third is that superintendents have not been prepared to evaluate, mentor, and coach principals with their respective theories of action as centerpieces. In short, multiple opportunities await researchers who are prepared to elicit principals’ theories of action, paying particular attention to the influence of somewhat unique school and district rural contexts as well as situational demands.

The Import of this Study

Important benefits accompany this line of research and development. For instance, as principals learn how to make theories of action explicit and testable, they will be able to systematically reflect on, and learn from their practice. Here, practice
develops professional expertise and marks the trajectory from novice to expert (Schön, 1983.) Additionally, as theories of action are derived, explicated and interpreted with researchers, the knowledge base for practice, professional development, and professional education will be enriched. Such an enriched knowledge base will include special contingencies and opportunities in rural schools and districts. ISLCC’s standards and others also stand to be improved.

Other benefits are noteworthy. Expectations for schools are changing. The government, communities, parents and students alike have different expectations for what schools should be able to accomplish. Schools are being reformed and even transformed in response to various pressures, including parent complaints about the quality of education, labor market demands for increasingly skilled workers, rapid advances in technology, and the growing popularity of public school alternatives such as charter schools and advocacy for vouchers for private education.

No one can say for certain how schools of the new century will differ from those of the past century, but one thing is clear. There can be little doubt that these schools will require different forms of leadership (Institute for Educational Leadership [IEL], 2000, p.1.) For example, the 2008 NAESP Handbook and Standards for Principals states, “Traditional leaders may have considered their jobs to be solely the managers of schools, ensuring that daily operations run smoothly. But the current social and educational context- which combines high- stakes accountability with the high ideals of supporting the vision, courage and skill to lead and advocate for effective learning communities in which all students reach their highest potential.” (p. 11)
Ferguson (2009), referring to high school improvement states, “High schools tend to be fragmented organizations in which order is sometimes challenging to maintain and where responsibility for improving instruction resides mainly in isolated academic departments and classrooms. Principals are often distracted by crises. Many defer routinely to the subject-matter expertise of departmental leaders, seldom interfering with how departments monitor, evaluate, or attempt to improve teaching and learning” (p. 1).

The suggestion is that leadership, to be effective, in the current societal and educational climate and era must be transformational. However, transformational leadership cannot be defined nor measured and evaluated based on lists of competencies, nor simply re-crafted inventories of standards for leaders/leadership. Transformational leadership brings about improvement, not solely reform. To be transformational, leaders will need to demonstrate their ability make their theories of action explicit, and then model how to reflect upon one’s practice, to learn from it, and modify it based on such reflection and learning. Until such time as principals model such processes, there is little likelihood that they will be able to create the conditions necessary for teachers and other school professionals to make their theories of action explicit and testable, learning from them even as they use data to improve them.

Significantly, transformational leadership is not an end in itself. It is in service of schools and entire districts with improved outcomes. Since schools and districts differ, there is good reason to believe that transformational leadership may be context-specific and also that it may change over time in the same schools and districts.
Not only is it important to understand the role of the principal in effective schools, but also there is a need to understand principals in rural schools – who they are, and what they do in order for them to become effective and lead for the success of their school and students. The research reported in this dissertation study was designed to address the gap in existing literature to address this need.

A report by Philip Hallinger and Ronald Heck (1998) synthesized 15 years of research on how principals impact their schools and concluded; “principals influence school performance by shaping school goals, directions, structure, and organizational and social networks. Further, successful principal leadership guides the school policies, procedures and practices that contribute directly to student learning.” (Institute for Educational Leadership [IEL], 2000, p.6) What is not included within this report is how the principal’s theories of action enable the principal to accomplish the necessary leadership, through a process of making their theories of actions explicit, then reflecting upon such action, in order to learn from their practice, and modify and strengthen it while in action. For example, how do principals think about their work? How and what school or district data are or are not utilized in establishing priorities? How does the principal weave together various sources of knowledge, developing personal theories of action? In what ways do principal theories of action change with experience- How? When? Where? Why? Additionally, how do superintendents influence principals’ cognitions? How do teachers, support staff, families and students influence principals’ cognitions and improvement priorities? Via what process are priorities established?

Introducing the Dissertation Study and Its Main Research Questions
This dissertation was a multi-site case study that focuses on principals within a rural New York State school district that had shown adequate yearly progress (AYP) as measured by student achievement on benchmark NYS assessments within the last 3-5 years. The study examined the theories of action of the principal in each school within the district, and how those theories of action relate to effective outcomes. The research utilized an integrated theory-of-change model (Argyris 1993; Argyris & Schön 1974) as well as single and double-loop models in research on decision-making (Argyris 1974, 1976.)

To reiterate, the main research question is as follows, “What are elementary and middle school principals’ theories of action in two rural school districts?” There is considerable literature relating to effective professional development and learning for teachers. The literature related to the same for principals is emerging. However, there is very little literature that is specific to the principal of a rural school. Commonly, there are differing resources if not philosophies related to utilization of such resources specifically for learning and professional development between urban, suburban and rural school districts. It is important to further develop knowledge about how, when and why learning takes place in the rural principal in order to see how theories of action emerge.

With all of the “standards”, domains, and skills/competencies that have been developed over the past quarter century, there is a large risk that the field will continue generating generic competencies that are irrespective of the context of “place”; or specific to various types of schools and districts.
Such was the rationale for this dissertation study. It was designed to develop knowledge and understanding about rural principals’ roles, responsibilities, behaviors and competencies in their rural school and district context – and furthered valuable insight gained from the development of “core” standards and competencies for principals, and applied them through the study of principals’ theories in action, and how they influence the above, leading to effectiveness both in the principal and the school. Schools and school districts are people-driven entities, and understanding the relationships that the rural principal develops and maintains is an essential component of understanding her theories-of-action.

The primary research question for this dissertation study is, “What are elementary and middle school principals’ theories of action in two rural school districts? ” The additional questions addressed were:

1. Is it possible to derive an overall, generic theory of action of effective principals in rural elementary and middle schools?
2. How does the principal draw identify improvement priorities?
3. In what ways have principal theories of action changed with experience?
4. How does the principal reflect while in-action?
5. How does the principal reflect on-action?
6. What is the importance of the superintendent-principal relationship within the context of a rural school and district, and how does this relationship influence the principal’s theories of action?
7. What is the importance of the relationship between professional staff members and the principal within the context of a rural school and district, and how does this relationship influence the principal’s theories of action?

8. What is the importance relationship between other support staff and the principal in the principal’s theories of action?

9. How does the unique context of the rural school/district impact principals’ theories of action?

Definition of Terms

It is important to provide the definitions of key terms that were utilized within the study:

- **Rural Schools** – For purposes of the study, rural schools were defined as districts wherein the total number of students in average daily attendance at all of the schools served by the LEA (Local Education Agency) is less than 2000; and each county in which a school served by the LEA is located has a population density of fewer than 10 persons per square mile. In addition rural schools were described by New York State as districts that lack the personnel and resources to compete effectively for Federal competitive grants and that receive grant allocations in amounts that are too small to be effective in meeting their intended purposes.

- **“Effective Schools”** - Effective schools were defined as schools with consistently strong and measurable student achievement levels. Alternatively, schools that are consistently improving the achievement of their students are deemed “effective.” For purposes of the study, schools achieving “Adequate Yearly Progress” as defined by the state of New York will be defined as “effective.”
Theories-of-Action – Theories-of-Action refer to the “master” programs, patterns, designs, sets of rules, or propositions that people use to design and carry out their actions to achieve desired goals. Their structural components include the governing variables, values, knowledge, beliefs, concepts, rules, attitudes, routines, policies, practices, norms, or skills that underlie actions.

The Significance of the Research

There is a significant amount of literature that suggests that principals matter in developing and maintaining effective schools. This study provides insight into a specific segment of principals: principals of rural schools. In order to understand why their schools are improving or have achieved desirable performance levels, and what makes the principal effective, further study was needed to identify more about who is the rural principal, and what he or she does.

In other words, what are principals’ theories-in-action that account for success? This study addressed this need. The literature review provided in Chapter 2 provides details about the gaps that exist in the current literature. These gaps inform this study’s design, and so does the growing body of research on principal leadership and their theories of action.
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

The research and related literature on effective principals are reviewed herewith. The review was focused on the following topics and keywords: principal leadership that positively impacts student achievement, leadership preparation and development that prepares principals to be effective in changing times, the impact of principal leadership on the job satisfaction and performance of teachers, distributed leadership, central office leadership in relation to principal effectiveness, and principals’ theories of action.

The evaluation of this literature proceeded with a dual lens. Relevant theory, empirical findings, methodological recommendations, and policy directions were identified. At the same time, gaps in the knowledge base were identified, along with the need for improved research methodologies and enhanced theory.

The review is organized as follows. The research related to principal preparation and principal development is reviewed first. Then the literature related to principal leadership for student learning is evaluated. From there, the chapter moves to “conditions” for success, starting with an examination of the literature on the principal’s impact on conditions within the school (i.e. distributed leadership, principal leadership creating strong teacher satisfaction as well as engagement throughout the school). Then, the literature focused on the relationship between the principal and the central office/superintendent, and how that relationship impacts principal effectiveness is reviewed. Finally, the literature on the principals’ theories of action is reviewed.
Relationship Between Pre-service Principal Preparation Programs and Their Theories of Action in Practice

Leithwood, et al. (2004) in a landmark report, How Leadership Influences Student Learning, conclude that in order to accomplish the turnaround of a troubled school, there needs to be intervention by a powerful leader, in this case an effective principal. They point out that there are virtually no documented occurrences of a turnaround having taken place in a troubled school without a strong principal. While there are many factors that may also contribute to student learning, principal leadership is concluded to be the catalyst.

The Wallace Foundation (2008) published a report that built upon the work of Leithwood. The research undertaken in this report attempted to answer two fundamental questions: (1) What is expected of our school leaders in today’s climate; and (2) What are the key ingredients of effective principal training, both before and after school leaders are first hired, or prepare them for the demands of their job.

The major findings start with this one: Successful training programs for principals are significantly different from the majority of programs in existence. “Traditional” university-based leadership programs were found to have persistent weaknesses that included: Admission standards that allow leadership preparation candidates to “self-select” themselves without having to demonstrate potential to assume a leadership position, weak connections between theory and practice, faculty with little field experience as leaders, and internships and field-based experiences that are not sufficiently connected to the rest of the program. Put simply, the prevalent
leadership preparation programs are not serving the needs of their students, enabling these new principals to “hit the ground running.” (p. 4.)

When the report was published, forty-six states had adopted leadership standards, and evidence was beginning to be collected that such standards were being utilized to evaluate leadership-training programs in order to hold them more accountable. Leadership academies were being launched, in such places as Iowa, Georgia, New York City and Louisiana, with two aims: (1) Provide high-quality alternatives that are responsive to district leadership needs, and (2) Provide competition to university based leadership programs.

This same Wallace study found that at least half of the nation’s states had adopted mentoring requirements for newly seated principals. This finding marked increase over previous studies. This finding paved the way for the third major finding of the study, relating to the concept of career-long learning.

The third important finding of the Wallace study was that leadership training should not end when principals are hired. Training should continue via high-quality mentoring for new principals. It should continue with professional development to promote career-long growth in line with the changing needs of all school and districts. The study pointed out that leadership development is moving ahead with three core features: (1) It is solidly connected to practice; (2) It is standards-based; and (3) It is a career-long process.

Additional findings from the Wallace study included that there is a significant cost to high-quality leadership development, which needs to be recognized and budgeted. One suggestion is that high quality leadership development needs to extend
beyond leadership preparation programs. Another is that in order for principals to be successful, attention needs to be paid to the difficult working conditions that they experience.

While the Wallace study is useful in its examination of some of the deficits of the leadership preparation programs, it barely scratches the surface of “unpacking” all that is involved with “addressing the difficult working conditions” that are likely to be encountered by principals. For example, while the study suggests that the successful leader sets direction, develops people, and redesigns the organization, it does not provide specific examples of practicing leaders whose theories of action manifest these suggested orientations, behaviors, competencies. More specifically, it does not offer details about principals who inherited “difficult working conditions,” successfully improved them, and, as a result, achieved better outcomes.

In the same vein, the report suggests that pre-service training programs need to be better connected to the schools and districts in which the leaders will eventually serve, but it does not provide examples of how to accomplish this connection. In short, there are more theoretical recommendations than there are specific, evidence based action steps that come from real-life schools and districts implementing the suggested changes.

The Wallace study was preceded by a Stanford University study (Darling Hammond, et al, 2007). Darling-Hammond, et al.’s study was structured to address three primary questions: (1) What are the components of programs that provide effective initial preparation and ongoing professional development for principals? (2) What are the outcomes of these programs? What are principals who have experienced
this training able to do? (3) What role do state, district, and institutional policies play in principal development programs?

The Stanford study identified outcomes of programs deemed to be exemplary. These outcomes were derived from the comments of supervisors of principals that came from such programs. Comments included a high level of confidence, the ability to articulate a belief and build a rationale and justification that encourages others to do the same thing and hold high expectations for all students, the ability to disaggregate data, how to use data, how to develop school improvement plans, and how to effective evaluate staff.

This research was designed to advance a particular framework. This framework holds that exemplary principal preparation programs should be able to offer visible evidence of the consequences of preparation for principals’ knowledge, skills and practices – and for their success in preparing candidates for the challenging jobs that principals face. In other words, this study was in search of “the value added components” of pre-service education. At the same time, this study began to delve into the relationship between the principal’s preparation program, and the principal’s actions (i.e., their “theories of action”).

Two critical pre-service program components identified by the Stanford study were the recruitment and the selection of students (principal candidates). Significantly, a high percentage of quality program graduates were referred or recommended to their program by districts, and two-thirds of those referred by their district had at least some costs paid by the district. Their pre-service programs typically included strong curriculum focused on instruction and improvement, and well-designed, tightly
integrated coursework and fieldwork. Finally, these programs include robust internships. The internship is critical to the success of the program model, in that the coursework becomes more valuable and relevant because it is tightly interwoven into practice.

The Stanford study also cited the importance of preparation program success being linked to strong program leadership (having “champions” that continually advocate and develop the programs). The leadership works to build important partnerships (between university and school districts). Strong programs also, to some degree, provide finances (financially supporting program candidates/graduates). The study also suggests the idea that long-term institutionalization of high-quality principal development models will likely require more systematic policy supports including the use of standards to drive change, supports for candidate recruitment and development, as well as the development of state and local infrastructure.

A study by the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy (Knapp, Copland, Plecki, & Portin, 2006) was also commissioned by the Wallace Foundation. Entitled, Leading, Learning and Leadership Support, this study delves more into the actions of principals than the studies reviewed above. The study cites “learning focused leadership”, which the study's authors define as having three layers:

1) The activities embedded in the exercise of leadership, consisting of several important activities. These activities include... role redefinition, where teams are established within the schools that take on instructional leadership responsibilities. Use of information is another– where systems are set up for teachers to examine student work in relation to grade-level expectations and
state standards. Reallocation of resources, such as reallocating time so that teachers can work together on instructional planning is another.

2) The supports for leadership and with a firm relationship with role definition (described above). Here role redefinition includes creating managerial support roles to remove some aspects of the routine work of the principal and enable more focus on learning. Information use refers to creating or locating informational tools for principals. Reallocation of resources refers to making teacher professional development that is linked to identified learning goals, a resource priority.

3) The connections between what educational leaders bring to their work and their leadership practice. Here, the emphasis is on their knowledge and skills, core values, their “theories of action”, and their images of purpose and possibility – what is referred to as leadership practice itself- and the potential connections between this practice and learning.

The study indicates that effective principals are more likely to address the appropriate learning agendas if they have achieved an essential outcome. Effective principals have developed theories of action and related skill sets that help them see and realize important connections between leadership and learning.

This study's authors further suggest that this way of thinking presumes that the professional learning of both teachers and principals is “system learning.” They define system learning as “assembling and interpreting information about the system as a whole...plus developing new policies, practices and structure that alter and hopefully enhance performance” (p. 17.)
The authors go on to state, “Leaders are more likely to address these learning agendas if they have developed “theories of action” as related skill-sets that help them see and realize these connections between leadership and learning. Over time, with careful attention to the organization with which they work, the families and communities they serve and the policies that impact to their work, these leaders can fashion learning improvement strategies that have good prospects of being achieved” (p. 17.) The study also references context – “of a larger set of conditions that guide and support learning-focused leadership.”

Parallel to the findings above, specific leadership actions are identified as crucial activities for the principal (Wallace Foundation, 2006; 2008.) One such action is redefining roles and responsibilities. Strategies identified for accomplishing such include the establishment of a persistent, public focus on learning. Building professional communities in the school and district that place a high priority on learning is also an important strategy. Another strategy is the use of data to engage groups in the external environment that matter for learning, and encourage the use of evidence and feedback. In order to focus resources on learning, teams develop shared leadership strategies along a variety of pathways that can influence learning, and create coherence among the various activities that are directed at learning improvement.

While this study expands on the identified actions, and specifies particular strategies that might be employed, it is not without limitations. Notably, it does not specify how the principals’ theories of action should be studied. Nor does it identify how school and district contexts influence these theories of action. Moreover, this study does not address whether and how principals’ espoused theories are implemented,
including how principals manage multiple demands on their time, attention, and priorities, and how they reflect upon their actions, given those demands. Nor does the report include methodological recommendations for further study. In fact, this study is limited by its focus on a single, hypothetical student and his/her school and district as a framework for illustrating the major leadership concepts.

The Relationship Between Principal Leadership and Improvements in Student Achievement

Rice (2010) reinforces the importance of principal leadership related to student achievement. Rice relies on work by researchers at the National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER). The subsequent report draws on longitudinal state data to estimate the effects of principals for different kinds of schools and students. The key research findings related to principal effectiveness are summarized below.

- Good leadership is important to teachers, and it affects their decisions about where to work;
- In comparison to less effective principals, effective principals are able to staff their schools with more effective teachers;
- Experience is a predictor of principal effectiveness;
- The principal’s job is complex and multidimensional, and the effectiveness of principals depends, in part, on their sense of efficacy on particular kinds of tasks; and also how they allocate their time across daily responsibilities;
- Principals’ subjective evaluations of teachers may offer valuable information on teachers’ performance beyond what can be captured by student test scores alone;
- Principal quality is most important in high-poverty and low-performing schools, but quality principals are inequitably distributed across all schools.
- High-poverty and low performing schools tend to have lower-quality principals.

The above finding that principal effectiveness is predicted by experience is not corroborated in other research. For example, Marzano and Waters (2005) found that this contention may be true within the first three years of service as a principal, but not as strongly thereafter. More concretely, expertise may be the important construct here, and it needs to be disaggregated from experience. Other research implicates expertise and, by extension and implication, differences in principals’ theories of action as instrumental in improvements in student academic achievement (e.g., Elmore, 2007, Fullan, 2008; 2009; Kruse & Louis, 2009).

**Principals and Improvements in Academic Achievement**

Brandt (1987) reported on the research findings of Richard Andrews, who systematically gathered data from 100 schools over a three-year period, measuring the increases in achievement of individual students within those schools. Andrews identified three different kinds of schools. “High profile schools” were those schools that have principals perceived by their teachers as strong instructional leaders. Moreover, high profile schools were characterized as having a principal with high expectations, frequent monitoring of student progress, a positive learning climate, and clarity of goals.

Andrews defined “low profile” schools as having a principal with none or few of the characteristics of the high profile schools. “Average” schools were characterized as being in between the high and low profile schools in terms of the presence of the above
characteristics in the principal. Andrews emphasized two important relationships: (1) When teachers have positive perceptions of the quality of their workplace, they are more productive; and (2) When teachers hold positive perceptions, incremental growth is more likely to be found in student achievement.

After analyzing the achievement of the 100 schools and then surveying teachers within those schools, Andrews identified 96 items. Andrews then used factor analysis to determine those items that were consistent and reliable. 18 of those items measured the instructional leadership of the principal as perceived by teachers and staff.

Two items are especially noteworthy. The first item most important to teachers was the visible presence of the principal in the school; and, more concretely, teachers’ perception that the principal is an instructional leader. When the principal was viewed as an instructional leader, 78 percent of the teachers reported that they went to their principal with instructional matters or concerns.

The second item of importance identified by teachers was the ability of the principal to set a vision for the school. Teachers indicated that their principal had a definite idea about the purpose of their school. Andrews pointed out that there were no schools identified in his study where excellence (as defined by student achievement outcomes) was achieved without a strong principal.

A “Report of the Task Force on the Principalship” (October, 2000) indicated that principals must serve as leaders for student learning. This leadership was further described as principals having knowledge of academic content and pedagogical techniques, having the ability to collect, analyze and use data in ways that promote excellence, and the ability to work with teachers to strengthen their skills. In addition,
the report suggests that the principal must rally students, teachers, parents, local health and social service agencies, youth development groups, local businesses, and other community residents and partners around the common goals of raising student achievement. In order to do so, the reports indicate that the principal must have the leadership skills and knowledge to exercise the autonomy and authority necessary to pursue the strategies listed above. In essence, the report offers a strong and important claim, “learning doesn't happen without leadership” (p. 2.)

The same report identified the role of the principal in the 21st century to be defined in terms of:

- Instructional leadership – focused on strengthening teaching and learning, professional development, data-driven decision-making and accountability;
- Community leadership – manifested in big-picture awareness of the school’s “place” in the community; shared leadership among educators; community partners; close relations with parents and others; and advocacy for school capacity building and resources;
- Visionary leadership – demonstrating energy, commitment, entrepreneurial spirit, values and the conviction that all children will learn at high levels, as well as having the ability to inspire others with the vision – both inside and outside of the building.

Given this three-component role, the task force made three recommendations addressing critical challenges related to “reinventing” the principalship. First: Fill the pipeline with effective school leaders, emphasizing recruitment and retention efforts, strengthening preparation programs, and exploring alternate pathways to the
principalship. Second: Support the profession, including emphasis on leadership for student learning in preparation and professional development, improving ongoing training, raising pay of principals, and promoting shared goals and efforts among organizations concerned with principal leadership. And third: Guarantee quality and results, including evaluating principals more effectively and frequently, finding ways to hold principals accountable for their role in student learning, and developing systems for gathering the data necessary to inform the principal's leadership.

The report concludes with a significant claim and an equally significant reminder. Claiming that the principalship needs to be reinvented, the reminder was “reinventing the principalship will not be easy” (p. 19.) The report suggested that state and local school systems, higher education, businesses, and principals would need to work together to ensure that in the future schools have the qualified leaders that they need. The report recommended exploring strategies for ensuring quality and results, chiefly through “unprecedented” efforts in principal assessment, accountability and data collection (p. 19.)

Unfortunately, this report leaves the field and reader with more questions than answers. Like other reports, more needs are identified, but without the specifics on how they best be addressed. More concretely, “general” recommendations and suggestions are offered, and they are not differentiated to the principal of a particular level, the principal working in a specific context, such as a rural or urban school, or with a diverse population. It is especially noteworthy that school and district context is not considered within this somewhat generic look at “reinventing the principalship.” While the report referenced various literatures and some research, it was more grounded within the
perspectives of the individuals who served on the panel than based on strong theory and empirical findings.

Burkhauser, Gates, Hamilton, & Ikemoto (2012) investigated how first year urban principals’ actions influenced student achievement outcomes. Additionally, they found that student test scores impacted these principals’ decisions to remain on the job. Principals were more likely to be retained with test scores improved, and they were more likely to leave after the first year when test scores declined. Schools with this principal turnover experienced yet another decline in test scores in the year following the departure of their first year principal.

Overall their study emphasized three priority areas in which principals’ were able to demonstrate leadership-as-influence. First, principals in schools with achievement gains were able to exert influence on the uses of data in planning and decision-making. Second, influential principals were able to impact decision-making in three areas: instructional content, personnel/management, and schedule/budget. Third and more important than their decision-making influence, these principals influenced teachers’ capacity (e.g., possessing requisite skills, ability to promote learning among all students) as well as staff cohesiveness. More concretely, these influential principals ensured buy-in and developed cohesiveness by means of five promising practices: Immediately recruiting strong staff; conducting one-on-one meetings with all staff; offering respect for prior practices and culture; being visible in the classrooms; and communicating clear and fair expectations.

Significantly, Burkhauser et al. (2012) did not observe a relationship between principals’ time allocations and student achievement. Put differently, spending time on
a priority area (e.g., data use, forming leadership teams, promoting teacher professional development) in and of itself was not associated with high levels of implementation or buy-in from staff. In brief, time may be a precious resource, but what matters is not the amount of time, but the quality of principals’ use of their time—what they do, when they do it, how they do it, and whatever adjustments they make as they observe, reflect, and learn. On these important matters, Burkhauser et al.’s (2012) findings are promising, but incomplete. More detailed information is needed about principals’ theories of action.

**Distributed and Transformational Leadership: Outcomes for Teachers and Students**

Harris (2008) provided an overview of the literature concerning distributed leadership. The purpose was to consider the empirical evidence that highlights a relationship between distributed leadership and organizational outcomes (in the case of schools, improved student achievement.) The author suggests that much of the literature about principal leadership provides useful insights into individual approaches to leading (often via stories about a particular school or district), but provides the field little insight into the practice of leadership.

One result is that too often leadership is reduced to “cookie cutter” or “silver bullet” advice. Harris concludes such stories or accounts simply reinforce popular conceptions of what individuals do. A related problem is that personal accounts of leadership substitute for empirical data.

Harris provides an important alternative. She begins with a definition of distributed leadership: “Any form of devolved, shared or dispersed leadership practice in schools” (p. 173.) Distributed leadership theory recognizes that many people have
the potential to exercise leadership in any organization but the key to success is the way that leadership is facilitated, orchestrated and supported. Harris suggests that distributed leadership does not imply that the formal leadership structures within organizations are removed or redundant. Rather, it is assumed that there is a powerful relationship between vertical and lateral leadership processes.

In a school, distributed leadership could manifest itself in the work of subject departments, cross-curricular groupings, action learning sets and school improvement groups. When teachers are working together to solve problems of practice, they will occupy a leadership role within the school and will be engaging in leadership practice. Distributed leadership is not restricted to any particular patterns, is not prescribed ahead of time, but it emerges within an organization in order to solve problems or to take action. Murphy (2005) implies that organizational change and development are enhanced when leadership is broad based and where teachers have opportunities to collaborate and actively engage in change and innovation.

Spillane et al.’s (2004) four year longitudinal study funded by the National Science Foundation and the Spencer Foundation was designed to make the “black box” of leadership practice more transparent, through a deep, longitudinal study of the practice of leadership. The foundational argument of this study is that distributed leadership is best understood as distributed practice. Leadership as a distributed practice is stretched throughout the school – both in social and situational contexts.

Spillane makes clear that leadership practice is the core unit of analysis in trying to understand school leadership from a distributed perspective. Spillane suggests that from a distributed perspective, leadership practice takes shape in the interactions of
people and their situation, shifting researchers and developers from an exclusive focus on the actions of the individual leader. He suggests that distributed leadership is not about the leaders themselves, their roles or even leadership functions, but in actuality is rooted in the interactions of people and the principal. How principals orchestrate these interactions in a planned, productive manner is an important, but heretofore, neglected aspect of their theories of action; and also in many principal preparation programs.

Elmore (2000) makes a case for re-conceptualizing the most important focus and work of the principal. Referencing studies completed in 1996 and 1999, Elmore suggests a strong internal normative environment – characterized by clear and binding expectations among teachers, among students and teachers, and among principals and teachers is essential. He indicates that the principal needs to transform dysfunctional relationships that encourage isolationism into functional relationships in which the norm becomes one of not only learning how to do new things, but also learning how to attach a positive value to the learning and the doing of new things.

Elmore outlines a model of distributive leadership for large-scale improvement. His model focuses on the following five principles.

1. The purpose of leadership is the improvement of instructional practice and performance, regardless of role: Elmore suggests that if the purpose of leadership is the improvement of teaching practice and performance, then the skills and knowledge that matter are those that bear on the creation of settings for learning focused on clear expectations for instruction;

2. Instructional improvement requires continuous learning: Elmore suggests that collective learning demands an environment that guides and directs the
acquisition of new knowledge about instruction, and that principals must create environments in which individuals expect to have their personal ideas and practices subjected to the scrutiny of their colleagues, and in which groups expect to have their shared conceptions of practice subjected to the scrutiny of individuals;

3. Learning requires modeling: Principals must be able to model the learning that they expect of others;

4. The roles and activities of leadership flow from the expertise required for learning and improvement, not from the formal dictates of the institution: Elmore states that improvement requires a complex cooperation among people in diverse roles performing diverse functions; the value of direction, guidance and cooperation stems from acknowledging and making use of differences in expertise.

5. The exercise of authority requires reciprocity of accountability and capacity: Principals need to build the capacity in people so that they may carry out those actions or outcomes for which they will be held accountable. Once again, distributed leadership makes the reciprocal nature of accountability relationships explicit – the principal builds capacity in the teacher by creating opportunities for learning, and by observing the teacher learning, the principal’s capacity is increased.

Elmore suggests that there are specific leadership functions to which principals need to attend in order to bring about school improvement: These functions are: Design school improvement strategies; implement incentive structures for teachers, support personnel; recruit, evaluate teachers; broker professional development
consistent with improvement strategy; allocate school resources toward instruction; and buffer teachers from non-instructional issues.

The concept of “comparative advantage” is introduced in Elmore’s 2000 work. Comparative advantage suggests that people should engage in activities that are consistent with the comparative expertise of their roles and avoid activities that are beyond their expertise. An example is that a policy maker should not be determining instructional strategy. Instructional strategy should be left to the principal and teacher who have the requisite expertise. Comparative advantage is the term that Elmore coins to describe Spillane’s concept of distributed leadership, and he differentiates the idea by indicating that comparative advantage suggests deference to and respect for expertise at all levels of a school and school system.

In the same vein, Leithwood et al. (2006) indicate that two key conditions are necessary for successful leadership distribution. The first is that leadership needs to be distributed to those who have, or can develop, the knowledge or expertise required to carry out the leadership tasks expected of them. The second is that effective distributed leadership needs to be coordinated, preferably in some planned way.

Harris (2008) identifies the following implications in conclusion of her overview of distributed leadership. First, it requires those in formal leadership roles in schools to create the cultural conditions and structural opportunities where distributed leadership can operate and flourish. Second, distributive leadership will necessitate that those in formal leadership positions consider how they can best maximize leadership capacity in their school and harness untapped leadership potential. Third,
schools will need to move away from a “leader-follower” relationship, necessitating flatter leadership structures and patterns of interaction. This means that new professional relationships will emerge based on collaboration rather than coercion based on power wielded from top-down approach.

The evidence suggests that distributed leadership is one potential contributor to positive change and transformation in schools and school systems (Fullan, 2006; Spillane, 2006). The question is, to what extent are principals’ theories of action aligned with distributed leadership?

Hayes et al. (2004) researched schools as learning organizations, and their work incorporated aspects of distributed leadership. Their work described the following characteristics of productive leadership, which are indicated as supporting teachers to develop productive pedagogies:

- A commitment to leadership dispersal which supports the spread of leadership practices and collaborative decision-making processes in building common vision and purposes;
- Supportive social relationships within the school, between staff (teachers and others) and students;
- “Hands on knowledge” about how educational theory translates into strategic action and is aligned with community concerns and relationships outside of the school;
- A focus on pedagogy in which leadership in a school is focused on improving student learning outcomes and learning with the school as a whole; Support for
the development of a culture of care which encourages teacher professional risk taking; and

- A focus on structures and strategies in which leadership focuses on developing organizational processes that facilitate the smooth running of the school.

After describing three different schools with principals that had different leadership style, Hayes et al. reached important conclusions worthy of quotation: "Style is not as important as willingness of these principals to contribute to the development of broad-based learning communities within their schools. In this regard, the principals we described shared some common ground: they promoted dispersal of leadership; they encouraged the development of positive relationships, taking responsibility for much of the emotional labor associated with supporting and maintaining these relationships; they worked to ensure that matters of pedagogy took priority on the school's agenda and within leadership practices; and, they were fully cognizant of departmental policies and directives while not feeling unduly bound by them" (p. 535)

The authors also concluded that principals should promote dispersal of leadership. They add: "we anticipate that their style and local conditions will also contribute to the form this may take in each school" (p. 535-536.) Amid grand claims about generic and generalizable principal competencies, the emphasis accorded to personal style, local conditions, and their interaction is noteworthy. Of course, all such findings, together with the researchers’ grand claims, merit additional research.

This study is one of the first to acknowledge that context is important as it relates to principal effectiveness, and indeed, principals’ theories of leadership.
Unfortunately, the study does not go far enough to begin to “unpack” how the principal’s theories of action drive the choices each made, and it does not at all describe the how the process of school improvement was informed by the learning-in-action, and reflection of the principal leading to intentional action and constant adjustment. The three schools described were more likely included in the study given that there was an element of distributed leadership in each, and each principal took a slightly different path in creating the conditions for that distributed leadership. The study is more helpful related to the thoughts and actions of the faculty than it is relating to the same within each principal.

The Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University conference report (2009) reported a direct correlation between effective leadership and improved student achievement. The report features 15 public high schools from Massachusetts, Illinois, Ohio, Maryland, Texas and Washington DC, wherein test score gaps were narrowed between each of the racial/ethnic groups and white students, when compared to the rest of their respective state.

In contrast to other research and research-related reports, this one proceeds with a different core assumption. The assumption is that the principal is not the only leader. It includes leadership teams with clear implications for principals’ roles and responsibilities for forming and facilitating the work of these teams. Here, in short, is an emphasis on distributed leadership.

The report concludes that student achievement rose when leadership teams focused “thoughtfully and relentlessly” on improving the quality of instruction. More specifically, change in student achievement occurred when core groups of leaders took
responsibility (publicly) for leading the efforts to raise student achievement.

Leadership teams first crafted mission statements that were used to keep their work on track; participated in careful planning (sometimes using resources from outside the school or district) for how learning experiences would be organized for teachers; clearly defined criteria for high quality teacher and students work; and implemented the work in ways that engaged their whole faculties. As plans were implemented, the teams and schools carefully monitored both student and teacher work in order to continuously refine their approaches.

The report provided prescriptions that were identified by examining the work of the 15 schools featured in the report. The five main categories are as follows:

I. Responsibility to Lead the Change Process;

II. Mission Statement and Focused Priorities;

III. Strategies and Plans for High Quality Adult Learning;

IV. Clear Criteria for Judging Instructional Practice;

V. Skillful and Relentless Implementation.

Throughout this report, the need for strong principal leadership is identified. The principal is responsible for forming the leadership team that “takes on” the primary guidance and facilitation of change efforts to bring about improved student achievement. One implication is that forming leadership teams, sustaining them, and optimizing their performance are competencies nested in principals’ theories of action. Another implication stems from the report’s emphasis on distributed leadership. Additionally, the report finds that the leadership team must commit to working hard, putting in extraordinary effort and time, must stand up to challenges while making
appropriate sacrifices so that people come to trust the team members, their motives, competence, reliability, as well as commitment to collegiality.

Furthermore, the report emphasizes that the whole faculty must be enlisted in professional learning, and that the leadership team must confront and ultimately overcome resistance to participation. The principal has additional responsibility, in that the principal needs to monitor how department chairs and teacher team leaders supervise teachers, including looking at graded student work and discussing the feedback that department chairs and teacher team leaders provide to teachers, and that teachers provide to students. The principal must hold the department chairs responsible for ensuring that school-level priorities for effective instruction are tailored to fit individual subjects.

While the report utilizes examples from 15 high-performing high schools, the recommendations within the report appear to be readily implemented at any level—elementary, middle or high school. The report is heavy on attention to process (i.e. specifying of sequential steps taken by building teams), which is an element that often is not specified in other literature relating to leadership for improved student achievement. This process approach is not commonly present in other literature.

Unfortunately, the study was not designed to specifically examine the context (rural, suburban, urban) in which the various principals within the study are working. Notwithstanding claims in support of generalizable, context-independent expertise, questions remain about the context-specific expertise of rural principals.

Beyond its inattention to school and district context, this study does not assist in “opening the black box” of principals’ theories of action. It is silent on principals’
relationship with their district office and how that impacts the improved student achievement. Granting the import of the professional learning of the teachers, principals’ learning and its import for their theories of action is not emphasized.

**Transformational Leadership**

Griffith (2004) examined the relationship of principal “transformational leadership” to school staff job satisfaction, staff turnover and school performance. The term “transformational” is not fully described nor differentiated from similar terms utilized in the literature that refer to “turnaround leaders” and other related terms. Of course, it implies leadership that influences positive outcomes in a school, but under-specification is a clear limitation of this study.

Griffith described the concepts of structure – the extent administrators provide staff and materials necessary for effective instruction and student learning; and consideration – the extent that administrators developed mutual trust and respect as well as shared norms and values among school staff necessary for positive and productive social relations as identified in earlier literature. He then describes effective principal behaviors as identified by Blase (1987).

Griffith indicates reports that effective principals had clear and well-articulated goals; delegated tasks to others; encouraged staff to participate in decision-making; incorporated others in problem solving; treated staff fairly and equitably; and provided staff support in difficult situations. Griffith adds to this literature in the introduction of the concept of “transformational leadership”, indicating that it involves the principal’s ability to make group members more interested in the group than they are in themselves. Griffith states, “To develop and build group members’ commitment to
common goals and purpose, transformational leaders through interpersonal relations appeal to broad human moral and psychological needs” (p. 334.)

Furthermore, Griffith strived to operationalize transformational leadership. He described transformational leadership as having three components. The first is charisma or inspiration. It is manifested in the ability of the principal to provide a clear sense of mission, which principals in turn convey to members and develop a sense of loyalty and commitment. The second is individualized consideration, and it is manifested in the principal’s treatment of each faculty member as an individual and also in a willingness to delegate projects and work to individuals, which stimulates and create learning; and intellectual stimulation. The third is the principal’s provision of opportunities for faculty to rethink traditional procedures and examine situations in new and different ways.

Griffith’s study surveyed more than 8,000 school-based employees on items relating to effective schools, school/organizational climate and items from other educational research that included surveys of school staff. 39 percent of employees completed the surveys, with the median completion rate being 38 percent. Survey items represented the three areas of transformational leadership previously identified: inspiration, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation.

Griffith found that principal transformational leadership was not associated directly with either school staff turnover or school performance. Rather, principal transformational leadership was evident in indirect effects. Indirect effects included higher staff job satisfaction among teachers, and lower, faculty turnover, leading to higher school performance. Researchers suggested that their results had strong
intuitive appeal. They claimed that the work of the principal pertains more to interactions with staff than with students because principals spend more of their time with school staff than with students. Thus, the researchers look for leadership and leadership effects on the nature of their interactions with staff. They focus on how these interactions influence the staff’s work experiences, including working relations among staff. Such areas as staff involvement and collaboration in planning, problem-solving, decision-making and implementing of school programs likely leads to better communication, collaboration, implementation, and job satisfaction among staff members. This also shapes the organization, especially the school’s climate.

There are limitations to this study, and the researcher who completed it is to be commended for identifying them. The data do not necessarily reveal causality in the relations that were observed. Moreover, limitations involving bias are important to identify. For example, the researcher acknowledges that higher levels of student achievement could lead to higher staff ratings of the principal. Improved student performance and low turnover could affect positive ratings of the principal. The researcher also acknowledges that unmeasured aspects of the school environment might also explain higher ratings of the principal such as material support, community support, etc.

The approach to this study was indicative of the “theories” about principal leadership at the time of the study – many “effective” principals were judged to be effective based on perceptual survey data, and from surveys that often relied heavily on the charisma, personality, and interpersonal characteristics of the principal. This and
many studies did not get to the specific level of principal theories of action and how they impact the principal’s use of time, energy and resources.

**Relational Trust as a Leadership Indicator, Resource, and Key Component in Principals’ Theories of Action**

Bryk and Schneider (2002) engaged in extensive research on effective principals in Chicago’s schools. The research implicated a new construct, which they named relational trust. Bryk and Schneider identified four key areas that contribute to relational trust involving principals: respect, compassion, communication and competence. Significantly, principals’ key constituencies in their respective schools identified these four factors. Moreover, all four factors have an organizational effect: They are instrumental in the development of a trusting school climate.

Bryk and Schneider defined each of the four key areas as follows. Respect derives from recognition of the role each person plays in a child's education. Compassion is the perception of how one goes beyond what it required of their role in caring for another person. Competence in the execution of a role is the ability to achieve the desired outcomes. Relational trust describes the interpersonal social exchanges that take place in a school community. Each party in a relationship maintains an understanding of their role obligations and holds expectations about the roles and obligation of others. When relational trust is present, people are more prone to persist and seek additional pathways to improved results. Within their review of the literature, Bryk and Schneider found evidence that high levels of trust are associated with collective efficacy, a positive school climate, and improved effectiveness.
Bryk and Schneider conducted a seven-year survey to assist them in determining the impact relational trust had on student learning, as well as the implications relational trust had on school governance. They discovered that schools whose scores were improving on standardized testing had high levels of relational trust among the existing relationships in the school community and vice versa. They also concluded that relational trust is an essential element of positive, effective school governance that focuses on school improvement policies.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) identified specific principal practices/dispositions that are significant in development of principal-teacher trust. They are: Be consistent; model integrity; show genuine concern, including empathy and sensitivity; communicate effectively and appropriately; share control; be competent, fair, and even-handed; and maintain openness. These researchers also emphasize needed organizational conditions for trust, particularly conditions that support cooperation and collaboration.

City, Elmore, Fiarmann and Teitel (2009) also reference relational trust. They suggest that trust has to grow out of patterns of practice over time in which people learn that they can depend on each other to behave in predictable ways in high-stakes activities. For example, a principal is more likely to share theories of action as well as professional goals and aspirations in an environment where trusting relationships have been developed. Teachers are more likely to share the work produced by students, for feedback from their colleagues in an environment where strong trust has been nurtured and developed.
The Ontario Leadership Framework (2009) also references to the practical necessity for the high relational trust in “Open-to-Learning” conversations. The framework suggests that principals’ interpersonal skills and values enable them to examine their own and others’ assumptions about themselves and others. Then, it is suggested that leaders need to be able to:

- Disclose their views and the reasons for them
- Listen to others’ views and be open to reciprocal influence
- Give and receive tough messages
- Detect and challenge their own and others’ problematic assumptions

The ability of the principal to master the above skills makes it possible for them to both provide and receive the “tough” messages that are genuinely a part of the improvement of learning and teaching.

Notwithstanding the import of skills inventories like this one, principals act relationally, often relying on and manifesting multiple skills, abilities, and sensitivities. In fact, the relationships among discrete skills, abilities, and sensitivities, especially how principals articulate and enact them, are the essence of their theories of action. Research interest thus resides in how, when, where, and why principals activate, combine, and integrate such discrete skills and abilities in everyday school and district contexts. Such is the design and intent of this dissertation study.

**District Central Office Influences on Principals**

In 2009, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McRel) released the fourth in the series entitled “What Works” in schools. This volume, authored by Marzano and Waters (2009), examines the extent to which relationship between the
principal and district or central office has a measurable impact on improving student achievement.

*Marzano and Waters*

Marzano and Waters intended to study whether or not district leadership “matters.” Their study was structured to address two questions. What is the strength of relationship between district-level administrative actions and average student achievement? What are the specific district leadership behaviors that are associated with student achievement?

The methodology employed was a meta-analysis, which they define as a range of quantitative techniques for synthesizing research regarding a specific topic. The sample utilized was all available studies involving district leadership and student academic achievement in the United States from 1970 until 2005, that possessed key characteristics. For example, studies reported a correlation between district leadership or district leadership variables on student achievement or allowed for computing of a correlation and used a standardized measure of student achievement or some index based on a standardized measure of student achievement.

The researchers found six district-level leadership “responsibilities” or initiatives with statistically significant (p, .05) correlation with academic achievement. Effective district leaders were characterized as:

1. Ensuring collaborative goal setting
2. Establishing nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction
3. Creating board alignment with and support of district goals
4. Monitoring achievement and instruction goals
5. Allocating resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction.

6. Defining autonomy vis-à-vis the schools they oversee and guide.

Goals 1, 2, 4 and 6 are most related to the superintendent relationship with the principal. By ensuring collaborative goal setting, the superintendent includes all relevant stakeholders in establishing goals for the district, and insures that principals are heavily involved in the development of the nonnegotiable goals, given that they will be the individuals that will implement the goals at the building level. The non-negotiable goals are identified as having two components: including goals in the areas of student achievement and classroom instruction.

The study indicates that once determined, the principal must support the goals both explicitly and implicitly. Explicit support is exemplified as the principal insures that a “broad but common framework” for classroom instructional design and planning is utilized in order to guarantee that research based instructional strategies are utilized in each classroom. Implicit support refers to the principal being sure to do nothing that subverts the accomplishment of the goals – be it criticizing the district goals, or subtly suggesting that the goals are off target or unachievable.

*Elmore’s Research*

Elmore (2000) also addressed the role of the superintendent as it relates to the principal, and indicates that effective superintendents in his studies were active in monitoring curriculum and instruction in schools, as well as were active in the supervision, evaluation and mentoring of principals. High performing districts in Elmore’s study showed a greater clarity of purpose, a much greater willingness to exercise tighter controls over decisions about what would be taught and what would be
monitored as evidence of performance, and a greater looseness and delegation to the principal/school level of specific decisions about how to carry out an instructional program. The high performing schools that Elmore identified relied on a common culture of values to shape collective action, and not on bureaucratic rules and controls. The shared values typically focused on improvement of student learning as the central goal. The principal of such schools encourage a view of structures, processes and data as instruments for improvement rather than as ends in themselves.

Elmore also emphasized that for schools to improve, it is essential for their leaders to look outward – to look at different ways that leaders lead in order to bring about necessary change, rather than looking within and recreating practices of the past. He indicates that such practice will invariably bring about the same results. Elmore suggests that schools and districts have largely recruited leaders from within their own system. In so doing, they often have selected individuals who are unequipped to lead differently, and to bring about necessary change in student achievement and outcomes. Such is the pro-improvement framework for Elmore’s five principles, and his focus on specific principal functions.

*Lortie’s Research*

Lortie (2009) found that superintendents handpick principals, so selection effects are operative when some research is conducted. What is not imminently clear is exactly how the superintendent’s influence shapes the principal’s theories of action. Even so, the Lortie’s research has import for this dissertation study.

Lortie (2009) conducted research with 113 suburban Chicago elementary principals. He interviewed them in 1980. Later, he participated in follow-up telephone
interviews in 1988. Lortie then combined the data gleaned from this sample with a statewide survey of Iowa principals taken at the same chronological time. Lortie argued that because of the relative slow process of change within the educational system, conclusions drawn from his research in the 1980’s enjoyed good currency in 2009.

Lortie describes in great detail the history of the principalship. With this context in mind, he presents and discusses his results and conclusions about the principalship. Some of his findings related to the context in which the principal works are important:

- The principal is held accountable for the work of those below them in the hierarchy of school districts (the teachers), yet simultaneously is held accountable by their supervisor(s) in central office, namely the superintendent.
- The principals in the study were marked by stability and continuity in their careers. Many worked as teachers in the district if not the very school in which they became a principal, illustrating a strong pattern of school districts hiring principals from within. Lortie points to two themes that result: a widespread pattern of caution on the part of both employers and employees, and a bit in favor of organizational continuity rather than change.
- The role of principal tends to be very public, and thus “working in a fishbowl” is a descriptor related to the transparency that is expected around their work.
- Principals in the study indicated that they felt they had little power to institute major changes; that they were not free to initiate change when and where they saw the need. Thus, Lortie reports that principals tend to act in “conventional ways” rather than charting new paths and taking risks as they see appropriate.
• Principals describe superintendents as being motivated by public satisfaction in making decisions and in supervising principals. Simultaneously, they expect principals to focus on student learning. Sometimes the two create conflict in deciding upon appropriate action.

• Another complex aspect of the principal is interacting with and keeping satisfied parents and community.

• Principals are tasked with supervision of teachers who belong to unions, and who often subscribe to having autonomy within their classroom. Principals need to balance relationships with teachers, the union and their superintendent when making decisions about the best course of action to optimize student learning.

• Given the above, principals cited supervision and evaluation of teachers as one of their most demanding tasks.

  Principals in Lortie’s (2009) study indicated that their greatest satisfaction is derived from indications that students are learning and that their school is viewed to be well run. Lortie also identified 5 dilemmas that principals face:

  • Take action versus hold off in service of morale
  • Prioritize evaluation versus hold off because it increases social distance
  • Include teachers in decisions versus prioritize efficiency
  • Provide detailed or intensive guidance versus give teacher latitude
  • Develop clear written rules for everyone and everything versus decisions on a case-by-case basis (p.86)

  Additionally, Lortie suggested that principals’ theories of actions often develop in and from their practice. As such, it is important that future research explore how
superintendents have monitored these developments, and the efforts that they’ve made
to learn from and also influence them. Additionally, attention needs to be paid to how
the above impacts the interactions between the superintendent and principal. The
findings of the study are important, as there is a clear relationship between the
expectations of the superintendent and district for the principal, and the actions that
the principal takes.

The drawback of Lortie’s research is that there is not a great deal of specific
information provided about how the theories of action of the principals in the study
were initially developed, and how and why they changed over time. This is primarily
because the study was not developed to examine the principal’s thinking, reflection and
action through such a lens. The field needs a specific study that builds on the work of
Lortie and others previously referenced, and specifically unpacks how and why
principal theories of action are developed, and what learning takes place and
knowledge is developed that help the theories to change and evolve over time. In
addition, several of the findings of the above study are likely magnified within a rural
school district, where relationships tend to be closer-knit, thus impacting the decisions
that a principal makes (potentially not wanting to “upset” those relationships). More
attention needs to be paid to the somewhat unique context within which the principal
of the rural school works.

**Principals’ Theories of Action as an Explicit Focus**

City, Elmore, Fiarman and Teitel (2009) identify the positive outcomes
associated with engaging theories of action. They suggest that an effective theory of
action is stated as a series of “If...then” propositions that can ultimately be tested against
real outcomes. The “If...then” equation enables one to remember that each theory of action is a proposition that can be tested, and should be subject to change and revision.

Capacity-building and Theories of Action

The Ontario Leadership Framework (2009) has a key focus on capacity building and is built on five specific principal capacities called Core Leadership Capacities (CLCs). They are setting goals, aligning resources with priorities, promoting collaborative learning cultures, using data, and engaging in courageous conversations.

In an effort to lead for success in every school, the focus for principals in Ontario is on each of these five capacities listed above.

Principal training is designed to build understanding of the five capacities, and skills that the principal will need in order to effectively provide direction and work with faculty and staff in order to achieve shared goals for increasing student learning. The framework is built on the understanding that the leadership capacities will help principals allocate their time, energy and resources as effectively as possible in providing instructional leadership. The commitment and ability to engage in “courageous conversations” is one that is identified as being key to effective leadership for improvement. Perhaps because principals are recruited from the ranks of teachers and see their role as buffering their colleagues (Elmore, 2000), the creation of courageous conversations focused on difficult problems and needs often is difficult and/or uncomfortable for principals.

The ministry references Heifetz, Grashaw and Linsky (2009) in suggesting that leadership often involves challenging people to live up to their words, i.e., to close the gap between their espoused values and their actual behavior. Closing this gap entails
addressing the unspoken issues that people know about and observe, but no one wants
to mention. Leadership thus entails creating special settings and opportunities for
improvement dialogue, namely settings that are free of defensive behavior and
conducive to high levels of transparency and public testing of ideas (see also Argyris &
Schön, 1996). It also requires helping groups to make difficult choices and even give up
something they value on behalf of something they care about more – the increased
learning of students. The Ministry suggests that engaging in courageous conversations
is about challenging current practices and fostering growth through conversation,
listening to and acting on feedback, and providing feedback that will lead to
improvements in student achievement.

*Courageous Conversations and Principals’ Theories of Action*

Additional research is dedicated to the concept of courageous conversations and
their import. Robinson, Hohena and Lloyd (2009) suggest that leadership practices that
are critical to constructive courageous conversations (referred to as problem talk)
include building relational trust, having “open-to-learning” conversations, identifying
qualities or behaviors that engender trust, and engaging theories of action to bring
about school-based change in instructional practice.

The intent of problem talk, according to the Robinson, Hohena and Lloyd, is to
uncover possibilities for change by identifying, describing and analyzing problems.
Effective leaders describe problems in a way that invites ownership and commitment,
and includes identifying the ways in which they, and others, may be contributing to the
problem. The authors then identify another important aspect of problem talk.

Courageous conversations entail the principal’s ability to inquire into the theories of
action that lie behind the processes they wish to change. This is described as exploring not only the behaviors and actions, but also the beliefs that lie behind them.

Scott (2004) provides seven principles that focus the courageous conversations. They are:

- Muster the courage to interrogate reality - Checking to see if conditions have changed, if the plan still makes sense, and then determine what is required (by the principal)
- Come out from behind yourself into the conversation and make it real – With authentic conversation, change occurs
- Be here, prepared to be nowhere else – The principal listening as though the conversation is the most important ever had with the individual(s)
- Tackle your toughest challenge today – A problem needs to be identified in order for it to be solved. Courageous conversations are a process in the search for the truth, and health relationships include both appreciation as well as confrontation
- Obey your instincts – The principal needs to listen for more than just the content. Listening for emotion and intent is equally important, then acting upon instincts rather than passing on them for fear of being wrong or offending someone
- Take responsibility for your emotional wake – Principals need to recognize that there is no such thing as a trivial comment, and that the conversation is the relationship. Developing the skill of delivering a message without invoking emotionality is important, along with speaking with clarity, conviction and compassion.
• Let the silence do the heavy lifting – The suggestion is to talk with people, not at them – slowing down a conversation so that insight can occur in the “space” between the words.

**Recent Research and Its Import for Developing and Evaluating Principals’ Theories of Action**

In today’s educational policy environment, the adoption, implementation, and continuous improvement of research-supported models and strategies is a top priority. Principals theories of action need to be developed accordingly. In the same vein, principals’ espoused theories and theories-in-use can be evaluated in relation to the research.

*The Chicago Principal Studies*

Bryk, et al. (2010) have developed a powerful framework for analyzing principals’ theories of action. Effective schools, in their research, gained this status in large part because of their principals. These researchers identified five elements accounting for principal effectiveness, together with the components of each element. They are:

- **Principal Leadership and its three components:** Principal management, instructional leadership, and inclusive-facilitative leadership
- **Parent-Community Ties and its three components:** Principal emphasis and facilitation of the school’s welcoming environment, principal expectations for reaching out to parents to encourage them to be involved in their child’s learning, and principal efforts to keep faculty and staff knowledgeable about the
neighborhood and family dynamics, and how to keep connected to both families and community resources.

- Professional Capacity and its three components: Professional Development quality, principal emphasis on continuous improvement, and principal establishment and nurturing of school-wide professional learning community.
- Student Centered Learning Climate and its three main components: Order and safety, supportive peer norms, and maximizing individual potential
- Instructional Guidance.

This empirically-based framework provides a powerful, research-based lens for examining and identifying principal theories of action.

**A Four Path Leadership Model**

Leithwood, Patten, and Jantzi (2010) have developed and tested a four-path leadership model. They describe these four paths as rational, emotions, organizational, and family. Their model is predicated on empirically grounded assumptions regarding leadership as the exercise of influence, especially the indirect effects of this influence on students. What is more, in this research, leadership is a practice, not just one person. Leadership is conceptualized and measured “as a set of practices distributed among staff rather than enacted only by those in formal leadership roles” (Leithwood, et al., 2010, p. 683). In other words, leadership is distributed among four paths, which may be described as follows.

The rational path refers to leaders’ attempts to exert a positive influence on the technical core of schooling—namely, curriculum, teaching and learning. It includes both classroom- and school-related variables. Academic press (establishing and
pursuing high, achievable goals) and disciplinary climate (extending to school climate overall) are special priorities.

The emotional path refers to the feelings, dispositions, and general affective states of staff members, both individually and collectively. Emphasizing that leaders’ competence in this arena hinges on their social appraisal skills and also that the emotional path and the rational path are related, Leithwood et al. (2010) focus on two priorities. One is trust, including relational trust (described earlier in this review). Teachers’ collective efficacy is the other.

The organizational path encompasses the variables that encompass teachers’ working conditions, ones that in turn have a powerful influence on teachers’ emotions. After identifying the several possible variables, Leithwood, et al. (2010) focus on two. One is instructional time. The other is teachers’ professional learning communities.

The family path is grounded in an impressive body of research suggesting that up to 50 percent of the variance in student achievement across schools can be attributed to family-related variables, especially the socio-economic status of the family. Here, Leithwood et al. (2010) distinguish between alterable and unalterable family factors that leaders may influence. And they cite literature describing, if only in a preliminary way, what leaders do to exert beneficial influences on alterable family factors in service of school improvement and student learning. Examples include developing a sense of community shared by staff and parents and appointing a liaison to work with parents and families.

Leithwood et al.’s (2010) data analysis indicated that the four paths model as a whole explains 43 percent of the variance in student achievement. Variables on the
rational, emotions, and family paths explain similarly significant amounts of this variation. Variables on the organizational path were unrelated to student achievement.

This pioneering research yields several important findings as well as implications for leadership preparation and future research. Three are especially noteworthy. They involve leaders’ uses of evidence; the limits of focusing narrowly and exclusively on instruction under the guise of instructional leadership; and the importance of new priorities for engaging parents and families in leadership preparation, practice and research.

Regarding data collection, evidence-guided decision making and future research directions, Leithwood, et al. (2010) offer a finding and an implication. First, the finding: “Our results point to a problem that arises when leaders neglect using relevant evidence, limit their use of evidence to student achievement, or are naïve data users.” (p. 695). The implication follows suit: Leaders’ approaches to evidence-based decision-making need to become more expansive. To wit: “…such decisions would need to include consideration of research evidence about variables with demonstrable effects on student learning and how leaders influence the condition or status of those variables. Successful school improvement decisions cannot simply rest on evidence about student achievement, no matter the quality of that evidence and the care with which it is interpreted.” (p. 697).

Noting that the dominant narrative in the leadership literature is saturated with the language of instruction, Leithwood et al. (2010) offer cautions. They reference their own findings about the effects of the emotional and family paths on student learning and achievement as well as the aggregate effects of their model. Noting that teachers
and students alike benefit from a “neo-heroic view” of principal as instructional leader, they also warn against the grand claim that instructional leadership should and must be the primary focus for the principal. They state: “Such a claim takes no account of the wide range of challenges the vast majority of principals face in their administrative lives and points to the principal as the only person capable of helping teachers improve instruction. This claim also ignores the extremely important and largely overlooked leadership that schools need and that, in most schools, only principals are able to deliver. Successful leaders improve learning in their schools in many ways. Improving instruction will always be important but is by no means on the only influence on student achievement.” (Leithwood, et al., 2010, p. 698).

Third, Leithwood et al. (2010) reinforce the import of the emotional and family pathways toward improved outcomes, emphasizing that leadership for both pathways is an under-developed and high leadership area. Parent and family engagement is a special priority, but it is one that typically is under-emphasized in preparation programs and has not received sufficient attention in the research. This neglect is unfortunate because “…engaging the school productively with parents, if this has not been a focus, may well produce larger effects on student learning in the short run than marginal improvements to already at least satisfactory levels of instruction.” (Leithwood, et al., 2010, p. 698).

**Dimmock’s New Research Review**

Dimmock (2012) completed a thorough review of the literature. He defined leaders as follows, “Leadership is a social influence process guided by a moral purpose with the aim of building capacity by optimizing available resources towards the
achievement of shared goals” (p.7) In beginning to explore principal theories of action, he identifies five conditions of leadership as follow:

1. Leadership exists within social relationships and serves social ends, aims, and goals: it primarily is oriented and directed toward groups and group-oriented processes.

2. Leadership involves purpose and direction. Without preempting the origins and development of group goals, leadership is designed and structured to develop and champion these group goals.

3. Leadership is a social influence process, and this influence may be direct and indirect, focusing on both specific and broad-based issues and priorities and the goals that are aligned with them.

4. Leadership is a function or set of functions, which sometimes are restricted to persons in formal leadership positions and sometimes exercised informally by people without formal leadership positions, but who have a proclivity to exercise it.

5. Leadership is contextual and contingent, i.e., there is no single best way to exercise it for all contexts. One implication is that leadership strategies, both responsive and proactive, depend on the nature of the organization, the goals pursued, the individuals and groups involved, time frames, and the characteristics of leaders themselves. (Dimmock, 2012, p. 6)

According to Dimmock (2012): “Under some conditions, what leaders do does spell the difference between success and failure. However, not everyone in a formal leadership role is in a position to make a difference, and not everyone in such a role or
position has the dispositions to be effective under any and all conditions. So the question is one of the fit between the leaders’ attributes and dispositions and the situational conditions, policies and resources.” (p. 8)

*Smooth Organizational Functioning as the Theory of Action*

Finally, Riehl’s (2012) review of educational leadership research overall as well as her analysis of specific leadership research needs relative to school-family-community partnerships has special import for this dissertation study. Emphasizing the need for leadership research guided by causal models of school effects on student learning (p. 11), Riehl offers an important conclusion derived her literature review: “Most current research on leadership effects on learning builds out from conceptual models that can be identified as organizationally focused theories. These models tend to specify what leaders do to keep their organizations functioning smoothly. Impact on the school organization’s bottom line of learning is implied, but often not articulated carefully or tested empirically, especially in early models that were adapted from business and industry.” (Riehl, 2012, p. 11).

What’s more: “Researchers have not yet produced many comprehensive and credible analyses of leadership effects on student outcomes, and the few that exist say relatively little about how leaders work with families and communities to impact learning.” (Riehl, 2012, p. 13).

Riehl (2012) recommends two promising lines of investigation for future researchers. Leithwood, et al. (2010), referenced above, is one. Bryk et al. 2010, also described above, is the other. Pursuant to Riehl’s recommendations, this study relies on the Bryk et al. (2010) framework because of its goodness of fit with the main
research questions and also because it emphasizes family and community ties in relation to effective school leadership. And it will employ the Leithwood, et al. (2010) study in its theory-building.

**Chapter Summary**

In summary, the studies reviewed have yielded the following findings. First, studies have found that effective principals, as defined and operationalized by researchers, influence student academic achievement in their respective schools. However, the relationship is correlational, not causal, and questions remain about the dynamics of this influence. Second, principals have indirect effects on student academic achievement via their more direct effects on teachers and other staff members (e.g., job satisfaction, retention). Relational trust is a construct that enables these effects to be conceptualized, operationalized and investigated empirically.

Third, leadership actions, such as redefining leadership roles and responsibilities, using data, evidence and feedback, and focusing resources on learning are all identified as crucial skills, abilities, and activities for the principal. Notwithstanding the import of these discrete factors, lists and discrete competencies do not describe and explain their activation, relationships, and integration in real world, school context. Fourth, distributed leadership is an important element within schools that are successful in improving outcomes, and principals have clear roles and responsibilities to play in “getting the conditions” right for distributed leadership teams and systems to function;

Fifth, effective principals are guided by clearly articulated expectations that are collaboratively developed, and regularly monitored. Sixth, effective principals have
“hands on knowledge” about how to connect the school with the community, health and social services, and other partners.

Seventh, district office can be a resource or a hindrance to the effectiveness of the principal. Put differently, superintendents and district level administrations may facilitate, constrain, or impede the development of knowledge in the principal, along with the ability to translate that knowledge into action that positively impacts increased school effectiveness and student learning.

Eighth, leadership development via pre-service education is a beginning step in an ongoing development of competent principals. However, preservice education is not the end of preparation, support and coaching needs. Preservice education needs to be supplemented throughout the principal’s career.

Ninth, past-present research methodologies are often limited due to the large reliance on large-scale surveys of self-perceptions and well as others' perception data. More research needs to include in-depth interviewing and multi-lateral data collection within specific contexts. In the same vein, there is a need for studies that begin a priori with the theory of action construct and proceed with research designs that enable theories of action to be identified, described, explained, contextualized, and interpreted.

Above all, and granting the extensive foundation outlined in the above research and additional research not reviewed in this chapter, gaps remain. For example, the research completed to date provides limited knowledge and understanding for the following reasons. It does not address the school and district contexts for principal’s roles, responsibilities, relationships, and theories of action. It does not unpack the “black box” of the principals’ theories of actions in the successful school. It continues be
framed by “great leader” ideas that emphasize the personality and charismatic qualities of the principal—at the expense of how the principal's theories contribute to action, and learning-in-action. It does not contribute in-depth knowledge about the rural principal, and what they do to improve their schools.

These gaps are opportunities. They provide the foundation for this dissertation study's research design. This design is described in the next chapter.
Chapter 3

Research Design

This is a study of leadership theories in action in a special school, district and community context – the rural context. At the outset, the primary research question for this dissertation study was, “What are principals’ theories of action in rural schools that are improving in effectiveness?” For reasons detailed later in this chapter, the main question later was revised. The main research question became: “What are elementary school and middle school principals’ theories of action in two rural school districts?”

Sub-questions included those that address the knowledge the principal draws on to identify improvement priorities; the extent to which principals’ theories of action have changed with experience; and how the principal gains knowledge and expertise as she reflects in-action as well as how the principal reflects on-action. Finally, the study examined, in rural district contexts, the import of two kinds of relationships for principals’ theories of action: Relationships with the superintendent, and relationships with other school-based professionals, especially teachers.

An extensive review of the literature revealed the import of these research questions. For example, prior research provides limited knowledge and understanding about rural principals. It does not address the special import of rural school and district contexts for principals’ roles, responsibilities, relationships, and theories of action. Although new research provides a template for principals’ theories of action (e.g., Bryk, et al., 2010), it does not unpack the “black box” of the principals’ theories of actions in improving schools, and it does not connect these theories to this developing, empirically grounded improvement framework. In fact, the literature continues be
framed by “great leader” ideas that emphasize the personality and charismatic qualities of the principal—at the expense of how the principal’s theories contribute to action-oriented improvement as well as professional and organizational learning. In short, the research to date leaves a significant gap about rural principals. This study was structured to address this gap.

The literature indicates need for what amounts to thick descriptions of leadership theories in action in the rural context. Thick descriptions require multiple methods and an all-encompassing methodology in order to articulate leadership theory. Case study methodology with multiple methods meets these several specifications. This methodology’s primary aim is to articulate theory (Yin, 2009). Salient details follow.

Case Study Methodology

Yin (2008) provides a two-fold, technical definition of case studies. The first part deals with the scope of a case study. According to Yin: A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (p.18) In other words, case study methodology is used to understand a real-life phenomenon, an understanding that includes and prioritizes important contextual conditions. Case study methodology is premised on the relationship between these contextual conditions and phenomenon being investigated (Yin & Davis, 2007).

The second part of Yin’s (2008) definition of the case study also is salient to this dissertation study. According to Yin (2008), the case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest
than data points. As a result, case study inquiry relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion. As another result this methodology benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis” (p18.)

In other words, case study methodology does not rely solely on a single source of data or a single tactic for data collection. It relies on multiple sources. And it benefits from the utilization of theoretical propositions developed prior to data collection, propositions that guide the analysis.

According to Yin (2008) case study methodology has different applications or multiple purposes. Alternatives include: Explaining the presumed causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for methods such as surveying or experimenting; Describing an intervention and the real-life context in which it occurred; illustrating certain topics in an evaluation in a descriptive mode, and enlightening those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes (p. 19-20.)

Yin emphasizes five components in case study methodology. They are: 1) The primary questions; 2) The study’s propositions (if any are identified); 3) The unit of analysis; 4) The logic linking the data to the propositions; and 5) The criteria for interpreting the findings.

The researcher is charged with ensuring correspondence between the phenomenon being studied and case study methodologies core components and aims. Once this correspondence has been established, the research questions can be finalized. Theoretical propositions can be developed even as the researcher identifies the unit of
analysis. Here, the researcher must define what the “case” is and determine, the relevant information to be collected about the unit or units of analysis. Later, after data have been collected, the researcher must utilize a variety of analytic techniques that link the data to the propositions of the study. This last phase requires the researcher to articulate the strategy utilized for interpretation of the findings, laying the foundation for the study’s conclusions and implications.

**A Two District Sample**

This study of rural principals’ theories of action proceeded with a two-site case study design with multiple methods. Details about sample selection, data collection and data analysis follow.

*A Purposive Sample*

This study was designed to elicit, describe, and explain “effective” or “successful” principal theories of action. Because the main aim was to derive empirical knowledge and theoretical understanding about effective and successful rural principals, random sampling was not a viable option. To be judged “effective” or “successful” in today’s educational policy environment, a district must achieve adequate yearly progress—as defined and evaluated by the state education department.

The search for two rural school districts commenced with this priority in mind. Purposive sampling was the logical choice. In addition to meeting adequate yearly progress standards, both districts needed to meet a feasibility requirement—namely, they needed to be accessible to the researcher. Once identified, other issues were addressed, including superintendents’ permission to conduct the study.
Ultimately, the two districts selected met these several criteria, at least initially. One district has two elementary schools and one middle school. The other district has one elementary school and one middle school. Each school has a full-time principal assigned to the building. Prior to initiating the study, the superintendent's permission was obtained.

Other criteria for district and school selection were developed to achieve this study's aims and goals. Comparable district and school size and similarity in overall budget and per-pupil spending were two important criteria. Another was similarity in school and district ratings identified within the “Comprehensive Information Report”, issued by the New York State Education Department.

An Unanticipated Development

Shortly after the study commenced, the state’s standards for determining adequate yearly progress were elevated. Schools across the state were impacted, with a surprising number deemed in need of improvement. Schools in the two rural districts selected for this study were among them.

Even with this unanticipated development, the selection and inclusion of these two districts remains justifiable. For example, 83 percent of the students in one district claim that they want to attend and complete college. In the other district, 51% of graduates received a Regents diploma with Advanced Designation, and 42% of students taking the Comprehensive English Regents exam scored at the “Meeting Learning Standards with Distinction” level. In short, these two districts and their leaders are special, and their characteristics, especially their strengths, align with the purposes of this study.
Justifying the Sample

Yin (2008) suggests that multiple case studies bring forth the possibility of direct replication. He also suggests that the analytic conclusions from two cases are more powerful than those that emerge from a single-case study. This study of rural principals was guided by these suggestions.

There are assorted ways in which multiple case studies can be accomplished. The embedded case study is one way. For a study such as this one, this embedded strategy was a logical choice. It enabled data collection from a variety of sources related to the principal’s leadership. Moreover, embedded case studies rely on holistic data collection strategies for studying the main case. For example, in addition to interviews, fixed response surveys and quantitative methods can be used to collect data about the embedded unit(s) of analysis (p.43).

Guided by Yin’s methodological suggestions, this study utilized a purposive sample of two rural districts. It focused on these district’s elementary and middle schools, leaving out high schools because of their complexity and the challenges they pose to study completion. Utilizing two districts produced more robust data about the phenomenon of interest. In other words, cross-school and cross-district comparisons hold promise for expanded perspectives on principals’ theories of action.

Data Collection Methods

Yin (2008) identified six sources of evidence most commonly used in case studies: Documentation, archival reviews, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts. This study utilized document reviews, archival records, a fixed response survey, and interviews, with interviews being a particularly
important data source. It relied on these methods to gain special knowledge and understanding about principals’ theories of action, the influence of superintendents on them, the special features of the principal’s school, and attendant influence of the rural context.

Qualitative methodology—and more concretely, in-depth personal interviews and focus group interviews—were implemented to explore the “what,” “why” and “how” of principal theories of action in the rural context. In-depth individual interviews structured by a theory of change interview guide were conducted with principals and superintendents. Additionally, focus group interviews were conducted with school staff. The rationale is as follows.

Espoused theories of action are best examined by qualitative methods because they are not about how many times an attitude, language or action is performed. Rather, theories of action are socially constructed and constituted by leaders. These theories also are influenced by other relevant actors, the policy environment, and the district context. What is more, theories of action may change over time as people, schools, policies and circumstances change.

With these premises in mind, direct interviews with principals were required. At the same time, principal interviews alone were insufficient. For example, because superintendents’ theories of action influence principals’—and vice versa—superintendents also must be interviewed individually. In the same vein, teachers and student support professionals influence, and are influenced by, principals’ theories of action. They offered important knowledge and understanding about them. Focus group interviews were designed and conducted accordingly.
The principal interview focused directly on the principal. It was designed to elicit an overall theory of action as well as constituent micro-theories focused on research-based leadership priorities (e.g., instructional guidance, parent and community ties) emphasized in the literature (Bryk, et al., 2010). Superintendent interviews followed suit.

Teachers were interviewed in focus groups. Student support professionals also were interviewed in groups with teachers. Teaching assistants and other support staff were interviewed within separate groups of no more than five people to a group. Secretaries were interviewed with support staff. The building principal sent an initial letter to all teachers, teaching assistants, student support personnel and secretaries to seek their voluntary participation in the study.

In addition to these individual and focus group interviews, this study relied on other sources of evidence. A short fixed-response survey was administered to principals and superintendents to obtain biographical information. The study also utilized document reviews—including various documents recording district, building and principal goals; school performance data; and archival records, including reports related to accountability and information that are produced by New York state, and presented in the same format for every school and district in the state.

Details Regarding the Interviews

The interviews enabled the exploration of how principal theories of action are linked to actions that improve student performance. They proceeded with three, specially constructed interview guides. One was designed for principals, another for...
superintendents, and a third for the focus group interviews with student support professionals and teachers, and secretaries and other staff.

The personal interviews followed the administration and initial review of surveys. Principals’ responses to surveys enabled questions to be carefully crafted in order to elicit more specific perspectives and explanation or elaboration upon the responses to survey questions. The interviews (Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1990) were an hour in duration.

The interview guides and surveys are presented in the Appendices. The superintendent instruments are in A, the principal instruments are in B, and the focus group survey is in Appendix C.

The strategy of using multiple interviews was essential to the study. It enabled principals’ theories of action to be identified, described and explained holistically, i.e. in relation to others’ perceptions, in particular schools, and in the rural context. In other words, principals’ theories of action were derived from self-descriptions in combination with other key colleagues’ descriptions of principals’ orientations, commitments, roles, responsibilities, and actions. Consistent with this study’s aim to articulate theory and with case study methodology (Yin, 2008), data were triangulated with a specific focus on principals’ theories of action.

This “interview in the round strategy” is perhaps the best way to understand theories of action. Theories of action are complex structures. The structural components of theories of action include the governing variables, knowledge, beliefs, concepts, rules, attitudes, routines, policies, practices, norms or skills that underlie action. Therefore, the interviews of the principals, superintendents, teachers, support
staff and secretaries further elicited perspectives about each of the components, and how or if they are interpreted to underlie principal actions.

Moreover, because theories of action are influenced by the context in which they are constructed, enacted, and perhaps revised, the interviews enabled participants to elaborate on the two related, but different aspects of the local context: (1) The school context; and (2) The rural community context. A third aspect was the superintendent’s leadership-related directives, influence, and guidance. The superintendent interview was structured intentionally to reveal this influence. In contrast, the principal interviews made no mention of the superintendent; and by design. In this logic, if principals referenced the superintendent, directly or indirectly, it was not attributable to leading questions in the interview guide or caused by investigator bias.

Details Regarding the Survey

The fixed-response survey was administered to the principals and their superintendent. Demographic information was collected from respondents to provide number of years of experience, and in what specific administrative roles. Information about the type of district or districts in which the administrative experience took place was also collected. The surveys assisted in collecting background information about the principals and superintendents so that interview time did not have to be dedicated to this task.

Informed Consent

All study participants were asked for informed consent, and the data collected was protected and secured. The investigator pledged confidentiality. In this and other
respects, this study was guided by the guidelines for the protection of human participants implemented by the University at Albany's Institutional Review Board.

**Data Reduction and Analysis**

Sense making of the data started during the interview process as the researcher listened, interpreted and probed strategically for the kind of knowledge needed for theories of action. Sense making continued with the researcher's transcriptions.

Then case descriptions of each school and the district overall were produced as the context for each principal's theory of action. The rationale, perhaps obvious, was as follows. If the rural context is influential in principals’ theories of action, then the details of this context need to be established prior to the interpretation of the interview data.

Next, each principal’s self-described theories were detailed, albeit without a focus on interpretation and theory articulation. Next, school staff members’ views on principals’ theories were described and then compared with principals’. Last but not least, superintendents’ views on principals’ theories were described with special interest in their relationships with principals’ theories.

In all such analyses, special attention was paid to the specifics of the principal's school and the rural setting. Where the rural setting is concerned, the researcher elicited from all study participants their views of unique rural influences. Interview questions were designed to elicit perspectives on the unique rural influences, constraints, opportunities, and challenges or barriers that are evident. The notes were utilized for cross-case analysis leading to theory development.

*Qualitative Data Analysis*
HyperResearch and HyperTranscribe are data collection and analysis tools, and both were utilized in this study. These electronic tools assisted in the transcription of digital recordings of interviews, and analysis of themes emerging from both surveys as well as interviews. They assisted with the coding of the data, and organization of emerging theories.

Qualitative data analysis proceeded with a dual frame. The framework provided by the literature review was one frame. A grounded theory approach, relying on constant comparative analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) for identifying and interpreting unique and unanticipated findings, was the other. This formal framework for this dual data analytic approach is known as template analysis (King, 2004).

As guided by template analysis, key themes derived from the literature review constituted the preliminary coding template for the qualitative data collected. Interest resided in Bryk, et al.’s (2010) five research-based priorities; Relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002); Leithwood, et al.’s (2010) four paths of leadership; and Reihl’s (2012) emphasis on “smooth organizational functioning.” Principals’ self-reported time allocations and use were of special interest because of the import of their responses in determining their theories-in-use, i.e., what they in fact prioritize and do, together with their rationale.

Establishing Trustworthy Data

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that trustworthiness of a qualitative research study is important to the evaluation of the worth of a study. Trustworthiness involves establishing four main qualities or characteristics. Credibility establishes confidence in the “truth” of the findings. Transferability indicates that the findings can apply or
transfer beyond the bounds of the study. Dependability demonstrates the quality of the integrated processes of data collection, data analysis, and theory generation. Confirmability indicates the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation or interest with special interest in the extent to which study's findings are supported by the data collected.

This study was designed in an effort to address the issue of credibility in that multiple sources of data both from the unit of study (the principal) as well as other school personnel are incorporated. For each principal and superintendent, data derived from fixed response surveys were paired with data generated from in-person interviews. When coupled with the document review data and, in the case of the principals, focus group data, a more credible data set was produced.

Two major mechanisms were utilized to enhance this study’s validity and guard against bias. First, the dissertation researcher’s narrative for each participant was shared with him or her. That is, the investigator sent every participant a copy of the text written in response to his or her interview. Revisions were incorporated, as respondents indicated. This procedure adheres to what Miles and Huberman (1994) call “member checks.” It is a research strategy for establishing consensus-based validation (consensus validity). It also is an ethical imperative, together with sharing this study’s findings with study participants.

Second, Dr. Hal Lawson served as a peer de-briefer in all aspects of the study’s implementation. Peer debriefing also helps guard against investigator bias, and it is an asset data analysis and interpretation.
Case descriptions were developed for each district from the multiple data sets developed (surveys, document review, interviews). The case study reports present the most relevant data related to each district school. The aim here was to establish the basis for a strong chain of evidence regarding rural contextual effects on principals’ theories of action. Such evidentiary chain contributes to the trustworthiness of a case study (Yin, 2008).

To reiterate, template analysis (King, 1998) was selected for qualitative data analysis because of its potential import for the identification, description, and explanation. Research-based leadership priorities-as-categories, derived from the literature review (e.g., Bryk, et al., 2010; Leithwood, et al., 2010), facilitated content analyses of the raw interview data. At same time, interest resided in important leadership priorities and processes (components in theories of action) not anticipated in the literature. Template analysis facilitates this data analytic approach because it emphasizes the use of a grounded theory framework for identifying and describing unanticipated, important findings.

A Methodological Innovation

The study yielded an unexpected methodological finding related to effective research methods eliciting and understanding principals’ theories of action. A four-component approach to investigating principal theories of action emerged. The four are: (1) Individual interviews designed to elicit leaders’ espoused theories, especially interview protocols structured by a theory of action framework and emphasizing constructs from the literature on principal leadership; (2) Investigations of how principals spend their time, which is a pragmatic method for gauging their theories-in-
use; (3) Interviewing faculty and staff members, especially the principal’s secretary, about their expectations and perceptions regarding what amounts to their principal’s theory of action; and (4) Analyzing and interpreting principal theories of action utilizing categories and constructs from literature. The data from these four methods offered opportunities for triangulation in service of theory development.

Study Delimitations:

The following delimitations have been imposed to facilitate this research study's design.

1. To facilitate timely completion in service of feasibility, the study was restricted to two rural school districts within an hour’s distance from the researcher’s location in the Capital Region of New York.

2. The study was restricted to two school districts, which meet study specifications and permit the researcher's access to the district for the study to be conducted.

3. The study was restricted to elementary and middle schools. High schools were not included because including them results in a study that is too ambitious for a single researcher.

4. The study was restricted to interviews with school and district personnel. It did not include data collected from students, parents and/or community members.

5. The study did not proceed with direct observations of principals in action. This is a priority for future research.

6. The findings from this study are not generalizable to other rural schools and districts. Their primary import is to enhance leadership theory and to inform future research on principals’ theories of action.
Limitations

The following limitations were recognized given the proposed study design.

1. The researcher presumed that study participants would recollect and provide valid, reliable knowledge.

2. The researcher presumed that study participants told the truth.

3. The researcher recognized that volunteer participants in focus groups present the risk of selection effects.

4. All data collected are bounded and restricted by a particular point in time.

5. No direct observations were prioritized for this study, and this presents an inherent limitation.

6. "Silences" on principals’ responses may have been an artifact of the interview guide (as structured by Bryk, et. al.’s (2010) five principal-driven supports). The researcher utilized the interview protocol so as not to risk leading the subject.

7. After the district sample was selected, two schools in one district, and one school in the other district were identified as in need of improvement. In short, not all schools included in the study are currently deemed “effective” (in part because the standards were elevated), and the main research question was altered to reflect this new status.

8. The researcher’s bias (e.g., prior experience as a principal, current role as a superintendent) posed a threat to this study's validity. It was mitigated by: (A) Utilizing survey items that have been tested and utilized in previous studies; (B) Framing survey and interview questions that did not reflect the beliefs and assumptions of the researcher; (C) Committing to listening and then analyzing
the responses of participants utilizing established data reduction and analysis methods; (D) Clarifying with interviewees the intended meaning of their responses; (E) The use of a peer de-briefer; and (F) Member checking to establish consensus validation of developing theories of action
Chapter 4

District A and Its Leaders’ Theories of Action

This chapter and the one that follows are organized in the same manner. Each chapter is structured to provide an in-depth, data-based account of the two rural districts, their superintendent’s leadership orientations and actions, participating principals’ theories of action, and perceptions from focus groups. Consistent with case study methodology (Yin, 2008), these chapters are offered as thick descriptions of the two cases. Put another way, the narrative in both chapters is descriptive, amounting to a story-like narrative for each district and its primary actors.

Data interpretation and theory articulation are not provided in these two chapters. Facilitated by cross-case comparative analysis, interpretation and theory development are the focus of Chapter 6. This unavoidably long chapter brings theory to bear on district-specific findings; at the same time these findings are used to articulate theory (Yin, 2008). This chapter also presents a methodological finding.

Because this study is based on the assumption that the rural context matters, this chapter and Chapter 5 that follows begin with a description of the particular rural community and school contexts. Once the context has been described, the analysis proceeds to data collected from the individual interview with the Superintendent of the district. Knowledge about, and from the superintendent provides a lens for examination of interview data collected from each of the principals who were interviewed in both districts. Data derived from the fixed-response survey administered to each principal, as well as review of school/district documents, are included. Data collected from focus group interviews held in each school are provided alongside the principal interview data.
A Thick Description of District A

Key Features of District A and Its Community Context:

District A is located within a county that is 17 non-highway miles from a metropolitan area that offers employment, culture, and educational opportunities. As such, District A is a somewhat economically diverse community. Within District A, there are “neighborhoods of trailers”, as well as homes with highly assessed market value. Residents who commute to higher-paying jobs in the nearby metropolitan area report to school officials that they like the “country atmosphere” and the quality of the schools. They also are able to easily access the restaurants, malls and cultural centers of the nearby small city.

District A is a rural school district of approximately 1300 students. It is located in a county of approximately 49,221 residents. The district consists of three schools: one elementary school spanning grades pre-K through 5 (n=550), one middle school spanning grades 6-8 (n=300), and one high school spanning grades 9-12 (n=450). One principal is assigned to each school. Each principal has sole responsibility for his building because there are no assistant principals within the district.

During the 2009-2010 school year, no grade level had more than 115 students, and the range in size of each grade level was 84-115. In 2009-10, the district had 19% (236) of students eligible for free lunch, and 12% (149) eligible for reduced lunch. There is little ethnic diversity within the district: 97% of students are white, 1% Hispanic or Latino, 1% Black or African American, and 1% Asian.

The annual attendance rate across the district is consistently between 95 and 96%. In 2009-10, the average class size in grades 1-6 was 17 students, 21 students in the...
middle level and about 20 students at the high school level. During that same year, 129 teachers were employed: 33% with Master’s degrees plus 30 hours or doctorate, and only 3% with fewer than three years of teaching experience.

100% of the teachers within the district are classified as highly qualified under the NY state definition. The turnover rate of all teachers was 5% in 2008-09. The district also employed 42 paraprofessionals during the 2009-10 school year.

Under New York State classification, District A is an Average Need/Resource Capacity school district. This means that District A is in the middle of the range of school districts within New York State based on property wealth and resident income levels. Both indices impact ratios for aid from New York State, as well as the ability of the school district to raise revenue via the tax levy.

For the period of 2001-2010, the poverty rate for all ages in District A’s county grew from 13.6% to 17.2%. The rate stayed within a 1% range for the period of 2001 to 2005, had an 8% increase from 2005 to 2006, then returned to a rate similar to the previous years in 2007. In 2010, the rate rose to 17.2% from the 14.8% of the previous year. Notably, the percent of children age 0-17 living in poverty in the county ranged from 16.3% to 21% in the same time period of 2001-2010. The rate rose from 16.6% in 2008 to 20.3% in 2009, then 21% in 2010. Additionally, the unemployment rate rose from 4.6% to 8.6% in the same time period.

The district’s fiscal report card, which provides comparisons of individual schools with schools across New York State, indicated general education expenditure per pupil of $10,225 ($13,240,885 instructional expenditure and 1,295 students), and special
education expenditure per pupil of $24,221 ($5,207,506 instructional expenditure and 215 students) for the 2008-2009 school year.

Comparisons with other districts highlight District A’s resources. The expenditures within District A’s New York State-identified “similar district group” for the same school year were $9,645 per pupil for general education, and $25,558 per pupil for special education. The expenditures for all school districts in New York State for the 2008-09 school year were $10,874 per pupil for general education and $26,551 per pupil for special education.

New York also provides comparative information for total expenditures per pupil. District A spent $19,251 per pupil for the 2008-09 school year. Similar districts spent $17,709 per pupil, and the expenditure accounting for all school districts in New York State was $19,381 per pupil. In brief, District A expends a greater amount per pupil than similar districts, and nearly the same as the state average which includes all schools within the state both the most affluent, and the poorest.

The school-age special education classification rate for District A was 16.38% in the 2008-09 school year. The classification rate for similar schools and all schools was 12.3% and 13.2% respectively. In brief, District A has a somewhat higher per pupil expenditure within general education programming, and a slighter lower per pupil expenditure within special education programming.

The implementation of the International Baccalaureate program at the secondary level likely explains the general education expenditure level for the year reported. The district’s intentional efforts to return more special education students to in-district
programming likely explains the special education expenditure level for the year reported.

*School District Performance*

At the elementary/middle level, the following was the performance of students on the New York State assessments for the 2009-2010 school year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exam</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percent at or Above Level 3</th>
<th>Percent at Level 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At the secondary level, 83% of students in the 2006 cohort (4-year graduate=Class of 2010) achieved the required score on the English Regents exam after four years of instruction, and 90% of the students achieved the required score on a Mathematics Regents exam.

In 2010, 92% of general education students received a Regents Diploma, 37% of those received a Regents Diploma with Advanced Designation. 18% of Students with Disabilities (n=3) received a Regents Diploma, none with Advanced Designation. These results are similar to those of comparable districts. In districts with small numbers of students in any given cohort group, small numbers of students account for large differences in percentage reporting. District A’s Students with Disabilities cohort results reflect such circumstances.

No general education students dropped out during the 2009-10 school year. Three students with disabilities dropped out. 83% of the students indicated that they intended to go to a 4 (45%) or 2-year (38%) college after graduation from high school.

District A's low dropout rate distinguishes it from other similar rural districts. The number of student graduating with a Regents Diploma with Advanced Designation is also a positive distinguishing feature of District A. However, performance of Students with Disabilities is not as strong as that of similar districts.

The District did not make Adequate Yearly Progress for the student cohort group of Students with Disabilities for English Language Arts in the middle level for the 2009-10 school year. During the fall of the 2011-12 school year, both the elementary school and the middle school were identified as “School in Need of Improvement (SiNi)” based
on ELA state assessments, thus making District A a Year 1 “District in Need of Improvement (DiNi).

This identification requires that each school develop a Comprehensive Educational Plan (CEP) and submit it to the State Education Department. If in two years the schools do not improve to the level that they are removed from the “list”, then further consequences in terms of State Education Department intervention could occur. Such is the context for the leadership of this district’s superintendent and her principals.

Superintendent A

Superintendent A is a female superintendent who has roughly 40 years of experience in various educational positions. She taught in a large, wealthy school district in New Hampshire, and then became an administrator in a suburban district in Central New York. She spent 20 years in a single district – as Principal and then Assistant Superintendent.

She became a superintendent in a small rural school district in the northern section of the southern tier of New York. During the interview she indicated that she became overwhelmed by the poverty within the district, and wanted to return to a district closer to where she grew up. District A provided this opportunity.

Tenure in District A

She has been the superintendent of District for nearly six years. When commenting on what motivated her to make the move to District A she stated, “The piece I found most intriguing was that there was nothing in place when I got here. Sometimes that makes it easier. Sometimes it is harder to be the superintendent in a
district that is "Number 1" than in the one that isn’t. When I came to District A, a couple of people thought that I was crazy! I remember thinking it was almost like building a house from the foundation up…there was no curriculum council in place, there were no procedures, policies were outdated, etc. It felt like an architectural design. It was a fascinating process…we were very fortunate in terms of the times- the economy was just right- things hadn’t completely imploded, and the state education department was not too attentive at the time, which I considered to be an attribute.”

Superintendent A went on to explain the context within the district upon her arrival, “There wasn’t even a cabinet that met regularly. They might have one meeting a month for one hour with administrators and supervisors and likely talk about things like well water. The administrators spoke ill of the teachers. I made it clear that had to stop. So, we started putting structures in place and making change – working with the teachers association, which was at war with the district. We had the opportunity to put all of the pieces in place and then just watch it incubate- that’s exactly what we did with everything.”

Superintendent’s Perspective of Principal’s Overall Theory of Action

Superintendent A has hired all of the administrators currently in key positions within the district, including her three principals. Upon her arrival, she made the quick determination that the high school was in need of significant and swift change. She described the school environment as “out of control.” She explained that he principal at the time had experience as an administrator in military schools overseas, but did not display any of the rigidity that one might have expected. In fact, this former principal displayed just the opposite.
In the superintendent’s words: “The inmates were running the prison,” meaning that there was general chaos and a lack of meaningful learning taking place. Superintendent A made the determination, “I can’t teach him what he needs to do this job,” and moved forward with termination. She recalled the business administrator at the time asking, “You’ve only been here 3 months, how can you terminate him?”

Superintendent A responded, “I’ve been here 3 months and 36 years...” referencing her first-hand knowledge of successful principals and appropriate learning environments.

The current high school principal at that time was an intern. Superintendent A elevated him to principal after she removed the former one. At that time he was 29. He had grown up and taught in a city, and, in the superintendent’s view, brought “all kinds of potential” to the school and the team.

The superintendent hired the current elementary principal at the beginning of the following year. The superintendent had known him as a teacher, and recommended him to the superintendent of a significantly larger district. She had cautioned the superintendent of that district that the young administrator would need support and guidance. Because he was struggling as a principal in a large district, he applied and was ultimately selected to be the elementary principal within District A.

Shortly thereafter, the superintendent moved the then middle school principal into a curriculum administration position. She replaced her with the current middle school principal. Once the middle school principal was in place, the leadership team was complete.
Commenting on the three new principals she had appointed, Superintendent A commented, “None of them had any experience when I hired them, for the first two years I thought I was going to drop dead from exhaustion. They have been eager students – and just needed to learn how to be comfortable with the role, understand their responsibility. It wasn’t the intellectual/academic kinds of things; it was the nuances of the principalship. As a superintendent, you can lay awake at night trying to figure out how to fire somebody...I would rather work with the raw material.”

Superintendent A’s theory of action is manifest in her self-reported actions and interactions with her principals. Keenly aware of the politics that impact relationships, Superintendent A has purchased the services of a principal-coach, who complements the mentoring that she provides to her principals. She indicated that she is “particular” about the credentials of that coach (purchased through a shared services agreement with her local BOCES (Board of Cooperative Educational Services). Specifically, Superintendent A does not want a retired administrator from a district with the same profile as District A, but one who has a range of experiences that can be shared with her principals, so that they come to see varying perspectives and approaches taken in other places—places different from their own school and district. She stated, “I walked away from a couple of former superintendents who wanted the job. I wanted someone from a large district, not someone who only ever worked in a very small one.”

The investigator then posed the following questions for the superintendent, “You hired all of your principals, and the way that you work with them is different. How do you go about growing your principals both individually and collectively? What is your approach?”
Superintendent A answered that she “tries to be a good listener.” She went on to reflect, “They've [the principals] grown so much and their needs are vastly different than they were 6 years ago. Talking with them - it’s indirect, but they are very astute about the nuances of leadership, the educational components of leadership that they have to have...”

Superintendent A articulated the importance of developing a shared vision for the district, one formed together with people “inside” and “outside” of the district. She stated that one of the ingredients for the success of District A was her ability to encourage people within the community and district to dream. She did not believe that they knew how to do that when she arrived within the district.

Expanding upon building the vision together, Superintendent A stated, “Developing a vision for the district together means helping to have dreams and then working on a master plan to get there. I could have probably put that plan together in 8 months, but people had to buy into it. It was a completely new process.”

Simultaneously, the ability to dream was identified by Superintendent A as a barrier to moving forward initially. She suggests that progress has been made over the past 5 years as people begin to see positive change occurring.

Overall, Superintendent A emphasizes the importance of the principals within the district staying focused on instruction and their instructional leadership responsibility. She provides them with a variety of tools to assist in their meeting success: Extended time together every summer (1 week retreat) for reflecting, learning, planning, and conversation that strengthens the team; Access to an experienced administrative mentor. Superintendent A is particular in the selection of the mentor,
such that the principals are provided with the perspective and thinking of districts larger and different than their own; Identifiable protocols and structures for collection of data and decision-making; and regular access to their superintendent.

This access occurs via weekly team meetings as well as relatively unlimited phone conversations and individual meetings. Superintendent A also regularly visits the buildings, to see the principals within the context of their leadership roles.

When asked directly about what the rural context implies to her Superintendent A responded, “I can’t find it.” She continued: “I think the concept needs to be tossed out.” (Emphasis added)

She described the geography of the district as being 120 square miles (one of the largest districts of the six in the county), with the second highest property wealth within the county. She indicated that one could drive along a road within the district and see a single trailer or group of trailers, yet go just a little farther and come upon an open 300 acres of “prime land.” There used to be far more working farms in the area; few are left. Superintendent A said that she took a helicopter ride over the district and saw properties with barns that have been converted to four-car garages, large properties that have separate “quarters” for hired household help, etc. She indicated that the experience left her with the thought that properties are not being taxed correctly within the county.

Superintendent A spoke about her view that smaller districts in rural areas should be strategically developing partnerships to share services. A countywide study was conducted to explore some of those opportunities. To date, few of the
recommendations have been implemented, although the completed study has only been released within the past six months.

“Two of the districts in this county will become insolvent within the next two years. Yet, some of my colleagues in the county are in denial about shared services.” Superintendent A went on to say, “The roadblocks I see are my colleagues – it’s not the boards.”

Superintendent A also says that after the previous county in which she had worked, she came to the conclusion that her current community does not really know what rural is. She stated, “There never was a food fight because food was too valuable. The cafeteria was the quietest place in school because everyone was eating. For most students it was the first meal they had since the last meal at school.” referring to her previous rural district.

As Superintendent A considered a question about the role of the principal when she held it, and how that experience influences how she supervises her principals, she began to hone in on thoughts about instructional guidance of her principals. Her responses are organized under core themes-as-headings, which are derived from Bryk, et al. (2010). Instructional guidance is the first one.

*Instructional Guidance*

Superintendent A’s approach to instructional guidance of the principals within her district is grounded in the belief that protocols and structures are equally important to involvement of educators across the system. The first steps Superintendent A took upon arriving in the district (after getting the right principals in place) was to begin creating structures such as the curriculum council and building-based teams that make
decisions based on process and data. She introduced a 6-phase process for putting programs in place framed within the Aligned Acts of Improvement model (Baldrige, 2005). This model is rooted in the Effective Schools framework (associated with Lezotte), Total Quality Management (associated with Deming) and the Malcolm Baldrige criteria for performance excellence.

Superintendent A expects that her principals will be instructional leaders, and that they are continuously involved in the learning and teaching process of their building. Superintendent A mentors her principals on the Aligned Acts of Improvement tenets, and in so doing seeks to insure that all building and district improvement efforts are integrated and results-oriented.

The vision that Superintendent A holds for students is that they will be intellectually competitive upon graduation from their high school. By this, she means that District A students will be equally prepared for success in college and the work world. This vision is demonstrated through some of the instructional initiatives that Superintendent A has guided while serving in the district.

*Personnel for Instructional Guidance*

Superintendent A clearly sees the relationship between the quality of the personnel and the achievement of desired outcomes. She clearly describes how each principal she hired has fit into and strengthened the leadership team of the district. She also describes the process of rebuilding relationships with the teacher bargaining unit within the district, and then creating structures and supports for teacher success throughout. Superintendent A is committed to some of the philosophies of “Good to Great” (Collins, 2001), and clearly explains how she moved existing personnel to
different positions within the district as she began to put various pieces of the plan together.

For example, the individual who was the middle school principal when Superintendent A arrived is now in a district-level curriculum leadership position. “She outgrew the principalship,” claims Superintendent A. Part-time curriculum support positions were created in the humanities, within a math-science-technology position, and recently a Director of Human Resources was hired. The district shares a Special Services coordinator with two other districts within the county.

Program Development. During this superintendent’s service, the high school has implemented the International Baccalaureate program. The development of this program followed the principles of the Aligned Acts of Improvement. This program represents a strong commitment financially and otherwise to the development of curriculum that is rigorous and cohesive, and necessitates a great deal of professional development and demonstration of proficiency on the part of the teaching faculty. The high school principal indicates a belief that “a district is only as good as the high school” and has embraced the frameworks and approaches emphasized by Superintendent A in order to move the building forward.

At the foundational level (i.e. the primary elementary grades), there is an intense focus on early literacy development. The principal of the elementary school has reached out to a local university for assistance with training and development of the faculty related to their skills in literacy development. The primary researcher (from the university) has also assisted in the development of a climate wherein instructional
decision and program development are based on research, and advanced after careful review of the student achievement data.

The middle school appears to be wrestling with the concept of literacy development across the content areas. The principal of the middle school cites being closely connected to a K-12 literacy research group that was convened by the curriculum director and met faithfully throughout the 2010-11 school year.

Superintendent A is also committed to the development of 21st Century learning skills. She explained that she has brought an incubator business (biotechnology) to the campus of District A. Their presence provides opportunities for students of all ages to see the real-world application of various curricula, and enables them to interact with science professionals- all on their own school campus.

Additionally, the district has made a commitment to educating as many special education students within the “walls of the district” as possible. Superintendent A indicates that the BOCES budget has decreased by $1.4 million in the past few years, as a result of returning students placed in BOCES special education classrooms to district-based classrooms. Superintendent A stated, “We are sending our most fragile children on the bus for 2 hours...I don’t like driving for 2 hours.” She went on to suggest that the quality of the programs was not as strong as she wanted to see, and she was convinced that her own faculty would achieve better results.

Responses to this change, according to the Superintendent were not uniformly positive. “One of our teachers got so angry she quit,” stated Superintendent A.

She also indicated that the return of students to the district increased the responsibilities of the district special education teachers. “The president of the
teachers union was not initially happy...she has since surprised even herself at how will it has gone.”

Clearly in the aspects of personnel and program, instructional guidance relies on the previously mentioned research and data informed systems approach to targeted improvement efforts. When asked what the next steps will be, Superintendent A indicated, "I’d like to see more parental choice, more differentiation of curriculum and opportunities, and more concepts of incubator business incorporated on the campus."

Student Centered Learning Climate

Superintendent A demonstrates the she sees the student-centered learning climate intricately linked with challenging students academically. She stated, “One of the things that breaks my heart is that there is no equity in New York State,” when referencing the rural district in which she served previous to District A she said, “I never worked so hard in my life as I did in that district. They [the students] do not get the same education as the children in more affluent places; don’t even try to pass it off as though they do.”

Superintendent A appears to agree with Lezotte’s claim that “teaching one thing and testing another tends to discriminate against the socioeconomically poor and disadvantaged students since they are the most dependent on the school as the source for their academic learning.”

Superintendent A continues to work collaboratively to build the student centered learning climate. She works closely with her high school principal in attending to the students at risk of dropping out of school. The high school has developed an alternative education program. Program data suggests it is successful – no student
dropped out of the high school during the 2010-11 school year. Superintendent A told her high school principal, “I don’t care if you have to staple them into the chair!” She then provided the leeway for the high school principal to work with his faculty and staff to develop the program appropriately.

Superintendent A makes it clear that a priority is for students to be known in each of the schools, and that instruction be differentiated so that all children learn and move forward. She promotes and expects visibility from her principals and coordinators. She states that she expects principals to be in good contact with parents, and that situations be addressed at the lowest possible level- empowering the adults involved related to their decision-making and conflict resolution skills.

Superintendent A claims that she does not micromanage her principals. She also claims that she recognizes that the climate is different from school to school. Given that, the Superintendent claims that each principal is not obligated to act exactly the same as every other principal. The Superintendent claims that she provides each principal the “room” to vary from the others.

Regarding parental and community ties, the superintendent indicated that there is an interesting dynamic in working with parents and community members within District A. Contrary to her previous district where most individuals came to events in jeans and t-shirts, in District A, there is a “range” of attire that reflects the socioeconomic range, and yet she also indicated that it is hard to know to whom you are speaking. She indicated that this is not a negative, just a different culture than that of the previous district.
It is important, however, as Superintendent A encourages all faculty and staff including the principals to maintain good communication with parents about their children. She also cautions others about making assumptions about who or how those parents are. She says that translates to drawing conclusions from evidence and interactions, not hearsay and bias.

*Developing Teachers’ and Other Staff Members’ Capacity and Commitments*

Superintendent A approaches the development of capacity and commitment through a systems approach to organizations. She openly said, “I love organizational analysis. The State Education Department has brilliant theory, and they have no idea how to translate it into practice.”

The above statement brings to light the circumstances that schools across New York state are currently facing. Superintendent A clearly identifies the supports that have been put in place over her tenure within the district, yet readily acknowledges that some of them are being lost due to drastic cuts within the district budget. As a result, some of these supports cannot be sustained. As examples of new challenges, she cited several major initiatives emerging within the state: Annual Professional Performance Reviews for teachers and principals, the shift to Common Core State Learning Standards, implementation of Inquiry Teams under Race to the Top, the advent of Student Learning Objectives for courses in “non state-tested” areas.

This superintendent embraces change that makes sense to her. In this context, she stated that the current pace of change is concerning to her and others. Referring to the effects of massive, fast-paced changes on teachers in her district, the superintendent stated, “My teachers are on a verge of a nervous breakdown.”
It shall become apparent that this is a common theme that emerged within interviews with all principals of District A as well as their superintendent. Change is taking place at a rapid pace. Requirements are being identified, without all of the details in place. Administrators are placed in a position of having to “push” new and/or different work, often without the answer to such questions as, “What about...” “When will we know...” “How will we measure...” etc.

Often commitment is related to capacity. Capacity, used here, refers to possessing the knowledge and skill to help students achieve at the highest levels. Superintendent A indicates that capacity-building will be necessary to meet most of the new requirements, yet resources for that capacity building are not provided through current formulas for state aid to schools. District A is receiving $14,000 annually for four years to meet the requirements of Race to the Top.

Parent-Community Ties

As introduced above, Superintendent A expects her principals to have strong ties to the community. Part of the expectation is realized through their visibility. Whether taking the opportunity to greet parents as they drop off their children in the morning, encourage parents to attend school programs such as Open Houses, parent-teacher conferences, evening events showcasing student talents and achievements or direct conversation, Superintendent A expects the development of ties between the schools and parents and larger community.

Superintendent A discusses strategies and expectations for parent-community ties with each principal, contextualizing it to their unique building circumstances.
Simultaneously, she works within the community with parents and others differently, and on behalf of the entire district.

For example, Superintendent A has Saturday “Coffee with the Superintendent” meetings, each with a specific topic throughout each school year. Within them, she can articulate district-wide vision and initiatives, and provide education and information to attendees. Superintendent A attends various community-wide events on behalf of the district. She attends library events, a cross-section of political events, wine-tasting events that are prevalent in the region (she drinks soda), as well as events in the larger Capital Region representing her school system.

In this dimension of leadership as in all others, Superintendent A states that she encourages her principals to be mindful and open-minded. She wants her principals to approach relationships as a two-way endeavor. This relates to her earlier observation, “Here you are never sure whom you are talking to.” Superintendent A wants her principals to avoid making assumptions about parents and community members. She wants them to listen as much as they speak in most circumstances.

Reflection on Action

The weeklong summer retreat with principals is Superintendent A’s strongest venue for encouraging the active reflection of her principals. She asserts that she is building a team that recognizes the unique strengths that each principal brings to the table, and encourages communication so that those strengths are leveraged across the administrative team.

Superintendent A is reflective about her still-young team. She indicates that they needed a great deal of attention and intentional mentoring in her first years in the
district, as they were all very young and new to the profession. Astutely, Superintendent A recognizes that they have grown, and that their needs for mentoring have changed as a result. This fact is what motivated her to seek the outside mentor/coach for the principals. Because of her well-grounded understanding of systems and change, Superintendent A has enabled and communicated the importance of maintaining some system-wide commonalities, in addition to essential unique school initiatives.

Superintendent A does not see leadership within a rural school as vastly different than leadership within a suburban or urban school – specifically in the context of Aligned Acts of Improvement. She clearly sees the needs of students in rural districts as different from those of needs of students in more affluent districts – grounded in the idea that rural students are at a disadvantage because of the poverty status of their families. Their exposure to literacy and print-rich environments is significantly lower, and often times support and advocacy from impoverished adults (parents, guardians or custodial grandparents) is different if not lacking in many cases.

Even as her resources are diminishing as requirements are increasing, Superintendent A indicates that she very much likes what she does. This is demonstrated in that she has been “retirement-eligible” for some time. However, she stays on the job, and she remains committed to her district. Her strengths-based, goal-directed approach is manifest in the following quote:

“I decided to polish the little gem here and see if we could make it sparkle...I do what I do because I like it, and if there comes a time when I don’t like it any more, I won’t do it. It’s been refreshing here.”

The Principals
Principal interview were structured to provide data relevant to this study’s research questions. For example: Are there special features in your rural school context that influence your role and responsibilities as principal? What specific student achievement outcomes or benefits are you after? As you reflect, are there beliefs or philosophies that you hold about being an effective principal that are unchanged since you began as a principal? How does the superintendent and her approach influence principals? Questions like these were asked and addressed in individual interviews with principals within District A. Findings follow.

Findings are presented under themes-categories covered in the interview. As a reminder, these themes/categories were derived from Bryk, et al (2010). These categories are:

- Principal Leadership – Principal leadership includes three components:
  1) Principal Management
  2) Instructional Leadership
  3) Inclusive-facilitative Leadership
- Parent-Community Ties – Components include:
  1) Principal emphasis and facilitation of the school’s welcoming environment
  2) Principal expectations for teaching out to parents to encourage them to be involved in their child’s learning
  3) Principal efforts to keep faculty and staff knowledgeable about the neighborhood and family dynamics
- Professional Capacity – Key components include:
  1) Professional development quality
2) Principal emphasis on continuous improvement; and

3) Principal establishment and nurturing of school-wide professional learning community

• Student-Centered Learning climate – The main elements within this support category include:

1) Order and safety

2) Supportive peer norms

3) Maximizing individual potential

• Instructional Guidance

**Elementary Principal A**

Elementary Principal A is serving in his sixth year as principal of his school, having spent an additional 4 years in the same school before becoming the full-time building leader. District A is the only district in which he has served as a principal. His school has 550 students in grades K-5. The school no longer has an assistant principal. As budgets have become “tighter”, the assistant principal position was eliminated.

Consistent with a pattern in many rural school districts, Principal A grew up within District A, and attended the school where he is now principal during his elementary grades. He student taught within the district, then served as a teacher in other districts both in and out of New York State.

**Principal’s Overall Theory of Action**

Principal A answered the question about what are the indicators of a successful school saying, “It is a place where students learn, we are collaborative in our efforts to support students, a place that is positive; meaning a place where students, teachers and
our staff want to be, and a place where we recognize all kinds of learners not just good test takers.” He also added, “It is a place where kids who are ok students but doing fantastic on a regional cheering team or an Irish step dancing team can be celebrated as well.”

When asked if the community shares the identified indicators, Principal A replied that he believes that the community shares them although he believes that they are interpreted differently between people. Some specific indicators of success Principal A identified that he has intentionally developed include: 1. Making decisions utilizing research and data; 2. Making changes so as to better address learning standards; 3. Making changes so as to better address learning standards; 4. Creating an environment of rapport and trust with teachers and staff; 5. Creating a culture wherein students are known, understood, respected and challenged; and 6. Ensuring that faculty and staff work collaboratively.

Principal A places a great deal of emphasis on the relationships that he has with his faculty. In identifying the tools that are most effective for him as a principal, he cites “the human tools” – having a good rapport with his teachers and having honest conversations. He indicates that one challenge he has experienced is a bias towards him that comes from the fact that he has not been a classroom teacher. He was a school psychologist prior to becoming a principal. He states, “There is definitely a bias that administrators all should have classroom experience. I got my certification as a teacher, and then worked as a school psychologist for a dozen year in private agencies. New York schools and private schools then came back here.”
Principal A indicates that teacher opinions seem to change over time as they relate to the principal having had classroom teaching experience. His comments suggest that he believes a principal can gain the perspective of a classroom teacher without having been one, and that perspective is important to teachers. He said, “I don’t think that it is an unfounded bias—actually not a bad thing, but there are ways to address the needs for support of classroom teachers and not have had 10 years in the classroom yourself. It is one thing that I’ve had to overcome. Now that I’ve been here for six years, I certainly hear that less as a concern.”

Principal A identified how he has overcome the initial teacher bias and said, “The tools I have are: Good relationships with my team leaders and building level team, and attempting to keep decisions away from opinion as much as possible—using the data that we have available.” He then identified an excellent staff as a resource—indicating that he believes his staff to be “people who are truly diligent in their caring for kids, willing to teach in-service courses for their colleagues.”

Principal A identified that he almost always works a 10-hour day (typically 7-5), and then things are added “on top.” When evening events are scheduled, he works straight through until about 9:00 p.m. His time is allocated to “the most pressing thing...not the most important but the most pressing”, which is student discipline. That can include not only what happens in school, but also what occurs on the bus.

Student discipline can account for as little as 30 minutes or up to 4 hours depending on the day. The next biggest “chunk of time” is allocated to paperwork. Whether required by the State or the Superintendent, Principal A indicates that paperwork can take an additional 1-2 hours per day. Upon reflection, he said, “It must
be more than that, because my day just evaporates before I know it." He also indicated that 2-3 hours are allocated to meetings—typically with teachers, but sometimes with parents.

If able to be more in control of time usage, Principal A declares that he would spend more time in classrooms. He indicates that he enjoys being with his students. He also suggests that his talents are better utilized when focused on instructional issues, in contrast to management issues.

Principal A indicates that 30% of his students qualify for free or reduced lunch. This percentage is lower than some rural schools. However, there are 12 students per square mile. He indicates this is the unique context that makes his school rural. “Our kids have well-intentioned parents. Fewer and fewer of them are working in resorts or working in agribusiness, but a lot of them are state employees. It is not that they are uneducated as a group, however, I don’t think that they have all the same tools that kids 20 miles north of here (suburban area) are exposed to.”

Data suggest that 25-40% of students at Elementary School A come with risk factors associated with lack of exposure to literacy. Principal A emphasizes for staff that this is not an excuse, but that it is a fact. That fact leads to commitment to moving students out of that “risk pool”, with the goal being that by second grade all students are on grade level. Research regarding profiles of dropouts is what grounds this principal and faculty in the belief about the importance of reaching the goal by second grade. Details about success factors and application of research follow.

*Instructional Guidance*
Principal A states that he meets with grade level leaders once per month. He also meets with each whole grade level one time per month. He meets with his Shared Decision Making Team (SDM) in the summer to review the accomplishment of goals set the previous year, review the student achievement data, and then develop the plan and goals for the coming school year. He meets with the SDM periodically throughout the school year.

Principal A acknowledges that before the current “era” of greater accountability, the building had a history of using data at a cohort level, not at the level of the individual student. He states that part of the culture of the school is one wherein the best decisions are made through the use of research and data. One example cited is a recent study by the building leadership team focused on the factors of school success. There was a perception that younger kindergarteners were at a disadvantage and that students would be better served if the age of entry requirements were changed so that students were older. After a review of the month of birth of students and their achievement throughout grades 1-5, the team concluded that there was not a direct relationship between age of entry and school success. Given that, the team moved on to a new focus.

Additionally, Principal A stated that previously the accountability piece was not a part of the culture. Principal A stated, “There was a huge lack of clarity when it came to our curriculum when I got here ten years ago. The most basic documentation of what schools do is often not there, which is not exclusive to this school or district.” He went on to state that “now” every student in the building receives guided reading instruction. He impresses upon faculty that they must “layer explicit reading
instruction on top of content areas such as social studies,” which did not previously happen.

There were several structures or initiatives cited by Principal A with the solution preceded by the word “now”, as in “now teachers are more mindful about their instruction and results...” In other words, at the time the interview as conducted, significant changes were underway. With further probing, this change-related phenomenon was linked to a new development: This school had been identified as a School in Need of Improvement by the state.

“I think it gives me a little more freedom to have very focused and direct conversations about student learning,” states Principal A. He indicates that he recognizes that to hold people accountable, he must have a greater presence within classrooms.

The School in Need of Improvement (SiNi) process required that a school quality review (SQR) take place, which led to the creation of the Comprehensive Educational Plan (CEP). Principal A indicates that the planning process was actually helpful, as it focuses everyone on data. He stated that it was not hard to pull the data together, as they had it, but what was inconsistent throughout the building was how the data was used. Principal A also stated about being “identified”, “We were very candid that we resented the image this casts on our school, but we will do our due diligence because we want our kids to get somewhere.” This will be examined in various contexts that follow.

*Student-Centered Learning Climate*
Principal A identified characteristics of the student-centered climate to be a school where students are known and understood, treated with respect and challenged. He also indicated, “I think we as a school have sometimes erred on the side of knowing them versus challenging them – I’ve heard stories that in the years gone by, because of the culture of this community, the administration would push very hard to be sure that kids wanted to come to school as a top priority. It’s great, but certainly not good enough. I don’t think they sacrificed learning, but I think there was a strong, strong emphasis on “developmentally this child is not ready”- to the degree that it masked that we need to push them to be ready.”

Eight years ago the Kindergarten team began implementing The Interactive Strategies Approach, which is heavily invested in strong literacy development. The team found from learning to implement the strategies that kindergarteners were capable of far more than they had thought. Principal A indicates that he continues to talk about high levels of rigor throughout the grade level team meetings.

“Our students have more vocabulary weaknesses than most students within more affluent districts. I share what my own son in third grade is doing in his suburban school – so that teachers are aware. It’s about greater perspective,” says Principal A.

The education and work experience of Principal A appears to contribute to his view and emphasis on the “whole child.” He speaks of monitoring and pushing students based on data, and simultaneously speaks about those elements that lead to a positive climate for learning, a recognition of talents of individual students, as well as the need for elementary schools to continue to provide fun, engaging activities, so that “kids can be kids” while they still have the chance.
Developing Teachers’ and other Staff Members’ Capacity and Commitments

As principal A described the “shifts” that are taking place instructionally and accountability-wise, the investigator posed this question for him, “You can’t do it alone. You have 550 students, likely 75 adults working in the building...what does that imply to you related to leadership and building capacity?”

Principal A replied that he recognizes the need for distributed leadership, and that he heavily relies on his team leaders. Principal A selects the grade level leaders. The teachers bargaining unit select the Shared Decision Making Team members. Principal A points out that none of the teachers serving as team leaders are teachers that he recommended for employment, but that the majority of them are not the “most veteran” faculty. Most team leaders have 10 or more years of teaching experience. Principal A raised that factor and said, “That leads to positive meetings – they know how to push back appropriately, and at the same time create a respectful climate. People can speak their mind.”

Principal A does not provide explicit professional development to team leaders on leadership, yet he provides various resources to them to bring forward within their meetings with their team. It appears that the funding reductions within District A are not atypical of other rural schools, and there is a greater emphasis placed on professional development via the development of learning communities throughout the building – groups of teachers making instructional decisions based on student achievement data, then sharing practice via team meetings that are facilitated by teacher-leaders.
The lack of answers from the New York State Education Department leadership related to teacher APPR and Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) is causing tension within the building. Principal A commented, “I don’t think that people understand though, when I’m pushing them for some things now, they can’t tell what’s coming from me and what’s coming from the state. I have to give more clarification to them about what is coming from the state level.” He went on to say, “Teachers would love for their principal to tell the State Education Department “we’re not doing this.” That’s fine, but until our Board of Education tells me to do that, I can’t. I have to find a way to make this work for kids and still meet the accountability requirements (“jump through these hoops”)

Principal A’s comment provides great insight into the unique balance that principals must maintain during times of increased accountability and external intervention into K-12 schools within New York. Principal A states that he recognizes that he must form relationships and trust with faculty and staff in order to be able to impact their performance, and thus improve student achievement. Simultaneously, he must answer, most often times in accountability terms to his Superintendent and Board of Education “above” him.

Principal A used an example from the budget development process to illustrate this dynamic. He was given strict financial parameters for his building budget. The amount was less than what the teachers initially requested. He said that own approach to this would be to accept the amount and “move on.” However, what he did was, “I met with the faculty and described my budget presentation to the District Office. It is what
is it, but they need to know that I am supporting them...even though I’m personally
more pragmatic, but they need to know that.”

Concurrently, Principal A indicates that he has experienced more parents
“shopping” for the school their child will attend, and there is pressure to keep parents
“happy.” Principal A indicated that it is hard to maintain the highest level of
commitment in such an era- one of high accountability without a great deal of clarity as
to what is actually required by the governing education department.

**Parent and Community Ties**

Elementary School A is a generally welcoming school as it relates to parent
involvement. Principal A reports that there are quite a few parent volunteers at the
primary level. These parents primarily assist with center-based learning and reading
support. At the intermediate grades within Elementary School A, there are fewer
parent volunteers.

When parent-teacher conferences are held, 90-95% of parents participate. Additionally, there is high participation in events such as Open House and evening
musical events and student performances. Principal A indicates that he does not get
pressure from parents for more involvement within the school.

Principal A identified that having parents who call him with a complaint first
speak directly with their child’s teacher is something that he does to support his
teachers. He indicates that there was previously a history within the district and
building that people went directly to “the top”, which was not discouraged. Just last
year, phones with outside lines were installed in classrooms, making it easier for
teachers to phone parents for a variety of conversations. Principal A indicated that in
some ways it might be easier for him to just deal with the complaints directly, as it takes more time to direct the parent to the teacher, provide the teacher the “heads up” so that they can be prepared for the parent conversation, then discuss with the teacher the outcome. In some circumstances, he also then ends up meeting with both the parent and the teacher together. However, he maintains that it is important for teachers to solve problems at their level whenever possible.

The rural classification of the school and district does not appear to be impeding parent-community ties to Elementary School A. In fact, the rural context may facilitate parent-community ties. One potentially unique circumstance is that there may be a larger number of teachers working in the school that live in the community, thus they are both teacher and parent of students in other teacher’s classrooms. Additionally, Principal A commented, “I don’t know that teachers here believe that parents really know their kids best. Some think that kids need a consequence in order to teach parents how important something is (such as homework)...in conferences there still is a lot of telling the parents what they should be doing, rather than listening to the parent about what is happening.”

Principal A identified that he believes the community is changing. He believes that there are more parents now who recognize the importance of school, and yet there are still a considerable percentage of parents who do not recognize the rigors of elementary school. This poses a challenge for the school. Principal A indicates that parents may not understand collaborative learning as well as the teachers, but the faculty talks to them about it, and attempts to provide them more tools to understand.
An example cited is that this year, parents were provided with leveled book lists so that they can make good book choices for their child based on the child’s literacy level. The list now includes fiction and non-fiction text, indicative of a shift implied in the move to the Common Core Learning Standards. At open house, parents were informed that 50% of the days would be addressing non-fiction text, and that this needs to be supported at home as well.

*Lessons Learned from Reflection-on-Action*

This investigator asked Principal A, “Your process of reflection – in action, post-action – how does it influence your action?”

The response was that “this year” he would be looking more closely at the relationship between instruction and student achievement. He indicated that he would be looking at both local assessments and state assessments, where previously the review was solely of the state assessments, and primarily an aggregate review of student achievement. Additionally, he is interested in reflecting upon the tone in the building, to some degree measured by the Effective Schools survey, but also in anecdotal “noting” of whether or not people are “generally content.”

Principal A also identified that when he first became a principal, he placed too much emphasis on every decision being made collaboratively. “I worked so hard to be collaborative, that I would end up spinning my wheels and looked like I was trying to run the school through a very decentralized democracy.” Reflection upon that dynamic revealed that there are some decisions that can and should be made collaboratively, and some that should not. “At the end of the day I still have to take responsibility because I have the responsibility,” he said.
Principal A also stated, “My principalship is nothing like that principalship that preceded me. I’m a very close friend with my former principal, and the one before her. I am envious of the job that they got to have – one where more time was spent in classrooms, and the school was probably more autonomous. That must have been really fun. What I do is fun, but it’s really different. The regulations are astounding.”

Time is clearly a factor in how and when Principal A reflects. He shared that he and his wife recently adopted three boys (siblings). “When I go home, it’s not like we just play – we deal with some heavy things, given the baggage they have. It all takes time.” He also said that he rarely takes a day off. “The days I find myself doing less work on the weekend than ever before- or my family and for me.”

He then indicated that he had purchased a house in a neighboring state. He and the family go there several weekends a month. “That’s where I can step back and think,” he said.

*Influences of Colleagues/Supervisors*

Principal A indicated that because he did not have classroom teaching experience as he entered his principal position, he attempted to learn a great deal from his Assistant Principal. The first was not strong, thus he did not learn from her as much as he hoped, but the second was a National Board Certified Teacher, and was more than willing to help him to learn. Principal A concluded that often he and that Assistant Principal took similar a similar approach on instructional issues, which instilled confidence within him about his ability to be a strong instructional leader, and overcome the bias his faculty held because he did not have classroom teaching experience.
Principal A identified that the administrative team meets “every Tuesday until we die.” He indicated that because the district is comparatively small, the principals work pretty closely, and learn from what each other does well, in addition to what mistakes they make.

The summer retreat was cited as the most instructionally oriented time that the principal team spends together, although he did acknowledge that there are additional items that come up in the weekly team meetings.

The current Superintendent hired Principal A, and he indicates that she is a source of growth as well as support for him. He recalled a project that his Shared Decision Making Team wanted to take on during his first year, and the Superintendent steered them away from it. She had Principal A do the legwork for the initiative. “Initially I was very resentful, and afterwards I immediately saw the wisdom of what she was trying to protect me from as a new principal. Not that I wouldn’t have arrived at the same decision, but I wasn’t ready to do all the legwork that it would have required to do the work efficiently and effectively.”

Principal A indicates that his Superintendent is “pretty accessible”, and always willing to have conversations of any nature with him. Additionally, Principal A identified that the preparation program he completed was not particularly useful to him. “It did not prepare me for the realities of being a principal by any stretch. I think this is the hardest job I have done by far. I thought I worked hard before…”

“Teachers second guess every decision you might make (on bad days), you have to be worried about making everyone happy and still move forward. No one else really has the same kind of pressure within the organization.”
“It’s lonely in that I chose the kind of job where everyone feels that they can tell you how to do your job…”

The biggest understanding that Principal A has today that he did not have when he began as a principal is, “Any time I open my mouth, I am speaking as the building principal...I am never just [first name.] Everything I say will be considered in the context of everything else that I have said. Every conversation with teachers – I am speaking from the “office of the principal”...I don’t know why that didn’t strike me before.”

Focus Group Interviews for Principal A

Two focus group interviews were conducted in Principal A’s school. One consisted of four teachers, a counselor and a psychologist. The other consisted of support staff members who are teaching assistants. The faculty member focus group for Principal A’s school consisted of personnel ranging in years of service between 1 and 20.

The faculty group provided insight into the “weaving” of community and school in commenting that there are many teachers who live in the community, have children attending District A, and also teach in the district. The prevailing perspective was that because of this “everyone knows each other, and everyone is willing to take the extra step.”

When identifying what they believe the principal’s theories of action and actions should be to positively impact students, the priorities identified by both groups were:

1. Be hands-on – get into classrooms to see students and teachers at work
2. Know the requirements and be sure that they are met
3. Know the faculty/staff on a personal level
4. Run relevant faculty meetings
5. Be upbeat and positive
6. Have good people skills and listen to all
7. Trust adults in the school

Having identified what they thought the priorities should be, the groups then talked about what they believe are the principal’s theories of action.

Each of the groups identified their principal as being “an open-door kind of principal.” They stated that they see their principal around the building frequently. Several group members commented specifically on their opinion that the principal pays attention to the adults in the building as well as the students. One participant said, “I had been out sick for a couple of days, and was struggling when I returned to work. He knew it, and took the time to ask how I was doing.”

Both groups stated that the faculty meetings in their building this year have been helpful. Specific topics such as Response to Intervention (RtI) and Common Core Learning Standards have been presented. Both groups suggested that their principal does not have meetings “just for the sake of meetings.” They stated that they see purpose in the faculty meetings.

The faculty groups also clearly communicated that they like to have autonomy within the classroom. Participants stated that they do not believe that a principal with a “cookie cutter” approach will get the best results from teachers. The stated that if a principal did take on a “one size fits all approach,” student achievement would suffer. (Instructional guidance)
Both groups indicated that their principal demonstrates that he has trust in them. One participant said when speaking of her principal, “He has faith that we know what we are doing.” Each group described that their principal attends grade level or team meetings one time per month. Additionally, the principal meets with the team leaders. Participants spoke positively about the principal’s presence at such meetings. Support staff also cited that the principal meets with them both individually and collectively as needed.

When speaking about external requirements, the faculty group conveyed that they believe that the state has “an agenda.” The professionals stated that part of that agenda is a strong focus on data collection [about student progress and achievement]. More than one participant said or indicated, “All this collecting of data is not why I became a teacher.”

Participants stated that the faculty has an agenda as well. They believe that their agenda is different from that of the state. They communicated that, in their view, the faculty agenda is the important one – it is “about individual kids.” The strong suggestion in each group is that the state agenda does not address the needs of individual students. (Student centered-learning climate)

Additionally, the faculty group spoke about the large number of new requirements coming from the State. Several identified that the principal, “Breaks things down into small pieces. He tries to make them seem more manageable. He gives us lots of hints.” The participants suggested that the principals are attempting to “scaffold the changes” in order to make them more doable. The group appeared to be positive about the principals’ efforts in managing external requirements.
When speaking about relationships with parents, the groups identified that the effective principal helps teachers reinforce issues with parents, “such as importance of attendance and doing homework.” Essentially, the effective principal “is willing to be the bad guy so that the teachers can keep teaching.” When speaking about Principal A, a participant described an interaction with a family that had multiple students, all of whom had poor attendance. “He took over the communication with the parent about the importance of regular attendance. He supports teachers in that sort of situation.”

(Parent Community Ties)

The group identified positive interactions that parents have with the school: Many attend activities such as Movie Night, Science fair, band and chorus concerts, and fifth grade moving up ceremony; Parents volunteer at the Book Fair and in the library; Parents come to school to eat lunch with their students; In the K-2 classrooms, quite a few parents volunteer and work in centers so that the teacher can do guided reading. The clear expectation of the faculty is that the principal attend events, and facilitate the opportunities mentioned above. Both groups stated that their principal meets their expectations in that regard.

**Middle School Principal B**

Principal B is the Middle School Principal within District A. The school has 315 students in grades 6-8. Principal B has been the principal of this school for the past three years, and previous to that he was an Assistant Principal in a larger, suburban school district. Principal B was a classroom teacher, and a teacher-leader, which led him to seek administrative certification.

*Principal's Overall Theory of Action*
Principal B identified the following elements of a successful school: Good scores on state assessments, a positive learning environment, and students who are connected and motivated. He indicates that each year the school completes the Effective Schools Survey, and then utilizes the resulting data to look for priorities and set goals for the following year. Principal B indicates that the Building Leadership Team (a.k.a. Shared Decision Making Team) is part of the formula for success within the building – working collaboratively, making decisions based on data, and developing the goals for the school.

Additionally, Principal B identified the administrative team as part of the formula for success, as the team meetings provide for him a venue to know what is occurring across the district, and the opportunity for all district administrators to “be on the same page”. He states that he believes school needs to be a place where students feel good about being within, as well as needing to feel valued within their school.

Principal B’s Middle School has been identified as a School in Need of Improvement (SiNi) by New York state. Principal B indicates that prior to this “identification”, the school had begun exploring the areas of developing 21st Century Learning Skills within students, and developing more opportunities for Project-Based Learning (PBL). Once identified, the school has had to focus on the School Quality Review Process (SQR) and development of the Comprehensive Educational Plan (CEP), which is the “roadmap” to improve student achievement on state assessments, so that the school can “get off of” the list. Principal B indicates that “now” there is a focus on literacy across the content areas.
“We are all a part of the ELA and Math assessments,” he says, and adds, “The state is just looking at those – not to devalue the other content areas, but we are all being judged on ELA and Math assessment scores.”

It is clear that the external accountability factors of Race to the Top have added the sense of pressure within the school, and within Principal B.

In reflecting upon how priorities might be different if more in control of priorities and time, Principal B indicated that there would still be a strong “push” for literacy; that the school is moving in the right direction with greater consistency in the teaching of reading. He indicated that this consistency at the elementary feeder school has resulted in his teachers having the same data for all incoming 6th graders at the start of the school year- for the first time since he became principal. When further reflecting upon greater control in prioritization, Principal B indicated that he looks at the “7 Essential Elements” (of standards-focused middle schools – identified by New York State Education Department) quite a bit, and attempts to gauge success at their implementation. Linked to that, Principal B indicated that a long-term goal is to be identified as a “School to Watch” (also a New York State initiative in identifying high-performing middle schools and sharing their practices for purposes of replication.) He also articulated an interest in learning more about Virtual Learning opportunities.

Principal B reports that he works 70-90 hours per week. He spends between 10 and 12 hours per day in his school, and then an additional 2-3 hours per night working at home when his own children have gone to bed. He estimates that he spends 80% of his time on the areas of managing the building and “dealing with students”, and 20% of his time in “instructional-type” meetings. He stated, “It’s not good – I need to get into
classrooms more.” He also stated that ideally he would spend 60% or three days a week of his time in classrooms – supporting teachers and seeing what is taking place within classrooms.

He mentions that his secretary is a big help in keeping him on track- and that she provides great assistance to him related to putting data into various forms and formats for him, reminding him of due dates for various items, whether report cards, newsletters, etc., as well as being sure that he is aware of upcoming appointments on his calendar. Principal B states, “She’s a lifeline. A great secretary is a critical piece for any successful principal – to really have someone that knows what they are doing...and who is efficient with technology.”

Additionally, there is a “House Principal”, who is primarily assigned to the high school (which is attached to Principal B’s school), but who comes to the middle school to assist in certain discipline situations, as well as to “cover” the building when Principal B has to be out for meetings, etc.

When asked to reflect upon whether there are any special features of the school in the context of being a rural school, Principal B responded that within rural communities, the school is the hub of the community. Given that rural schools tend to be “smaller”, students can be connected and motivated in different ways in the instance that they don’t like school or the academic elements of school. He says, “For the kids that don’t like school, we try to help them find something of interest – most of the time it will take care of the academic part.”

Principal B also identified teacher leaders as a part of the formula for success within his school. This will be examined more closely in the following section.
Instructional Guidance

When asked about the strategies that he uses to provide instructional leadership, particularly given the current time utilization, Principal B identified that he relies on team leaders. There are teacher leaders for each of the teaching teams within the building. The teams meet 4 days per week, and the team leader facilitates the meetings. Principal B meets with his team leaders once per month. Additionally, he holds one meeting per month with each full team.

Principal B indicates that during the weeklong administrative retreat, he and the other principals spend time developing the sequence of their faculty meetings for the year. The intended topics changed as a result of the school being identified by the state. Regardless, Principal B attempts to keep the focus of faculty meetings on instructional topics. He states that he is attempting to bring new ideas into faculty meetings. He provides websites, articles and resources that support initiatives throughout the building. Principal B stated that with the emphasis within the Common Core Learning Standards upon non-fiction, he is attempting to bring resources related to non-fiction reading to all teachers. “Previously, teachers have been delegating that responsibility to the reading teachers. They have to take a piece of this, so I try to do some modeling within the faculty meetings.”

Principal B encourages teachers who are collaborating on goals, or who demonstrate effective strategies in their classroom when Principal B is observing, to make presentations or do demonstrations within the faculty meetings, so that everyone can benefit from their effort. Principal B also identified that he is supportive of the in-service courses that are offered throughout the district, particularly in view of the fact...
that of late there are few funds for sending teachers to conferences for professional
development. He also reinforced the value that he places on learning from peers and
made two related statements, “We need more peer observation. Teachers will listen
more to each other at times than they will to us [administration].”

*Student-Centered Learning Climate*

Principal B states that he believes that small schools offer students more both
academically and socially. He believes they are known, and that his school in particular
works to develop the whole students. Having worked in a larger school district, his
belief is that in larger schools, students “get lost”, and that they do not have the same
opportunities to become well rounded.

While Principal B referenced rigor, he did not relate it directly to the student-
centered learning environment, and he did not address how he knows that each
individual is provided the opportunity to reach his or her full potential every year
within the middle school.

When referencing the climate amongst the faculty, Principal B indicates that
there is a great deal of anxiety around the new Annual Professional Performance
Review (APPR) requirements, particularly given that teacher ratings are directly
related to achievement on state assessments, and the school has just be identified.

Principal B is grounded in middle level theory, which is partially demonstrated
in his commitment to the development of the whole child. He speaks about the
importance of application of knowledge about the unique developmental behaviors of
middle school-aged students. He is striving for a school that provides both academic
rigor and opportunities for social development. However, he did not articulate clearly
outcomes and targets in each of these areas, nor did he identify and describe the strategies that he intends to utilize to reach them.

*Developing Teachers' and Other Staff Members' Capacity and Commitments*

In addition to insights provided about instructional guidance of teachers, Principal B spoke of his efforts toward helping Teaching Assistants (TA) and Aids to grow. “My big thing with them is how they communicate and connect with the kids. Sometimes you have to point things out to them.”

Principal B provides examples in describing how he can watch a TA in an interaction with a specific student, and it is clear to him that the TA does not have a clear concept of physical space, and the distance that must be kept from some students, given their response to authority. He indicates that he uses observations of such interactions as the opportunity to provide them with “small instructional pieces,” within the context of a recent event. Principal B also indicates that there is an attempt throughout the district to provide support staff with specific training on Superintendent Conference days.

When speaking about commitments of teachers, Principal B again addressed the impact of the school having been identified by the state. “Teachers have taken a step back now, and are focused on the test and getting good test scores. This puts things such as Project-Based Learning and 21st Century Skills on the back burner...not totally but that teachers are saying, "My job could be rated on these scores." The State is doing a disservice to what colleges and businesses are saying they want from schools [in putting such an emphasis on scores on state assessments].”
“It’s about changing the culture,” he states, then, “We need to be equally focused on the academic and social development of our students. Yes, we want our students to want to come to school, and be happy in school, but we must also insure that they do well academically.”

Parent-Community Ties

The dimension of relationships between the school, teachers, parents and community brought from Principal B the highest amount of description and perspective when compared to other dimensions. Principal B describes the community as very close knit “in their way of beliefs.” Examples provided were FFA and music programming throughout the district. He stated that both are “sacred cows” that “cannot be touched”, and that as such, the programs are rarely touched when budgets are being developed.

Principal B describes the community as a mixture of people with very different sets of values. He states that there are low SES folks “for whom education is a not a priority and never will be,” to the “upper end” wherein there are students with aspirations to go to an Ivy League college upon graduation. Principal B stated that he believes the International Baccalaureate program at the high school will serve all types of students well. Principal B went on to suggest that, “Getting that mixture of people to work- even with the students – is difficult.”

The result of cutting some teachers at the secondary level is that there are higher numbers of special education students in each section of the remaining classes. Principal B has seen more parental input about not wanting their children in particular class sections because “all the IEP kids are in there.” He expands by indicating that
some parents do not trust that their child will get a good education within a class
makeup such as that. He reports that some parents complain that the class is “going
slow” now, and that in his view; in some cases the parents are correct. He indicates that
it is a challenge to keep classes heterogeneously mixed.

   Principal B indicates that teachers are frustrated with the lack of academic
support from home. He says that he tells teachers to send home with students
“homework that they can do independently, because often once kids get into 6th or 7th
grade, particularly in math for example, parents cannot help them.”

   It was also stated that the principal does not think that the teachers as a whole
grasp “the baggage” that students are bringing to school. Principal B also spoke to
potential bias on the part of the faculty saying, “They get frustrated when there is that
lack of support because they also know that some of these kids could do very well.
That’s where we have to start changing our mindset that the kid is not going to be
successful here – particularly if he is not doing the homework.”

   Lessons Learned from Reflection-on-Action

   Principal B indicates that he has a 40-minute commute to and from work each
day, and that he utilizes that time to reflect and/or prepare. Particularly in the evening,
he spends time thinking about what he needs to do differently given the events of the
day. He indicated he asks himself what he accomplished today, and at times is at a loss
for a clear answer. “You probably did accomplish things because you were out in the
hall, and you talked to some people.”

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Principal B also takes a monthly look at where the building is related to the plan and goals developed within each summer. He referenced the administrative retreat as a time for group reflection upon the status of the district, as well as future direction.

Influence of Colleagues/Supervisors

When asked how teachers influence his work as a principal, Principal B indicated that meetings with and observations of the ELA teachers have helped him to develop knowledge and plans related to intentional literacy development within the middle school. He also cited that the elementary principal had been a significant resource to him in this area as well. The K-12 literacy committee has provided an opportunity to clarify philosophy as well as actions steps, and appears to be leading to more cohesion in K-12 literacy development efforts.

Principal B indicated that the principals meet monthly with the curriculum coordinator. These meetings help him to be clear on the instructional guidance and leadership that he provides within his building.

The Superintendent was in close touch with Principal B during the two years he served as Assistant Principal within a different district, and Principal B cites his access to the external coach/mentor as a strong influence on him and his development as a leader. He indicates that he has specific conversations with his superintendent about being a principal, and that because she was a principal, she provides him with valuable insights. The Superintendent in his previous district changed under tumultuous circumstances during his two years there, thus there was not a great deal of influence upon Principal B.
Finally, the dissertation researcher asked Principal B if anything was missed within the interview that could help with understanding his perspective on the “rural phenomena”, if it does indeed exist. Principal B responded, “I think it takes a certain person to understand “ruralness” – I have connections in the community because I grew up in a community like this one. He mentioned that the high school principal grew up in a city, and it has taken him longer to understand the rural culture.

Principal B went on to indicate that people “talk shop” in the community, and he can relate to that having grown up on a farm. He then related this to board of education members. “When board members speak at a board meeting, they speak about what they are most comfortable with – it’s about the sewer system of the school if they are in construction. It’s rare for some board members to really get into any type of educational talk, because they don’t know enough about it. It’s not a bad thing, just what it is.”

Continuing, he said, “To talk the talk with what they are most comfortable is an important thing. Those are the values of the community too. There is still talk about some of the small farms that are left around here, and what to do with the farmland. Those are important things to know. Why they wouldn’t ant to give that land up to development...you need to understand that.”

Principal B concluded by stating that he believes not every administrator would be successful in District A because they would not fit in, and just would not be able to adapt.

*Focus Group Interviews for Principal B*
Two focus groups were held for Principal B. The faculty group consisted of four teachers, and the support staff group consisted of two teaching assistants. The Focus groups within school B had similar expectations for their principal, as did the groups within School A. When identifying what they believe the principal’s theories of action and actions should be, the priorities identified were: Know the requirements and be sure that they are met; know the faculty on a personal level; conduct relevant faculty meetings; have good people skills and listen to everyone; and trust adults in the school.

Almost identical to the focus group interview for Principal A, when speaking about relationships with parents, the groups identified that the effective principal helps teachers reinforce issues with parents, “such as emphasizing homework and coming to school every day.” This appears to be a perspective that is similar throughout the schools within District A.

The group described that their definition of “rural” is that the district is made up of small towns. They describe that the circumstances of kids’ lives are tough (pockets of poverty). They stated that in their view, the activities at school are the center of the life of kids and families. Long bus rides to get to school were also cited as a “condition” of rural life.

Focus group participants described District A as rural, and characterized it as follows. “Kids get to be kids here. Families are involved. Parents want their kids to have a successful school experience, but they are not “thinking around the corner. They [parents] don’t necessarily think about how that school experience will contribute to success later in life.”
Additionally: “It’s not a given that kids here will go to college. Their parents, and grandparents went to this school. Kids see their own potential differently.” The member who made the final comment suggested that the brightest students do not necessarily believe that they can compete outside of their school and community. It was also cited that there are “lots of teachers” in District A that grew up within the community.

The groups spoke to their view of the effective principal and indicated that previous professional experience is important. Groups stated that they believe a principal should serve as a classroom teacher in order to be able to become a principal. It was also stated that the principal should have a broad knowledge of both curriculum and students. They stated that the principal has to keep an eye on requirements as well as “an ear to the ground.”

**Brief Summary**

The Superintendent in District A ruled out “rural” as a special influence or context. Her leadership orientation is not exclusively local. Her vision extends beyond the local, rural setting serving as the place-based home for her district.

Moreover, Superintendent A has considerable influence over the two principals’ theories of action and their school improvement plans overall. This influence began when she hired them, i.e., her principals are hand-picked. It has continued in part by explicit designs. For example, the Superintendent’s emphasis on “aligned acts of improvement” has the effect of creating shared goals and directions for both principals and their schools. In the same vein, the Superintendent’s emphasis on preparing students for 21st Century realities with priorities for 21st Century skills influences both
principals. The provision of a coach for these principals also is an example of district-level influence attributable to the superintendent.

Principal A differed from Principal B in that his experience prior to becoming a principal was as a school psychologist. He did not serve as a classroom teacher. He explained that this was an issue that needed to be overcome with some of his faculty, who were concerned, as he hadn’t “walked in their shoes.” Principal A described how he developed greater knowledge and appreciation for the work of classroom teachers – both through presence in classrooms, as well as by working closely with a former district administrator who was a National Board Certified teacher, and willing to share both knowledge and perspective with him. The Focus group of teachers and student support professionals appreciated Principal A’s background, as they commended his sensitive and insightful interactions with the students in the building. They also suggested that Principal A’s background was helpful in addressing some of the adult interaction dynamics within the school.

Principal B is similar to Principal A in total number of years served as a principal. Whereas Principal A actually attended school for a couple of elementary grades within District A, Principal B attended a rural school district, but not District A. However, he cited having grown up in a rural community, and how that experience is helpful to him particularly when interacting with board of education members, as he is familiar with their rural context. Focus groups commended his understanding of parents. Teacher participants within the focus group also commented on Principal B’s efforts to get grade levels and teams to be more consistent in their instructional approach.
Chapter 5

District B and Its Leaders’ Theories of Action

District B is located in a rural area of New York State, approximately 45 miles away from any metropolitan or small city area. The district spans three different counties. There are nine towns that comprise the district. The majority of the nine towns have no businesses within them. District B spans approximately 165 square miles. The major industry within the area is tourism.

For the period of 2001-2010, the poverty rate for all ages in District B’s largest county grew from 1.4% to 15.6%. Inside this dramatic increase are several fluctuations. For example, the rate decreased by nearly 2% from 2009 to 2010 and it grew by nearly 3% between 2008 and 2009. There was also an increase of 2.1% between 2005 and 2006.

Notably, the percent of children age 0-17 in the county ranged from 18.6% to 24.2% in the same period of 2001-2010. The rate rose from 19.8% to 22.3% from 2005 to 2006, and from 22.6% to 24.4% from 2008 to 2009.

District B is classified as a rural school district with approximately 1900 students. It is located in a county of approximately 55,531 residents. The district is comprised of four schools. It has one elementary school spanning grades K-2 with approximately 450 students, and another elementary school spanning grades 3-5 with some 400 students. The one middle school spans grades 6-8 with approximately 450 students, while the high school spans grades 9-12 with approximately 600 students.
Each of the principals of the two elementary schools and the middle school has sole responsibility for their school. In short, there are no assistant principals in any of these schools. The high school has a principal, an assistant principal/athletic director, as well as a dean of students.

During the 2009-2010 school year, no grade level in the district exceeded 180 students. The lowest number of students in any grade level during that year was in kindergarten, with 122 students enrolled. For the past five years, the entering kindergarten class has been progressively smaller than the graduating class of the previous spring.

The annual attendance rate across the district is consistently between 94 and 95%. In 2009-2010, the average class size in grades 1-6 was 22. The middle school average class size was 17 students. The average class size in the high school was 26 students.

There is little ethnic diversity within the district. 96% of students are white. 2% are Hispanic or Latino. 2% are Black or African American, and 1% Asian. During the 2009-2010 school year, 19% of the students were eligible for free lunch (364 of the 1900 students), 9% (164 students) were eligible for reduced-price lunch. These students’ needs signal poverty-related challenges.

The school-age special education classification rate for District B was 11.87% in the 2008-09 school year. The classification rate for similar schools and all schools was 12.3% and 13.2% respectively. In brief, District B has a slightly lower than average rate for special education classification. The Pre-K-2 building principal and the intermediate elementary principal both articulated an approach of not classifying
young children “too soon”, and targeting students with developmentally appropriate instruction.

During the 2009-2010 school year, 137 teachers were employed in the district: 8% possessed a Master’s Degree plus 30 hours or doctorate, and only 3% had fewer than three years’ experience. The newer teachers were spread nearly equally between the elementary and the high school level.

100% of the teachers within the district are classified as highly qualified under the NY state definition. The turnover rate of all teachers was 28% in 2008-09. The turnover rate includes teachers who retired during the identified school year. Many districts experienced larger-than-usual numbers of retirements during that year, given a state-sponsored retirement incentive. The district also employed 49 paraprofessionals during the 2009-2010 school year.

Under New York State classification, District B is an Average Need/Resource Capacity school district. The need/resource capacity index is a measure of a district’s ability to meet the needs of its student with local resources. The index is the ratio of the estimated poverty percentage to the Combined Wealth Ration. The Combined Wealth Ration is an index that represents two forms of wealth: income and property. The Combined Wealth Ratio is an index that allows district to be compared in terms of district wealth per pupil. So, the district’s classification means that District B is “in the middle” of the range of school districts throughout New York State in terms of the resources available (on paper). Per pupil expenditures provide in-depth data about how these resources were allocated.
The district’s fiscal report card for the 2008-2009 school year provides comparisons of individual schools across New York State. The report indicated general education expenditure per pupil was $7,114 ($13,994,135 instructional expenditure overall for 1,967 students). The special education expenditure per pupil was $17,394 ($4,122,263 expenditure overall for 237 students).

Comparisons with other districts highlight District B’s resources. The expenditures within the “similar district group” for the same school year were $9,645 per pupil for general education (District B’s was $7,114) and $25,558 per pupil for special education (versus $17,394 in District B). The expenditures for all school districts in New York State during the 2008-09 school year were $10,874 per pupil for general education and $26,551 per pupil for special education.

School District Performance

At the elementary/middle level, the following was the performance of students on the New York State assessments for the 2009-2010 school year:

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<tr>
<th>Exam</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percent at or Above Level 3</th>
<th>Percent at Level 4</th>
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<tr>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>52</td>
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The District did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for students with disabilities in the area of English Language Arts at the elementary/middle level for the 2009-2010 school year. If a district does not make AYP in English Language Arts at the elementary/middle levels for two consecutive years, then New York State places the district into “improvement status”. Though the scores were embargoed at the time of this writing, the middle school was notified that they did not make AYP in ELA for students with disabilities during the 2010-11 school year, and therefore was identified as a School in Need of Improvement (SiNi).

At the secondary level, 89% of students in the 2006 cohort (4-year graduate=Class of 2010) achieved the required score on the English Regents exam after four years of instruction, and 94% of the students achieved the required score on a Mathematics Regents exam. In 2010, 91% of general education students received a Regents diploma. 55% of those students received a Regents diploma with
Advanced Designation. 17% of Students with Disabilities (n=2) received a Regents diploma, none with Advanced Designation.  

During the 2009-10 school year, 7 general education students (1%) and 4 special education students (4%) dropped out of school. 84% of the students indicated that they intended to go to a 4 (36%) or 2-year (48%) college upon graduation from high school. Additionally, 11% (n=19) of students indicated they intended to go right to employment upon graduation. 2% of students indicated that they would be entering military service.

The achievement results of District B are similar to those of comparable schools within the “average needs” category at the elementary and middle school levels. Across New York State, there has been an historic “dip” in student scores on New York State assessments for grades 6-8. This decline is apparent when results obtained by the same students while in the elementary grades are compared to results obtained in grades 6-8. Typically, middle school results are not predictive of performance on state exams required at the high school.

The percent of students receiving a Regents Diploma with Advanced Designation is higher than that of comparable schools. In the same vein, the dropout rate for District B is lower than that of comparable schools. Both sets of data provide strong indicators of District B's accomplishments with students at the high school level. A notably different (higher) result for District B when compared to similar schools is in the area of Career and Technical Education (CTE) Programs. Of the 26 students that completed a CTE program, 24 or 92% of the students completed and
attained a high school diploma. The average for all of New York State in this category is 78%.

**Superintendent B**

Superintendent B is 43 years old. He was born and raised within the District B community. He went away to attend college, later returning to the community upon graduation. He began as a teacher. Later he became a principal before becoming Assistant Superintendent within the district. He was appointed superintendent approximately four years ago.

*Leadership Orientations*

When speaking about aspirations that he holds for the students within his district, Superintendent B states that his views differ from those of his building administrators. He clarifies that statement indicating, “My views differ because I have literally spent 43 years of my life in this community. I understand—my parents live down the hill from the high school. Both are retired and living on Social Security. I am the only educated person in my extended family.”

Moreover: “I have a better understanding of the community than I believe that my building administrators do, which is not a “hit” on them, but I believe that the demographics that we live within is very important when considering what our expectations are for our kids.” Additionally: “Aside from the fact that I want every student to graduate, to achieve all the levels that the state and federal government say they should, I’m talking more about aligning our beliefs of what a [District B] graduate is with the customs and traditions of the [District B] community.”
Throughout the interview, Superintendent B referred to his roots within this rural community. He relates his first-hand understanding to his expectations for everyone who works within the district. He directly discusses the community context when reflecting upon his work with and supervision of building principals. His frame of reference is apparent in the sections that follow.

**Superintendent’s Perspective on Principal’s Overall Theory of Action**

Superintendent B hired just one of the principals currently serving within the district. Superintendent B was the principal of the primary school before he moved into his first District Office position. The current principal of the primary elementary school followed the current Superintendent as principal of her school.

Superintendent B articulates a strong belief regarding the difference between leadership and administration. He states that when he became the Superintendent he told his principals, “You need to be a leader.” When asked what that means, Superintendent B stated, “The best quality of a leader is that when the going gets tough, the staff will follow you through whatever it takes to get through it.” He also indicates that it is his expectation that the principals will exhibit leadership skills that recognize the balance between the management of the building and the instructional leadership component of a building.

The dissertation investigator asked Superintendent B about whether or not he differentiates his expectations for each principal, and if so, how does that work. Superintendent B responded, “I do. Part of that is by virtue that state assessments are not being offered in the K-2 building. I work with the principal of the K-2 building to have her bridge the gap between the two elementary buildings. I expect
her to work with the staff to keep them from working differently because there are no state assessments to which they are accountable. The pre-K-2 building may have the most important job in creating the foundation for all to come...and Principal A as a leader needs to keep the staff in the game."

Additionally: “The state assessments have had for me a pretty clear line on how I should be working with each of the administrators. We struggled at the middle school with our math and ELA scores- we’re just not happy with them. My work with the intermediate elementary principal has been about understanding the learner coming up from the K-2 building- emergent readers, reading at instructional levels, etc.”

The investigator posed the following questions: “When you have the principals all together, do you use particular strategies because you know each of them? And how do you pull from them to stretch their own growth in addition to the growth of the group at large?”

Superintendent B stated that this has been a learning process for him as a young superintendent. He stated that he meets with his leadership team every week for between 3 and 4 hours. He said, “What I learned, and it took a while, is that they all have varying view on their responsibilities as building administrators. The middle school principal loves management—I’ve got to get him to understand the importance of instructional leadership. The high school principal was the high school health teacher. I worked with her. I’m now working with people who helped me get to where I’m at...I felt I needed to be aggressive to show them I’m here for a reason. I’ve learned that it was not necessary.”
Superintendent B says that he places importance on the qualities of leadership. Given that, he selects a group of books, different for each principal, and as part of their evaluation, each principal reads a book a month, and writes a reflection that is submitted to the Superintendent. Superintendent B joined an early childhood association along with the primary school principal, believing that she needed to become more fluent in the work of developing emergent readers. He states that he strives to model the behaviors that he would like to see in his principals.

Superintendent B states that leadership development should be differentiated. “Part of this comes from my understanding of my building administrators’ backgrounds,” says Superintendent B. “Principal A is a high school counselor by training. Principal B at the intermediate school was a high school English teacher, and has never taught in an elementary classroom. Both are fantastic leaders, both have very different qualities to bring to the table. I think that’s what makes us lean on each other.”

As Superintendent B considered a question about his principals’ time allocation, he began to focus in on his thoughts about instructional guidance of the principals. His responses are organized under core-themes-as-headings (from Bryk, et al. 2010), starting with instructional guidance.

*Instructional Guidance*

Superintendent B indicates that he began the 2011-12 school year by challenging his principals. “I told them I wanted them to actually keep track of how much they are actually working on instructional leadership, and how much time on
management issues.” He indicates that in a summer series of planning meetings, “We agreed that the quality of our schools will be reflected in our instructional leadership and not necessarily in our management.”

The Superintendent elaborated in describing how a new initiative designed to help the principals focus in on instructional leadership began. The leadership team was working with their BOCES Network team on principal Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) training. Superintendent B indicates that within conversation at the training, “We agreed that we need to do more classroom walk-throughs, and that in doing that we agree that least 50% of the day that was previously spent sitting in the office doing management, would be spent doing walk-throughs.” He continued, “I said our goal this year is that 75% of your day [principals] will be spent out of the office working with staff- whether at a team meeting, in a classroom, sitting and observing student learning, meeting with departments...but you are going to leave no more than 25% of your day to the management of your building.”

While viewing a video the superintendent acquired for the team to learn about conducting effective walkthroughs, the team saw the School Administration Manager (SAM) model in action. This led the team to have conversation about whether implementing the model would assist the principals in strengthening their instructional leadership. Superintendent B believes that providing SAMs in the buildings will contribute to the goal of greater instructional leadership from the principals. In this view, SAM is a theory of action in its own right.
During his interview, Superintendent B told this investigator, “This month [December, 2011] we are going to be hiring administrative assistants for our buildings. Believe it or not, my building administrators were not necessarily in favor of it. They are unsure about, I think, because some think that asking a teacher to be in a role that might seem to be superior to their colleagues might not be a good thing to do. It doesn’t have to be a teacher; it could be an administrative assistant that has a broad picture of what is going on in the building. The SAM won’t help with instructional process. It will help the administrator to better manage the building.”

He continued: “The only option I gave them was how many they wanted in their building, and how to implement in their building. I told them it was going to happen; after talking about it together and I felt comfortable that it could work. Principal A wants one for every grade level, Principal B wants two, Principal C wants one for each department, and the high school principal just wants one. There has to be an accountability that this person is working outside of the school day to earn their money. For the first year, I need a monthly report on what this person is doing...and relating it to how the principal is becoming a better instructional leader,” according to Superintendent B.

When asked how he would evaluate the progress made toward stronger instructional leadership, Superintendent B said, “That’s something I really have to...that’s the piece we are working on. I can tell you that one of the indicators for me- is the principal’s ability to get into the classrooms more. “

Another example of instructional guidance was provided when Superintendent B spoke of agreeing to allow the 3-5 building to purchase a reading
series for implementation. “I’m not a fan of purchasing one series to lean on – teachers need to realize that it is a resource, not the curriculum,” said Superintendent B.

Moreover: “A trainer came with the series. I gave her a list of things that should be worked on with the 3-5 principal. She would work with him for a couple of days at a time, then meet with me before she went home, and provide me with an unbiased opinion as to how Principal B was becoming a better instructional leader.” Superintendent B also cited the following; “I get the minutes from all meetings. I’m looking for discussion items – do I feel the discussion items are in line with what the principal should be doing as a 3-5 building administrator.”

Another source of instructional guidance comes from the Superintendent’s decision to purchase 20 days’ worth of consulting time from a professor of reading from a college that is within 2 hours of District B. The professor works within every building in the district, and collaborates with the principals as they identify their priorities related to literacy. Several of the principals commented within their interview about how helpful this resource has been to them.

Superintendent B indicated that he had the “ability and the luxury” to mold his principals into what he wanted them to be as leaders. He stated, “One of those qualities was that in creating change, you have to create-buy in. There has to be trust. The staff has to trust that what you are doing is right for the children and for them. You don’t gain trust until you’ve empowered staff.” He then said, “I purposely asked the principals to create common planning time in teacher schedules, and to find common time for department to meet during the day. That has been a
challenge.” Superintendent B’s thoughts then began to shift into various aspects of climate—both for adults as well as students, which is the next theme to be examined.

**Student Centered Learning Climate**

The investigator asked Superintendent B directly, “What are your principals’ expectations of a positive student learning climate?” He quickly responded that this is an issue with which there are struggles, particularly between the K-2 principal and the 3-5 principal. He elaborated, “I believe that the K-2 principal expects there to be a very strong, nurturing learning environment. Sometimes to a fault, she will probably promote that more than she will promote independent learning ability.” He explained that then when the children transition to the intermediate school, the staff is attempting to teach and promote independence, and students being responsible for their learning. “You can see the challenge that we have – there are differing views there,” Superintendent B reflected.

The approach that Superintendent B is taking can be described as follows. “I am meeting with the staff of both buildings tomorrow afternoon to discuss this issue. I want every one of my teachers, regardless of what grade to be providing our students with strategies on how to work through the struggles they are having. If they can’t decode a word, there are ways to work through that. We’re not teaching that now. Principal B (3-5 building) is not, because he doesn’t know enough to teach it. Principal A is not teaching it because she doesn’t believe that they should be independent. So, as the Superintendent I have to step in and set forth a plan on how it is that we are going to correct that. I had hoped that within four months (from the start of this school year) that the principals would correct that together through my
discussions with them, but it hasn’t happened. I failed to get them to recognize how important the concept is. If Principal A were offering a state assessment, her view of the importance of independence might be very different. It’s interesting what state assessments do to the nurturing environment…”

*Developing Teachers’ and Other Staff Members’ Capacity and Commitments*

The investigator asked Superintendent B the following, “When you talk about hiring SAMs, scheduling collaborative time for grade level teams and departments, etc. it sounds as though you are developing intentional structures of distributed leadership…what is your role in helping your principals to see the development of the capacity of others as being an important part of their job?” Superintendent B referred back to the development of leaders through reading about leadership, and then added, “I wanted them to move from top-down decision making to more decentralized decision-making at the building level.”

Superintendent B states that creating structures does not necessarily lead to the desired behaviors, including accountability. He said, “I told them I had to see minutes and agendas of the meetings. I’d walk into a first grade team meeting that was scheduled from 8:15-9:00. What I’d see was that one teacher came in at 8:15, another at 8:30 because she was making copies. I was telling myself that this was not the intent of team meetings. There is a learning process to break down the barriers that would lead to better discussion. We’ve created a higher expectation that there doesn’t always have to be a leader in the room to get things done. As time moves forward with limited resources, one of the most important qualities the principals need to have is how to empower their staff.”
Several times within his interview, Superintendent B mentioned that the high school principal in District B is the most “advanced” all of the team members. She is also the most senior administrator on the team. He describes this principal as being the most proactive of all of the principals. He also states that the high school principal is the most reflective, both in-action and on-action.

Then the investigator asked, “If you had the opportunity to work with the other three principals for the next fifteen years, would you anticipate that they would lead much the way the high school principal does now?” Superintendent B responded, “I do. It’s something that we have talked about quite a bit. We haven’t yet come up with a formal evaluation of it.”

He continued by explaining that he works differently with each of the principals. He meets with the principal of the 3-5 building once a week in a meeting that is formally established. Superintendent B indicated that this principal asked for these meetings, and needs them. He stated that there is no such regularly scheduled individual meeting with the other administrators— that meetings take place with them individually as needed.

Superintendent B provided an important insight that he realized during the past summer. He said, “One of the things I learned is that I would tend to respond to something that any team member would say before another team member said anything. I learned not to do that. I learned that I was not allowing them to grow or see differing views on any particular subject when I infuse my opinion as the Superintendent. I was holding them back by speaking before them.”

Parent-Community Ties
Superintendent B is very clear in his expectation that the principals be responsive and available to parents and the community. He mentioned that only one of the four principals live within the district. He also said that he does not believe that principals' residences matter one way or another.

Superintendent B has other priorities within the arena of parent-community ties. “I never want a building administrator to turn away a parent when the parent has a question, concern, congratulations or whatever. This is not cliché. It is more important now than ever because we rely on parent support for budgets. It is also a time when trust is dwindling with community members and taxpayers.”

Superintendent B indicated that both elementary schools have Morning Program (a school-wide assembly that celebrates successes, provides forum for students to learn to speak in public, and invites parents and community members to enjoy each assembly with the children.) He elaborated by indicating that it is not just important for elementary schools to hold such assemblies, but that he expects his principals to be visible at if not run those events. “Because I was a building administrator for seven years, I recognize what positive things can come from the principal being on stage with little kids- making a fool of himself, dancing and doing those things. You gain a lot. It helps to gain trust that you are just like the parents sitting and watching the program.”

Superintendent B also indicated that it is his expectation that his principals attend Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings that are held one evening per month. “My principals did not feel the need to be at PTO meetings – sometimes they still don’t. That very quickly became and expectation of mine. You have to be at PTO
meetings, you have to be at “Breakfast with Santa”...that is your time to be visible and represent the district. It takes me back a little bit that I have to take the time to explain that to my leaders.” He indicated that it was something that he had to be vigilant about, so that the principals were clear on his expectations.

The interview moved to an examination of whether the principals are able to link such events and activities to the academic goals of each school and the district overall goals for students. Superintendent B indicated that there is still a range of ability amongst the principals to make the link. He also stated that the team has created parent forums. The forums are not held solely at budget time. The forums are intended to discuss upcoming topics. Equally important, they are intended to work with parents to “gain their trust.” Superintendent B states that the forums have helped to ease the transition between the Pre-k-2 school and the 3-5 schools.

When speaking about seeking feedback from parents and the community, Superintendent B said, “The principals were initially reluctant to seek feedback. It was all new to them. Previous superintendents did not see it as a strong need. Since I am coming from the community, I could see that it is an important thing to do.”

Reflection on Action

Superintendent B states that, in his view, most often his principals are reflecting post-action or after-the-fact. He attributes this to the relative lack of experience of each administrator within the position of principal. He asserts that as they become more fluent with reflection, they will start to do it while in action.

Superintendent B described a special situation that has import for this study. A few years ago, Principal A made a decision about a change in her building, based
primarily on work that she had done with two new teachers in the building.

“Principal A worked with two new teachers that happened to gain her attention. She did not recognize the importance of leaning on the power players in her building throughout the process. Principal A lost a considerable amount of trust with long-standing members of her staff that had served on influential committees. Principal A did not recognize the importance of at least having these people at the table when the discussions were taking place.”

The Superintendent asserts that Principal A did not learn from that experience, as he still receives feedback (two years after this event) that she does not do enough to engender buy-in within the building. He states, "I've got to find a way to have Principal A understand the importance of having the important people at the table when making a decision that is going to impact the larger building. I've told her that to gain trust she must get into the classrooms more. I told her that her teachers recognize that she was not a teacher (she was a high school guidance counselor prior to becoming a principal), and it matters. I have made a subliminal effort to move her in this area, and it hasn't really been effective."

The investigator asked the Superintendent whether his view of the role of the principal has changed during his tenure as a superintendent. He states that his view has changed. “The change is mostly in regards to my belief that the principals have an obligation to meet community expectations. I expect that they build trust with the community, be in contact with the community, and promote the good and no-so-good that is happening in our buildings. That has changed dramatically since I became Superintendent. Monthly newsletters, automated phone calls about events,
and working directly with the Communications Specialist to regularly communicate the good things that are happening, are all expectations that I now hold for building principals – in an effort to continue to gain the trust of the community members. That did not happen four years ago.”

When asked if his principals have improved during his tenure, the Superintendent responded, “The principals have improved as instructional leaders without a doubt. That has been my focus and their focus. Besides that, they have improved as leaders. That’s important to me. They have improved in recognition about how what they do every day impacts the three other buildings. In some cases they were competing against each other previously, and now they are working together.”

The Principals

Interviews with each principal were structured by important questions such as these. Are there special features in your rural school context that influence your role and responsibilities as principal? What specific student achievement outcomes or benefits are you after? As you reflect, are there beliefs or philosophies that you hold about being an effective principal that are unchanged since you began as a principal? How do the superintendent and his approach influence principals? Findings follow.

Findings are presented under themes-categories covered in the interview. As a reminder, these themes/categories were derived from Bryk, et al (2010). As in the previous chapter, these categories are: Principal leadership, instructional
leadership, parent-community ties, professional capacity, student-centered learning climate, and instructional guidance.

**Principal A**

K-2 Elementary Principal A is serving in her 7th year as principal of her school. Prior to becoming the principal, she was a high school counselor, grades 9-12 for 7 years. District B is the only district to which Principal A applied to become a principal. When queried as to whether she envisions moving to any other administrative position, she indicated that she has no intention to do so. However, she recognizes that tight budgets may lead to administrative reduction within District B, so she is “prepared to be moved.”

This principal’s Pre-K-2 elementary school has approximately 450 students enrolled, including the Pre-Kindergarten students. The school is co-located on the same campus with the High School. This physical arrangement contributes to opportunities provided to high school students to work with elementary students who are learning to read. Over time, some staff members have transferred between the Pre-K-2 school and the 3-5 elementary school.

**Principal’s Overall Theory of Action**

When asked what she believes are indicators of a successful early elementary school, Principal A responded, “The children want to come to school, there are strong home-school connections, and the school builds foundations of literacy.” Principal A immediately followed by speaking about Morning Program. She indicates that Morning Program is held three days per week at School A. Families are invited to attend. Principal A states that Morning Program provides the opportunity to build
and strengthen community. Principal A also stated, “This may be the last year that we will be able to have it three days a week.”

Principal A continuously referred to the new requirements from the District Office or New York State’s Education Department. In her view, these requirements may force changes to traditions within the building. Significantly, she does not view these changes as beneficial to the school or the students.

Principal A stated that she believes all teachers in a primary elementary school are teachers of reading. As such, she says that they need professional development to increase their knowledge about teaching reading. She indicated that there has historically been significant professional development opportunities offered the week after the students are released for the summer. She also said, “As of late, there are more things occurring during the school year.” Principal A cited that there are five half-days built into the district calendar specifically for professional development opportunities.

Principal A states that she typically works a 10-hour day. When asked how she would categorize her time usage, she identified the following areas: Lead Morning Program; wandering the halls; Walkthroughs (“The superintendent has required us to do these) – 1 hour per day. Then in the afternoons: Child Study Team meetings; and Team meetings every other week.

Principal A indicated that she would prefer to spend more time greeting students and parents each morning, more time with parents in general, and more time “with kids than observing program.” Because of the new requirement for classroom walkthroughs, she has less time “just being” with students.
Principal A mentioned that the administrative team meets in the summer. Items such as the district calendar, major initiatives, and requirements are all part of the agenda during that meeting. It is a time for the team to attempt to insure that they are “all going in the same direction.” She states that focusing on priorities is helpful to her.

Principal A indicates that a good amount of time was spent during the past Summer on examining and considering the implications of the Common Core Learning Standards. Use of data was also a priority item for discussion and planning. Principal A indicates that the meetings are helpful to her, although sometimes the team gets sidetracked. She said that sometimes conversation becomes more philosophical, which does not lead to specific outcomes. She stated that she believes that the highest priority for the elementary level is to focus on guided reading.

*Instructional Guidance*

Principal A indicated that currently all of the teachers in her building are tenured. She stated that her faculty is “Passionate about kids and the work.” At the same time, Principal A said that there is so much new research and literature that has surfaced since many of her teachers received their degree. Principal A stated, “All teachers need to learn more.”

She asserts that curriculum maps are not up to date throughout the district. She suggested that this is representative of what she sees to be a pattern of “getting sidetracked.” The curriculum maps were a priority when they were first created. No longer a priority today, they are getting outdated.
When asked what strategies she employs to help her teachers learn and move forward, Principal A said, “Discussion is extremely helpful. What has not worked is the “turnkey approach,” i.e. one or two teachers are sent to training, and then are expected to return to the building and train the rest of the teachers. With this approach, it is hard for teachers to “step out from the pack” and learn from their colleagues in the way that the turnkey approach would require.” Principal A states that four years ago she was able to hire a literacy coach. The position has been recently lost due to budget constraints.

*Student-Centered Learning Climate*

Principal A is very committed to the development of a positive learning climate within her school. She constantly referred within her interview to the benefits of activities such as Morning Program. This program enables the school to come together on a regular basis and celebrate and strengthen the community.

Principal A meets with the Child Study Team on a regular basis. Along with the principal, this team consists of the school nurse, counselor, psychologist, and other pupil service providers as necessary. The principal describes relying upon the social worker and school psychologist that are both assigned to her building for both supporting students directly, as well as supporting teachers in their efforts to do so.

Principal A spoke about the importance of getting to know every child and their parents/guardians. She wants her students to like school, and to want to come to school. She indicated that she forming these relationships as an important part of the foundation that is built within a K-2 school. She asserts that it will help the students to be successful throughout their school career.
Developing Teachers’ and other Staff Members’ Capacity and Commitments

In this part of the interview, Principal A spoke about “tension” that has historically and apparently continues to exist between her K-2 school, and the 3-5 elementary school. She repeated more than once, “It’s about the students.” She started to clarify some of the issue in saying, “There are things going on related to adults.” However, it was difficult to get extensive elaboration about this statement.

Principal A indicated that there have been historic differences in beliefs and approaches between the two elementary schools. She was not clear about the specifics of the dynamics between the administrators of the two schools during the time period she was referencing.

Principal A indicated that she and the principal of the 3-5 school get along well. She also indicated that they have different backgrounds and different approaches. Previously, the 3-5 school “lobbied for” and was allowed to purchase a basal reading series, which appears to be in conflict with the philosophies of Principal A. However, she also stated multiple times, “They have state testing- we don’t.” Principal A also suggested that she believes there is a preference amongst teachers to work at the Pre-K-2 building rather than the 3-5 building. Some teachers have had to shift because of enrollment changes. “People were thinking that they must have done something wrong to be moved there.”

When asked about strategies to build the capacity of her faculty and staff, Principal A cited that the walkthroughs, even though required by someone else are helpful. She says that she will share observations she made during a walk-through with her teachers, and that they have found this to be helpful. Principal A also
suggested that when she sees an effective strategy being implemented in a
classroom, she attempts to get the teacher to first recognize the strategy, and then
share it with others..."without calling out individuals." Principal A did not reference
here intentional efforts at building the capacity and commitments of support staff
within her building.

*Lessons Learned from Reflection on Action*

This investigator asked Principal A what she has learned in her six years as
principal that she did not know when she began. In response, Principal A cited the
following: 1. Things will always keep changing; 2. She didn't know a great deal
about reading; 3. She didn’t realize that learning to read would be such a struggle for
some students; and 4. Her faculty doesn’t understand that learning to read is truly a
struggle for some students.

Principal A also indicated that she has made her expectations clear to her
faculty. She has told faculty that they are to follow the scope and sequence
developed for curricula, and that she expects them to monitor themselves...based on
what their students are doing. Principal A indicates that she does collect the
Benchmark reading scores from the teachers.

Principal A also indicated that both teachers and support staff influence her
thinking at times. She added, “I’m a person that sometimes has to indicate that
things will be done my way. I will acknowledge what I’ve heard others say.” She
indicated that she would review the notes that she has taken during walkthroughs
and uses them to reflect upon her actions and their impact across the building.
Principal A also stated that she thinks the administrative team is a “good team.” She stated that the Director of Special Education is a very knowledgeable individual, and that she and the other principals value her support and advice. Principal A said that each of her colleagues has a different background, and that the varying perspective that results is helpful to the team overall.

When reflecting upon the influence of her superintendent, Principal A stated, “He is very supportive.” He was the principal of this building, and his wife still teaches in this building. She stated that the superintendent is visible and accessible, and that she appreciates that he is available to her and the other principals when needed. Finally, Principal A reflected about learning within her position, “If you think you've finally “got it”, it’s time to move on.”

**Focus Group Interviews for Principal A**

Focus groups were not held within Principal A’s school, as there were not enough faculty or support staff willing to participate. As with all of the principals included in the study, Principal A preferred to send the letter from the researcher to her faculty and staff to seek their participation. Interested parties were instructed to contact the researcher directly. It is possible that Principal A did not promote participation to a great degree, thus explaining a lack of volunteers within her school.

**Principal B**

Principal B is serving in his third year as principal of his grade 3-5 elementary school. When he became the principal at School B, he had been serving as an assistant principal for a year. He also had seven years of high school English teaching experience, all within District B. Principal B indicates that as a former teacher of
English, he very much values communication. He emphasizes its importance – both in terms of expectations he holds for himself as well as for his faculty and staff.

School B is a school of approximately 400 students in grades 3-5. The building itself is “attached” to the middle school, and there are several shared spaces such as a cafeteria and gymnasiums. Principal B indicates that when he arrived at the school, he inherited an experienced teaching staff, many with 20 or more years of teaching experience. He suggests that this was a challenge, as he was a relatively young administrator, and had never worked within the level at which he became principal. More insights related to this challenge follow.

Principal’s Overall Theory of Action

When asked about his indicators of a successful school, Principal B was quick to provide several examples. The first was state test scores. He said, “To be quite honest with you, I would not have given that answer two years ago and that’s mainly because I believe that if we all do what we are supposed to do and the best we can do, our scores will reflect that. Sometimes they’ll be good and sometimes good is relative. Some years will be better than other years- there isn’t a score out there that would make me say that we are “good enough.” Principal B indicated that the community is looking at the scores, and he now receives more parent calls than ever before from parents wanting to discuss their child’s score.

The next indicator of success that Principal B identified was student engagement. The measure of student engagement varies for Principal B, from how students acknowledge him in the hallway, how they react when get enters their classroom for a walk-through, as well as whether or not he sees them engaged within
their classes. Principal B identified such things as students answering questions and asking questions within their class, as indicators that he looks for to “read” the level of student engagement. “It is not as easy to qualify, I guess,” says Principal B, “but it’s something that I can see when I walk into a classroom.”

Teacher input is another success indicator identified by Principal B. “I look at the level and content of teacher feedback, particularly on the things that are going well. Ultimately, no matter what the goal is on a piece of paper, if the teachers are not buying into it, it is a dead end.” Principal B asserts that he uses feedback from team meetings as well as faculty meetings in his decision-making. “I try to be as flexible as I can, while maintaining the certain strict expectations that I might have, that I can’t bend. I surround those with a lot of flexible expectations that provide me a little bit of leeway.”

The final indicator of success was that of the quality of interactions he has with parents. Principal B indicated that he had recently gone to the K-2 building to read to the students. While there, a parent had approached him. Within the conversation, she identified the intermediate school as a “hidden gem” within District B. “That is the kind of thing that I can’t write on my presentation to the board, but I’m going to tell my wife when I go home. It is one of those things that is hard to put on a continuum, but it is an understanding that I want to spread.” Principal B explained that because his building is not attached to the K-2 building, there is often parental concern for young children making a transition between schools. He stated that he tries to make connections with parents while their children are still attending the K-2 school, so that they have more confidence in him
and the building faculty when their child does get to grade 3. “To hear that parent tell me she thought our school is a gem says to me that we are making the right decisions here.”

The investigator asked Principal B about how many hours per day and week he works. He replied, “A 9-hour day is typical. A 10-hour day is expected [by the superintendent]. I do 10-hour days a couple of days per week. For example, today I won’t be going home until 10 pm at least- there is a board of education meeting tonight, and I am presenting.”

Principal B indicated that he typically arrives an hour earlier than the students, and he stays at work for at least an hour past when the students leave. “Anything beyond that is beyond that,” he states. When asked how he utilizes his time each day, Principal B said, “A big chunk of my time is spent in informal observations. Those are difficult to schedule into the day, but I do try to pick a day a week and go through all of a grade level...with varying success.” Continuing he said, “Another chunk of my time is spent on the communication piece.”

Principal B explained by stating that the time is spent communicating with parents, teachers and staff- whether via email, face-to-face meetings or through phone conversations. He also explained that he attempts to leave his door open most of the time. “My office is right next to the copy machine, so I can see a lot of teachers. They “pop in” regularly with a few things of varying importance depending on who you ask.”

This principal then stated that there are times when he has to close his door in order to “get things done.” One example was examination of data. “I am trying to
determine what to do with some data, which essentially boils down to arranging meetings with the teachers to look at data- that’s not something I do in isolation. I don’t want to pretend like I sit and crunch those numbers and then throw out my calculations...but I’m thinking about how to get the most use out of my teachers’ time when I do get some of their extra time.”

Finally, Principal B identified that a portion of his time is spent "kind of walking around" during the school day. He stated that during the first quarter he spends a large amount of time in the cafeteria, to help get things established. Additionally, he is checking to see how things are going overall in the school.

Principal B considered the question of whether he would utilize his time differently if he had total control over its utilization. He stated “I would probably spend more of my time or the bulk of my time inside the classrooms. That’s where I’ve learned the most.” This response enabled a transition to examination of Principal B’s beliefs about the provision of instructional leadership.

**Instructional Guidance**

Principal B stated that because his teaching experience was at the high school level, he has had to learn about effective approaches to literacy development at the intermediate elementary level. “I came from the secondary model. I’m not going to read a Fountas and Pinnell book. The book is not going to teach me what being in the classrooms will teach me. I could sit and read it, but I would not retain it in the way that I have from popping in and seeing the work. It is not the curriculum as much as the students’ reaction to our curriculum. I also get a real idea of where the teachers are coming from when they tell me about obstacles that they face daily. That’s where
I’ve learned the most, where I have the most fun, and what helps me build rapport with my teachers such that they know it is “no big deal” when they see me pop into their room. They know there is nothing to fear in it.”

For clarification, the investigator asked, “So essentially, these are classroom walk-throughs?” Principal B answered affirmatively. He said, “We did this as a leadership team this year. Basically, the superintendent insisted that we spend more time in classrooms. Collectively, we [the principals] decided that we should probably provide some sort of informal feedback. I pop in and write the teacher a note wherein I try to give as many supportive comments that I can think of, and when applicable, I’ll provide either a comment, a question or a suggestion.”

He also described a situation where he had completed a walkthrough, and left a note for the teacher. The teacher “tracked him down” as soon as she was able, to tell him that her word wall was above the windows, at an angle that the principal hadn’t been facing. Principal B asserted that the teachers know that he wants to see word walls, and was concerned that he would think she did not utilize the strategy. Principal B states, “That was a “huge” victory. It tells me that having the word wall is important to her as well as to me.”

The investigator then posed the following questions: “You said that you are much more driven by goals that have an instructional component to them- what are you after? What are you looking for in terms of instructional outcomes, and how does that guide what you do as a principal?”

Principal B replied, “Growth is the magic word for me- particularly with such an eclectic group of students. There’s always going to be multiple ways of looking at
progress, and there obviously isn’t a magic number that I’m looking for. The way that I look at it is that I need to encourage and instruct our teachers to take our weekly assessments and our formative assessment (provided within the Basal reading series) and use them to drive instruction.”

He elaborated in stating, “I’d just assume that teachers do not do all of the lessons within the reading book. So, I encourage them to wipe them out and do something more interesting. They swear that they do it, but it’s difficult [for me] to know for sure…” When asked if he collects teacher plan books, Principal B stated, “I do. To be perfectly honest with you, I look to see that they have a lot of skills, and I like to see small groups in there. But, I collect plan books because my boss tells me to.”

Principal B qualified the above by adding, “I shouldn’t say it’s not valuable [reading plan books]- there’s value in that the teachers might make them a little more comprehensive because they know I’m looking at it, but again, I think it’s a time consuming way and a less effective way to do what walkthroughs can do more effectively and efficiently. Walkthroughs are also a more interesting way for me.”

Principal B stated, “In my walkthroughs I like to see whole-group instruction as a piece of any curriculum, but I want to see students in groups of varying sizes and in some cases in groups prescribed by their ability. In other cases I want to see heterogeneous groupings, the difference being when we’re talking about skill building. I want to see students working at their skill level- in particular, guided reading.”
This began the transition to examination of the learning climate within School B. Insights regarding Principal B’s theories on the learning climate follow.

**Student-Centered Learning Climate**

This investigator asked Principal B, “What are the elements that you use to gauge the student-centered learning climate, both in terms of individual students and in the aggregate?” Principal B indicated that his classroom walkthroughs provide a great deal of information about the student-centered learning climate. He stated that he expects to see flexible groupings of students- in every classroom at every level. He also stated that implementation of flexible grouping has been a struggle for some of the more experienced teachers, as they may not have learned strategies for such grouping when they were in college.

Principal B stated that he has a reading teacher who recently received her degree. He says that she has many strategies for the teaching of reading, and that she is preparing materials for the teachers to “grab and go.” Principal B stated that he likes to see that kind of collaboration and peer assistance.

Principal B then commented upon the “larger” aspects of school climate and spoke about intentional character development. School B has a whole-school assembly two times per month on Wednesday afternoon for 45 minutes to an hour. The school used to have Morning Program on a daily basis, but has evolved to this model, as “I wanted more time in the mornings for instruction, and we also found it difficult to get students “settled” again after a 45 minute assembly right in the morning.”
Principal B described that the assembly contains classroom presentations, singing of songs, introduction of the character trait of the month, and opportunities to give awards to students. Administrators from across the district also attend and read stories throughout the year. “I call this “Community Connections”...we connect within our building and to the community outside the building. When we have our assemblies we invite the public. Parents can attend. This is for the District B community,” Principal B states.

Principal B runs the assembly. As he assumes this responsibility, he is able to provide time for teachers to collaborate and work together on project-based learning. “My expectation is that the whole community promotes comfort- I want these students to recognize the teachers in the building, and I want them to get used to working with a variety of people. It is also a chance to let parents come in and see that too...to get a sense besides what they hear on the soccer sidelines.”

In speaking about the district’s organizational climate, Principal B commented that he believes the climate has changed in the past three years since he became the principal. “I’ve seen a huge improvement. I’m not going to claim credit for it, but I think when I came here there was a real sense of “us vs. them” that was created by previous administrators [referring to the 3-5 building in relation to the other three schools within District B.] I like to think of us as a team in terms of all four buildings working together.

The previous principal might have implied “They’re doing it wrong. Or he might have justified things that were done in the building by saying, “Who cares what happens to the students when they leave here.” We do not badmouth or bash
another building. If you feel that way, that’s your business, but if you make it your business within the school, then we are going to have business within my office...those conversations are unacceptable. People get it.”

Again focusing on the climate within his building, Principal B stated, “We are testing student every year that they are in this school – it’s a lot of accountability on our shoulders. We’ll get criticized sometimes for the tests we do beyond the state assessments [reference to the K-2 building perspective]. Frankly, I tell them to mind their own business because we need to do it – we need to prepare our students for the NYS assessments, which are now 4 hours long in some cases. I do think that the teachers have felt over the years a lot of additional stress because in this building it’s “test, test, test” and it’s very easy to then put a microscope on us looking at the test results. That’s a contributing factor to the ill will. The new APPR is not going to help that.”

The issues raised by Principal B related to the testing of still-young children, and the stress that accountability is putting on individuals and school systems are widespread. District B is not unique in their description of how school and district climate appears to be negatively impacted by these issues. The middle school (Building C) was identified as a School in Need of Improvement (SiNi) based on performance results of NYS assessments taken during the 2010-11 school year. Principal B spoke of this “identification.” In his words: “The middle school being “tagged” impacts me a great deal. I’m not just close in proximity but because Principal C is a friend of mine inside and outside of work. I recognize that the 6th grade doing poorly falls more on my shoulders than on his, mainly because I had
them for three years, to his one. What effects the middle school effects this
intermediate school. Our victories we share, and our defeats we share. The teachers
here know that I feel that way, and they also feel that way. I know it for a fact, and I
know that my teachers read the honor rolls when they come out. They want to see
our strong students continuing their success.”

Illuminating his thoughts about culture, Principal B said, “In particular with
special education, the area for which we were identified, that’s a department that is
only a few people per building and speaking to the department head, I know it’s a
scope across the district. I don’t ever refer to students as a number, but just the
thought that certain kids can’t be successful is not an idea that we subscribe to here.”

*Developing Teachers’ and Other Staff Members’ Capacity and Commitments*

Principal B spoke about the relationship between building the master
schedule, and developing his faculty and staff expertise. He indicated that time is
built into the schedule to allow teachers to meet together on a regular basis. He
looks to his team leaders to make those meetings productive and efficient. Principal
B also indicated that he has done the schedule for the building TA’s (Teaching
Assistants) differently each year since he became the principal. “That’s because of
the feedback that I’ve gotten. We have TAs that are not just willing but are highly
capable of effecting change, and working with students in appropriate ways to help
them achieve. I need to be sure that I provide the means to make that happen. Now I
give them the time block, and they figure out how to use it with the teachers with
whom they collaborate. This gives everyone some ownership and ability to work in
the most effective way, which keeps them motivated and working together.”
Additionally, Principal B addressed how hiring new staff fits into the realm of building capacity and commitment. “These days when a position opens, the application stack is huge. I look to the people who have been in substitute positions, as then I can see if they are the “real deal”. I suggest to local people who want to get “in” that they should consider subbing. The ones who don’t take me up on the suggestion to start subbing are scared- for whatever reason. It makes the decision that much easier because it is one less person to talk to.”

Influence of Colleagues/Supervisors

The investigator asked Principal B, “Does your relationship with your fellow principals influence your thinking or your actions?” Principal B quickly responded, “Definitely. As the rookie of the group, I value their feedback.” When asked if fellow principals provided him specific feedback, he said, “There are some that will. Principal C and I will typically call [superintendent]- there are certain topics that I look to certain individuals for, and others that I don’t.” Principal B then stated, “I know the high school principal well because I worked under her for seven years. That gives me a grasp on the things she can help me with and the things with which she might not be as helpful. I look to Principal A quite a bit- she’s a bookworm. She’s excellent at sharing her knowledge.”

Principal B said the following about the whole team working together, “We all have our “to do list” in the day...sometimes a fellow principal has something to deliver say about the Common Core. I am not going to stop her from delivering it, but there are going to be times when I say, “I wish I had gotten a heads up so I could
use common language on the topic.” It’s not an issue, but it concerns me. " Principal B explained that the faculty meetings are not held on the same day across the district. When speaking about the administrative team working together with the superintendent, Principal B reflected, “If I could make changes it would be that often-times we get together and we commiserate about what is happening globally, where more often I’d rather sit an come up with a plan of attack that I think requires the superintendent’s leadership to really make happen, because he’s the one with our common vision and our common goals that need to line up.”

He then said, “There are times when I would just like an action plan, and my role within it defined, and then go make it happen. That’s a tough one that I battle with, because I don’t want the superintendent to be micromanaging. I’ll manage things in my building, however there are things that go beyond this building. To make them line up we really do need the superintendent to move them. Sometimes that happens and sometimes it does not.”

Principal B spoke about the Superintendent’s influence on his thinking and action. He stated, “He’s been a tremendous help to me. More than anything it is the way that he has done it. He creates an environment where we can lower our guard a bit and speak frankly about what is happening. He’s been very generous with his time. It’s definitely helped me to get to a point where I’m at in my career in terms of my comfort level in my building and getting the transition to being an elementary principal down. Now I’m “down”, but it was challenging. If he was less understanding or he was somebody different, I probably wouldn’t have even taken
the job. It was my understanding of him and recognizing his expectations of me that made me think that even if I make a few mistakes, I’ll be o.k.”

*Lesson Learned from Reflection on Action*

This investigator asked Principal B, “How much of the experiences that you had growing up in a rural school, then teaching and being a principal in a rural school have been influenced by the context of a rural school...what does that really mean to you?” Principal B responded directly. “It has been a complete and total influence on me. What I learned from a rural district is the connections that I've made. Not in a networking sense, but that the people I'm closest to today are the people that I grew up with. The benefit of District B, even with class sizes of 27 in the fifth grade, is that these kids will know each other very well when they graduate high school, and those connections are everything. You are not going to succeed academically if you don’t have some comfort and you don’t take some risks. If you don’t know the people around you...if you are not familiar with their expectations or who they are...you might never reach outside of your comfort zone. For me at the core, it’s those relationships that we build. The superintendent too – he’s from here- he knows. It’s just dawning on me...”

Finally, when thinking about the biggest thing that he knows now that he did not when he became a principal nearly three years ago, Principal B said, “Being in the classrooms has had the biggest impact for me and has created the most comfort for me. It has taken me to the next level where I can say that I know...because I walked in and saw it. I spent too much time worrying about books that I should be reading to try to figure this [the principalship] out, when I should have been “popping in.”
It’s seeing it and the reaction/conversations that occur afterwards. I can lead this one toward another so that they can work together. They’ll take suggestions from their co-workers before they’ll take them from me. I’m always trying to encourage people to work together.”

*Focus Group Interviews for Principal B*

Focus groups were held with both a faculty group and a support staff group within Principal B’s school. The timing of the scheduling of the focus groups may have impacted both participation as well as actual conversation. The day that focus group meetings were held, layoff notices had been distributed to more than 30 teaching faculty. None had yet been distributed to support personnel, but the participants indicated they believed there would be layoffs of support personnel.

Both faculty groups began with a discussion about what they see as indicators of the successful principal. Participants stated that the administrators are “now” talking to one another across the district. This was exemplified in the statement, “With the middle school being a “School in Need of Improvement”, it is clear that the intermediate (3-5) elementary is coordinating more with the middle school, and the middle school is coordinating more with the high school.” The implication is that the enhanced dialogue between buildings will serve the students.

From the unified focus, each group moved in a slightly different direction. The layoff notices demonstrably agitated teachers in School B. One commented, “It’s only February, and layoff notices have gone out. It puts stress on the people involved. It is hard to stay positive for five more months, when you know that you
are losing your job.” (One member of this group divulged that she has received her termination notice.)

“The rest of us are stressed because we know that next year we will be “doing this” with 30+ kids,” stated one teacher. “We are still working to create an atmosphere that is positive for the children,” said another. Another stated, “Our principal is feeling the pressure because he is new. He has talked to each person who got a pink slip. They got letters at home telling them that they will likely be gone. Previously, people were pulled out of their classroom while teaching, told they were targeted for layoff, and then sent back into their room to teach.”

Various participants began to speak specifically about their views about their principal’s actions, and in some cases theories of action. One stated, “Our principal had no elementary experience. He was appointed principal at our school, and was given no mentoring. That first summer, he had no idea what he should be doing.” Another contributed, “We have no administrator in this district with any elementary experience, and three do not have any classroom experience.”

Participants were clear that they believe a principal should have classroom teaching experience. Additionally, they should have taught at the level at which they are to be appointed principal. Prior to Principal B’s appointment, there had been a “gap” of three months, wherein an interim had left, and no appointment made. “We were basically without an administrator for three months,” said one teacher, “We took care of the building. It bonded us as a staff. We had to make all of the decisions.”
The group identified the following expectations for the principal of their school: Have classroom experience at the level, so as to appreciate the load that teachers bear; like the age group; be visible; stop into classrooms just to say “Hi.”; conduct walkthroughs; and provide adequate planning time for faculty.

Group members then provided their assessment of their principal’s ability to meet these expectations. The group believes that the principal’s high school teaching did not adequately prepare him to become an elementary principal. Some intimated that their principal is not comfortable with the elementary children.

Members stated that Principal B “does well” at being visible. They also stated that “this year” the schedule was written in such a way as to provide for "longer blocks of uninterrupted time [for language arts instruction, primarily].” One teacher also stated that, “Special Education and transportation run the district,” implying that teacher priorities are not always primary.

A group member stated: “We are like his mentor. But it is unwelcome. He has/had no idea how to deal with discipline at this level.” Another followed saying, “We wanted him to just tell us what to do. He was looking to us to help him figure things out. We were looking to him for leadership.”

One teacher indicated that she had worked at the primary elementary school previously. At that time, there was a principal who has since retired. She commented about the principal, “She was a strong leader. Everyone knew what was expected of him or her. There was a system for everything. There was no “wishy-washiness.” Everything was researched, and well thought out.” The same teacher indicated that not everyone appreciated that principal’s actions, but in her view, the
majority of faculty and staff did. Several members of the focus group indicated that they want to know what is expected of them. They suggested that currently they do not know what their principal expects.

The other topic, subtly broached by a participant, was the principal's work ethic. She said, “You want to know that your principal is working as hard as you are. When you volunteer your time, you expect that he will too. If we are to arrive early and/or stay late, you expect that your principal will too.”

This focus group closed their session with the comment, “This district has a young, inexperienced administrative team. We’ve got to go get our kids…”

Support staff in a second focus group indicated that Principal B sometimes goes into the cafeteria and out to bus dismissal. They indicated that he does it to support the aids and teaching assistants. Whatever the original intent, the outcome is frustrating to the support staff. “The kids act differently when the principal is in the room. So then, he thinks that the problem is with us, not with the kids.”

However, the group identified that Principal B is willing to “bounce ideas” and solutions with them.

Overwhelmingly, the support personnel group of School B indicated that they would like their principal to be a stronger leader in bringing about consistency of teaching practices in the school. They indicated that different teachers are teaching differently within the same grade level. They explain that this reality makes it hard for them to support the students from classroom to classroom. The group also suggested that the principal should have taught at the level at which they become
principal, so that they could recognize such a dynamic, and then know what to do to
“address it.”

The group was also unanimous in expressing that they think a strong
principal provides thoughtful professional development for the support staff. They
do not believe that their current principal exhibits strength in this area. “Whenever
there is a professional development day, he figures out the plan for the teachers, then
“makes due” with something for support staff.”

Finally, the group indicated that they believe it is important for the principal
to encourage teachers to reach out and provide strategies to parents in order for
them to help their children at home. They suggest that some parents are not
attending to the importance of schoolwork and/or homework. In their view, “The
principal is too afraid to disagree with parents. He is afraid of offending them.”

**Principal C**

Principal C is the middle school Principal within District B. The school has
approximately 450 students in grades 6-8. Principal B has been the principal of his
school for 4 years, and previously was the high school assistant principal for two
years.

Principal C formerly was a high school math teacher. He taught in two
different rural districts that are within 45 miles of District B. He indicated that he
applied to multiple schools when applying to District B, and District B was not his
first choice place of employment.

*Principal’s Overall Theory of Action*
Principal C identified the following elements of a successful school: The school looks at the whole child and recognizes students that have tough out-of-school situations, achieves passing scores, and prepares students for high school. He indicated that having been a high school math teacher, and then the assistant principal at the high school of District B, he had his own notion of what students need to be successful at the high school. Primarily Principal C states that his expectations center on respect and responsibility.

Principal C described that he has met students with 90 averages who did not show respect for others. He has also met students who have struggled with academics, yet were the most respectful kids that you could ever hope to meet. He stated, “I try to project to my student population more so than anything is the respect and responsibility aspect of being a student.”

Principal C states that he very seldom works less than 10 hours per day, and probably 50-60 hours per week. When asked about the “breakdown” for that time he said, “Prior to this year, 80-85% of my time was spent dealing with student discipline. When I first started, I had no assistant principal or counselor. The other 15% of my time was managerial...very little was as a curriculum leader. 95% of my staff has been here 25-30 years and are getting ready to retire. I did not come in and make big change. I observed a lot, and took a lot of input. Last year, I got a counselor, and a two-hour per day assistant principal. The assistant principal didn’t really help- I’m glad to have it, but that really didn’t help. This year- I would say that I spend 70% of my time dealing with curriculum, 15% on student discipline, and 15% forming relations with the students.”
Principal C stated that what drew him to District B was that he had always been a supervisor of some sort, and when he pursued his master’s he got his administrative certification. He stated that he new he never wanted to be a superintendent, but that he did want to be a principal.

*Instructional Guidance*

The middle school was identified as a School in Need of Improvement (SiNi school) in the fall of the 2011-12 school year. When asked how the building had changed over his four years as principal, Principal C said, “This year more than ever I really had to work side-by-side with staff. The SQR (School Quality Review required of SiNi schools) was almost a blessing in disguise. No matter what ulcers it gives you, it made me work side-by-side with the teachers. With the way that the State has handled the changes in education this past year and a half it’s helped my relationship with staff.”

Principal C then continued that reflection and stated, “One of the things in becoming an administrator...there’s lays been this line of “us vs. them”, and I’ve always hated that line. I tried to make it as gray and shady as possible. I think by being honest with my feelings about things that have come across from the State and being very vocal and honest, I think I probably have the most support from my staff that I’ve ever had.”

He added: “Because of the things that the state is putting on us for accountability, I’ve had teachers at breaking points – crying and saying [Principal C], I don’t know how to do this. Before being identified, everything [lack of student achievement] was blamed on all exterior reasons why we didn’t do better...I’ve been
saying it’s only the things within our walls that we can change. We can’t blame everything on the parents and other outside factors. I’ve been telling them to focus on what we can do. I am finally getting teachers to say that they don’t know how to differentiate. They say, “I have all this data- I know my students, but when I get to the analysis I don’t know how to do this.” We are very union heavy here. I’ve broken through a lot of barriers.”

The investigator then asked Principal C, “With so many demands on your time, what structures do you build for when your teachers finally tell you that they do not know how to differentiate?” Principal C said that he has provided staff development opportunities with the professor from a “nearby” college. She observes, models, and then gives teachers suggestions on how they can implement the strategies.

Principal C indicates that this began last school year, and that teachers were very suspicious. He says, “This year we took a step back. I told the teachers way ahead of time. I told them that I wanted her to come in, first meet with the department, talk it over and schedule what they wanted to do. I told them I’m staying out of it, and I have. I think that was what made them comfortable.”

When asked what he has seen in a classroom that is different, Principal C stated, “Let’s take math. A few years ago we got these tablet PC’s (personal computers). At first it was great because students could get notes, etc. But what happened was everyone got comfortable and no one moved. I wasn’t seeing any differentiation. Getting [college professor] in giving different suggestions…now I’m seeing more group work going on. I’ve told teachers that I want them to try new
things. Our scores have been stagnant, and now we’re identified with SPED – what do you have to lose to try something different. I hear more talking by students than teachers- that’s when education is occurring when students are talking.”

Principal C also indicated that the required walkthroughs are making a difference. He indicates that he initially kept all feedback positive. Then teachers were coming to him to ask what he thought. Principal C indicates that now he gives them “little suggestions.”

**Student-Centered Climate**

Principal C stated that he is “old school” in his views about what schools provide. As a result of requirements for AIS and resource room services, some students have had to be removed from elective classes and technology class in order to receive supportive services. This has not been easy for him. “It kills me what is happening right now. I am acting completely against my beliefs and we are taking everything from students. I guess I’m doing things now that I’m forced to do…and my staff feels the same way. They truly love what they do, are truly here for the whole child. That’s the difficult part- taking away from children the things that keep them here, and putting everyone on a conveyor belt. They all have to be college-ready, when I’ve got kids here that I know are not going to reach an 85 on a state exam to reach the proficiency level.”

Principal C says that the school still offers activities and opportunities that make kids want to come to school. He also spoke of a district improvement team that has membership from all buildings. The committee is working on a grading policy. Half is based on academic achievement, and half on “soft skills” or the 21st Century
skills that are being required. He also indicated that sometimes within the middle school, homework is punitive. Principal C believes that homework shouldn’t be a punishment, and that if it is going to be assigned at all, it better be targeted and important.

Developing Teachers’ and Other Staff members’ Capacity and Commitments

It appears as though Principal C is comfortable in utilizing teacher leaders and the college professor-consultant to assist in helping his teachers to learn more about their craft, and make the shifts in instruction that are required within the Common Core Learning Standards and moving student achievement forward for greater success on NYS assessments. Principal C mentioned multiple times throughout his interview that he has a veteran staff with many years of experience—most teachers having taught their entire career within this middle school. To a degree, Principal C is employing a “united against a common enemy” strategy in rallying his faculty in response to greater accountability requirements and scrutiny from the State Education department.

Principal C did indicate that he was rewriting the entire school schedule to implement for the second half of the year. This is in response to the Comprehensive Education Plan developed as a result of being identified as a SiNi school. Principal C said, “Hopefully this will help us out to be more specific, more prescriptive in our instruction. Specifically, this refers to our resource and Academic Intervention Services (AIS) rooms.”

Principal C indicated that he would be getting School Administration Managers (SAMs). He indicates that the concept is intriguing, but will need to be
sure to utilize them in the time frame that has been identified (outside out the contractual day), as he doesn’t want to see the initiative cause “dissention amongst the ranks...they’ve been around a long time.” He said, “I welcome it, but I am also a little leery of it.”

*Parent and Community Ties*

When asked about his insights relative to relationships with parents and community – particularly related to achievement of his goals, Principal C said, “I’ve learned to “schmooze” them. I’ve gone from parents that wanted to kill me to those same parents getting to the point of wishing me a happy birthday. You have to listen. You have to sit back and take it. Whatever they give to you- just take it. Then say thank you and what can I do to help you? Turn it around. When they don’t feel threatened, they back off.”

The investigator asked if Principal C thinks that this approach is different in a rural district, than in suburban or rural district. Principal C said, “Don’t know. People are people no matter what their background. You have to listen first. You don’t know what their background is...you don’t know their circumstance- it’s the same thing I say to the staff about the children...unless you know where they are coming from...think before you speak.”

*Influence of Colleagues/Supervisor*

Principal C said that he “went through four different administrators” during his internship. He said, “They all had different styles. I picked up on those styles. I knew pretty much what my style was.” He said that he learned not to overstep his
bounds when he was an Assistant Principal. He asserts that he picked up what he liked in each style.

When asked how his superintendent influences him as a principal, Principal C stated, “You want honesty? We all have a personal relationship with [superintendent]. Because of the relationship, as a team we feel guilty saying no. We’ve extended our boundaries where we shouldn’t sometimes.”

Principal C was suggesting that principals need to advocate for their building, as they have a unique opportunity to do so. Potentially, the personal relationship with the superintendent can prevent the principal from being comfortable disagreeing with the superintendent...particularly on issues related to their specific building. He also stated about his superintendent, “When I need him, he is there.”

Principal C said that the principals get together if they each are going to cover the same topic at a faculty meeting. He also states that they do not hesitate to call each other for information. It appears that the issues that currently evoke the greatest amount of conversation amongst the principals are: speaking about the Common Core Standards in faculty meetings, and utilization of the professor-consultant in each building.

Lessons Learned from Reflection-on-Action

When reflecting upon the things that he has learned in his four years as principal, Principal stated, “I don’t think I understood all of the responsibilities of being a principal when I started. Even having been an Assistant Principal, I didn’t really understand. I loved being an AP. I remember a professor saying if you’re just happy with being an AP...he put it down. He said that it was a dead-end job. But I
really loved that job. I did want to be a principal, but I don’t think I really understood all the responsibility and things that it entailed. There is so much, and it’s something new that you learn every day. It’s not something that you can’t take home with you. It’s not a job that when you leave it’s done…”

Principal C stated that if he were at the same decision point again, he would still choose to be a principal. “I think it is the most important spot where I could make the biggest change in a child’s life…and I thought it is a position where I could make a change within the climate and culture of a building.”

**Focus Group Interviews for Principal C**

Focus groups of both faculty/student support personnel and support staff were held. The faculty group consisted of three teachers. The support staff group consisted of two teaching assistants and the building secretary. The middle school faculty/student support focus group also cited low morale across the district and within their school because of the layoff notices. “Many of us can’t wait to get to school, but it is because of the kids. My spirit is down.” Members also referenced the fact that the middle school had been “identified” by the State Education Department as a negative factor in morale.

This group spoke about the principal having a large impact on morale. One told a story about a principal who had shared that he was a “crab in the morning”. He had told this teacher that it “just is the way that I am.” The teacher told him that he could not continue in that manner, as he should be modeling what he would hope to see teachers modeling for children. “If he is crabby, he makes teachers crabby. When teachers are crabby, there is no way that the kids will get our best.” She stated
that Principal C is very “even” in his moods and emotions, and that in that way, he serves the school well.

The faculty focus group also identified expectations that they hold for the effective principal: Mean what you say, say what you mean, and carry through with both; reign in the tendency to treat people differently; listen; be approachable; be visible; and be a strong communicator.

The group acknowledged Principal C to be approachable and visible. Simultaneously, they suggested that with experienced faculty, the principal does not need to monitor or develop teacher management skills, and that he should “trust in what I teach.” They also commended Principal C for his strong communication related to the values of the school community and the character education initiatives. They talked about a recent fight (which they indicate is a rare occurrence), and Principal C’s response. He called the entire school into the gym for a meeting. He spoke about expectations, and his disappointment in the behavior displayed. The group indicated that, “You could hear a pin drop” in that gym.

The group also spoke about their expectations regarding the principal treating all faculty members equally. They cited that the Principal C’s response to being identified was to create “Focus Fridays”, wherein the entire student body is divided into small groups, and every faculty member is expected to work with them to develop their ELA and math skills. The group claimed that the plan was developed in isolation, and discussed only with a small group of “hand-picked people.” However, they indicate that everyone is to be involved and accountable for making
the initiative successful. The group did not demonstrate commitment to, or optimism about the outcome.

When speaking about the unique circumstances of being a middle school principal within a rural school, one group member said, “In a rural school, the principal is like the mayor. He needs to bring people together, be well-read on current topics, communicate clearly and frequently, and maintain order throughout.” These thoughts were extended with, “The principal has to know the middle school kid. This is not a high school.”

Group members suggest that Principal C needs to get to know the students better – even if by simply asking them about their day. One stated, “In acceptance of risk, we should be guided by the kids.” This group spoke of wanting to see their principal interested in seeing students engaged in learning. They would like to see Principal C making connections with students, not emphasizing “power” within his relationships with them.

The support staff focus groups from both schools also spoke about similar themes. These personnel speak with pride about their perception of the relationships they have developed both with students and their families. The group members spoke about wanting their principal to help them learn and grow as professionals. Members also spoke about their view that the job of the principal is both complex and difficult.

Finally, the group indicated that they believe it is important for the principal to encourage teachers to reach out and provide strategies to parents in order for them to help their children at home. They suggest that some parents are not
attending to the importance of schoolwork and/or homework. In their view, “The principal is too afraid to disagree with parents. He is afraid of offending them.”

The support staff focus group from School C also spoke about the importance of receiving intentional professional development. They would like to see more than they are currently receiving. They did indicate that Principal C has encouraged a bit of “push back” at requests made of them by colleagues that may not be appropriate. “He tells us to be comfortable in saying, “That’s not what I do.”

Principal C was acknowledged by the support staff focus group for his calm demeanor. Members have worked with/for other administrators who were at times overwhelmed or emotional, and they “just make us all look bad,” said one group member. The group also identified accessibility as one of Principal C’s strengths. They can get to him when they have a problem. One person said, “I know he holds issues close when I talk to him,” meaning that he trusts the principal to be confidential. The support staff said this is important to them. They indicate that confidentiality is essential if they are going to risk sharing their perspective about teachers or classrooms with the principal.

The investigator asked the group what they thought the principal wants from them. They cited the following: Remind him of appointments; provide him the “heads up” about potential problems; and help to deescalate staff- provide them perspective about a decision or a message that the principal has sent.

The group was then asked what they thought the principal wanted from them (both individually and as a group). They responded with the following: Be dependable – do whatever he asks of them; Follow through with whatever task is at
hand; keep the students engaged – when kids are engaged, it helps the principal; and be flexible. The group members indicated that they believe everyone wants the same thing for himself or herself as they want for the students: “We should know something about each other personally. We should develop relationships. We should support one another.” They ended by saying that they see these priorities as Principal C’s priorities.

**Brief Summary**

Superintendent B emphasizes the rural setting for his district. In other words, he is aware of the importance of place and the special nature of rural families and communities. Here, it is important to emphasize that Superintendent B has lived in this school community for his entire life and has strong beliefs related to the maintenance of certain traditions. Biography thus influences leadership orientation. His strategy for influencing his principals appears to be an indirect one. For example, several times within his interview he indicated an outcome he sought, yet said that he would “let his principals decide how to go about it.” Although he does not dictate, neither does he provide specificity as to the target he sets, leaving room for some inconsistency throughout the district.

The principals within District B have prior work experience at different grade levels prior to becoming principals. None of the principals taught at the grade levels for which they are now responsible. Each has a slightly different theory of action, perhaps because the superintendent does not provide direct leadership focused on specific leadership and school improvement priorities.
Focus groups were held in two of the three schools within District B— not within School A (K-2 building.) Focus groups conversations and themes were likely impacted by timing. Layoff notices had been distributed to teachers throughout the district within the same day or week in which the groups were conducted. As a result, morale in these groups appeared to be low.

Although layoff notices had not yet been distributed to support staff, members were “waiting for the other shoe to drop.” Members spoke to their view of a “class system” that exists between faculty and support staff. They indicate that teachers expect support staff to do virtually anything that they themselves do not want to do. “That’s not my job,” was a phrase mentioned as emanating from teachers and implying that support staff needed to do whatever the task at hand. Another indicated that teachers regularly, “pawn off work” to support staff.

Focus groups clearly articulated their view that their principal’s lack of teaching experience at their respective school’s grade levels is a barrier to full confidence in the knowledge of and effectiveness of the principal. The focus groups within schools B and C also tended to emphasize their expectations for the principal-as-manager. For example, teachers expect their principal to manage student discipline, scheduling, and organization. Although these teachers indicated that they wanted their principal to have strong instructional knowledge, they also made it clear that they want to be “left alone” to make pedagogical decisions as they see best, based on their knowledge and experience.

Essentially, teachers overall offered a shared expectation. They expect their principal to take charge of smooth organizational functioning and leave the teaching-
learning business to them. In brief, this expressed preference implicates an endemic tension between research-based strategies for principal leadership for school improvement and staff members’ expectations and preferences for leaders’ theories of action. This tension is explored and interpreted in the next chapter.
Chapter 6

Cross Case Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

The main research question for this dissertation study was as follows. What are elementary and middle school principals’ theories of action in two rural school districts? This study was predicated on two assumptions. It was assumed that the rural context influences principals’ theories of action and, in turn, these theories of action help to explain the extent to which their schools are effective.

Overall, the study was designed to yield relevant details. All such details, important in their own right, also provided opportunities to articulate principal leadership theory. Case study methodology was employed because its primary aim is to articulate theory (Yin, 2008).

There are several possible data analytic strategies for theory development. This study relies on four main strategies. They are identified next.

One strategy is to compare and contrast the two districts with a focus on the characteristics of their surrounding rural communities. A second is to focus on the interview data collected from superintendents and principals with reference to a specially-designed theory of action interview protocol. A third is to rely on the empirically-based, principal leadership priorities derived from the research on effective principals, using these priorities as an analytical template (King, 1998) for the analysis of interview data from superintendents, principals, and focus groups. A fourth, related to the third and structured by template analysis, is to use this same research-based framework for principal priorities to look for unique, under-developed, and missing principal leadership orientations and theories of action.
These four strategies structure the data analysis and interpretation that follow. In all four sections, the analysis and interpretation are selective, unavoidably so given this study’s limitations and delimitations.

Three unanticipated, important findings are identified and described briefly in conclusion. One is methodological and centers on alternative ways to derive and triangulate principals’ theories of action. The other two findings are substantive, i.e., they have a direct bearing on the main research question regarding principals’ theories of action, also enhancing leadership theory. One finding emphasizes the effects and influence of superintendents’ theories of action, while the other emphasizes the effects and influences of state policy and regulation. These several findings raise important questions about the “rural” in rural schools and districts.

**Introducing the Rural Feature in These Two School Districts**

In New York State, rural schools are defined as districts in which the total number of students in average daily attendance at all of the schools served by the Local Education Agency (LEA) is less than 2000. Alternatively, each county in which a school served by the LEA is located has a population density of fewer than 10 persons per square mile.

Additionally, New York State Education Department documents describe rural districts as lacking the personnel and resources to compete effectively for Federal competitive grants. The rationale is as follows. Typically, Federal grant applications are extensive. They require multiple personnel for both application and implementation. Rural schools rarely have the personnel to successfully apply for and
implement such initiatives. What is more, grants received often are too small to be effective in meeting their intended purposes.

Special features like these are of interest in studies of rural districts and their constituent schools. Document reviews conducted for purposes of this study proceeded accordingly. Assuming that the rural context matters, and also that the two districts have different rural contexts, data analysis began with a comparison.

A Snapshot of the Two Districts

On the district website, District A leaders describe their community as follows. “Our communities, with roots in agriculture are well known for their rich history, as a tourist destination and for those seeking the beauty of a natural setting.” The site also indicates this district’s relationships with cities. According to the website, the district is situated 135 miles north of a major city, 180 miles west of a major city, and 20 miles south of a small city.

District B is described on its website as follows. “Our district schools are situated 3 miles apart. There is a rural landscape from farm vistas to spectacular lakefront. Our easy access to [small city] and [region] permits our families to pursue a myriad of recreational, cultural and career interests.”

In this dissertation researcher’s view, the District B community has a more “rustic” atmosphere to it. This impression is based in part on its location of the community is in the northern region of New York State.

District A is located south of District B. The website portrays the environment in terms of natural beauty, yet proximity to the features of larger urban areas. The
difference in the characterization of each district and community becomes relevant in other aspects that follow.

*Important Commonalities, Similarities and Differences*

Both districts are classified as rural, and indeed they are. However, on close inspection the two are different. Details follow.

Both District A and District B have a full-time superintendent. Both districts have a full-time principal assigned to each school within the district. The districts have similar grade level alignments within their schools. District A has three schools (an elementary school with grades K-5, a grade 6-8 middle school, and a high school spanning grades 9-12.) District B has four schools. There are two elementary schools. One spans grades PK-2, the other grades 3-5. District B is aligned the same as District A in the secondary schools.

Both districts in the study encompass large geographic areas. As is typical for rural NYS districts, each district is located within more than one county. District A encompasses about 120 square miles. District B encompasses approximately 165 square miles. District A is comprised of 11 towns. District B is comprised of 9 towns. The towns within each district are small. Many of the towns have no business or industry in them.

Within both districts, there is a wide range of property wealth. New York State classifies both districts as “Average Need/Resource Capacity School” districts. This means that both are in the middle of the range of school districts within New York State, based on property wealth and resident income levels. Both indices impact ratios for aid from New York State, as well as the ability of the school district to raise revenue via the
tax levy. The districts were similar in the 2009-10 Free and Reduced-Lunch rate, both with approximately 30% of students eligible for either program.

These two districts differ in the number of students they serve. District A has district-wide enrollment of 1300 students. There are fewer than 10 people per square mile in the catchment zone for District A. In contrast, District B has enrollment of 1900 students district-wide. District B also has fewer than 10 people per square mile.

**Poverty Rates**

The overall poverty rate within the largest county of both school districts increased during the period of 2001-2010. For the period of 2001-2010, the poverty rate for all ages in District A’s county grew from 13.6% to 17.2%. In 2010, the rate rose to 17.2% from the 14.8% of the previous year. For the period of 2001-2010, the poverty rate for all ages in District B’s largest county grew from 14% to 15.6%. The rate decreased by nearly 2% from 2009 to 2010 and it grew by nearly 3% between 2008 and 2009.

Likewise, the percent of children age 0-17 living in poverty increased in both districts during the same period. District B has about 3% more children age 0-17 living in poverty than does District A. The unemployment rate in the largest county of District A was 8.6% in 2010. The unemployment rate in the largest county within District B was 10.1% in 2010.

These data signal some of the challenges for these rural districts. Significant numbers of children enter school coming from disadvantaged circumstances. In many cases, attention to health and dental care is less-than-adequate. Many students receive their nutritionally complete meals only at school. Additionally, the living environment
for such students is not print-rich, i.e., literacy and language resources typically are not readily accessible in homes. This inescapable reality presents challenges for rural schools, alternatively framed as opportunities.

*Attendance Rates and Class Sizes*

The annual attendance rate for both districts is consistently high, averaging nearly 95%. This high average daily attendance rate is typical for rural schools within New York State. Class sizes are similar between the two districts. District B has a somewhat larger average class size in the high school (26) than District A (20).

*Per Pupil Spending*

Per-pupil spending is an important indicator of a district’s ability to provide for the educational needs of its’ students. For instance, with larger catchment zones, rural schools must spend a great deal of money on transportation of students. In districts with smaller catchment zones, fewer funds are dedicated to transportation. In some NY districts, no transportation is provided. There are many such examples that illustrate spending differences between rural and other NYS schools.

A significant difference between District A and District B is found in their respective per-pupil spending. District A spent $10,225 per general education pupil in the 2008-2009 school year. District B spent $7,114 per general education pupil during the same year. District A exceeded the average spending of “similarly classified” schools ($9,645 per general education pupil) by $580 per pupil. District B was below the average spending of “similarly classified” schools by $2,531.

District B spent $17,394 per special education student in 2008-2009. District A spent $24,221 per special education student in the same year. The expenditure for
special education students in similar schools in New York State averaged $25,558. Both district’s middle schools were identified by the State of New York as a “School in Need of Improvement (SiNi) during the 2011-12 school year based on the performance of middle school special education students in the area of English Language Arts. This “identification” has had a significant impact on both schools and districts. The impact will be described later in this chapter.

Additionally, significant differences are apparent in spending on academic programming. Interest resides in the key indicators. For example, the greater the per-pupil spending within the non-special education category, the broader the academic offerings for students (i.e. strings programs, targeted programming for Gifted and Talented, greater numbers of elective courses offered at the secondary level, etc.) The greater the spending within the Special Education category, the greater the likelihood that specialized and/or differentiated programming is offered. These propositions are important because all such programmatic offerings impact overall student achievement.

Other Relevant Comparisons

District A is somewhat financially advantaged over District B. The unemployment rate is higher in District B. Since employment and economic development overall influence taxes, and school districts are funded in part by taxes, District B’s overall community economic profile appears to place additional pressure on the school district in terms of increases to the tax levy that would benefit investment in academic opportunities for students.
This fiscal difference is exemplified somewhat in class size comparisons. District B has larger class sizes than District A. The biggest differences in class size are at the secondary level. Additionally, there is a significant difference in per-pupil spending between the two districts. This difference is visible in spending on both general education and special education programming. With greater amounts of money to spend, District A has greater ability to create programs and hire personnel to support their students.

Moreover, District B has a higher dropout rate than does District A. This finding cannot be directly correlated to the differences in per-pupil spending of the two districts. However, having more financial resources enables District A to provide a greater breadth of opportunities for students. These opportunities could lead to greater engagement in and connection to school. Both factors can be antidotes to students dropping out of school.

Additionally, District A has more resources than District B to dedicate to the professional development of faculty and staff. Such professional development, in theory, keeps faculty aware of and exposed to innovative practices, and contributes to their sense of confidence and competence. What is more, Superintendents’ leadership is framed in part by the available money, and so these resource differences are expected to play out in somewhat different leadership orientations and actions.

**Comparing and Contrasting the Two Superintendents**

The superintendent of District A has considerably more experience, both in the field of education and in the role of superintendent than does the superintendent of District B. Superintendent A has been working in the field for more than 40 years,
whereas Superintendent B has been working for approximately 20. Superintendent A has served in a variety districts, both in and out of New York State. Superintendent A has served as a teacher, principal, assistant superintendent and superintendent. Superintendent A has also worked as a superintendent in more than one rural school district. Superintendent B has served as a teacher, principal, assistant superintendent and superintendent all within District B.

It appears that the variety of locations and positions that Superintendent A has experienced have contributed to her ability to compare and contrast her district and circumstances to places beyond the district. In contrast, Superintendent B has only worked within District B, so has not experienced first-hand differences between districts. This limits his ability to provide perspective of different places when working within his community. This difference between the two superintendents becomes more apparent when the data are analyzed in relation to relevant categories derived from the literature.

Superintendent Theories of Action

To refresh the reader’s memory: Individual interviews of at least 90 minutes were held with both Superintendent A & B. The interviews were structured by Bryk, et al.’s (2010) empirically-grounded framework for the contributions of principals to effective school performance. Interviews thus elicited each superintendent’s perspective of principals’ overall theory of action with special sections focusing on the principals’ instructional guidance, the principals’ development of student-centered learning climate, the principals’ development of teachers’ and other members’ capacity
and commitments, the principals’ development of parent-community ties, and the principals’ reflections on action.

This study discovered important differences between the two superintendents. In fact, this study's findings can be interpreted as differences in these two superintendents’ theories of action, differences that also influenced their respective principals’ theories of action. Comparisons follow.

To begin with, each superintendent holds different aspirations for the students within their district. The contrasts between two statements, both derived from interview data, are instructive. Superintendent B said, “Aside from the fact that I want every student to graduate, to achieve all the levels that the state and federal government say they should, I’m talking more about aligning our beliefs of what a graduate is with the customs and traditions of the community.” Here, in short, is the influence of the rural community context on a superintendent’s theory of action.

This finding is consistent with one of the main assumptions for this study—namely, that “the rural” in rural districts matter. In the same vein, Schafft & Youngblood-Jackson’s (2010) have emphasized that throughout history, rural schools have been central to maintaining local traditions and particular identities of rural communities. Apparently, Superintendent B’s leadership orientation follows suit.

Superintendent A offers a contrasting view. When speaking about her aspirations for students, Superintendent A articulated the importance of developing a shared vision for the district. In her view, this vision must be formed together with people “inside” and “outside” of the district. She indicated that she needed to encourage people within the community and the district to dream, because in her view, they did
not know how to do that prior to her arrival in the district. She also stated that she wants her students to be intellectually competitive upon graduation. To her, this means students will be equally prepared for success in college and the work world beyond their home, rural community.

In contrast, Superintendent B speaks of aspirations for students in terms of the past and in terms of local community traditions, again emphasizing the “rural” and a sense of place, while Superintendent A speaks of aspirations for students in terms of the future. Her perspective comes from and promotes a global view, one that is not driven exclusively by the rural context. These important differences have import for leadership theory related to rural schools and districts.

*Local Versus Cosmopolitan Leadership Orientations*

The summary findings provided above signal how each superintendent leads the district. These findings also indicate how they direct, guide, seek to influence, and supervise their principals. To the extent that a focus on the local, rural community setting also is indicative of an orientation toward the past and the future, important differences in leadership are apparent. It appeared to this investigator as though Superintendent A, who apparently is less oriented toward the rural features of her district, has a forward-thinking view and plan for District A.

In contrast, it appeared as though Superintendent B, who emphasized the rural context during his interview, is less forward-looking. He expressed his intent to retain certain elements of tradition and the past, even as the district moves forward with the implementation of his expressed agenda.
Relevant leadership concepts can be brought to bear on this important difference. In the eyes of this dissertation researcher, Superintendent B has a local leadership orientation. He is influenced and guided by the local community, taking stock of its special features, traditions, and needs.

In contrast, Superintendent A consistently demonstrates “Cosmopolitan” traits as described by Merton’s (1949). Superintendent A consistently looks beyond her school and local community in the development of plans and initiatives. She wants her students and community to learn from and be aware of practices and perspectives that are different from their own. In contrast to Superintendent B, Superintendent A spoke more frequently about her expectations of the schools and districts (and thus the principals) being driven by a broad-based, global perspective.

**Different Priorities for District-wide Alignment**

Some leadership and school improvement experts emphasize the importance of district-level leadership for whole system alignment (Fullan, 2010, Marzano & Waters, 2006, DuFour and Marzano, 2011). District-wide, cross-school alignment emphasizes commonalties and similarities, starting with improvement priorities and, in theory, including principals’ theories of action.

The findings from the superintendent interviews reveal differences in these two leaders’ emphasis on alignment. Superintendent A has made it a priority, while Superintendent B’s attention to it is not as apparent. Examples of differences follow, paving the way for differences manifest in their principals regarding alignment.

Superintendent A emphasizes alignment, and she appears to value structures and protocols to support and promote it. She introduced District A and her principals
to the Aligned Acts of Improvement, a framework that provides structure to the work of
the district. Within that framework, Superintendent A has promoted protocols that
include: research into a proposed initiative or change; identification of resources
necessary for implementation; a reflection upon what may need to be eliminated in
order to have the ability to implement; development of a plan for implementation; a
system of monitoring implementation; and finally a system for evaluating the outcomes
and impacts of the initiative or change. During the course of the interview, she
presented herself as a methodical and strategic thinker, planner and implementation
leader. Also during her interview, she emphasized that, in addition to personalizing her
interactions with her principals, she also emphasizes what all of them need to
emphasize and do. Additionally, she emphasizes her expectation that her principals
work with and learn from one another in order for whole-system thinking to be shared
and understood.

In short, Superintendent A directs and guides her principals, and their theories
of action need to be understood and analyzed accordingly. For example, this
dissertation researcher observed among her principals shared understanding and
leadership orientations, and they appear to be attributable to Superintendent A’s,
district-wide leadership. Above all, principals and the superintendent tended to
describe these shared features using “alignment language.” For example, when
interviewed, each of her principals, in their own way, spoke to an understanding of
“Aligned Acts of Improvement.” Each of the principals also spoke to some degree about
the district-level and district-wide influences on their school and the context of their
work.
Superintendent B expressed strong beliefs about the importance of leadership. He cited the influence of reading that he has undertaken, particularly over the course of his administrative career. He indicated that he requires his principals to read literature on leadership. He selects a variety of options for reading, and then each principal chooses what they will read. Based on this claim, the researcher expected principals in District B to identify the influence of their reading on their theories of action.

The data did not support this expectation. When interviewed, Superintendent B’s principals did not refer to their reading. Nor did they make specific references about the relationship between their reading and the development of their leadership skills and abilities. What is more, when the principals in District B spoke about initiatives within their own building they did not emphasize a commitment to alignment throughout the district. Each referenced the knowledge developed when they served at the high school level, but none spoke of intentional collaborative work among the principals and the superintendent to align building and district initiatives.

In summary, Superintendent A had, or created, the luxury of hand-picking her principals. She also appears to be versed in and committed to school and district improvement theory emphasizing alignment. She develops specific strategies that recognize both individual schools and the linkages between schools in the development of a system-side perspectives and approaches to alignment. In contrast, Superintendent B does not have explicit theories about the importance of alignment and leadership for it. Specific strategies for ensuring alignment were not evident in District B.

Investigating Alignment Differences
One way to understand alignment differences is by exploring each district's hiring patterns. Superintendent A hired each of the principals in her district, a distinctive advantage as Lortie (2009) has indicated. She described intentionally seeking new-to-the-field principals, as she could then “mold” them, both individually and collectively. She discussed how she looked at both their individual strengths as well as the strengths that would contribute to the effectiveness of the team when making selection decisions.

In contrast, Superintendent B has hired just one of the principals currently serving within the district. Also in contrast to District A, all of the current principals worked in some capacity within District B prior to becoming a principal within District B. Superintendent B has exercised his ability to move administrators within the various district buildings. The principal of the K-2 building, and the principal of the 3-5 building each have non-administrative experience at the secondary level. The K-2 principal was a high school counselor, the 3-5 principal was a high school English teacher, and the middle school principal was a high school math teacher.

District A appears to have tighter alignment between all district buildings than does District B simply because Superintendent A seized the opportunity to hire all of her current principals. She described how she explicitly communicates her expectations about alignment within each school and throughout the schools of the district. When each principal was hired, this expectation was articulated.

In contrast, all of the administrators of District B served at the high school level prior to becoming principal at a different level. Unlike Superintendent A, Superintendent B did not have the opportunity to hire the principals with whom he
currently works. And, he has not been as explicit as Superintendent A regarding expectations for alignment, setting the stage for differences in alignment priorities between principals in Districts A and B.

Superintendent Mentoring, Coaching, and Overall Leadership Development

Superintendent A has arranged for a mentor for her principals. It appears that she believes that multiple individuals can and should be involved in the ongoing professional development of building principals. Superintendent A also reports that she has been very careful in selecting the principal mentor. She is specific in stating that she wants the individual to have had experience in settings that are markedly different than District A. She wants her principals to become aware of differing perspectives and approaches that exist outside of their building and district.

Superintendent B appears to take primary responsibility for the mentoring and development of his principals. He did mention asking various consultants from local higher education institutions for their perspectives about the principals with whom they interact. However, the role of the consultants was to provide professional development for teachers in the schools, not explicitly for the principal each school. Superintendent B then utilized the consultant perspective in his direct approach with each principal.

Superintendent B indicates that he works with and supervises each of the principal differently. He bases his interactions on his knowledge of each as an individual. He also indicates that he has had to work with the group of principals collectively so that they become a functional team. He stated that when he became
superintendent, there was a sense of competition between the principals that was inhibiting team dynamics.

It appeared from the interview that Superintendent B places an emphasis on developing principals by modeling desired behaviors. In some cases he also directs principals. Two examples of this modeling strategy were provided within the interview with Superintendent B.

The first example: Two building principals were attempting to address some dissonance existing between faculty of the K-2 and the 3-5 building. The dissonance was associated with differing philosophy about approaches to reading. Superintendent B indicated he made suggestions to each principal individually about how to handle the situation. When neither achieved what Superintendent B targeted, he called for a joint meeting of the two faculties. Within that meeting, Superintendent B articulated the approach to moving forward from that point.

The second example was more subtle and involved modeling done by Superintendent B. He requested that all minutes of any meeting held within the district be sent to him for his review. Within his review, he determined that time was not being used as efficiently as he expected. In some cases, Superintendent B attended meetings to model his expectation for on-time start, and efficient action within meetings, and in other cases, he suggested that the principal do the same.

In contrast, Superintendent A described a process of listening, facilitating, and developing her principals in a more indirect manner. This indirect approach is consistent with leadership theories emphasizing influence (e.g., Leithwood, et al., 2010). During her interview, Superintendent A described how she structures her weekly team
meetings such that the principals share “problems of practice” when the whole team is together. The team then discusses the issues presented, and all benefit from hearing a colleague work through a specific issue.

Superintendent A also described how she meets with each principal individually. She suggests that she listens, asks questions, and attempts to get the principal to arrive at their own solution, having had a sounding board with whom to share. Superintendent A suggested that she tries not to “give them an answer or my opinion”, but prefers for them to “arrive at a solution” themselves. She stated that this is not always the case. She emphasized that sometimes she is directive.

**Superintendent’s Priorities for Instructional Guidance in the Context of State Assessments**

Superintendent B spoke of the influence of state assessments and their results in his work with his principals. State assessments and community values/traditions were the two areas most emphasized by Superintendent B within his interview. Superintendent B spoke of the pressures of the accountability systems that are now in place in New York State. His middle school’s identification as a School in Need of Improvement (SiNi) has added to this pressure.

It appears that the emphasis that Superintendent B places on compliance and accountability has far-reaching effects. It appears that he is directly influenced by state policy and regulation. In turn, he emphasizes these same influences with his principals. These superintendents’ influence-oriented goals are one thing. Their theories-in-use with sufficient specificity are another. Here, it is noteworthy that, although Superintendent B communicated his expectation that the scores improve, he did not provide details about specific process or steps by which such improvement will occur.
One net effect is predictable. Where instructional guidance is concerned, it appears that
the principals in District B are left somewhat to their own devices.

In contrast to this evident pattern in District B, Superintendent A did not
mention state assessments in the context of principal development. This is an
interesting finding in view of an unanticipated discovery—namely, that two schools
within District A have been identified as in need of improvement by the state. Even
with this situation, Superintendent A has not made compliance with accountability
requirements her predominant theory of action. Superintendent A continues to
reinforce the shared understanding of the Aligned Acts of Improvement framework in
guiding her principals to instructional solutions to the achievement deficits.

Superintendent A’s development of her principals’ competence for instructional
guidance appears to be rooted in her commitment to develop structures and protocols,
which guide the involvement of educators across the school district. This leadership-as-
influence strategy influences principals’ theories of action. Principals have been
required to make decisions within this structured, consistent process; decisions based
on data.

Each principal described the process by which research on instructional
practices and programs takes place. Based on the data generated by their assessments
and evaluations, interventions and initiatives are developed.

Superintendent A “schools” her principals in these and other ways, so that their
leadership focuses on integrated and results-oriented efforts. The reach of this
superintendent’s theory of action is manifest in her principals’ theories. In other words,
District A’s principals articulate theories of action that reflect the influence of Superintendent A.

Superintendent B described an approach toward instructional guidance centered upon provision of resources that he identifies as being helpful and important. The implementations of School Administration Managers (SAMs) as well as accessing of 20 days of time from a college professor expert on reading are two examples of such. Superintendent B is not specific about his theories of action as they relate to instructional process and planning. In this theory of action, superintendent B provides the resources and then leaves it to each principal to develop their implementation plans. It follows that principals in District B have somewhat unique implementation plans and theories of action.

Differences between the two superintendents also were manifest when they discussed aspects of principal capacity. To reiterate, Superintendent A spoke more frequently about her expectations of the schools and districts (and thus the principals) being driven by a broad-based, global perspective. These expectations were referenced as coming from a variety of sources. These sources included current knowledge about workforce demands and development trends, the strategy being utilized within the community to continue a trend of growth and development over time, and a recognition that educator practice must change in order to reach the goal of all students being intellectually competitive upon graduation.

Superintendent A’s leadership and especially its contrasts with Superintendent B’s, can be appreciated by, and interpreted in relation to, Dimmock’s (2012) five conditions of leadership. Derived from an international body of research, the five
leadership conditions are: (1) Exists within social relationships and serves social ends, aims, and goals; (2) Involves purpose and direction; (3) Is a social influence process, direct and indirect, while focusing on both specific and broad-based issues and priorities and the goals that are aligned with them; (4) Is a function or set of functions, which sometimes are restricted to persons in formal leadership positions and sometimes exercised informally by people without formal leadership positions, but who have a proclivity to exercise it; and (5) Is contextual and contingent. All five features are evident in the data derived from Superintendent A’s interview. She speaks of these conditions when describing her efforts toward developing her principals’ capacities. All such conditions are indicative of a cosmopolitan leadership orientation.

Superintendent B spoke more frequently about meeting the expectations from people both inside the school and within the community related to upholding traditions and “commonly held values” of the community-at-large. Because Superintendent B has lived in the community all of his life, he believes it to be important to develop his principals’ understanding of the community and traditions.

Here, it bears repeating that Superintendent B appears to fit the Merton (1949) typology for local leadership orientation. Superintendent B expects that his principals understand and appreciate the views and values of the community, and that they frame their leadership within that context. This perspective is clearly representative of the rural influence upon Superintendent B. Superintendent B referenced 21st century skills and learning in a general sense without direct relationship to the development of principal capacities. In contrast to Superintendent A, his perspective is more local, and less globally oriented.
Comparing and Contrasting The Principals in Districts A and B

Fullan (2006) is among the researchers who have emphasized the concepts of “espoused theories” and “theories in use”. He states that having a theory in and of itself is not enough. He indicates that a theory of action must be made explicit. According to Fullan, part of the work in making a theory of action explicit is to develop strategy that addresses culture and context. The researcher’s challenge is to develop methodologies to depict these complex theories of action in context and with reference to cultures.

The interviews with principals were structured accordingly. Interviews with principals were structured to derive theories of action, perhaps making them explicit if they were in the main implicit. Interviews also were oriented toward the influence of the rural context. For example, principals were asked: Are there special features in your rural school context that influence your role and responsibilities as principal? What specific outcomes or benefits are you after? As you reflect, are there beliefs or philosophies that you hold about being an effective principal that are unchanged over time since you began as a principal? How do the superintendent and his approach influence principals?

Principal Identification and Experience

The principals in District A and B have served different amounts of time as principals. Some have only served as principal within a single district. Others have served as principal in another district. No principal interviewed had more than nine total years of service in an administrative capacity. All of the principals interviewed had achieved tenure within their district.

For purposes of clarity, each principal will be identified as follows:
District A:

K-5 Principal = Principal K-5A

Middle School Principal – Principal 6-8A

District B:

K-2 Principal = Principal K-2B

3-5 Principal = Principal 3-5B

Middle School Principal – Principal 6-8B

The administrative experience of each is identified in the Table 1 below,

Table 1. Administrative Experience of Principals in Districts A and B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>Years as Principal in Current District</th>
<th>Years in Administration other District</th>
<th>Total Years within Administration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal K-5A</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal 6-8A</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal K-2B</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal 3-5B</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal 6-8B</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Principal Interviews

The first method this study utilized to collect data regarding principal theories of action was interviews. Interviews held with each principal were structured according to Bryk, et. al.’s (2010) five principal-driven essential school improvement priorities, together with the resources and supports they entail. The five improvement priorities
are: Principal Leadership, Parent-Community Ties, Professional Capacity, Student-Centered Learning Climate, and Instructional Guidance. Special sections of the interview guide were developed for each priority, enabling in principle the identification and description of “micro-theories of action” for each priority as well as an overall theory of action encompassing all five priorities.

Each interview began with the researcher’s request that the principal identify what s/he believes are indicators of a successful school. Then the interview guide was structured to guide the respondent through a process of backward mapping. Backward mapping questions targeted the theory of change, i.e., how each principal described the process of achieving success. The researcher probed, as needed, to elicit key priorities, preferred strategies and tactics, and attendant beliefs and values and with the expectation that each principal’s theory of action will have special characteristics. Just as beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder, success often is a personal priority, not just a district or statewide imperative, and the interview was designed to elicit information about all such influences.

In both districts, elementary principals identified the successful school as a place where students want to come every day. All apparently embrace, if only implicitly, a child-centered view of elementary schools with a concern for the whole child (Lawson, 2010).

These principals also were subject-centered and competency-oriented. For example, they suggested that the successful elementary school program produces a strong literacy foundation within students. Additionally, each principal spoke to the development of community – both within classrooms and school-wide. They offered
this sense of community as an important aspect of a successful elementary school. With this common vision for indicators of success, the interview data enable distinctions between and among the principals. Differences emerged within each district and also between them.

While the principals both within and across districts all spoke about the importance of developing relationships, their emphasis varied on relationship development, and by implication, how principals’ priorities contribute to relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). These relationships are complex and nested. Principals strive to create positive relationships, and at the same time, interpersonal relationships among others also influence principals’ theories of action. This study was not designed to take stock of this complexity, but the interviews with principals and the focus group interviews with staff (described later) yielded suggestive findings.

District A principals and District B principals differed in this important area of relationships with staff. For example, Principal K-5A spoke to the importance of developing relationships within his building in order to facilitate success. He spoke of the importance of developing good relationships with teachers, and then how those relationships serve as the foundation for having honest conversations. This finding is consistent with Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) research emphasizing relational trust between teachers and the principal. It is interesting to note that this principal was a school psychologist prior to becoming an administrator, not a classroom teacher.

Principal 3-5B identified strong state test scores as an indicator of a successful school. He stated that he would not have identified the scores as most important two
years ago, but that now there are many more people looking at and making judgments about the meaning of the scores.

When asked about indicators of a successful middle school, both Principal 6-8A and Principal 6-8B emphasized a school that achieves good scores on state assessments. One reason may be that each is the principal of a school identified by the State as “in need of improvement” (SiNi). Both principals also emphasize relationships with students. They state that students need to be known, welcomed and understood in order for a school to be deemed successful. From the similar identification of indicators of success, the two principals began to distinguish themselves differently.

Both principals also apparently embrace, if only implicitly, a student-centered view of middle schools with a concern for the whole child (Lawson, 2010). Principal 6-8A distinguished himself from Principal 6-8B in his inclusion of an atmosphere of academic/intellectual rigor being an equally important indicator of a successful middle school.

*No Apparent Differences Between Elementary and Middle School Principals*

Another strategy for analysis and interpretation is to present data from principals serving at different grade levels. This approach enables an analysis by school level—with the assumption that the level of schooling matters in principals’ theories of action. The analysis did not provide empirical support for this assumption. There were few significant differences in the data coming from interviews of elementary and middle school principals.

*Exploration of the Five Principal-Driven Improvement Supports*
Having established principals’ visions and perceived outcomes, which define a successful school, the interviews progressed to the exploration of the five principal-driven improvement resources. Data collected related to each resource follows.

**Principal Leadership**

Included within this improvement resource area are three priorities: Principal management, instructional leadership, and inclusive-facilitative leadership. Each priority places an emphasis on the principal’s role in developing classroom practice, and nurturing teachers. In theory, the principal serves as the catalyst to develop teachers individually and collectively so that they can achieve desired outcomes.

In the area of instructional guidance, Principal K-5A was the most specific among all of the principals in articulating his theories of action. He described the work of his Shared Decision Making Team. He holds extended-time meetings with the team in the summer wherein data is reviewed and reflected upon. With that data and insight, the team sets goals for the ensuing school year.

Principal K-5A emphasized the uses of data. He indicated that the school has moved from their history of looking at data from only the cohort level, to using data at the level of the individual student. The principal also asserted that the culture of the building has moved to one wherein there is an understanding that the best decisions are made through the use of research and data.

This principal also cited specific examples to support the above assertion. He cited a building study focused on a theory that the entry age for kindergarteners should change from turning five by September 1 instead of the current December 1 requirement. The theory was that kindergarteners would perform better academically
if they were older at entry to school. Once the data were collected and examined, it appeared that there was no correlation between achievement and age at entry. Thus, the team’s theory was “dropped.” The team then moved on to other issues.

He also cited use of various data when migrating toward guided reading instruction throughout the building. This consistent approach to reading instruction has led to the collection of common data points for all students in the building—something that was not in place when this principal began in his role.

Principal K-2B was not specific in describing her approach to instructional leadership within her building. She stated that the curriculum maps throughout the district were not up to date. However, she did not describe any process for updating the maps within her building. This principal indicated that her strategy for helping her teachers learn and move forward is “discussion,” which she finds to be extremely helpful in contrast to a turnkey training model.

Principal 3-5B indicated that his strategies for instructional guidance include two priorities. They are classroom walkthroughs (required by the superintendent, but an opportunity to build rapport with teachers, as he gets to see the obstacles that teacher face daily); and his directive to his teachers that they use the formative and weekly assessments within the basal reading series and “use them to drive instruction.” This principal was non-specific when identifying what he utilizes to measure growth within his students.

In speaking about principal provision of instructional guidance, Principal 6-8A spoke about utilization of his team leaders. He indicated that the summer administrative meetings also develop a sequence of faculty meeting topics. The
progression is designed to provide instructional guidance and faculty development. Principal 6-8A also spoke about utilizing the knowledge and talents with teachers. He encourages collaborative goal setting. He also is attempting to build momentum for greater classroom visitation and observation between teachers.

Principal 6-8B referred to utilization of a professor from a nearby college for provision of both coaching and provision of in-service. He states that the professor meets with the teachers and he “stays out of it,” so that the teachers are not threatened by the coach.

**Parent-Community Ties**

Included within this resource area are: The Principal reaching out to parents to get them involved in their child’s learning, helping teachers to be aware of students’ surrounding families and neighborhoods, and networking community services. The principal serves as the “connector” between the school and the community, and the teachers/staff and the parents of students they serve. This support area also includes the principal seeking to supplement school services with community resources (Bryk, et. al., 2010).

All of the five principals indicated that they believe it to be important to maintain positive relationships with parents and community. Particularly in District B, the superintendent expects principals to invite parents and community to events within the schools. There are specific community events that occur on an annual basis, and are included in the superintendent’s expectation for principal-community interaction.

Consistent with the elementary school as a place where parents and educators interact, all three elementary principals indicated that they attempt to encourage their
teachers to reach out to parents. But theirs is a very specific strategy for working with parents. Principals provide teachers with strategies designed to encourage parents to help their children with homework.

All five schools are located within small towns, and rural settings, thus there are not “neighborhoods” such as though that might be found within a suburban setting. Perhaps this is one reason why utilization of community resources was not mentioned by any of the five principals interviewed.

On the other hand, typically there are strong relationships between rural schools and county-based services. Community ties with service providers also appear to be needed because both districts appear not to have an extensive system of student support professionals at the same time that their district-wide poverty levels are increasing. Thus, principals “silences” on community health and social services are potentially important because they suggest a departure from practice in other rural schools, especially ones with increasing poverty rates.

Clearly, these principals are focused on intra-school priorities. Possible explanations include superintendent guidance, self-direction, and the current policy environment, especially for principals leading schools designated by the state as needing improvement. Companion findings that follow in succeeding sections especially implicate state policy influences and directives.

Professional Capacity

Included within this resource area are: Principal selection and nurturing of new personnel, providing quality professional development to all staff, and facilitating the development of a school-wide collaborative professional community. In provision of
support, the principal also builds commitment to quality of instruction and student outcomes. The principal is the “driver” here, developing both competence and commitment.

All of the principals spoke about the need for teacher practice to evolve. In order for this evolution to occur, they emphasized the provision of professional development. However, the principals varied in their respective approaches. By way of illustration, Principal K-2B first identified her theory that continuous learning is important in order for a school to be successful. Specifically, she cited new developments in the effective teaching of reading, and stated that teachers need to keep learning to stay current with those new developments. However, she did not articulate a well-planned, intentional effort to develop specific teacher knowledge.

In contrast, Principal K-5A articulates a multi-pronged approach to provision of professional development. This approach included: district-wide and building-based workshops, utilization of teacher leaders for purposes of professional development, as well as utilization of the Shared Decision Making Team for such pursuits. This could be attributed to the superintendent’s influence related to creation of multi-tiered structures to accomplish positive outcomes.

Each of the elementary principals had a somewhat unique approach to the development of capacity and commitment within their faculty and staff. Principal K-2B spoke primarily of district-wide in-service courses that are offered periodically throughout each school year. As previously described, she also spoke of some faculty discussion designed to develop knowledge.
Principal 3-5B was the only principal who spoke about the relationship between building a master schedule and building staff members' capacity. He stated that time is built into the workday so that teachers can be together for meeting and learning together on a regular basis. He also spoke of utilizing faculty meetings as a venue for building staff knowledge.

Principal K-5A spoke of the selection process for both his grade level team leaders, as well as the teachers that serve on the Shared Decision Making Team. He views the members to be teacher leaders, and relies on them to assist him in building knowledge and capacity of staff throughout the building. He meets with each monthly, and provides resources to them within those meetings. He spoke of the development of learning communities throughout the building, but was non-specific about the definition or intended outcomes.

Only one of the principals spoke about the relationship between teacher hiring and the building of professional capacity. He spoke some about the building selection process. This school does not have set criteria that the successful candidate must meet. The principal did not elaborate upon matching building needs related to teacher knowledge and skills with filling teacher vacancies. Thus, in the end, it is the person that he thinks will best “fit in” with the existing grade level and faculty.

Significantly, at a time when teacher leadership is being offered as a recommended school improvement practice (Burgess, et. al., 2009), none of the five principals spoke about development of the teachers to serve as grade level chairpersons within their building. They did not mention providing special skill set development for the teachers who are identified as chairpersons.
What they did emphasize is communication via monthly meetings. This is a theory of action focused on improved communication. It is not a theory of action for sharing power or authority, which is the essence of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2005). Principals’ causal thinking is as follows: If the principal holds enough meetings, and the meetings improve communication, then capacity of the team leaders will improve.

However, this focus on communication is not the same as an emphasis on academic press, i.e., what Leithwood, et. al. (2010) calls “the rational path of leadership.” Nor is it the same as “the organizational path of leadership” (ibid), which involves teachers professional learning communities and a companion focus on increasing instructional time. The principals interviewed in this study were silent on these research-supported leadership priorities and school improvement practices.

**Student-Centered Learning Climate**

This leadership resource emphasizes a school climate that focuses on high standards (Bryk, et. al., 2010). The principal is the catalyst for the “press” for high standards. The principal also pushes for evidence of accomplishment of the high standards. The school has a positive overall climate that is individualized.

All five principals indicated that they enjoy spending time with students. All emphasize relationship-building priorities. None spoke of how they strive to “leverage” those relationships with students to encourage them to exert their highest academic effort to optimize their performance.

Two principals sketched a theory of action regarding the outcomes from these relationships with students. They indicated that these relationships “serve them” when
disciplinary situations arise. None spoke about how relationships with students facilitate the development of relationships/partnerships with parents and families of the students.

All principals voiced their affinity for their students. They also articulated that a student-centered learning climate is a priority. Principal K-2B described that climate in terms of knowing every student. Additionally, she cited the importance of Morning Program to reinforcing and maintaining a positive climate. She was less specific related to individual learning, and strategies to differentiate learning for her students.

Principal 3-5B spoke candidly about knowing and challenging students; suggesting that perhaps previously there was more of an emphasis on the former than the latter. Now that the middle school has been “identified” as in need of improvement by the State, the principal indicates that he is much more active in and committed to “monitoring and pushing students.” This emergent approach, perhaps a developing micro-theory of action, is based on the data that they collect on and from each student.

The middle school principals spoke about being visible in the school as a strategy for developing and maintaining a student-centered climate. Each said that they attempt to walk in hallways during “passing times” to speak with students. They each indicated that they occasionally go to the cafeteria during lunchtime to sit with and talk to students. Each also indicated that students appreciate seeing them at events—sporting, music or others, thus they attempt to attend as many of the after-school events as possible. Neither of the middle school principals mentioned a research-supported priority. The priority is to ensure that all students experience an
individualized, rigorous academic environment as part of a student-centered learning climate.

Two of district A/B principals emphasized their school climates, especially the relationship among the adults in their schools. More specifically, they described how the State Education Department policies and requirements for accountability are having adverse influence on teachers. All of the principals indicated that there is a great deal of teacher stress within their building. They report that teachers are, to a large degree, indicating that they do not believe they can accomplish all that is being required of them. They also stated that many of the teachers view the requirements as punishment mechanisms.

Also in relation to state mandates, principals reported that many teachers do not believe that data resulting from state and certain other required assessments is going to help them improve their instruction or student outcomes. To the contrary, these principals indicate that teachers are resentful of the time spent testing, and of the additional paperwork that results from the testing. Additionally, principals report that their teachers suggest that they could better use their time developing units rather than learning how to manipulate and review data via technological means.

Elementary principals in particular emphasized how pressures resulting from State Education Department requirements impact students albeit indirectly. They emphasized time pressures in particular. For example, they voiced a concern that there are fewer and fewer opportunities for the assemblies and celebrations that have been long-time fixtures within the elementary school.
In the same vein, Principal K-2B mentioned that she likely would not have Morning Program as often in the coming years as she has in the past. Principal K-5A indicated that where assemblies used to incorporate the whole school, now assemblies often include grades K-2 only, as the intermediate teachers do not believe that they can spare the classroom time.

When describing their respective school climates, both the Principal K-5A and Principal 3-5B commented upon tension that exists within their building. These tensions derived from adult-to-adult relations (a key part of school climate) in combination with new state-mandated requirements. With the advent of a new evaluative system, additional state assessments, and implementation of new Common Core Learning Standards, principals indicate that people are feeling overwhelmed. The K-5 principal indicates that his teachers were “offended” by the School in Need of Improvement (SiNi) designation, and that it has been a hindrance to keeping people motivated to try new things and elevate their practice.

Principal 3-5B indicated that the fact that the middle school in District B had been “identified” as a School in Need of Improvement by the state is putting pressure on his school and teachers. He explained that his school is “preparing” the students for success in middle school. Of late, not enough of the students are meeting success in the 6th grade, which led to the middle school designation. He also indicated that his school is being criticized by the faculty at the K-2 school in the district for the amount of testing that they are doing. He states that it is all in response to accountability requirements, and that it is creating ill will between the two buildings, as well as within his building.
Principal 6-8B focused primarily on the provision of elective courses and student activities when addressing the student-centered climate. He spoke about the provision of AIS services to students who require them, yet it was in the context of the “extras” being removed from the schedules of such students...not in the academic aspects of the provision of those services (strategies, focus, assessment of progress, plan for accomplishing students “testing out” of the services.)

To summarize, these rural principals emphasize the influence of state policy regulations and requirements on their theories-in-use. These several policy environmental influences (testing, school “identification”) can be viewed at least as constraints on these principals’ theories of action. (Constraints are the forces and factors that recommend some alternatives, while ruling out others.) In this case, these principals’ theories of action are constrained by policy influences and requirements, together with accompanying interpersonal challenges involving teachers. These interpersonal challenges among the adults at school implicate school climate needs and priorities.

If these principals are correct when they emphasize rising levels of teacher stress, growing resentment, and interpersonal relationship challenges, then they also are identifying, describing, and having to address unintended, undesirable consequences of state level policy requirements on school climate, necessitating adjustments in their respective theories of action. In fact, these state policy requirements may be viewed as emergent “drivers” for these principals’ theories of action.
An analogy is instructive. Just as some teachers may teach to the test, so too may these principals be prone to lead in relation to the disciplining power and influence of state mandates. Instead of stewarding relational trust, these principals apparently must respond to their teachers’ rising emotions, increasing stress levels, and interpersonal challenges. The data suggest as much, and they represent a different view of Leithwood et al.’s (2010) emotional path of leadership.

**Instructional Guidance**

The fifth resource area identified by Bryk, et al. (2010) relates to the principal’s push for cohesive and aligned curriculum. It also encompasses the provision of pedagogical strategies and materials and tools for teachers to accomplish such cohesion and alignment. This support area also focuses on the principal’s high expectations for teacher performance.

Data-driven decision-making is a component of instructional guidance. Although each of the principals interviewed mentioned that the State Education Department is requiring data-driven instruction, none offered highly specific actions taking place within their building to address the requirement. What is more, each of the principals had a slightly different view of which data is the most important as it relates to aligned curriculum and improved student achievement.

Principal K-5A was the only one of the elementary principals who spoke specifically about a theory of action involving use of data for decision making. He indicated that he prefers to keep process and decisions out of the realm of opinion by focusing decisions and decision-making groups on relevant data. He described an
established practice within his Shared Decision-Making Team to review data annually—including both academic and perceptual data.

His definition of data included non-academic measures, such as the Effective Schools Survey that is administered annually within his school and district. Administration of this survey preceded his becoming principal of his school. However, it is a requirement district-wide. In order to make the survey administration more “expedient” (given time constraints) the district has opted to administer portions of the survey to varied stakeholder groups each year. Previously, all portions were administered to all stakeholders—teachers, students and parents.

Principal 3-5B spoke to decision-making, but in contrast to the K-5 principal, he indicated that he takes feedback from team meetings as well as feedback from faculty meetings to make decisions. He referenced the level and content of teacher feedback as an indicator of success. He justified this approach when he stated that believes that teacher “buy-in” is the difference in achieving identified goals.

All five principals described their high expectations for their teachers. Four of the five principals mentioned the new requirements for the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR). While each appeared to be in favor of providing quality feedback to teachers in order to improve their performance, all expressed concern about the process. Each indicated that the timelines for development of the evaluative system are unrealistic, given the myriad of additional requirements teachers face.

Moreover, the principals expressed concern over their ability to meet the supervision-and-evaluation requirement. They are concerned about whether they can and should observe every teacher at least two times per year.
Four of the five principals described the impact of a recent development—namely, having a School in Need of Improvement within the district. This change has influenced these principals' perceived priorities. They state that they now need to hold teachers more accountable to research-based practices and data-driven decision-making. However, at the point in time in which the principals were interviewed, none had developed a specific plan to accomplish such an outcome.

**Principal Interview Summary Findings**

While each of the principals touched upon some of the five areas of improvement supports (Principal Leadership, Parent-Community Ties, Professional Capacity, Student-Centered Learning Climate, Instructional Guidance), none did so in a manner to indicate that they possess specific theories of action to accomplish them. None of the five principals had the full-range of research-supported priorities identified by Bryk, et al. (2010). None of them emphasized needs for a depth of knowledge about each of the five areas. Overall, they were silent on how these five areas may be related, indeed interactive, and how they strive to integrate them.

Additionally, principals were at best vague about how their beliefs and values drive their theories of action. None of the principals articulated knowledge of evidence-based principal leadership, or how their practice aligns to such an ideal. This finding is especially salient today—when educational policy emphasizes theoretically-sound and research-supported models and practices for all education professionals.

A narrow, standardized view of the principal is readily derived from the interview data. In a nutshell, principals perceive themselves in a familiar role set. It is widely known as “principal as instructional leader” (Beck & Murphy, 1993).
Instructional leadership appears to be rooted in a traditional model of individual as leader. Here, leadership is attributable to exceptional individuals who lead alone.

Overall principals did not appear to recognize that recent literature suggests the principal alone cannot accomplish such leadership, nor should s/he attempt to do so. Nor did these principals describe their leadership as a set of distributed practices. Apparently these principals’ conventional view of the principal as instructional leader also includes a set of authority relations whereby the principal is the leader and the teachers are implementers of instructional practices as supervised by the principal.

Significantly, principal interviews indicate a progressive narrowing and increasing standardization of leadership, both within districts and between them. Narrowing is manifest in what these leaders omit in their theories of action. Standardization is manifest in the priorities they emphasize. It is especially evident in the apparent loss of differentiation between leadership for an elementary school versus for a middle school.

To the extent that this narrowing and standardization is an accurate interpretation, this study contributes to relevant theory regarding the policy and contextual influences on principal leadership (Dimmock, 2012). In brief, principal theories of action are developed with influences from three systemic levels: (1) State level policy; (2) District level leadership; and (3) School-level factors, starting with the principals’ preferences and espoused theories. One implication is three units of analysis: State education departments, district office, and schools. This conceptual framework provides the investigative side of Fullan’s (2006, pp. 74-75) proposal for “tri-level systems change” involving the same three units.
Finally, these principals are caught in crosscurrents. Perhaps this is one reason why their theories of action are under-specified and also accounts for their being out-of-step with current leadership research. Overall, these principals’ theories of action are rooted in this conventional model of school leadership. Additional support for this finding can be found in each principal’s self-reports regarding how they spend their time.

*Principals Reported Time Use and Its Import for Their Theories of Action*

A second strategy for identifying, describing, and explaining principals’ theories of action is to examine how they report spending their time. In contrast to some parts of the interview guide, which can be interpreted as eliciting principals espoused theories, self-reported time allocations and priorities signal principals theories-in-use. Details follow, including possible triangulations with the data summarized above.

Data derived from interviews with principals suggest that principals spend extensive amounts of time working each day and week. Each of the principals articulated how they currently utilize their time, as well as how they would do so if they had more control over their utilization. Time allocation and actual use is important, as it represents a theory-in-use for each principal.

What principals actually do may differ from what they espouse. What principals say they should spend most of their time doing versus what they actually spend their time doing is an important difference for examination. The difference is akin to the intended curriculum versus the implemented curriculum. One represents concepts “on the drawing board,” while the other represents actual action.
Related to time usage, all three elementary principals indicated that the typical workday is 10 hours long. Principal K-2B spoke about a typical day that includes leading Morning Program, wandering the halls, superintendent-required classroom walkthroughs, Child Study Team meeting, and other assorted meetings.

Principal 3-5B indicated that one of two “large chunks” of the typical day is spent doing informal observations. The second “chunk” is spent on “the communication piece.” He elaborated in saying that a portion of his time is spent “kind of walking around.” Early in the year, he spends time in the cafeteria to help establish appropriate routines. Later, he circulates throughout the building to “see how things are going overall.” He said that he tries to pick a day of the week and observe an entire grade level, but that he has had varying success in accomplishing that goal.

Principal K-5A indicated that his time is allocated to the “most pressing things”, which might not always be, in his words “the most important things.” Student discipline is first, and varies from day-to-day in the amount of time it requires. The next biggest “chunk” of time this principal identified was spent on paperwork. He also said that 2-3 hours are devoted to meetings of different groups and teams.

Both middle school principals indicated that they spend up to eighty percent of their time in management-type activities. Some days, student discipline can account for fifty percent of the time that students are in the building. Additionally, working through substitute placement and “coverage”, and schedule adjustments due to testing, assemblies, etc. can account for an additional ten to twenty percent of a day. Neither school has an assistant principal. Both of the principals indicated that they “lean” on
either a school counselor or social worker for assistance with some of the identified student issues.

Both middle school principals also described their instructional leadership in terms of attendance at team meetings. Neither was specific in the leadership actions undertaken within the team meetings. Each of the principals stated that they “need to spend more time in classrooms, but it is hard to get out there.”

On the surface, it would appear that at least a portion of the time of the principals is spent in pursuit of important leadership activity as identified by Bryk, et. al., 2010, Leithwood, et. al., 2010, and Riehl (2012). Where principals self-reported time allocation is concerned, it appears “smooth organizational functioning,” described by Riehl (2012) is the dominant orientation to school leadership, as is evident in these principals’ self-described time use.

On closer examination, however, it again becomes apparent that the principals have underdeveloped theories of action regarding what they say and do. This evaluative judgment is not intended to be harsh or unfair. It derives from a comparison between a comprehensive, evidence-based theory of action and the theories of action these principals apparently have.

To be clear, the principals clearly have self-defined theories of action. What they don’t have is comprehensive, evidence-based theories of action when comparing and contrasting what they say and apparently do with what the principal leadership literature suggests.

These strong claims need to be tempered in two ways. First and foremost, this characterization should not be viewed as an attribution of blame. Finding such
dominant pattern of principal leadership is one thing. Attributing sole responsibility to these hard-working, dedicated principals is another. To reiterate, the data suggest that principals are caught in several crosscurrents in the here-and-now.

What is more, this study was not structured to assess the long-term impact of their pre-service education programs and their professional development programs, especially to the extent to which these programs have disseminated relevant leadership theory and research and assisted principals in developing evidence-based, integrated theories of action, including how to reflect on and improve them.

The second qualification is methodological. This study did not include direct observations of principals’ orientations and actions. Findings are based on two data sources. One source is what principals told the researcher within interviews, and the second is what focus groups told the researcher.

Exmaining “Smooth Organizational Functioning” as a Theory of Action

A significant finding is that principals’ self-descriptions of how they allocate and spend their time is an important method for eliciting their theories-in-use. In this study, principals’ theories-in-use as derived from self-reported time allocations and use differ in fundamental respects from what they espouse in response to other parts of the interview guide.

Principals reported actions may support Riehl’s (2012) assertion that “smooth organizational functioning” is a dominant principal theory of action. When asked if they were granted greater control over the use of the time within their day how would it be spent, all five principals indicated that they would prefer to spend more time in classrooms. However, none was specific regarding the relationship between their time
spent in the classrooms and either improved instructional practices or consistency or improved student achievement.

There is another important perspective on these principals’ theories of action, and it is rarely emphasized in the literature. Principals’ theories of action are structured in part in relation to the expectations of teachers and other adults in their respective schools. Here, it is especially important that focus group participants in all five buildings suggested that they look to their principal to “manage the building.” Elements identified within this building management included writing a “good” building schedule, attending to student discipline, and communicating with parents.

This smooth organizational functioning orientation via school management includes a role typically called “buffering” (Elmore, 2003). Staff expectations in some cases emphasize this role. Two focus groups comprised of teachers and student support professionals indicate that they want their principal to “run interference” with parents, so that they could utilize their time with and on students, rather than “defending” their classroom practices. Additionally, focus groups consistently spoke of their expectation that the principal manage the building such that s/he “lets us do what we do well.”

Riehl (2012) suggests that current research builds from organizationally focused theories. These theories focus upon what leaders do to keep their organizations functioning smoothly. Such theories do not explicitly address the principal’s impact upon student learning, in part because many such theories have been adapted primarily from business and industry. While principals generally tend to “reject” the suggestion from some elements of their community that “schools should be run like a business,”
the actions described by the principals within this study would be supportive of the theory of “smooth organizational functioning.”

Examining Principals’ Theories Via a “Four-Path Leadership Model”

Leithwood, et al. (2010) developed and tested a four-path leadership model. They describe the four paths as rational, emotions, organizational and family. The model is predicated upon empirically grounded assumptions regarding leadership as the exercise of influence, especially the indirect effects of this influence on students. Leithwood et. al.’s (2010) data analysis indicated that the four paths model as a whole explains 43 percent of the variance in student achievement.

The rational path refers to leaders’ attempts to exert a positive influence on curriculum, teaching and learning. Academic press and disciplinary climate are special priorities within this path. The emotions path refers to the feelings, dispositions and general affective states of staff members, both individually and collectively. Leithwood et. al. (2010) emphasize that the emotional path and the rational path are related, and focus on two priorities: relational trust, and teachers’ collective efficacy.

The principals’ theories of action related to the four paths appear to be underdeveloped. The missing theories of action relate to the rational path (academic press), the organizational path (instructional time and teachers’ professional learning communities), and the family path (exerting beneficial influences on alterable family factors in service of learning). While each spoke peripherally to the elements, neither was specific or intentional in the path they strategically develop to insure their desired outcomes.
The primary path emphasized within interviews with all five principals focused upon the emotional path. The middle school principals each described teachers stressed to the degree that they spend time in the principal’s office crying, and stating that they “don’t know how to do it” [meet new State Education Department requirements]. All five principals reported that school climate overall in their building has become negative in response to the rapid pace of changing requirements, and a lack of clarity about all components of the requirements.

None of the principals specifically spoke about their understanding of leadership as the exercise of influence. While they spoke of having grade level or team leaders in place in the building, they did not speak of their understanding that leadership is conceptualized and measured “as a set of practices distributed among staff rather than enacted only by those in formal leadership roles” (Leithwood, et. al., 2010, p. 683). In other words, none of the five principals described theories of action that include all of the four paths. It appears that regulatory compliance supersedes action that encompasses all four of the Leithwood, et. al. (2010) identified paths.

*The Import of Relational Trust*

Bryk & Schneider (2002) engaged in extensive research on effective principals in Chicago’s schools. The research implicated a new construct, which they named relational trust. The four identified key areas that contribute to relational trust involving principals are: respect, compassion, communication and competence. Bryk and Schneider also suggest that the four factors have an organizational effect: They are instrumental in the development of a trusting school climate.
Focus groups held in each of the district’s schools were helpful in exploring the concept of relational trust. Focus groups were divided between faculty and staff. The focus groups of faculty members spoke about all of the four key areas of relational trust. The support staff focus groups spoke primarily about respect and communication. A few salient details follow.

*Respect.* All focus groups identified that in rural schools, which tend to be centered within smaller communities, “everyone knows everyone”, and there is a “tight knit” feel to the culture. All groups spoke to the importance of character development and the cultivation of respect. The development of strong character and respect, in their view, is a pillar for effective principals. Each focus group, in their own way, spoke to the importance of the principal demonstrating respect for students, parents and community, as well as faculty and staff. All focus groups indicated that overall they believe their principal demonstrates and models respectful behavior.

*Communication.* Every focus group stressed the importance of communication. They also stated that communication is an area that can always be improved. In two of the focus groups, there was a nuance of communication addressed, related to “preferential” communication. In some schools, faculty articulated a perception that the principal had an “inner circle” with which communication was more frequent and perhaps more detailed. In the buildings where this problem was mentioned, perceived favoritism appeared to contribute to some degree of perceived negativity, signaling a school climate challenge.

*Compassion.* The focus groups spoke about compassion as it relates to “understanding where they [the students] come from”, and “meeting them where they
are.” Some group members mentioned specific instances where their principal demonstrated compassion in assisting the faculty member through a difficult personal experience (i.e. “When my mother was sick, and I had to take a bunch of days off, he was very understanding,” or “I had been out sick and was dragging when I did come back, he took the time to find me and ask how I was doing and what I needed.”)

Additionally, compassion was addressed in terms of the principal’s ability to understand “what the teachers are dealing with,” or the principal’s having “walked in our shoes so that he/she understands what it’s [teaching] like day in and day out.” This dimension then became directly linked to the key area of competence.

**Competence.** The faculty focus groups were universal in stating their belief that a principal should have served as a teacher “within the level at which they become a principal.” This strong conviction was particularly apparent in District B. District B is special because each of this district’s principals did not teach at the grade levels contained within their assigned building. The faculty articulated that having such background knowledge is, in their view, important when making decisions that will impact both faculty and students.

Simultaneously, the same faculty members in the focus groups spoke about their view that the principal should “trust them” [speaking to their pedagogy], and “leave them alone.” They indicated that based on their experience and knowledge, they are perfectly capable of making decisions about what their students need and how to provide for those needs. The focus groups articulated their resentment towards new requirements for data collection, as well as to some degree, the new requirements for producing evidence of individual student learning within their classrooms. When
speaking to data utilization, more than one teacher stated, “That is not why I became a teacher.”

The focus group findings related to principal competence highlight another significant finding of the study. Aspects of competence were “weighted” in terms of their importance by teachers versus student support professionals. The faculty articulated a strong belief that previous teaching experience at some grade level within the school where the principal is assigned is essential. When a principal is named and does not hold such experience, it negatively impacts the teachers’ expectations that the newly named principal will be effective in leadership within the school.

The support staff focus groups primarily spoke about the key areas of respect and communication. Support staff focus group members also reported that they believe their principal to be respectful – in interactions with students and community, as well as faculty and staff. These focus groups varied from the faculty ones, however, in speaking about their view of a “pecking order.” They believe that their principal and the teachers believe that the role of the teacher is “more important” than the work that they perform.

Group members also spoke about the frequency of teachers “passing off work” that they did not want to do to members of the support staff. It appeared that support staff members would like their principal to provide greater clarity – both for them and for the teachers with whom they work about specific job duties and expectations. The members also appeared to want their principal to address the “tier dynamic” between teachers and support staff, to have a more “level playing field” or whole team approach.
Relating to the key area of communication, the support staff focus groups had varying access to and perspectives about the communication efforts of their principal. Some indicated that their principal seeks them out individually and communicates well. Others indicated that they virtually never see or hear from their principal. It did not appear that any of the principals within the study have regularly scheduled meetings with support staff—either individually or collectively.

The support staff focus groups spoke peripherally to competence. The resounding theme within their comments was that they would like their principal to be as mindful and intentional related to planning for their professional development, as it appears to them that the principal is in planning the same for the teachers. Aids and Teaching Assistants indicated that there are varying practices between classrooms of the same grade level, which makes it hard for them to support students, as well as to be clear on what their role is. Members suggest that the principal needs to take more steps to achieve cohesion of instructional practices within grade levels.

The secretary to the principal clearly had the greatest access to each principal of any of the support staff that participated in the focus groups. The secretary's relationship with the principal is unique and based on acknowledged understanding of mutual need. The principals rely on their secretary for assistance with organization, focus, at times “running interference”, and more. Secretaries described “bringing information” to principals. Principals described needing and trusting their secretary to have an “ear to the ground”, and provide them a “heads up”, so that they can address situations proactively. Future research might probe this principal-secretary
relationship for more details because, for some principals, the secretary may be the de
facto distributed leadership team.

**The Impact of State Policy and Regulation on Principals’ Theories of Action**

Throughout the interviews with the five rural principals, the phrases, “Now I...” or “Now we...” were repeated several times. Phrases like these signal a developmental shift. It became clear that there has been a shift within the past 12 to 18 months within education in New York State, which has resulted in a shift within the rural schools included in this study. All such shifts have influence principals theories of action, especially their theories-in-use.

The advent of the Common Core Learning Standards, and State Race to the Top initiatives have heightened both the pace and stakes related to reform efforts. The requirement for development of a new teacher and principal evaluation system (APPR) is especially important. APPR includes a scoring system that weights up to 40% of a professionals’ rating upon student test scores. This new system has introduced confusion and tension into the environment of these rural schools (and throughout New York State.) All in all, there are noticeable policy crosscurrents.

Principals are the center of all such policy, practice and leadership crosscurrents. Confounding for this dissertation study in one respect, this policy, practice and leadership turbulence is fortuitous because this study provides developing outlines for understanding some of the intended and unintended consequences of APPR for principals, their superintendents, schools and surrounding rural communities. A few examples are in order because they can be offered as preliminary findings from Race to the Top.
Four of the five principals indicated that the changes related to Race to the Top have, to a degree, “given them permission” to have the “hard conversations” with their teachers and other staff. All of the principals identified the emphasis being placed on utilization of data in decision-making within their school. Principals are divided in their view as to whether or not this emphasis is a good thing or a positive development.

It appears that the external “forces, which principals perceive as coming from the State Education Department, are moving these school leaders towards holding their faculty members accountable for their teaching and its effects on student learning. They know that data are important. However, not all of the principals were able to specifically describe what data they believe to be most important, or what decisions they are making as a result of a review of student data. These perceived limitations have import for principals’ theories of action, rendering them selective and incomplete vis-à-vis their roles and responsibilities as implementation mechanisms.

Notwithstanding principals’ ambiguities, a significant finding from this study is that the New York State Education Department mandated requirements for principal and teacher accountability have had demonstrable effects on principals’ theories of action. Their theories of action have become narrower and more standardized. Uniqueness attributable to school level, rural location, and personality of the leader is less evident and not highly valued.

Every individual (principal and superintendent) interviewed spoke to the change in requirements related to development of new standards, assessment of students, and evaluation of teachers. Every principal responsible for a building wherein
NYS assessments are required stated that in their view, an indicator of a successful school is achieving “passing scores” on state assessments.

One principal stated that before his school had been identified as “in need of improvement,” he had been moving his faculty towards utilizing project-based learning and developing 21st century skills within students as a portion of the lens for reflection upon the content and quality of their instruction. He stated that upon being identified, and with the “press” related to timelines for developing the required Comprehensive Education Plan, both initiatives had been “moved to the back burner.” Developing new Common Core Learning Standard (CCLS) units, and negotiating the terms of the teacher APPR have become the new priorities.

Each of the principals with grade levels including those required to take NYS assessments (grades 3-8) spoke about how their school is being judged according to performance on those assessments. Each spoke, to some degree, about parents seeking greater information about assessment results. Two spoke about parents “shopping for schools” and questioning achievement and performance, in a manner not previously experienced. Each principal of an identified school was required to make a public presentation about the plan to improve student performance within a specified time period. All of these elements have contributed to accountability becoming the principals’ theory of action.

The Influence of Superintendents’ Theories of Action on Principals’ Theories of Action

This study’s findings include the superintendent’s influence on principal’s theories of action, individually and collectively. This influence is directly and immediately evident in District A. District B also provides evidence regarding the
variability among building principals, variability that eventuates when the
superintendent is not specific regarding his/her priorities, especially alignment
requirements.

In brief, Superintendent A’s leadership can be characterized as “tight”, while B’s
can be described as “loose.” DuFour (2007) and others (e.g., Fullan, 2006) have studied
the concept of simultaneous loose and tight leadership. DuFour describes tight-loose
leadership as, “This leadership approach fosters autonomy and creativity (loose) within
a systematic framework that stipulates clear, non-discretionary priorities and
parameters (tight)” (p.2) DuFour also cautions that an essential element of effective
tight-loose leadership is the leaders’ ability to be tight about the “right things.”

Superintendent A appears to be tight about prioritizing initiatives within the
district. Superintendent A is also tight about utilization of the Aligned Acts of
Improvement framework. Simultaneously, Superintendent A is loose about the action
steps selected to achieve the specific target. This is because of her articulated
confidence in her principals’ skills and abilities. She provides for her principals
guidance, and tools, and then enables their discretion, creativity and professional
judgment.

The principals within District A each described their understanding of district
protocols, and the specific targeting aspect of the Aligned Acts of Improvement. Each
principal articulated the understanding of an aligned K-12 school district. Each
principal spoke about making building decisions, recognizing that they have systemic
impact.
Superintendent B appears to be tight in his expectations for how priorities are implemented throughout the district, and within each school in District B. He takes a directive approach in supervision of his principal team. This is exemplified in his description of requesting to read minutes of all PLC meetings that take place throughout the district, and then specifically directing each principal to accomplish particular steps within a process.

Additionally, Superintendent B’s tight expectation for implementation of particular steps was exemplified in his calling the faculty of School A and School B together to attempt to bridge a rift that exists related to curricular approach and expectations for students. Superintendent B took this step having suggested to each principal ways to mitigate the situation, and being disappointed in the results of their effort. When the principals did not address the problem as Superintendent B wanted them to, he addressed it himself by calling the joint faculty meeting, and directing teachers as to next steps to bridge the rift.

Superintendent B is loose in specific definition of targets and alignment of the K-12 instructional program. Superintendent B and the principals within the district speak of “high” or “passing” test scores as a measure of a successful school or district. The state-defined level of acceptable achievement has become the definition of student success to a large degree within District B.

Neither Superintendent B nor his principals suggest that deep understanding of instructional processes and quality are essential in order to accomplish improved student achievement. Interviews did not reveal a theory that intellectual struggle and pedagogical development on the part of teachers is necessary in order for improved
student learning to occur. Assessment for learning is not a concept or theory that is in play at this time within District B. When improvement targets are not specific, starting with the superintendent, so too are principals’ actions developed to achieve them. Thus, an important finding of this study is that the Superintendent’s theory of action significantly influences the principal’s theory of action. And all such theories of action are influenced by the state policy context (Dimmock, 2012).

Both District A and District B are exposed to increased regulatory change and pressure. Both districts are subject to new tax levy limitations imposed by New York State. Both districts are required to develop new teacher and principal evaluative systems that include student test scores as a percentage of the ratings. Each district is responding differently to these regulatory changes. In response to these changes, each principal reflects to a large degree, the superintendent’s theory of action.

The findings of the study indicate that the concept of “ruralness” is not as heavily determinative as predicted when this study was designed. The extraordinary comment of Superintendent A when speaking about the rural influence, “I can’t find it,” is a strong indicator of this finding. While personnel from both District A and District B spoke about demographics that define a rural district (i.e. number of students per square mile, ability given size to compete for large grants, etc.), the rural context does not appear to explain study findings.

As referenced earlier, the work of Robert Merton (1949) has relevance to some such findings. Merton developed a typology for describing leaders on the basis of their orientation. He identified two types of leaders: Local Leaders have interests that
radiate around immediate community matters. Their leadership is closely knitted within relationships of community members. At times, leadership is based on whom they know in contrast to what they know.

In contrast, cosmopolitan leaders’ scope of interests transcends the local environment. These leaders represent their community on outside engagements and they attract beneficial projects to their community. Cosmopolitan leaders read widely to be abreast of news that could benefit their community and for personal development. Such leaders rely more on what they know than whom they know.

Merton’s (1949) classification has import for this study. The two district superintendents and their principals can be classified as primarily local or cosmopolitan. Their classification, possibly biased by the investigator, offers the advantage of signaling the extent to which “rural” matters in district and school leadership. It also sets the state for future research.

A review of the administrators included within this study enables “classification” of each, using Merton’s framework. Table 2 below presents this classification.

Table 2. A Comparison of the Two Districts Using Local and Cosmopolitan Leadership Orientations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District A</th>
<th>District B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent: Cosmopolitan</td>
<td>Superintendent: Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal A: Cosmopolitan</td>
<td>Principal A: Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal B: Local</td>
<td>Principal B: Cosmopolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School: Cosmopolitan</td>
<td>Principal C: Local</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An Unanticipated Methodological Finding

The study yielded an unexpected methodological finding related to effective research methods eliciting and understanding principal theories of action. A four-component approach to investigating principal theories of action emerged. The four are: (1) Individual interviews designed to elicit leaders’ espoused theories, especially interview protocols structured by a theory of action framework and emphasizing constructs from the literature on principal leadership; (2) Investigations of how principal spend their time, which is a pragmatic method for gauging their theories-in-use; (3) Interviewing faculty and staff members, especially the principal’s secretary, about their expectations and perceptions regarding what amounts to their principal’s theory of action; and (4) Analyzing and interpreting principal theories of action utilizing categories and constructs from literature.

The data from these four methods offer opportunities for triangulation in service of theory development, as the preceding analysis has been structured to indicate. Especially with regard to above-mentioned fourth method, template analysis (King, 1998) is a valuable data analytic procedure. Template enables the application of research-based priorities and themes, derived from the literature review, to qualitative data analysis. At the same time, template analysis’ emphasis on grounded theory analysis enables the discovery of unanticipated, new findings. These two features enable the achievement of the primary aim of case study methodology—to articulate
theory (Yin, 2008). This chapter has been structured accordingly, paving the way for the conclusions in Chapter 7.
Chapter 7

Summary, Conclusions, and Implications

This dissertation study was designed initially to address the following main question. What are the principals’ theories of action in rural schools demonstrating effectiveness? After the study was launched and the two rural districts were identified, New York State’s standards were elevated. As a result, some schools, once deemed “effective,” were identified as in need of improvement.

This change necessitated a change in the main research question. The revised research question is: What are elementary school and middle school principals’ theories of action in two rural school districts? Insofar as these two districts continue to perform acceptably overall, and have strengths that commend them, the overall logic of the study and its rationale remain in good currency.

As a reminder: These two school districts were purposively sampled to enable a focus on “successful” and “effective” principals in these two districts. Special interest resided in the extent to which the rural location of these schools and their districts was influential in principals’ theories of action. Sub-questions identified at outset derived from the main research question and the revised one. These questions were: (1) Is it possible to derive an overall, generic theory of action of effective principals in rural elementary and middle schools? (2) How does the principal identify improvement priorities? (3) In what ways have principal theories of action changed with experience? (4) How does the principal reflect while in-action? (5) How does the principal reflect on-action? (6) What is the importance of the superintendent-principal relationship within the context of the rural school and district, and how do this relationship
influence the principal’s theories of action? (7) What is the importance of the relationship between professional staff members and the principal within the context of the rural school and district, and how does this relationship influence the principal’s theories of action? (8) What is the importance of the relationship between other support staff and the principal in the principal’s theories of action? (9) How does the unique context of the rural school/district impact principals’ theories of action?

The questions turned out to be ambitious in relation to unavoidable constraints encountered as the study proceeded. At the top of the list of constraints were the extraordinary pressures placed on these districts and their leaders, together with the stress accompanying economic shortfalls and personnel decisions. As a result, some of the questions, notably questions 3 and 4, have received short shrift.

**Study Design**

The study was designed as a two-site case study with multiple methods. It utilized a purposive sample of two rural districts. It focused on these districts’ elementary and middle schools; leaving out high schools because of their complexity and the challenges they posed to study completion. The study proceeded with the assumption that cross school and cross-district comparisons held promise for understanding principals’ theories of action with special interest in the rural context and the influences on these theories of action and improvement planning overall.

The main research question and the sub-questions were instrumental in the selection of the research methods. To begin with, superintendents and principals completed a short, fixed response survey. This survey collected biographical-
demographic information such as age, previous professional experience, and time in current post.

Individual interviews were held with the superintendent of each school district. Additionally, individual interviews were held with the elementary principals (n=3) and middle school principals (n=2) within each district. All such interviews were structured by a specially designed theory-of-action instrument, one structured to yield an overall theory of action as well as constituent micro-theories for specific priorities such as instructional guidance and parent and community ties (Bryk, et al., 2010).

Two kinds of focus group interviews were conducted. One kind consisted of teachers and student support professionals. These focus groups were completed in four of the five schools. One was ruled out because of feasibility and participatory problems. A second kind of focus group interview was conducted with support staff. Originally scheduled for all five schools, there were conducted four of the five. The same school without a teacher focus group was the one without a support staff focus group. Secretaries were originally targeted for individual interviews, but ultimately were included as part of the support staff focus groups.

Additionally, document reviews were completed in the two districts. These reviews included evaluations of school and district goals as well as school performance data. Accountability reports from the New York State Education Department were reviewed for each district and school within district. Significantly, data about each district’s surrounding community and county context was collected from several sources (e.g., district websites, county data-bases). All such data were needed to
contextualize the districts, their superintendent’s orientation, and principals’ theories of action.

A Brief Synopsis of the Main Findings

Thick descriptions of the two districts, named Districts A and B, are provided in special chapters dedicated to each. District A is the subject of Chapter 4, and District B is described in Chapter 5. These descriptions pave the way for data interpretation and theory articulation, via cross-case comparisons, in Chapter 7. Examples of the findings from these three chapters follow.

Overview of District A

District A is situated 135 miles north of a major city, 180 miles west of a major city, and 20 miles south of a small city. As such, District A is not an “isolated rural” district. The district encompasses about 120 square miles, and is comprised of 11 towns. Approximately 30% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The district spent $10,225 per general education pupil in the 2008-09 school year, and $24,221 per special education pupil in the same year. The district is classified within New York State as an “Average Need/Resource Capacity School”.

District A is a rural school district of approximately 1300 students. It is located in a county of approximately 49,221 residents. The district is comprised of three schools: one elementary school spanning grades pre-K through 5 (n=550), one middle school spanning grades 6-8 (n=300), and one high school spanning grades 9-12 (n=450). One principal is assigned to each school. Each principal has sole responsibility for his building because there are no assistant principals within the district.
District A’s low dropout rate distinguishes it from other similar rural districts. The number of student graduating with a Regents Diploma with Advanced Designation is also a positive distinguishing feature of District A. Significantly, 83% of the students indicated that they intended to go to a 4 (45%) or 2-year (38%) college after graduation from high school. Data like these were instrumental in this district’s inclusion in this study.

Overview of District B

District B is situated approximately 45 miles away from any metropolitan or small city area. The district spans three counties, encompasses about 165 square miles, and is comprised of nine towns. The district spent $7,114 per general education pupil in the 2008-09 school year, and $17,394 per special education pupil in the same year. The district is classified within New York State as an “Average Need/Resource Capacity School.”

District B is classified as a rural school district with approximately 1900 students. It is located in a county of approximately 55,531 residents. The district is comprised of four schools. It has one elementary school spanning grades K-2 with approximately 450 students, and another elementary school spanning grades 3-5 with approximately 400 students. The one middle school spans grades 6-8 with approximately 450 students, while the high school spans grades 9-12 with approximately 600 students.

During the 2009-2010 school year, no grade level in the district exceeded 180 students. The lowest number of students in any grade level during that year was in kindergarten, with 122 students enrolled. For the past five years, the entering
Kindergarten class has been progressively smaller than the graduating class of the previous spring.

District B’s rate of students graduating with a Regents Diploma with Advanced Distinction is a distinguishing feature of District B. This achievement was one reason why this district was included in this study.

**Deriving Theories of Action**

Qualitative data derived from the specially designed interview guides were instrumental in the identification of principals’ and superintendents’ respective theories of action. As indicated above, interest resided in each leader’s overall theory of action and also in their micro-theories of action for specific school improvement priorities.

Template analysis (King, 1998) was selected for qualitative data analysis because of its potential import for the identification, description, and explanation. Research-based leadership priorities—categories, derived from the literature review (e.g., Bryk, et al., 2010; Leithwood, et al., 2010), facilitated content analyses of the raw interview data. At the same time, interest resided in important leadership priorities and processes (components in theories of action) not anticipated in the literature. Template analysis facilitates this data analytic approach because it emphasizes the use of a grounded theory framework for identifying and describing unanticipated, important findings.

In fact, one of the important findings from this study is an enriched methodology for eliciting, identifying, describing, and explaining leaders’ theories of action. Four methods materialized as salient: The individual interviews with a theory of action
format (described above), which elicits principals’ espoused theories; specific questions posed to principals about how they allocate and spend their time, which provides information about their theories-in-use; superintendent interviews, which provides information about district-wide and superintendent-induced influences and components; and focus group interviews from teachers, student support professionals and support staff. Details are provided at the end of Chapter 6.

Theories of Action in District A

The Superintendent in District A ruled out “rural” as a special influence or context. Her leadership orientation is not exclusively local. Her vision extends beyond the local, rural setting serving as the place-based home for her district.

Moreover, Superintendent A has considerable influence over the two principals’ theories of action and their school improvement plans overall. This influence began when she hired them. It has continued in part by explicit designs. For example, the Superintendent’s emphasis on “aligned acts of improvement” has the effect of creating shared goals and directions for both principals and their schools. In the same vein, the Superintendent’s emphasis on preparing students for 21st Century realities with priorities for 21st Century skills influences both principals. Superintendent A’s provision of a coach for these principals also is an example of district-level influence on principals’ theories of action, influence directly attributable to the superintendent.

Principal A was as a school psychologist with no prior experience as a classroom teacher. He explained that this lack of classroom experience was an issue that needed to be overcome with some of his faculty, who were concerned, as he hadn't “walked in
their shoes.” He also described how he developed greater knowledge and appreciation for the work of classroom teachers – both through presence in classrooms, as well as by working closely with a former district administrator who was a National Board Certified teacher, and willing to share both knowledge and perspective with him. The Focus group of teachers and student support professionals appreciated Principal A’s background, as they commended his sensitive and insightful interactions with the students in the building. They also suggested that Principal A’s background as a psychologist was helpful in addressing some of the adult interaction dynamics within the school.

Principal A’s theory of action manifested his superintendent’s influence. Like the other principal in the same district and the principals in District B, this principal’s theory of action is selective. This selectivity is manifest when research-based leadership priorities and action strategies are used to analyze the data. Details are provided in Chapters 4 and 6.

Principal B is similar to Principal A in total number of years served as a principal. Principal B also attended a rural school district as a student (not District A). He cited the influence of having grown up in a rural community, and how that experience is helpful to him particularly when interacting with board of education members, as he is familiar with their rural context. Focus groups commended his understanding of parents. Teacher participants within the focus groups also commented on Principal B’s efforts to get grade levels more consistent in their instructional approach.
Like Principal A, Principal B’s theory of action manifested his superintendent’s influence. As with A, this theory of action also is selective. It attends to instructional guidance, for example, more than the other research-based leadership priorities.

Data collected from both principals, like comparable data from the superintendent, are indicative of the influence of the current New York State policy environment. The two principals, emphasizing a “then-versus-now orientation” in their responses, describe what amounts to a progressive narrowing and standardization of their theories of action. Any special attention to the unique features of their surrounding rural context appears to be eroded in the process. Details are provided in Chapters 4 and 6.

*Theories of Action in District B*

Superintendent B emphasizes the rural setting for his district. In other words, he is aware of the importance of place and the special nature of rural families and communities. Here, it is important to emphasize that Superintendent B has lived in this school community for his entire life. He has strong beliefs related to the maintenance of certain traditions. Biography and place-based knowledge thus influence his leadership orientation.

His strategy for influencing his principals appears to be an indirect one. For example, several times within his interview he indicated an outcome he sought, yet said that he would “let his principals decide how to go about it.” Although he does not dictate, neither does he provide specificity as to the target he sets, leaving room for some inconsistency throughout the district.

In fact, variability was evident among District B’s principals’ theories of action.
The principals within District B have prior work experience at different grade levels prior to becoming principals. None of the principals have taught at the grade levels for which they are now responsible, which turned out to be important for their teachers. Each has a slightly different theory of action, perhaps because the superintendent does not provide direct leadership focused on specific leadership and school improvement priorities.

As with the principals in District A, these principals’ theories of action are selective. Selectivity and indeed gaps or omissions are especially apparent when research-based categories are used to analyze the interview data. As with the principals in District A, it is interpreted that this selectivity is a dynamic process, one attributable to the current Race-to-the-Top policy environment.

In brief, the data imply that, as this agenda proceeds, these principals’ theories of action are narrowing. At the same time, they are becoming more standardized, i.e., level of schooling is not as important as before. Focus groups clearly articulated their view that the principal’s lack of teaching experience at their respective school’s grade levels is a barrier to full confidence in the knowledge of and effectiveness of the principal. The focus groups within schools B and C also tended to emphasize their expectations for the principal-as-manager. For example, teachers expect their principal to manage student discipline, scheduling, and organization. Although these teachers indicated that they wanted their principal to have strong instructional knowledge, they also made it clear that they want to be “left alone” to make pedagogical decisions as they see best, based on their knowledge and experience.
Essentially, teachers overall offered a shared expectation. They expect their principal to take charge of smooth organizational functioning and leave the teaching-learning business to them. In brief, this expressed preference implicates an endemic tension between research-based strategies for principal leadership for school improvement and staff members’ expectations and preferences for leaders’ theories of action. Chapters 5 and 6 provide details.

An Example: Data-informed Leadership and Instructional Decision-making

The current emphasis, nationally and internationally, on the important of data for leadership and pedagogy, also emerged in this study. It provides a revealing contrast and a related set of findings.

In District A, the approach to data utilization is similar to the approach to other new initiatives underway in the district. It takes place within a framework that has been adopted and is understood throughout the district, one described under the overall umbrella of “aligned acts of improvement.” This construct and the attendant processes can be traced back to the Superintendent's theory of action, which has a penetrating reach into each principal’s theory of action.

Primarily, each building in District A utilizes a cyclical approach to planning, implementation, review and further research and revision cycle. Structured to be alike and aligned in this fundamental, there also is some “freedom” that is exercised in each building as they identify their implementation plan for any initiative. Within that, the teaching background of the principal appears to have less influence on teachers’ perceptions about the principal’s ability to move initiatives forward.
In District B, there is not a clear framework or approach throughout the buildings or district for instructional or student achievement goals. As a result, principals and their buildings are not clearly aligned, the principals’ theories of action vary because the improvement priorities are insufficiently specified.

Absent specificity of target or process in B, the teachers appear to place more emphasis on the background of the principal as it relates to their ability to provide expertise to the faculty. In many instances, the lack of specific knowledge of the principal is attributed to the lack of relevant teaching experience. Teachers did not articulate confidence in the ability of their principal to help them garner improved results. This is a proxy for the lack of relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), which rests in part on teachers’ perceptions of principals’ competence. Such a lack of relational trust has profound implications for effective leadership-as-beneficial influence and school improvement planning overall.

**Six Conclusions**

Drawing on the findings presented in Chapters 4-6, examples of which are summarized above, six conclusions appear to be warranted. They are offered contingently with recognition of this study’s inherent limitations and self-imposed delimitations. Consistent with case study methodology’s primary aim (Yin, 2009), these conclusions primary contribution may lie in theory articulation, together with their import for future research.

*The Import of Superintendent Theories of Action for Principals’ Action Theories*

Conclusion one: The Superintendent’s theory of action is pivotal in the development of their principals’ theories of the principal. Particularly within the
“new” regulatory and financial environment of schools within New York State, the superintendent’s theories of action directly influence principals’ theories. These superintendent theories of action become apparent in the approach that each takes with their respective principals to advance their school improvement agendas.

Theories regarding principal leadership and their theories of action Studies (however operationalized) simply must attend to the influence, indeed the strong directives, provided by their respective superintendents.

*Teachers’ Views, Expectations, and Interactions*

Conclusion two: Teachers’ views of principals’ biography, especially their teaching experience, influences their expectations for, and relations with, their principals. In both District A and B, when interviewed, teacher/student support professional groups voiced their strong belief that a principal should have teaching experience within the grade levels that are contained within the school where he/she becomes principal. They emphasized that it is important for the principal to have “walked in their shoes”, so he/she can understand “what our days are like.”

In all teacher focus groups, teachers’ expectations (perhaps viewed as implicit demands) were articulated. For example, teachers articulated belief that they have strong training and experience. They also asserted that should have more freedom in instructional direction and decision-making. Many consider the current focus on utilization of data in instructional decisions to be offensive. These expectations, perhaps expressed as preferred roles and responsibilities for principals and for themselves, can be expected to influence principals’ theories of action. They certainly
are influential if principals seek to establish relational trust with their teachers and student support professionals (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

*The “Rural” in Rural Schools and Districts*

Conclusion three: At least in this study, rural classification of a school and the district is not an influential on principals’ theories of action as initially assumed. The same can be said o superintendents, at least in the case of Superintendent A. Here it is noteworthy that the grounded theory analysis in this study produced an important theoretical finding—namely that Merton’s (1949) long-standing distinction between local and cosmopolitan leadership has import in today’s globalized educational world. Superintendent A clearly has a cosmopolitan orientation, while B is clearly local, and the theoretical and research implications extend beyond this limited, exploratory study.

While there are elements of the rural community that are unique (such as long bus rides for a majority of students, less access to services and certain types of programs and activities), and principals reference factors and forces like these in their interviews, this study suggests that these elements are not the primary force, in determining the theories of action of the principals.

On the other hand, Superintendent B emphasizes the “rural” in his espoused theory of action. His theory-in-use does not provide details. The question, then, is whether rural superintendents have the same orientation and, if they do, whether five years from now all such theories of action with rural priorities will be viewed as residual orientations. In other words, any such rural stamp on leadership will be viewed later as an artifact of the current timing for this study. Conclusion four bears
directly on the attendant substantive and methodological issues.

State Department of Education Race-to-the-Top Policy

Conclusion four: State Education Department policy has become the de facto theory of action of principals as mediated by their respective superintendents. Even when guided by a research-supported interview guide with special categories-as-priorities, principals invariably focused on regulatory compliance, and accountability measures identified by the New York State Education Department. In both districts, the findings indicate a progressive narrowing and standardization of principals’ theories of action and school improvement overall. Trade-offs are implicated here, and so are endemic tensions.

Both districts included in this study had at least one school identified as “in need of improvement.” The principal of each district school described the impact of such identification, as it related to their decision-making and action planning. Additionally, each principal interviewed referenced the advent of new Common Core Learning Standards, in most cases new assessments aligned to the new standards, as well as new requirements for teacher and administrator evaluative systems (APPR).

Principals’ theories of action thus encompass state regulations and compliance requirements and increasingly are riveted on them. Differences between elementary school and middle school leadership apparently are vanishing. In the same vein, the majority of principals also mentioned that parents are holding them accountable for results of state exams and requirements, and their presentations to the Board of Education now emphasize their progress related to compliance. State policy and district
interpretations and implementation regulations thus add to the crosscurrents of the role of principal.

_Crosscurrents in the Construction of Principals’ Theories of Action_

Conclusion five: Principals’ theories of action are constructed and reconstituted in situations with multiple, competing demands from diverse constituencies, and they need to be studied and developed accordingly. This study provides some relevant details, also contributing to theory.

For example, divergent expectations and preferences between principals and their respective professional staff members and teachers were apparent in both districts. As a case in point, all of the principals in the study communicated the importance of making instructional and programmatic decisions based on data about student achievement.

As principals “push the envelope,” related to developing systems for data utilization, they are getting pushback from teachers who claim, “This is not why I became a teacher.” Tensions and endemic conflicts are manifest here, and they contribute to the crosscurrents influencing all of the participating principals’ theories of action.

In a nutshell, principals’ theories of action are not developed and implemented in isolation. In fact, principals are caught up in crosscurrents involving state policy mandates and changes, superintendents’ leadership priorities and styles, their perceptions of their rural students, families and communities, their own priorities for leadership-oriented improvement and smooth organizational functioning, and the expectations of their teachers, student support professionals, and secretarial staff.
members. Owing in part to these crosscurrents, the principals participating in this study are not autonomous leaders. They enjoy varying degrees of discretionary authority, i.e. they have considerable influence and control over “how to” and “how best questions.”

As indicated in conclusion four, state policy mandates, filtered through superintendents’ priorities and leadership styles, emerge as especially influential in the development of principals’ theories of action. This study also provides evidence that teachers, student support staff, and secretarial staff also exert influence, especially in their explicit expectation that principals prioritize “smooth organizational functioning.” Although the expectations of school board members, powerful community leaders, parents, and young people were not tapped in this study, in rural communities where “everyone knows everyone” these expectations contribute to the leadership crosscurrents. Relevant research about principals and providing directives and guidance for their theories of action is yet another potential force, even though it was not evident in this study. What was evident is the need to disseminate and communicate this research to both superintendents and their principals.

Merton’s (1968) construct, structural ambiguity, can be employed to describe and explain the dynamics associated with these crosscurrents and the overall conclusion it recommends. Structurally ambiguous situations are one in which diverse constituencies, each with their own respective goals; compete for the attention and favor of a leader. Such is the situation for the principals in this study. Their theories of action can be interpreted and appreciated accordingly. Attributions of criticism and
blame are ill founded and unjustifiable when such structurally induced conditions are apparent.

**The Consequences of Under-developed Theories of Action**

Conclusion six: When principals’ theories of action are under-developed and out-of-step with current research, they are vulnerable to the influence of external forces, factors, and actors. Instead of holding firm on research-supported and expert-recommended school improvement models, leadership strategies, and rural-contextual opportunities, they are prone to respond immediately to the strongest voices and respond too readily to hastily-imposed, external expectations and regulations.

Granting that, in today’s policy environment principals and superintendents must comply with state policy mandates, they are able to do so without compromising important priorities and strategies characterizing their uniqueness. For example, there is good reason to hold the position that elementary school leadership is different from middle school leadership; and both are different from high school leadership. In this light, when these differences apparently disappear because of state policy directives, there is cause for concern. In raising this question and offering the overall conclusion, this study also contributes to leadership theory.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study offers important directives and recommendations for future research. For example, future research should build on this study by exploring in greater detail the relationship between superintendents’ theories of action and their principals’. Their respective and collective interpretations of the state policy context and what it means for them, individually and collectively are important. So are questions regarding
the influence of the rural context on their theories of action. In addition, the experiences with this study give rise to some methodological recommendations. Their numbering below is to enable comprehension. They are not rank-ordered in importance.

1. **Focus groups should be replaced with individual interviews when possible.**

   The focus groups were not as informative as originally anticipated. In this researcher’s view, group members did not contribute equally. Nor did they take exception to opinions stated by other group members. Here, it is important to note that the researcher observed some non-verbal signs of “differing opinion” in some focus group participants, yet no verbal challenges or “contrasting of viewpoint” took place. In some cases, junior members of the faculty appeared to defer to senior members.

   Additionally, when convening a group, the meeting time is invariable immediately at the end of the workday, in part because it is the “easiest time” to assemble people from across the building. As personal and professional demands are perceived to be increasing, it can be hard to assemble groups at this time. Scheduling individual interviews can be accomplished at greater convenience to the individual, simultaneously potentially gaining greater participation.

   Individuals interviewed will offer maximum benefit to a study most when and if they represent a range of experience both in teaching and support staff participants. An initial survey to ascertain the professional and educational background of participants is also recommended.

2. **Additional studies need to focus on superintendent theories of action**
Superintendent theories of action were very influential in this study, and they merit future investigation, both alone and in relation to principals’ theories of action. Significantly, these superintendents’ theories are not developed in isolation. For example, superintendents are accountable to boards of education that may or may not fully understand the policy environment as well as implications of accountability requirements. Additionally, boards of education, having been elected by the public, often focus on non-instructional issues that can border on micromanagement of the superintendent and/or school district. What is more, superintendents, no less than principals, are caught in crosscurrents indicative of structural ambiguity. In the same vein, expectations (and implicit demands) of principals and teachers influence superintendents’ theories of action because leadership influence depends, in part, on what subordinates will permit.

Notwithstanding, superintendents by virtue of job requirements, bring to their position considerable professional experience. Such experience shapes their theories of action. This study finds that superintendent theories of action significantly influence principal theories of action. In order to further inform the literature on principal effectiveness, further research on the how’s and whys of superintendent theories of action is warranted. Further studies focusing on superintendent theories of action will simultaneously place an emphasis on the District influences upon theories of action.

3. **Future studies focused on principals’ theories of action are needed.**

This study has achieved one of its primary aims if it facilitates future research on principals’ theories of action. Methodological findings have import for future research,
and so do this study’s contribution to theory. Especially needed are studies that add individual interviews and direct observation of principals’ daily activities and priority setting. In addition to individual interviews with principals, including a group interview including all district principals is recommended.

Additionally, interviews of parents, community members, and the president of the board of education about principals’ theories of action are recommended. Such interviews will assist in further measuring the impact of the rural context (if any) upon the principals’ theories of action.

4. Further studies focused on the influence of crossovers upon underdeveloped theories of action.

To the extent that principals are caught in crosscurrents; and also to the extent that their theories of action are under-specified and out-of-step with current leadership research, they are vulnerable to influence by external forces. For example, they will be swayed by external constituencies, prone to comply automatically with state policy mandates, and easily persuaded that leadership for an elementary school does not differ from that for a middle school.

5. Further studies focused on the influence of stated education policy upon principals’ theories of action.

The profound influence of state education department policy on principals’ theories of action, mediated by the superintendent’s theory of action merits future investigation. Fullan’s (2006) framework will provide a beneficial guide. For example, Fullan recommends a strategy involving “permeable connectivity”—a way to coordinate and harmonize improvements without what amounts to a compliance-
oriented straightjacket. This means perpetual learning and improvement and systems for it—and nothing that approximates perfect, once-and-for-all, alignment. (p. 81).

On the other hand:

“The word autonomy would not get at the solution envisaged in this book. Permeable connectivity requires a sophisticated and delicate balance because to work it requires all three levels—school, community, district, and state—to interact regularly across and within levels. We don’t want the inadequacies of tightly controlled centralization being replaced with the equal flaws of school and community autonomy. The answer, so to speak, is to have state interests present in local settings, while local interests are reflected in state thinking and action.” (Fullan, 2006, p. 96).

**Implications for Professional Education**

Pre-service and professional development programs for principals must emphasize theories of action, emphasizing overall theories of action, constituent micro theories focused on one priority (e.g., instructional guidance), and how to incorporate and integrate relevant leadership and school improvement research. Since theories of action are dynamic, not static, and because principals-as-middle-level leaders always are caught up in crosscurrents, strategies for continuous quality improvement also are needed.

Taking a cue from this study, the context also needs to be taken into account (e.g., rural setting), even if it materializes as less significant than initially posited. Studies focusing on contextual influences and determinants might be improved if they take into account the current realities, for example as structured by compliance-driven
policy mandates, in comparison to ideal realities, i.e., optimal theories of action constructed without policy interference and “noise.”

The principals in this study appear to have under-developed theories of action. In fact, the “theory of action construct” and all it represents as a holistic, coherent, and practical view of leadership was difficult to derive from some of the principals participating in this study. This researcher would contend that, to a degree, this begins with the principal preparation program. It appears that few principal preparation programs pay close attention to the development of theories of action, and in some cases, research-supported leadership models.

There is emerging literature related to factors correlated to the success of first-year principals. If the principals in this study are indicative of principals across the state in which they work, the principals are not equipped to address the formidable challenges related to facilitating improved student learning and achievement outcomes.

**Implications for Policy**

New York State reform policies and resources need to have more strategic relationship to school and district leaders and practitioners in the field. Presently, some such policies as designed, enacted, and implemented are having unintended consequences and undesirable side effects. In theory, these problems can be prevented if the policy learning and improvement apparatus is in place. There is work to be done.

Throughout the interviews completed within this study, every administrator articulated that the current pace of change (or “reform”) coupled with the lack of an articulated roadmap is causing extreme stress and pressure within schools. Additionally, higher expectations and stronger outcomes are being legislated in an
era of significant reduction of financial resources. Multiple administrators have told this researcher that they have experienced teachers who are contemplating leaving the field. Well-being is threatened as stress levels escalate, and the long-term consequences for children, youth, and schools are not positive.

Indeed, these several problems may trigger undesirable workforce turnover. The superintendents each gave examples of principals they know or know of who are thinking about leaving administration. For the rural schools, that traditionally thrive on close relationships and a community of caring, the intense regulatory pressures are eroding the very community upon which they are founded and take such pride.

State Education Department officials need to form strategic relationships and partnerships with leaders from schools of all types with the aim of forming policy that is both targeted and pragmatic. The pace of change needs to be appropriate, and it needs to allow for development of the collective knowledge and understanding that is required in order for policy goals to be achieved and policy learning to occur. Educators, by their very nature, believe in developing the potential of all students. Well-intended policy, although on the surface aligned to that calling, can be counterproductive to its achievement. Educators at all levels, especially in policy circles, can and must do better. This modest dissertation study has provided priorities and strategies for improvement planning on these several fronts.
References


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Appendices
Appendix A. The Interview Schedule for Superintendents

Section 1: Superintendent’s Perspective of Principal’s Overall Theory of Action

1. Assume that you are an evaluator needing to understand your principals’ success stories. What outcomes would you measure, i.e., what are the main indicators of your success?
2. Are these outcomes the same or are they different for each of your principals? Explain.
3. Viewing them as a group, how do you account for their collective success stories? In other words, what did they do to achieve these good outcomes?
4. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.”
5. Are some more important than others? Explain.
6. How do you think your principals combine these ingredients in a “recipe” or a “formula” for success?
7. Are these ingredients for success the same for all of your principals? Explain.
8. What specifically do you do to enable your principals’ success?
9. How do you want your principals to allocate their time?
10. If you were in complete control of your principals’ time, would you have them utilize it differently? If so, what would you have them do differently? Why?
11. Who keeps your principals on the right track? How does this happen?
12. What kinds of obstacles have your principals encountered? Within their respective schools? Within your district? Within your community? [For those who have been a superintendent in a different district – How are these obstacles different in this school/district than in your previous one?]
13. How did you assist your principals to overcome these obstacles?
14. What obstacle-removing strategies have worked for them?
15. What did you do to help them address these obstacles?
16. What about your obstacles in working with your principals? What have you done to address them?
17. Are there special features in your rural school context that influence your roles and responsibilities for supervising your principals? Explain.
18. Think back to when you first began. Have you changed your approach with your principals? If so, what have you changed? Why? If not, why not?
19. In your work with your principals, do you emphasize the special features of rural schools and communities? Explain.
20. If the superintendent once was a principal: Think back to your approach to the principal’s role and then compare it to your past work as a principal. What are the main differences? Do these differences make a difference?

Section 2: Instructional Guidance

As you know, solid learning and teaching strategies are the most important factor in students’ academic achievement. Help me understand your priorities and efforts in providing instructional guidance to your principals.
21. What specific student outcomes or benefits are you after?
22. What strategy or strategies have you used to achieve them?
23. Have you been successful?
24. What specifically have you done with your principals to achieve success with students? Why?
25. What improvements involving teachers are you after?
26. What specifically do you do with your principals to achieve success with teachers?
27. Have your principals improved their approaches and overall performance?
28. What improvements have you seen in principals?
29. Have you observed improvements in students? Explain.
30. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others? Explain.
31. How do you combine these ingredients in a “recipe” or a “formula” for success?
32. What are your next steps to achieve even greater success?

Section 3: Student-centered Learning Climate

As you know, one of your main responsibilities as principal is to help get the conditions right for learning and teaching. The right conditions include a safe and orderly school and classroom environment, and an environment in which there is a “press” for academic stretch and maximizing individual potential, which some leaders call “a positive school climate.” Help me understand your priorities and efforts in developing this climate.

33. What specific outcomes or benefits are you after? Do you have specific outcomes/targets for principals? Do you have specific outcomes/targets for teachers?
34. How do you work with your principals to strengthen the student-centered learning climate?
35. Have you been successful? In other words, is the climate in this district overall different now than when you first became the superintendent? Explain.
36. How do you account for your success stories? In other words, what did you do to achieve these good outcomes?
37. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others?
38. What do you do work with your principals to ensure that they emphasize these ingredients for success?
39. Do your principals create somewhat unique, learner-centered climates in their respective schools? Explain.
40. Is there a difference in the learner-centered climate of each of the schools in this district? Explain.
41. Do you help your principals develop school leadership success formulas or recipes?
42. Are there special features in your rural school context that influence your work with to develop a student-centered learning climate? Explain.
4: Developing Teachers’ and Other Staff Members’ Capacity and Commitments

As you know, gaining the professional commitments of teachers and student Section support professionals is a key to success. No school is likely to remain successful if these professionals are not loyal and committed to the school; or when they lack a “can-do attitude” and do not seek opportunities to individually and collaboratively learn and improve. Help me understand what you do to maintain and improve professionals’ loyalty, capacity and their commitments to learn and improve.

43. What specific outcomes do you want your principals to achieve?
44. What strategy or strategies have you encouraged them to use to achieve them?
45. Have they been successful? Explain.
46. How do you account for their success stories? In other words, what did each principal do to achieve these good outcomes?
47. What did you do to help these principals achieve success?
48. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others? Explain.
49. Are there special features in your rural school community context that influence your principals’ efforts aimed at staff loyalty, capacity and continuing improvement?

Section 5: Parent-Community Ties

As you know, solid ties with parents and communities are keys to principals’ success. Help me understand your priorities and efforts in this area.

50. What, in your view, are the elements of strong parent-community ties?
51. What strategy or strategies have you used to help your principals achieve them?
52. Have they been successful? Explain.
53. How do you account for their success stories? In other words, what did they do to achieve these good outcomes?
54. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others? Explain.
55. How do you want your principals combine these ingredients in a “recipe” or a “formula” for success?
56. What do you do to help them develop these recipes for success with parents and communities?
57. Are there special features in your rural school community context that influence your principals’ work with parents and community members? [For superintendents that have worked in a non-rural setting as a principal or superintendent: How are these features different than from your previous school community context?] Explain.
Section 6: Lessons Learned from Reflection-on-Action

58. Think back to when you first began as a superintendent. What lessons have you learned about supervising, mentoring, and coaching principals?

59. Do you try to strike a balance between district-wide commonalities and each principal’s needs to view their school as unique? How do you do this?

60. How do you deal with your principals’ unique personalities? How, if at all, does this impact your approach to mentoring and supervising each?

61. Now think of yourself as an expert consultant for new superintendents in rural schools. What advice would you give them about the most important “dos” and “don’ts” in their work with their principals?

62. What “do’s” and “don’ts” would you suggest to new rural principals?

63. What percentage of your time is spent in supervision and development of your principals? If you had complete control over your time usage, what percentage of your time would you choose to allocate to this pursuit?

64. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about rural principals’ success stories?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How many years did you teach before becoming an administrator?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What did you teach? If you were not teaching, what was your position?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Where did you teach/work? (Please provide name of school, type of district - urban, rural, suburban)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. What administrative positions have you held? Please list each separately, along with name of school district, and number of years served.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How many years have you been a superintendent?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. How many years have you served as superintendent in your current district?</td>
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Appendix B. The Interview Schedule for Principals

Section 1: Principal’s Overall Theory of Action

1. Assume that you are an evaluator needing to understand your success stories. What outcomes would you measure, i.e., what are the main indicators of your success?
2. How do you account for your success stories? In other words, what did you do to achieve these good outcomes?
3. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others? Explain.
4. How do you combine these ingredients in a “recipe” or a “formula” for success?
5. Look back to when you first began at this school (in your role as principal). Have you changed your approach or priorities for success? If so, why? If not, why not?
6. On average, how many hours do you work each day? How do you allocate your time to achieve success?
7. If you had complete control of your work time, would you utilize it differently than you currently do?
8. Who keeps you on the right track? How does this happen?
9. What obstacles have you encountered? Within your school? Within your district? Within your community? [For those who have been a principal in a different district – How are these obstacles different in this school/district than in your previous one?]
10. How did you overcome these obstacles? In other words, what strategies worked for you?
11. Are there special features in your rural school context that influence your roles and responsibilities as principal? Explain.

Section 2: Instructional Guidance

12. As you know, solid learning and teaching strategies are the most important factor in students’ academic achievement. Help me understand your priorities and efforts in providing instructional guidance to your teachers.
13. What specific student achievement outcomes or benefits are you after?
14. What strategy or strategies have you used to achieve them? (Probes) Is there a set of strategies for your guidance of teachers? Is there an additional/separate set of strategies for your interaction with students?
15. Have you been successful? What improvement have you seen in teachers? What improvement have you seen in students? Explain.
16. How do you account for your success stories? In other words, what did you do to achieve these good outcomes?
17. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others? Explain.
18. How do you combine these ingredients in a “recipe” or a “formula” for success?
19. Do you have new plans for your future work with instructional guidance for
teachers and students? Explain. What are your next steps to achieve even greater success?

Section 3: Student-centered Learning Climate

20. As you know, one of your main responsibilities as principal is to help get the conditions right for learning and teaching. The right conditions include a safe and orderly school and classroom environment, and an environment in which there is a “press” for academic stretch and maximizing individual potential, which some leaders call “a positive school climate.” Help me understand your priorities and efforts in developing this climate.

21. What specific outcomes or benefits are you after? Do you have specific outcomes/targets for teachers? What strategy or strategies have you used to achieve them?

22. Do you have specific outcomes/targets for students? What strategy or strategies have you used to achieve them?

23. Have you been successful? Is the climate in this school different now than when you first became the principal? Explain.

24. How do you account for your success stories? In other words, what did you do to achieve these good outcomes?

25. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others? Explain.

26. How do you combine these ingredients in a “recipe” or a “formula” for success?

27. Are there special features in your rural school context that influence your efforts to develop a student-centered learning climate? Explain.

Section 4: Developing Teachers’ and Other Staff Members’ Capacity and Commitments

28. As you know, gaining the professional commitments of teachers and student support professionals is a key to success. No school is likely to remain successful if these professionals are not loyal and committed to the school; or when they lack a “can-do attitude” and do not seek opportunities to individually and collaboratively learn and improve. Help me understand what you do to maintain and improve professionals’ loyalty, capacity and their commitments to learn and improve.

29. What specific outcomes are you after?

30. What strategy or strategies have you used to achieve them?

31. Have you been successful? Explain.

32. How do you account for your success stories? In other words, what did you do to achieve these good outcomes?

33. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others? Explain.

34. How do you combine these ingredients in a “recipe” or a “formula” for success?

35. Are there special features in your rural school community context that influence your efforts aimed at staff loyalty, capacity and continuing improvement?
Section 5: Parent-Community Ties

36. As you know, solid ties with parents and communities are keys to principals’ success. Help me understand your priorities and efforts in this area.
37. What, in your view, are the elements of strong parent-community ties?
38. What specific outcomes are you after?
39. What strategy or strategies have you used to achieve them?
40. Have you been successful? Explain.
41. How do you account for your success stories? In other words, what did you do to achieve these good outcomes?
42. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others? Explain.
43. How do you combine these ingredients in a “recipe” or a “formula” for success?
44. Are there special features in your rural school community context that influence your work with parents and community members? [For principals that have worked in a non-rural setting as a principal: How are these features different than from your previous school community context?] Explain.

Section 6: Lessons Learned from Reflection-on-Action

45. Think back to when you first began. What are the primary ways that you have come to know what you now know?
46. If you knew then what you know now, is there anything you’d do differently? Explain.
47. As you reflect, are there beliefs or philosophies that you hold about being an effective principal that are unchanged since you began as a principal? What are they?
48. Now think of yourself as an expert consultant for new principals in rural schools. What advice would you give them about the most important “dos” and “don’ts”?

Section 7: Influence of Colleagues/Supervisors

49. How, if at all, does your relationships with your teachers and student support professionals influence your thoughts and actions as a principal?
50. How, if at all, does your relationship with your fellow administrators (principals, supervisors) influence your thoughts and actions as a principal?
51. How, if at all, does your relationship with your superintendent influence your thoughts and actions as a principal?
52. Have you worked with the same superintendent for your entire service as a principal in this district? If not, how have the superintendents differed?
53. If you have served with multiple superintendents within this district, how has your role and job expectations changed with each different superintendent?
54. Who has been the most influential “mentor” for you in your administrative career? Why? How did this mentoring occur?
55. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your success stories and how you have achieved them?
Hello!
I wanted to accompany our interview with some demographic data- to be sure that I have it correct for you. Could you please take this short demographic survey to add data to my study? I continue to appreciate your time and assistance!
~Lynn

1. How many years did you teach/work before becoming a principal?

2. What did you teach? If you were not teaching, what was your position?

3. Where did you teach/work? (Please provide name of school, type of district - urban, suburban, rural)

4. How many years total have you been a principal?

5. How long have you served as a principal in this district?

6. Did your current superintendent hire you?
   - Yes
   - No

7. To how many schools did you apply when applying to this one?

8. If more than one, was this school your first choice position?
9. Do you envision changing to a different administrative position in the future?
- Yes
- No
- Maybe

10. If so, what position?

11. How soon would you envision making that change?
- Within a year
- Within 2-3 years
- 5 years from now
- Not sure

12. Last question - What have been the biggest challenges/barriers in your work as a principal, and how have you been able to overcome them?

Thanks for taking the time to complete this!!!
Appendix C. The Focus Group Interview Schedule

Section 1: Principal’s Overall Theory of Action

1. Assume that you are an evaluator needing to understand your principal’s success stories. What outcomes would you measure, i.e., what are the main indicators of your principal’s success?
2. How do you account for your principal’s success stories? In other words, what did he/she do to achieve these good outcomes?
3. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others? Explain.
4. If you had complete control of your principal’s time, would you have your principal utilize it differently than he/she currently does?

Section 2: Instructional Guidance

5. Does your principal make learning and teaching a priority in your school?
6. Does your principal provide teachers with instructional guidance, which enables them to be successful with students?
7. Does your principal provide guidance to student support professionals, enabling them to be successful with students?
8. Is there anything else your principal could do to improve teaching and learning in your school?

Section 3: Student-centered Learning Climate

One of your principal’s main responsibilities is to help get the conditions right for learning and teaching. The right conditions include a safe and orderly school and classroom environment, and an environment in which there is a “press” for academic stretch and maximizing individual potential, which some leaders call “a positive school climate.” Help me understand your principal’s priorities and efforts in developing this climate.

9. What specific outcomes or benefits is your principal after?
10. Does your principal have specific outcomes/targets for teachers? What strategy or strategies has your principal used to achieve them? (For teacher group)
11. Do your principal have specific outcomes/targets for students? What strategy has your principal used to achieve them?
12. Does your principal have specific outcomes/targets for student support professionals? What strategy or strategies has your principal used to achieve them? (For non-teacher group)
13. What about other support staff such as secretaries, cafeteria workers and custodians? Does your principal prioritize them? Explain.
Section 4: Developing Teachers’ and Other Staff Members’ Capacity and Commitments

Gaining the professional commitments of teachers and student support professionals is a key to success. No school is likely to remain successful if these professionals are not loyal and committed to the school; or when they lack a “can-do attitude” and do not seek opportunities to individually and collaboratively learn and improve. Help me understand what your principal does to maintain and improve professionals’ loyalty, capacity and their commitments to learn and improve.

14. What specific outcomes is your principal after?
15. What strategy or strategies has your principal used to achieve them?
16. Has your principal been successful? Explain.
17. How do you account for your principal’s success stories? In other words, what did your principal do to achieve these good outcomes?

Section 5: Parent-Community Ties

18. Solid ties with parents and communities are keys to principals’ success. Help me understand your principal’s priorities and efforts in this area.
19. What, in your view, are the elements of strong parent-community ties?
20. What strategy or strategies has your principal used to achieve them?
21. Has your principal been successful? Explain.
22. How do you account for your principal’s success stories? In other words, what did your principal do to achieve these good outcomes?