THE ROLE OF SMALL SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of WILLIAM J. WADLINGTON find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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THE ROLE OF SMALL SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS

Abstract

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A learning leader in a school district is the agent of change who can influence improvement in instruction or assessment delivery by the classroom teacher. A phenomenological approach was utilized in this qualitative study of the superintendent's role and associated activities performed in a small school district. Five school district employees in each of three districts were interviewed to understand their perceptions of the superintendent's roles and duties as a learning leader. Interview data, field notes and memos were coded to describe categories and framework areas common across the interview responses of the fifteen participants. Four major framework areas identified from the literature and refined during a pilot study provided structure for the analysis: (a) superintendent (principal) as learning leader, (b) teacher as learning leader, (c) outside agency as learning leader, and (d) student learning improvement—general (unidentified leader).

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Dedication

"There are no passengers here; we are all crew members."

Participant J-04

To all of the crew members who make a difference in the lives of the students they teach

and to their efforts to make the next generation better than the one preceding.

Chapter One: Introduction

Phillip Schlechty (2006) stated, "If student performance in America's public schools is to be improved in any significant way, school leaders must transform their organizations from bureaucracies into learning organizations" (p. 62). To a great extent this dissertation and research was focused on the way the superintendent in a small school district must become that school leader to transform the small school from "bureaucracies into learning organizations" (p. 62). Plainly stated, the superintendent of a small school district must be the learning leader at the district, school, and classroom levels. In recent literature a great deal of emphasis is placed on the K-12 school principal as instructional leader (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Peterson, 2002; Ravitch, 2010; Reeves, 2009; Schlechty, 2009; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003). While it is clear from the literature that the school principal must be an instructional leader for teachers, the role of the superintendent as instructional leader is less clear. Diane Ravitch (2010) made the case, "The principal should be the school's "head teacher", the person who evaluates teachers and helps those who are struggling to teach well" (p. 228). Notably, the superintendent in a small school district is much closer to the role of principal than a superintendent in a medium or large school district in respect to instructional leadership. Several studies have been conducted on the role of superintendent as instructional leader; however, most are based on an assumption that their role is to empower and train school principals as instructional leaders rather than being an instructional leader themselves (Boone, 1998; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; McEwan, 1998; Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985; Monk, 2006; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Reeves (2009) explained that the superintendent's role as a learning leader has a "telephone effect," which speaks to the everyday expectations that the superintendent espouses and which are cascaded throughout the school district.

. . . the superintendent whispers to the deputy, who then whispers to the same—or almost the same—story to the assistant superintendent. The story—or a pretty close variation of it—is repeated to principals who pass it along—or something fairly close to the assistant principals, who, if they have time will attempt to recall what they heard to department heads and grade level leaders, who may share it with faculty members (p. 50) .

The telephone effect does not address the conscious decision of the leader to be a leader of learning. Absent from many of these studies is the small school district and how the role of the superintendent as instructional leader can be very important to the improvement of instruction, the caliber of learning and student achievement (Boone, 1998).

The dearth of apparent research concerning superintendents acting as de facto instructional leaders for a school district is noted by Theodore J. Kowalski (Björk & Kowalski, 2005). He commented about inconsistencies surrounding the instructional leadership role of superintendents, "Today, differences of opinion about superintendents being instructional leaders are evident in inconsistent state policies for professional preparation and licensure" (p. 5). The implications of the contemporary and historical literature presupposes that the superintendent utilizes instructional leadership as a behind the scenes resource manager and executive rather than as the direct leader for district improvement of instruction and as the facilitator of change. This more recent literature seems to identify four major contributors to the changing perception of the role of superintendent as a learning leader which are: (a) mandated student accountability by state and federal legislation, (b) standards-based reform efforts, (c) professional learning communities trend, and (d) innovations in technology and pedagogy that change the potential nature and methodology of learning (Boone, 1998; Center for Policy Studies and Education Research 2003; Duckworth, 2008; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Kowalski, 1995; Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985; McEwan,

1998; Monk, 2006; Portis & Garcia, 2007; Sayre, 2007). It is important to note that implicit within these four contributors of the forces on the changing role of superintendents, are the ever-present social pressures for leaders to transform society through its public schools. Thus superintendents must adapt to changes occurring daily, while simultaneously moving their districts forward and working as a change agent to successfully keep their districts moving forward.

Statement of the Problem

Superintendents of small school districts have a greater hands-on role as instructional leaders than their larger school superintendent counterparts. However, little specific preparation in pre-service or in-service programs for small school district superintendents in instructional leadership exists; particularly preparation that notes the differences in contexts and roles. Furthermore, little guidance exists to provide school boards and other superintendent selection groups in small districts with insights into the nature of the role of the instructional leader as school boards hire prospective superintendents for small school districts.

The changing nature of education underlies the changing role of the superintendent. Nowhere is this more evident than in small school districts. Because of the nature of educational reform and advances in pedagogy, the superintendent has a pivotal role as an instructional leader in the school district to lead the change and transformation efforts of the district toward a "learning organization" (Schlechty, 2009). A qualitative study can help us to better understand in what ways and to what degree the superintendent of a small school district acts as an instructional leader within these changing dynamics of the educational system. Findings have import to educational institutions that train, mentor, and hire small school district superintendents. This study provides both educators and school boards with valuable information about the position. Throughout this study the focus was on the role of the superintendent as a learning leader, the person in

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charge of fostering and developing instructional leadership within the school district; however, the underlying responsibility of the superintendent is to increase student achievement. This responsibility is clearly represented by the attention by the public on student scores in today's high stakes testing environment. Increasing student achievement is accomplished by systematically improving instruction and assessment methods through management of pedagogy and content instructional training, focusing on student achievement and diagnostic assessment practices that benchmark standards (Anthes, 2002; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Lamkin, 2006; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McEwan, 1988; Portis & Garcia, 2007; Reeves, 2009; Sayre, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2003; Waters and Marzano, 2006). The small school district superintendent has the primary role of making decisions that foster teacher collaboration and build a professional learning community to accomplish meaningful, second-order learning improvement (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Dufour, et al., 2004; Sergiovanni, 2004; Sergiovanni, 2006). Second-order change is an imperative because it transforms schools from an organization ". . . with the intent of improving the performance of existing systems," to an organization where "Transformation is intended to make possible to do things that have never been done by the organization undergoing the transformation" (Schlechty, 2009, p. 3). For the purposes of this study, it is important to recognize learning leadership methods and distinguish them as either "reform" efforts or as "transformation" efforts as proposed by Schlechty (2009). According to Marzano and Waters (2009), second-order change

> . . . is perceived as a break with the past, (2) lies outside existing paradigms, (3) conflicts
> with prevailing values and norms, (4) requires the acquisition of new knowledge and
> skills, and (5) requires resources currently not available to those responsible for
> implementing the innovation. (p.105)

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The promise of second-order change processes is that the organization will meet the needs of learners that the current system is not equipped to meet (Schlechty, 2009; Senge, 1990; Waters & Marzano 2009).

The education system was described and discussed next through the competing dimensions placed on an effective small school district superintendent's role. First the small school district superintendent must possess the knowledge of a transformational leader for learning. Second, the small school district superintendent must have the capacity to perform organizational management practices within the school district (Borst, 1994; Kowalski, 1995; Lamkin, 2006). This is in spite of a larger bureaucratic system that required operating within federal and state educational guidelines and mandates (Peterson, 1999; Reeves, 2009). Thus the second point that follows is that small school district superintendents need to keep student achievement and instructional improvement as the focus of their work and perform management tasks concurrently (Lamkin, 2006).

While superintendents in medium and large school districts have other educational leaders within their cabinets who can "pick up the slack" if the superintendent leaves the work of the instructional leader undone and pursues the manager's role, in a small school district the superintendent does not have this luxury of relying on others to fill in the gap (Kowalski, 1995). An analogy that best describes the common perception of the work of the small school district superintendent is that of an operator of a small plane that must repair and maintain the aircraft while in flight and perform the functions of the pilot, navigator, flight controller and communicator. This analogy places the superintendent of a small school district in the primary position as leader and driving force for change effecting learning improvement. It is a demanding

role and one that has been described by superintendents in small school districts as "wearing many hats" (Ivory & Acker-Hocevar, 2007).

Significance of the Study

Collegiate departments of education and superintendent professional associations will have access to qualitative findings concerning the expectations of others regarding the superintendent's role as instructional leader in small school districts. Findings from this study will provide superintendents currently employed in small school districts with information for them to reflect and orient their efforts and daily schedules toward more of an instructional leadership focus and role. Furthermore, school board members charged with selecting the best candidate for their small school district may use these findings in their selection process to focus on hiring a superintendent as the leader for learning with an emphasis on second-order change.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Influences

This study builds on the research conducted by James E. Borst (1994) on instructional leadership and concerning roles of superintendents. The 1994 study by Borst identified the richness and diversity of roles within the superintendency. The study utilized semi-structured interviews to gain perceptions of superintendents about their varied roles. While the Borst (1994) study was of large school districts, there was a call in the conclusion of his dissertation for further research to be conducted around the roles of the superintendency and presumably in other sized districts. Because his study was restricted to large school districts only, it seemed appropriate to ask similar questions of superintendents' roles for small school districts to better understand superintendent's roles as learning leaders in small school districts.

A second theoretical influence on this study is from the work by Marcia Lamkin, *Challenges and Changes Faced by Rural Superintendents* (2006), which provided one of the first studies about the roles of small school superintendents. Her work suggested that as the demands on the small school district superintendent increased, assistance decreased. Lamkin (2006) noted:

> Third, the challenges of rural service are different enough to warrant some specialized training for service to rural districts. The burden of being the only administrator in the central office—sometimes in the district—plus the demands of the closely-knit rural community and the calls for personal accountability render service to rural districts distinct from service to suburban or urban districts, where the superintendent would enjoy many layers of administrative assistance and separation from daily classroom and community concerns. Existing literature described specific obstacles that face rural schools and their superintendents and that render service in such districts and roles less attractive than service in other settings. (p. 26)

Thirdly, as Lamkin (2006) proposed, there is a need for specialized training for small school district (rural) superintendents. She identified the same set of managerial tasks for both small and large school district superintendents. However, she concluded than in many cases, the small school district superintendent did not have the assistance in personnel to successfully manage employee negotiations, building projects, district and board politics and community visibility. This lack of assistance and the multiple roles inherent in the superintendency in a small school district was an added layer of stress on an already stressful leadership position. Small school district superintendents are many times the learning leader in their school districts by

default. In many instances, the superintendent is the only administrator in a small school district or may be the only administrator focused on student learning and accountability.

The limited resources in a small school district are time and energy; therefore, the small school district superintendent must manage her or his time efficiently and identify key aspects and associated priorities of her or his role. Leading the learning process in a small school district may very well become the lens through which the superintendent's role is constructed and through which all the other decisions are made concerning the priorities established for resources such as, curriculum development, materials adoption, content, and pedagogical training of staff. To a degree, funding, staffing, and even construction decisions are influenced significantly by student accountability outcomes. It follows, then, that improvement of instructional and assessment strategies must be of paramount importance to the small school district superintendent who wishes to lead their district into a successful future. How the superintendent constructs her or his role is important to how she or he will make changes in the district (Lamkin, 2006; Mazano & Waters, 2009; Schlechty, 2009).

Theoretical Lens

Change will be the theoretical lens for this study. Specifically, change in the form of the transformation of schools into learning organizations as described by Schlechty (2009). Other terms that appears in the literature to describe this change are reform, restructuring, and school improvement; however, this study will focus on behaviors that support transformation and a tightly-coupled school district organization centered on student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009). According to Schlechty (2009) the school transformation process calls on leaders to change their focus from a bureaucratic organization to a learning organization. The transformation of schools into learning organizations requires second-order change that holds the

promise of improved teaching and learning. Second-order change infers deep structural change and disturbs the status quo, interrupting normative practices within a more traditional and bureaucratic culture where the superintendent is more concerned about managerial and political functions connected to their work than her or his instructional leadership role.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to explore the meaning of instructional leadership practices and activities of school superintendents in small school districts in eastern Washington State to better understand how their work and roles impact student achievement. The majority of school districts in Washington State are small, defined as less than 2000 students. For this study, instructional leadership is generally defined as those practices that have the potential to improve teacher instruction and assessment capabilities. Furthermore, for purposes of this study, a small school district is defined as a district with less than 600 full time equivalent students. The insights and findings derived from this qualitative study have the potential to guide the investigation of this topic in greater scope and breadth and add to the literature on the small school district superintendent.

I propose to identify the learning leader roles of the superintendent of small school districts in eastern Washington State and collect perceptions from district personnel concerning learning leadership activities within the district. Data analysis will generate findings to further clarify learning leadership roles as it relates to the roles of small school district superintendent and the importance of pre-service and in-service training for current superintendents. These results may provide the focus for a group of "sitting" superintendents to use in a professional learning community to change their current leadership roles from traditional roles of management-focused leaders to learning-focused leaders. Furthermore, I propose to begin to

associate a lack of focus on roles of learning leaders as an important area for inclusion in superintendent preparation programs at the university.

Research Questions

The overarching research question for this study pertains to the role of the small school district superintendent as the learning leader of instructional improvement as viewed by members of the small school district in which the superintendent works. Specific research questions are:

1. What are the perceptions of district staff, including principal, teacher and paraeducator, regarding the role of the small school district superintendent in instructional improvement activities within the learning organization?

2. What are perceptions of the superintendent regarding the role of the small school district superintendent in instructional improvement activities within the learning organization?

3. What specific instructional leadership activities are fostered, guided or directed by the small school district superintendent? How do these specific leadership activities correspond to the role of the superintendent in building a learning organization? How do these specific leadership activities foster second-order change?

Delimitations of the Study

1. Selection of School Districts:

   a. Three (3) school districts in eastern Washington from North Central Education Service District (NCESD) and Northeast Washington Educational Service District Number 101 (NEWESD101) were selected from a list of districts that agreed to participate in the study. The Agree to Participate List was populated from volunteers who answered requests at several meeting of superintendents in NEWESD101 and NCESD.

b. Selection criteria to identify the three school districts were:

    i.   The first criterion excluded school districts that were not 600 students or fewer full time students.

    ii.   The second criterion excluded school districts that are not K-12 programs.

    iii.   The third criterion excluded school districts that had recently undergone institutional trauma, e.g.: death of a staff or student; departure of the superintendent; etc.

    iv.   The fourth criterion ensured that the three school districts represented a variety of students represented in eastern Washington. It was important to represent not only the average small school district, but also the range of diversity among the districts in eastern Washington. One district selected will represent significantly white, middle class demographics, while at the other end of the range one school district will represent minority, poverty demographics.

    v.   The fifth criterion geographically represented the two Educational Service Districts in eastern Washington: NCESD and NEWESD101.

    vi.   The sixth criterion selected a school that had a good to excellent reputation for learning improvement activities.

    vii.   The seventh criterion selected school districts where the superintendent had enjoyed longevity (at least five years).

    viii.   The eighth criterion was to conduct interviews at varying times during the school year. This is to attempt to diminish the time of the year that

participants' general attitude and outlook may be influenced by such

things as state mandated tests.

2. Selection of Participants:

   a. The school district superintendent selected two teachers and one paraeducator

      from a list of individuals who agreed to be interviewed. The superintendent in the

      district was instructed to select individuals who best represented the district voice

      concerning learning leadership.

   b. The superintendent and principal were interviewed (if more than one principal,

      the district superintendent selected the principal to be interviewed if more than

      one principal volunteered for the study).

Limitations of the Study

1. There were several characteristics of learning improvement, instructional leader, and

   student learning improvement that were outside of the context of this study.

2. The phenomenological study was limited in size and scope.

3. The study was limited to the degree to which the current atmosphere of change and focus

   on instructional improvement fails to represent an historical view of the small school

   superintendent in the role as instructional leader.

4. Individuals selected as part of the study were involved in instructional leadership

   activities in their school districts at a greater rate than peers that were less involved in

   instructional improvement.

5. The participants were selected by the superintendent of the district being studied;

   therefore, the participants represented the superintendent's perception of who best would

have the knowledge of the school district and their role as an instructional leader in that school district.

Assumptions

1. The participants would provide perceptions of the learning leadership activities of the other staff members of the school district.

2. Selecting schools in different geographic locations, with varied demographics, and varied school size would provide a broad spectrum of perceptions and provided valuable insight.

3. The qualitative analysis reliably followed recognized literature-based processes and related common framework areas derived from participant perceptions.

4. The findings of this study may be used by other school districts of the same general size.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this phenomenological study, the following terms will be used:

- Classroom Paraeducator: a classified (hourly) school district employee who provides direct instruction to students in a classroom under the guidance of a certificated teacher.

- Certificated Teacher: a teacher with a teaching certificate and appropriate endorsement to teach in an assignment where high qualified.

- Learning Leader: the person or persons who act as change agent or caretaker of the improvement of student learning and overall improvement or teaching and learning.

- NEWESD101: Northeast Washington Educational Service District 101 located in eastern Washington State. Go to http://www.k12.wa.us/maps/esdmap.aspx for a map with school district and educational service district boundaries.

- NCESD: North Central Educational Service District located in central Washington State. Go to http://www.k12.wa.us/maps/esdmap.aspx for a map with school district and educational service district boundaries.

- Participant: An interviewed subject for the purposes of this study.

- Small School District: A school district with no greater than 600 full time students with grades kindergarten through twelfth grade.

Overview of the Study

Chapter One introduced the study and provided a context for the study. The chapter was organized into the following major headings: statement of the problem, significance of the study, theoretical framework, and purpose of the study. The theoretical framework is further divided to discuss theoretical influences and the theoretical lens utilized for this study. Within the purpose of the study, several areas received particular attention: research questions delimitations of the study, limitations of the study, assumptions, definition of terms, and overview of the study.

Chapter Two was the literature review related to small school district superintendents in their role as learning leaders. The literature review centers on traditional roles of small school district superintendents, perceptions of the change in the role of small school district superintendent, and related causes for these changes and expectations for small school superintendents as they fulfill their roles as learning leaders. The chapter was divided into the following headings: superintendent and student learning, the small school superintendent leading the learning, superintendent role in transformation of schools, and a glimpse of the future. The small school superintendent leading the learning is further divided into specific areas: literature relevant to the study and literature directly related to this phenomenological study.

Chapter Three provided details concerning research methods utilized in this study. Research site selection and description, participant selection and description, validity and safeguards were all subsections under the heading of research design. The data collection and methods section described by the use of a four-step analysis process of coding that organized and analyzed data from participant interviews and other data. Data were analyzed using the structure provided by four framework areas derived from literature review and a pilot study.

Chapter Four provided documentation of analyzed data derived from the four-step coding analysis process within the structure provided by the four framework areas. Perceptions were organized into the four framework areas and specific excerpts were presented to support the analysis process. Participant perceptions were aligned to framework areas. The final part of the analysis examined the relationship between and among the four framework areas and the phenomena of overlapping within the framework areas. Data analysis was divided into finding meaning and implications from the overlapping framework areas.

Chapter Five presented the findings from the meaning making process. This chapter first identified four general findings from the study. The second section of this study identified implications from this study to small school district superintendents. The third part of the chapter provided recommendations to small school district superintendents and for superintendent training concerning their role as learning leaders. The call for further study preceded conclusions of the study.

Chapter Two: Review of Superintendent as Learning Leader Literature

First and foremost the superintendent must be a change leader to be an effective learning leader. Leading the change in the way teachers teach and the way students learn is at the heart of school improvement. According to Portis and Garcia (2007):

> Many successful superintendents led their change efforts with a clear, deliberate
> articulation of the vision and goals of reform and the desired culture for the district. They
> worked purposefully to establish a district culture in which personnel have a relentless
> commitment to results, ownership, equity and continuous learning. (p. 19)

Recognizing that superintendents may have many roles, Kowalski (1995) stated, "Ideally, I would like to be the instructional leader of the school system, but reality dictates that I manage and put out fires" (p. 91). This concept of performing management duties while leading school change is a common framework area in the literature on superintendent leadership and will be discussed later in relation to leading school transformation.

Several recent doctoral dissertations identified the important role of instructional leadership in the superintendent's position. Duckworth (2008) stated, "In the high stakes game of educational testing and reform, superintendents are faced with federal, state, and local initiatives to increase student performance" (p. 40). Sayre concluded in a study of classroom instructional capacity (2007),

> As superintendents are required to become instructional experts, increased
> understandings of how they are able to influence instructional practices within the
> classroom could become a necessary component of professional training. By focusing on
> instructional capacity, superintendents can be given a new set of tools to equip them for
> the many new challenges they face. (p. 200)

The bottom line for instructional leadership is that superintendents must do everything possible to ensure that instructional improvement occurs. This may signify that superintendents visit classrooms, lead in-services, release resources for training, and demand the best from all staff members (Center for Policy Studies and Education Research, 2003). There appears to be a growing concern about learning leadership in school districts and the aligned concern about how superintendents will carry out this task. In the Center for Policy Studies and Education Research (2003) there is a clear call for superintendents to transform their roles to instructional leaders and move towards a hands-on approach within their districts where each decision will be guided by the positive effect on student learning. Indeed, this document called for concerted efforts to drastically transform training programs for the superintendency to one that has learning leadership as the principal focus. The early literature focused on the role of the superintendent as resource manager and the leader of leaders (Bjork, 2009; Cuban 1976; Schlechty, 2009), but now there is a more expanded view of the role that is more contemporary and includes management duties, in so much as they support the main focus of instructional and student achievement improvement (Bjork, 2009; Cuban 1976; Schlechty, 2009).

The Superintendent and Student Learning

When the position of school superintendent emerged in the late nineteenth century, the position was seen primarily as a teacher-scholar position whereby exceptional teachers moved into the position of superintendent to elevate learning, train teachers, and "inspire higher ideals" (Bjork, 2009). Lars Bjork cited work by Cuban (1976) in describing the early role of the superintendent:

It must be made his recognized duty to train teachers and inspire them with high ideals; to revise the course of study when new light shows that improvement is possible; to see that

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pupils and teachers are supplied with needed appliances for the best possible work; to

devise rational methods of promoting pupils. (p. 16)

As the industrial revolution changed the focus of education, so today has the

communication revolution changed the role of the superintendent along with the requirements for

leading accountability gains as measured by state and national tests. According to Bjork (2009),

during the first part of the twentieth century the superintendent's role was disputed and therefore

led to confusion among superintendents and training programs about what the primary duties

within the ranks of superintendents and superintendents' training programs. Cuban (1976) noted,

these disputes identified two perceived superintendent role conflicts. "The lines of argument

crystallized over whether the functions of a big-city superintendent should be separated into two

distinct jobs, i.e., business manager and superintendent of instruction" (p. 17). The focus of the

superintendent as manager continued for most of the twentieth century until the school reform

movements heralded by the publication, *A Nation at Risk* (1983), began to raise serious questions

about the role of the superintendent.

These reform efforts caused the focus of the superintendent to move from the role of

manager and political leader to one of teacher-leader and change agent focused on improving

student learning and achievement. While the manager role did not disappear from the

superintendent's job description, a great deal of attention began to be placed on shifting the

responsibility of the superintendent from manager to school learning leader tasked with the job

of improving student learning and achievement. Under school reform, led by the political power

or the "education president," a term at any given time given a president who enacted educational

reform, superintendents had an ever-increasing responsibility to improve instruction and student

achievement. Much of this pressure came from elected officials at the state and federal levels

engaged in blind tinkering with the education system (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Ravitch, 2009).

Diane Ravitch (2009) spoke about the legislated school improvement, as follows:

> Our schools will not improve if elected officials intrude into pedagogical territory and make decisions that properly should be made by professional educators. Congress and state legislators should not tell teachers how to teach, any more than they should tell surgeons how to perform operations. (p. 225)

The school reform movement that began in earnest in the last decade of the twentieth century heralded a return of the superintendent to matters of instruction and student achievement. Once again the superintendent was being caste in the role of "lead teacher" and superintendents were expected to inspire and train building level leaders, rather than merely manipulate the learning environment with first order change activities such as changing the school class schedule, adopting new curriculum, or modifying the student achievement structure selectively through tracking. The building leader, with direct supervision of the school superintendent, could focus on the classroom level that may lead to successfully influencing student achievement and improved learning (Bjork, 2009; Cuban, 1976; Marzano & Waters, 2006; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Bjork identified this change in the superintendent's role in the following manner:

> Thus, the superintendent that articulates the district's goals and then makes structural changes consistent with them in such areas as evaluation and rewards for performance, staff recruitment, selection and socialization, rules and regulations sends important messages and role cues to participants at the lower levels in the organization. In this way, the school superintendent may be able to have a more direct influence in changing the behavior of principals and teachers at the building and classroom levels. (p. 10)

A review of the literature provided several contemporary research studies with findings concerning the superintendent and student learning (achievement). Waters and Marzano (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of research concerning the effect of superintendent's leadership on student achievement. The findings were:

Finding one: district level leadership matters

…found a statistical significant relationship (a positive correlation of 0.24) between district leadership and student achievement.

Finding two: effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts

…researchers also identified five district-level leadership responsibilities that have a statistically significant correlation with average student academic achievement. All five of these responsibilities relate to setting and keeping districts focused on teaching and learning goals. (p. 3)

The articulation and relationship between the activities of the learning leader and the response in the classroom requires a larger view of the student learning system. For improvements in student learning and achievement classroom practices must engender the vision of the school learning leaders. Senge (1990) and Friedman (2005) fostered the idea of conceptualizing the world as an intricate system. Senge (1990) spoke of "system thinking" and made the following remark, "Since we are part of the lacework ourselves, it's doubly hard to see the whole pattern of change" (p. 7). Friedman (2005) proposed that the new role of education is providing students with the capacity to "learn how to learn" (p. 301). Both Senge and Friedman touched on the dilemma facing superintendents in the post-reform age of education. The dilemma is that superintendents will be expected to perform all of the managerial operations of

the school district while maintaining the key focus of the organization on learning and student achievement. In this post-reform world of education, superintendents will be expected to make decisions with student achievement at the core of each decision, rather than other factors that Schlechty (2009) categorized as bureaucratic, such as: using standards as assessment, centralized strategic planning, goal-setting to maintain the status quo, a focus on rules and policies rather than beliefs and values, seniority and time in grade as important as past performance" (pp. 290-306).

The role of superintendent as the "lead-teacher" has returned from its early roots to transform the present work of the superintendency (Bjork, 2009; Cuban, 1976; Ravitch, 2009). Superintendents in the twenty-first century will need to be far more than good managers and effective politicians; they must place student achievement at the center of their decision-making activity. In the words of Diane Ravitch (Ravitch, 2009):

> At the present time, public education is in peril. Efforts to reform education are, ironically, diminishing its quality and endangering its very survival. We must turn our attention to improving the schools, infusing them with the substance of genuine learning and reviving the conditions that make learning possible (p. 242) .

The Small School Superintendent Leading the Learning

Studies Regarding the Superintendent as Learning Leader

The small school superintendent is in the position to place student learning and student achievement as the focus of each and every decision. In many instances the demands on a small (rural) school superintendent are far greater than their larger (suburban or urban) counterparts (Boone, 1998; Canales, 2006; Lamkin, 2006). Lamkin (2006) found that "First, the premise that the role of rural school superintendent has become increasingly difficult may be the direct result

of increased demands and decreased assistance. That is, the rural (small school) superintendent now struggles to do more with less" (p. 22). This concept, which pervades the literature, that the superintendent has increasing demands on his or her time and talents, speaks to the superintendent as a learning leader or as Cuban (1976) characterizes, "teacher scholar" (p. 15). Cuban identified the superintendent's roles as follows:

> Few people question the importance of the superintendent to the future of a school system. A superintendent somehow influences directly and indirectly the board of education, the bureaucracy he manages, the staff he heads, and the students he is responsible for. What a school chief does and does not do in these areas affect the community. In short, most educators, board members, teachers, and members of the community believe that a superintendent makes a difference in their children's education (p. 7) .

The last part of the quote above, "superintendent makes a difference in their children's education" is at the heart of this qualitative study. Regardless of the other dimensions of the superintendent's role, the ultimate standard for superintendents' success will be based upon how a superintendent "makes a difference" in student achievement. Bjork (2001) made the point that the superintendent's job in the twenty-first century will be to improve learning, teaching, and student performance/achievement; tasks previously assigned to principals and accepted by some teachers (p. 3). Bjork (2009) also made the point that it will be the focus of a superintendent's time and talent:

> If the superintendent believes that the most important purpose of his/her role is maintaining organizational stability, then the managerial role will dominate his/her activities and instructional leadership will be viewed as a separate layer of responsibility. If, on the other

hand, the superintendent believes that ensuring the stability of the organization and advancing student learning are of fundamental importance, then he/she will seek to use his/her routine managerial activities to increase his/her effectiveness as an instructional leader (p. 13).

Nelda Cambron-McCabe and her colleagues (2005) provided advice to aspiring and serving superintendents concerning challenges that will accompany the twenty-first century role in their book, *The Superintendent's Fieldbook: A Guide for Leaders of Learning*. The most prominent focus is to "focus the intellectual resources of the school district on better teaching and learning" (p.189). There is a fundamental shift in the role of superintendent from the business model of managerial efficiency to one of leading learning and teaching utilizing sound management practices to assure maximum effectiveness and value for learning (Cambron-McCabe, et al., 2005; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Schlechty, 2009).

In a survey of ten small, rural district superintendents in Texas, Boone (1998) reported that of the six "priority leadership behaviors," three directly related to superintendent leadership activities pertaining to learning improvement. The three identified by Boone (1998) were, "(a) focusing all stakeholders' attention on instruction, (b) involving others in instructional planning, (c) communicating high performance expectations . . ." (p.18). These findings from the Boone (1998) study were not surprising in the light of later studies that found many of the same things related to the role of the superintendent of a small school district. Borba (2003) identified four of the nine effective practices from the study involving high performing, high poverty school districts. Borba reported that "effective superintendents: (a) focused the entire district on student achievement, (e) were strong instructional leaders, (f) placed high priority on professional development, and (i) held administrators accountable for student achievement" (p. 7).

The superintendent as learning leader was discussed in a paper presented at the National Council of Professors of Education Administration in 2007. Leone, Warnimont, and Zimmerman (2007) suggested,

> One of the correlates of effective schools was a climate of high expectations. This was noted by both the superintendent and board presidents in each of the schools studied and over both years of the interviews. In fact, a climate of high expectations was the first item mentioned in most of the interviews (p.25) .

Superintendents must not only be learning leaders, but must also be lead learners according to Lashway (2003), "By necessity, then, today's leaders define themselves as learners, not just doers, constantly scanning the environment for new ideas, tools, and solutions, and reflecting on the implications" (p.9).

Studies Regarding the Learning Leader Practices

Inherent to any change or transformation, leaders utilize specific practices that mold and move the change in the desired direction that aligns to the basic purposes of what they are trying to achieve. Jacobson (1988) identified a strong articulated vision,

> The findings of the study suggested that many of the same behaviors that characterized principals in effective inner-city schools were evident in the superintendent of the effective small rural district. For example, the "effective" superintendent had one very clear objective and that was to improve student performance. He made his faculty aware that he believed that their performance was *the* critical factor in student improvement. Student and teacher performance was monitored and teachers not meeting expectations were denied tenure, pressured into retirement, or dismissed. At the same time, teachers who met the superintendent's expectations were encouraged to collaboratively problem-

solve, with the assurance that their efforts would be supported through the

implementation and enforcement of a strict code of student discipline. (pp. 38-39).

The school district superintendent, in the example provided by Jacobson (1988) above,

articulated a clear vision, identified a clear expectation, evaluated the degree of meeting

expectations, and provided clear consequences for failure that permeated to the classroom.

A second practice is identified by Jacobson (1988), "The rural superintendent also has to

be attentive to new innovations and educational technologies that can help the district overcome

problems that result from low population densities, e.g., telecommunications and distance

learning" (p. 41). The practice of innovation through emerging technologies, while not new to

education, is one practice that can level the playing field between the resources available to

school district superintendents in large and small schools. The Internet and the technological

advances heralded within the past four decades provide learning leaders in small school districts

the opportunity to interact in real time with scientists, poets, authors, government officials, and

human resources usually reserved for students in metropolitan school districts. A second

example of the educational technological advances that level the playing field for small school

district superintendents is the emergence and main stream acceptance of on-line courses for

students at the high school and college level. This means that a student sitting in a brick and

mortar school well removed from a university can participate in advanced courses to the limit of

their cognitive ability not because of proximity.

A third practice important for a learning leader is to "challenge the status quo" (Leone,

Warnimount & Zimmerman, 2007) to institute change or transformation, or face inertia. The

learning leader must both act as a change agent and model for other staff members to lead them

to question the status quo. Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) made the case that the learning

leader, a principal in their work, must act as a change agent, risk taker and general keeper of the change or transformational initiative: "Challenging Status Quo, leading change initiatives with uncertain outcomes, considering new and better ways of doing things, and operating at the edge versus the center of school's competence" (p. 45).

Marzano and Waters (2009) concluded, "Do not be content with existing levels of skill, assuming that levels of expertise are sufficient for high reliability. Dedicate yourselves to continuous improvement" (p. 116). What Leone, Marzano, Waters and others are encouraging is that the learning leader must be the heart of resisting the status quo and personify the ideal of continuous improvement through modeling the behaviors that they want to see in others. The small school district superintendent must act as the keeper of the flame of change and transformation that will result in continuous improvement in student learning and achievement. Moreover, the small school district superintendent must do more than carry the flame; she or he must ignite the wick of urgency for improvement throughout district staff.

The scope of the aforementioned change agent and maintainer of the status quo is aligned with the concept proposed by King (2002) in his definition of learning leader roles, "it is anything that leaders do to improve the teaching and learning in their schools and districts" (p. 62). This scope suggested by King (2002) suggests that superintendents must have as their central purpose a focus on improving teaching and learning. King (2002) suggests that superintendents place teaching and learning improvements as their razor for making decisions. The roles do not need to be at the opposite ends of a continuum.

A fourth learning leader practice that will lead to improved student learning and achievement is one related to the learning leader being a decisive problem solver and decision maker (Tift, 1990). Decision making practices are necessary for an organization to continually

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transform versus stagnate due to lack of direction and problem-solving skills. Carolyn Tift

(1990) clearly identified problem solving and decision making practices as a key to successful

learning leadership,

> In rural settings, the rural educational leader is often isolated from other educational
>
> educators. Many experienced rural administrators have indicated that to be successful in
>
> their role it is imperative to have the problem solving skills necessary to make well
>
> reasoned decisions on their own. There is not the cadre of administrators that their urban
>
> counterparts may use as a sounding board (p. 49).

Marzano and Waters (2009) proposed a different relationship between the learning leader and

decision making in their advice to district leaders,

> If a fighter pilot's first move is to turn away from an oncoming enemy plane, he or she
>
> loses sight of the situation and forfeits the ability to make necessary corrections in
>
> behavior. The same principle seems to apply to district leaders when faced with "threats"
>
> regarding their second-order change initiative. Turning into a threat means being
>
> proactive regarding the change process (p. 109).

The learning leader must be nimble, focused and make decisions that create a self-energizing

organization predicated on continuous improvement with a collegial esprit de corps.

Superintendent Role in Transformation of Schools

There is a significant call in the literature to transform schools from bureaucratic

institutions to learning organizations (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Schlechty, 2009). This

transformation process is different from the reform movement of the past because it questions the

past structures upon which leadership has been vested. Second order change focuses on how the

changing environment in schools pertains to the changing the role of leaders to focus on learning

and teaching (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Ravitch, 2010; Reeves, 2009). The aforementioned authors identified strong leadership with a focus on student achievement and social networking by the adults in the school system to create a change in the school that is different from previous reform activities. Senge (1990) further made the case to use personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision and team learning, "four disciplines of an organization," to forge systems thinking "fifth discipline" to culturally change the organization (pp. 6-7) and view the work holistically.

This qualitative study gathered perceptions concerning small school superintendents as learning leaders and current perceptions about leadership activities identified to effect the improvement of student learning. The nature of change in school district sites was one of the questions during participant interviews (Appendix A) with a focus on elaborating questions to identify specific examples of the nature of change and identification of change agents.

Diane Ravitch, former United States Assistant Secretary of Education, clearly makes the case to abandon the school reform efforts that currently plague student achievement to move toward educational improvement that focuses on teaching and learning at the classroom level. Among the many recommendations that Ravitch proposed, several spoke specifically to the body of this study. A summary of Ravitch's (2010) proposals included,

> Our Schools will not improve if we continually reorganize their structure and
> management without regard for their essential purpose. Our educational problems are a
> function of our lack of educational vision, not management problems that requires the
> enlistment of an army of business consultants (p.225).

Diane Ravitch sounded the call for the same type of change that others previously identified in this study recommended. Ravitch and others clearly called for the transformation of educational

institution with the focus on leaders for learning that support student achievement and outstanding teaching. Moreover, Ravitch maintained that improvement will not improve if the focus remained on first-order change actions and does not focus on second-order change actions beginning with a focus on the essential purpose of schools.

A Glimpse of the Future

As one reviews the history of schools in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the time from the 1990s to the 2010s may well be referred to as the "School Reform" era, where standards-based education, legislatively mandated high-stakes student assessments, and political meddling describe the time period. Schlechty (2009) described reform as, ". . . changing procedures, processes, and technologies with the intent of improving the performance of existing systems. The aim is to make existing systems more effective . . ." (p. 3).

The next era may well become known as the "School Transformation" era that will be earmarked as a focus on social networking, student achievement, and leaders from the educational world directing the improvement of learning and teaching. Schlechty (2009) described transformation as, "[It] is intended to make it possible to do things that have never been done by the organization undergoing the transformation" (p. 3). The school transformation era will require small school superintendents to be teacher-scholar leaders with the penultimate focus of the work on student learning improvement. Every decision should be viewed through the lens of improving student learning and the "bottom line" will become learning as doing, rather than merely learning by taking a test.

Reform, by its very description and purpose, focuses on improving the current system; therefore, a first order change can only be effective to the limits of the current system. On the other hand, transformation is by its very nature a "socially-driven" second-order change that

changes the culture and the organization system of operation (Schlechty, 2009). Peter Senge in his book, *The Fifth Discipline: the Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (1990), made the case that the Fifth Discipline—Systems Thinking causes leaders to focus on the system to which they are involved. The application of this dynamic provides the superintendent with the obligation to view his or her school district as an intricate social network. This "systems thinking" is echoed by Marzano and Waters (2009),

Recommendation #3: Keep the Big Ideas In the Forefront.

District leadership must constantly remind school administrators and teachers of the

beliefs and ideas that lead them to the district's second-order change initiatives (p. 110).

Second-order transformational change requires the leader to maintain and articulate the vision of changing the social network of the small school district, to focus on the "how" of teaching and learning and relegate the improvement of the current system as a test as an artifact of days gone by. Senge maintains, "Though the tools are new, the underlying worldview is extremely intuitive; experiments with young children show that they learn systems thinking very quickly" (p.7). The changing social network proposed by Marzano and Waters (2009) can best be fostered and nurtured by the superintendent of a small school district through a systems thinking approach advocated by Senge (2009).

The small school superintendent will need to be ready for this next era in education and ensure that their focus is on student learning and transforming their learning organization through a focus on creating and expanding a changing social network that includes administrators, teaching staff and students. Of the three groups in the changing social network that will effect transformation in small school districts, the group that may have the quickest and least problematic transition is the student group according to Senge (2009).

Chapter Summary

The literature supports the concept of the superintendent as learning leader with an historical basis associated with the creation of the modern-day superintendent's position. At the same time the loss of the focus on learning and teaching was clearly identified in the literature over time as superintendents took on more managerial functions. Additionally, the literature strongly suggested that the current role of the superintendent as learning leader is to train building administrators to do his or her bidding. Within recent literature, the role of superintendent as learning leader is undergoing a change toward a leader for the transformation of the school organization. Finally, there is a clear call to return the focus of the superintendent's role as a champion and model for learning leadership.

The role of the small school district superintendent is in a state of transformation. It is inherent to the superintendent of a small school district to transform her or his role into that of a learning leader who "faces" danger, disrupts the status quo, and act a strong role model for other learning leaders both within and outside of his or her school district.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This qualitative research study conducted in three school districts utilized phenomenological methods for data collection and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Heath, 1998; Murphy, 1998, Tellis, 1997). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), "Qualitative Research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interview; . . . that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives" (p. 5).

Robert Stake (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) described the inherent richness of a case study in the following manner: "Case study facilitates the conveying of experience of actors and stakeholders as well as the experience of studying the case" (p. 454). While this study is an exploratory study, it utilized the basic methods and philosophical perspectives of case study in selecting the three school districts but focused on a phenomenological approach to make meaning of both the experiences and perceptions of the participants. Michelle Byrne (2001) stated, "Phenomenology is one of many types of qualitative research that examines the lived experiences of humans. Phenomenological researchers hope to gain understanding of the essential "truths" (i.e., essences) of the lived experience" (p. 830). The merging of the two research philosophies, case study and phenomenology, was intended to integrate the best attributes of both approaches.

Another modification in research design was in the analysis of data. Phenomenological methods employ coding and categories that result in themes. Because a framework emerged in the pilot study and was validated in the study, a priori areas became the substitution for the themes.

The purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions of superintendent, principal, teacher, and school staff pertaining to the role of the superintendent in instructional improvement (see Appendix B). Therefore, research methods selected provided an opportunity for school personnel to be interviewed about what they believed the superintendent's role was as learning leader. There are few other studies that examine the role of the small school district superintendent in instructional improvement from these multiple perspectives. Specifically, the focus of this research identified perceptions across participants regarding the superintendent's role as an instructional leader within a framework derived from an initial literature review and findings from an earlier pilot study. Findings from the pilot study informed the dissertation study and modifications to the framework used for initial analysis in the study.

Pilot Study

Framework and Modifications

Four framework areas for learning leadership, or instructional leadership, identified during an initial literature review and substantiated in the pilot study were: (a) superintendent as learning leader; (b) principal as learning leader; (c) teacher as learning leader; and (d) outside agency as learning leader. This pilot study, conducted in three school districts in the geographic study area two years prior to this study, tested this conceptual lens with findings from participant perceptions.

At the conclusion of the pilot study, two modifications were made to the framework areas. The first framework modification was to combine the superintendent as learning leader with the principal as learning leader area. The second modification was to add a new area of student learning improvement—general (unidentified leader). In most of the interviews, the superintendent and principal areas coalesced into a single area, usually referred to as administration. When participants identified the superintendent and principal actions as learning leaders without using the term

administration, there was also a lack of direct reference to either the superintendent or the principal. Participants referred to the superintendent in one part of the interview as a leader and then referred to the principal as the leader for the same learning improvement activity. For example, a participant from one pilot site described how the principal led the late arrival of professional development activities; however, within five minutes into the interview, stated that the superintendent led the book study learning activity and the professional learning activity. This is one example of participants' inability to differentiate the roles of the superintendent and the principal as a learning leader that led to changes in the framework areas used for this dissertation study.

The second modification of the original framework added a new area of "Student Learning Improvement—General (Unidentified Leader)." There were a number of comments unassociated with any other framework area. For example, a participant from one pilot study site made the following comment when asked, "Tell me about your school district." "We're a K-12 system and everything we do kind of is K-12. We share staff in most buildings. We are kind of a model in this area for professional development." There was not a specific leader identified in this comment; however, it provided information about student learning improvement and the culture of learning within the school district. During a later comment, the participant expanded this initial comment with greater detail and identified leaders for specific activities. Each participant interviewed in the pilot study had comments that could not specifically be attributed to any individual or group of individuals; therefore, the framework area of "Student Learning Improvement—General (Unidentified Leader)" became a logical addition to the other framework areas.

Interview Guide

The interview guide (Appendix A), developed during a qualitative research class through Washington State University, prior to the current study, included the following modifications in four major phases: (a) general background, (b) improving learning perspective, (c) superintendent learning leader perspective, and (d) closure. Thirteen questions and multiple suggested probes are in the interview guide. The interview guide underwent peer review to ensure questions aligned to research questions of the study. Furthermore, the interview guide was critiqued by the superintendent and principal of each of the school districts involved in the pilot study for review and possible revisions. Moreover, several doctoral students were asked to critique and offered suggestions to refine the interview guide used in the pilot study.

Site Selection, Description, and Participants

Site Selection

Three small size school districts were selected in eastern Washington (Office Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2010) from three counties identified by the pseudonyms Alpha, Beta or Gamma counties. Specific school sites selected used "critical case" protocol. Critical case protocol compared a potential site to a set of ideal characteristics with the guiding principles of the selected schools that would be representative of most other schools of similar size (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). The "ideal" characteristics for the purposes of this study were:

1. The school district has a student enrollment of 600 students or less.

2. The school district is located in eastern Washington State within one hundred miles of the researcher's home.

3. The school district has student demographics similar to other schools in eastern Washington State.

4. The school district has student assessment scores (Washington Assessment of Student Learning) similar to other schools in eastern Washington State.

The specific sites, which were selected from a volunteer pool of districts and respondents who answered a personal request made to superintendents at a regional superintendent's meeting in Spokane, Washington, and Wenatchee, Washington, were provided with a brief description of the nature and needs of the study. Superintendents interested in the study contacted the researcher for additional information.

Site Description

Site A. Site A is a kindergarten through 12th grade public high school with an every day, all day, preschool as part of the educational program supported by the people of the community as part of the Maintenance and Operations Levy. The building is a mid-1990's retro-fitted cinderblock with metal roof and bastion supports. Most of the structure of the hallways was one of pebble gravel floor concrete and most of the walls were painted cinderblock. The facility was clean, well kept, and in good condition. There were many windows, and even though it was a day with sub-zero temperatures outside, all of the spaces were fairly warm. Hallways were a bit cooler than classrooms.

The most prominent feature when one first walks through the main door is a sense of welcoming. This spoke very well of the learning environment as it is more closely compared to someone's home, rather than arriving at a place of business. The office was warm, the people inside provided care and made me feel welcomed. I went through the entire day with help offered from every person with whom I had contact. The students were not surprised with the idea of a visitor coming to their school and greeted me with questions and curiosity.

Students appeared cheerful, happy, and openly responded to questions when engaged and offered conversation to a stranger visiting their school. Student demeanor can best be described as a feeling that there was a sense of belonging; that students felt comfortable at school. Furthermore, student demeanor demonstrated that they felt that they were a part of the school and the school was a part of them. For many of these students this demeanor could very well be due to the actuality that school may be the only place where these students truly have a feeling of belonging.

Site A is located in a remote area of eastern Washington and is currently in a trend of decreasing enrollment. The enrollment for 2010-2011 was 235 students P-12 (O.S.P.I., 2010). The school district is the primary employer within the school district boundaries and is the civic and cultural center for the community. The ethnic demographics of the community and the school are 90% or greater European-American with small percentages of Mexican-American and Japanese-American.

The number of families who live in poverty in Site A increased by nearly 20% in the past five years. The number of students who received free and/or reduced meals increased nearly 25% in the previous four years according to school district data.

Site B. Site B was a very rural community that had some very nice homes and some that were not well maintained. There were three churches, a community building, and a city park in the community. The community is significantly separated from any major highway and any major population center. The park system, swimming pool, and other community activities and infrastructure appeared to be well kept and illustrated a sense of community pride. The school is located on the top of one of the hills near town and actually it has significant access issues as

there is one very steep road that comes up to the school and then a steep hill that goes down to the city center.

The town appeared to be in decline. Many storefronts were empty and several of the buildings had undergone partial demolition. The town appeared to have a significant population of second homes or retirees by reviewing the number of recreational vehicles next to homes. The changing demographics of the community were later confirmed by several of the participants interviewed.

The first impression of the school is that it is an older facility that is well-maintained and in very good condition. The grounds of the school are in very good shape and support the atmosphere of a welcoming campus. The elementary school is adjacent to the secondary school and the cafeteria by a distance of about 200 meters. The concrete work is showing some wear; however, it is a very pleasant and welcoming campus.

As one walks through the door, the foyer and the commons area offer the statement that this is a place of learning and of pride. There is a sunken area that also serves as the seating area for a small stage that is adjacent to the library learning center. There are large roll-up doors or collapsible doors that separate those three areas. There is a fireplace built into the wall adjacent to the office area with a decorated mantelpiece. The superintendent's office is set in two rooms just to the south of the main entrance and the elementary and high school office is set in the same kind of location in three or four rooms to the north of the main entrance. The inside of the facility looks very well kept. There is a great deal of vaulted ceilings, different kinds of protrusions, lockers set into the wall, and a nice color scheme that provides a sense of open space and an positive aesthetic. Even though the facility is nearing fifty years old or more, it is in very nice

shape and is a very pleasing environment. The entire facility appeared to be well-maintained and kept clean by both students and adults.

Site B is located in a rural area of eastern Washington. There is a trend of decreasing enrollment and community decline. The enrollment for 2010-2011 was 109 students K-12. The school district is the primary employer in the school district boundaries and is the civic and cultural center of the community. The ethnic demographics of the community and the school are 90% or greater European-American.

Site C. Site C is a school district of approximately 600 students, declining enrollment, and a rural county seat. The school district facility contains a junior high/high school, district office, elementary school, playing fields, and a city park. There are several other school district facilities directly adjacent to this large facility, including a vocational agricultural building that is interconnected and interspersed with local businesses. This school district has been in the current location for nearly 100 years; however ongoing modernization projects have maintained the school district facilities as functional and attractive. The ethnic demographics of the community and the school are 90% or greater European-American with small percentages of Mexican-Americans, Russian-Americans, and Japanese-Americans.

As I walked into each one of the buildings, I was greeted by either students or staff. They were helpful in directing me to my destination. The general atmosphere was very comfortable and welcoming. The high school, which also housed the district office, is a modern, cheerful, well maintained, clean, school building. The elementary school exhibited the same degree of warmth and attention to a visitor. Recent construction, replacement of carpeting, and the addition of a practice gym provided evidence of the community's commitment to maintaining a fine facility for their children. It appeared that the classrooms I visited all had a LCD projector or

document reader, document cameras, and each classroom had a modern computer. During one of the interviews, a participant spoke proudly that this school district had advanced technology equipment compared to other neighboring districts.

Site C had maintained constant enrollment, however, the demographics of the student body had changed rapidly. The free and reduced meal rate has gone from 6% to 30% in a matter of three to four year period. Participants cited a change in clientele from previous years. There were a significant number of families of poverty who have moved into the school district. Several participants stated that the county housing authority had adopted a practice in recent years of placing families in this rural community as well as several other rural communities in the surrounding area.

Site C has a majority of certificated teachers with 25-35 years of teaching experience. This age demographics provide a great wealth of experience in the classroom. However, participants provided a portrait of a senior staff where many who qualified for retirement chose to remain in teaching because of the economic downturn and necessity of health insurance cost beyond retirement benefits; they would have otherwise retired.

Participants

One of the purposes of this study was to discover the common perceptions across groups of the role of a small school district superintendent as learning leader. Therefore, data were collected from five school staff positions from each of the three research sites. The five school staff positions interviewed were the: (a) school superintendent, (b) school principal, (c) elementary certificated teacher, (d) secondary certificated teacher, and (e) classroom paraeducator.

Participants were selected by the superintendent and agreed to be part of the study. Each participant provided a signed Participant Consent Form (Appendix C) before the interview began

after the researcher reviewed purpose and scope of the study. Participants received the interview guide at least one week prior to the scheduled interview. Additionally, participants were provided an interview guide to refer to during the interview process. Each interview was recorded on a micro recorder and field notes were written in the on the interview guide in the space provided and on the reverse side.

Demographic information of participants. A consideration for this study was that school district sites and participants represented eastern Washington small school districts. These three sites included a variety of small school districts. The participants had a range of educational experiences in the school district sites. Tables 1 through 4 present site demographics at each of the sites.

Table 1

Participant Information for County Gamma—Site A

Code	Participant Role	Gender	Education Experience	
			District	Total
J-01	Superintendent	M	11	16
J-02	K-12 Principal	M	9	16
J-03	Paraeducator	F	8	8
J-04	2nd Grade Teacher	F	4	11
J-05	H.S. English Teacher	F	6	6

Table 2

Participant Information for County Alpha—Site B

Code	Participant Role	Gender	Education Experience	
			District	Total

18-1	Secondary P.E.	F	27	27
18-2	Superintendent	M	11	28
18-3	Paraeducator	F	5	6
18-4	3rd Grade Teacher	F	14	30
18-5	Elementary Principal	M	3	23

Table 3

Participant Information for County Beta—Site C

Code	Code	Code	Code	
11-01	11-01	11-01	11-01	11-01
11-02	11-02	11-02	11-02	11-02
11-03	11-03	11-03	11-03	11-03
11-04	11-04	11-04	11-04	11-04
11-05	11-05	11-05	11-05	11-05

Participant educational experience. The average district education experience was far less than the total educational experience (Table 4). In all three sites participants were employed in the school district between forty and fifty percent of their careers (see Tables 1-3). Superintendents reviewed the data in Table 4 and then confirmed that it was a fair representation of the educational staff in the school districts.

Table 4

Participant Total and District Education Experience in Years

Site	District Education Experience		Total Education Experience	
	Range	Average	Range	Average
A	4-11	7.6	6 - 16	11.4
B	3-27	12	6-30	22.8
C	10-18	12.4	13-42	24.8
A+B+C	N/A	N/A	6 - 46	19.7

Range of teaching assignments. Elementary teachers taught second grade, third grade, and a third/fourth grade classroom combination. Secondary teachers taught English and social studies, history, and physical education and associated student body (ASB)/leadership. Two of the superintendents had one or more full time principals. One superintendent had a half-time K-12 principal. Two paraeducators provided assistance to general education classrooms; however, they had a key role in providing direct instruction to students with individual education plans. One paraeducator provided general educational support, but also acted as the district assessment coordinator.

Range of ethnicity. All fifteen participants identified their ethnicity as European-American. This staff demographic mirrored the community and the school enrollment in every research site. While Site B had some recent immigration of Japanese-American families, the trend was clearly toward European-American inhabitants of the school districts studied. This staff and student demographic is also represented within the rural schools in central and northeast Washington State with a few pockets where demographic trends were different.

Data Collection

Collection of data from agency (OSPI, ESD, and School District) sources included demographic, state assessment scores and information published about the district's learning philosophy. These data ensured that each school district site represented ideal characteristics for the purposes of this study.

Participant interviews conducted during a one-day period, arranged by the school district superintendent, provided each participant with a letter of introduction, consent form, and copy of the interview questions prior to the interview date. There were fifteen participants in this study. Interviews lasted from 45 to 60 minutes. Each participant responded to a series of interview questions (see Appendix A) about their perception of a learning leader and more generally how learning improvement occurs in their district. Prior to the conclusion of the interview, each participant was asked to provide any information about student learning improvement and the role of the learning leader in their schools not shared in the answers to questions on the interview guide. Before the departure from the school district, the researcher asked the superintendent to provide any other insight about the district's involvement in learning improvements. These final superintendent comments were placed in field notes before the researcher left the school district site.

Data were transcribed and placed in the annotated template (Appendix D), using four-steps identified through literature review (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Additional guidance concerning the coding and classification process was derived from Harry, et al. (2005) who supplied several suggestions concerning the data analysis process identified above. While the framework areas represented an amalgam of the literature discussed surrounding the learning leader, it acted only as an organizer during the initial analysis. Four additional steps utilized during analysis deepened the analysis and were:

1. Side-by-side comparison of verbatim responses

2. Open Coding

3. Axial Coding

4. Topical coding

Step One: Side-by-Side Coding

The first phase of side-by-side coding was to arrange the data for side-by-side comparison of the verbatim interview responses along with the annotated notes. The observations taken during interviews and annotations also provided data for content and context analysis and to make notes for later interpretation.

The annotated template (see Appendix D) provided the verbatim transcription of the audio recording of an interview on the left side of the annotated template with the right side for notes pertinent to the interview responses. Annotated notes connected participant comments about their school district with school district data derived from the Report Card page from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction website (O.S.P.I., 2010). During this initial phase data were placed through a sieve which sorted responses directly pertinent to the research questions and those comments pertinent to the description of the school district into four areas.

The second phase of side-by-side coding focused on key points proffered by participants and identification of questions that would be answered through further investigation from the school district website for each site and/or the Report Card page from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction website (O.S.P.I., 2010).

The final phase of side-by-side coding was to review the verbatim interview responses and the annotated comments for each participant. Annotated comments would then be amended to ensure that connections were made and key points were identified.

During initial analysis verbatim interview data were bolded within the text to identify comments directly pertinent to the research questions. In the researcher comment section of the annotated template individual comments were identified by general pertinence to the research questions and questions were posed by the researcher to connect the interview comment to background information about the school district. For example, if a participant made a comment about dropping enrollment, the researcher would then pose the question in the researcher comment section, "What is the enrollment trend for the school district over the past ten years?"

Participant interview comments not directly pertinent to the research questions were not bolded in the text. While this data is important to establish the setting, it was not identified for initial coding. This text would further be reviewed for meaning in later coding processes.

Step Two: Open Coding

The second step of analyzing data completed "open coding," to identify patterns in the annotated data. Of special focus during the open coding step was finding commonly used phrases or terminology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Since this study focused on the superintendent as learning leader, phrases involving learning or learning leader were identified by initial color coding. After the initial coding for "superintendent as learning leader," the annotated data were reviewed and coded for a variety of response patterns. This second step was repeated several times to identify patterns evident to the researcher from the data.

The first phase of the open coding step of data analysis involved reviewing all participant comments deemed pertinent to the research question. The initial open coding identified commonly used phrases or terminology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This focus resulted in highlighting in blue any text that involved references to "learning improvement", "learning leader", "instructional

improvement", or like terms. The blue highlighting indicated that the text referenced student learning improvement in general.

The second phase of the open coding analysis reviewed all of the text that was not initially identified with bold font. This second sorting process assured that participant comments earlier identified as not pertinent to the research questions were reviewed under a different frame of reference than general classification. Researcher comments were added during this phase of open coding when changes were made to the original classification. These comments would provide markers during subsequent coding processes for further review of this coding.

The final phase of the open coding process was to evaluate the participant interview for contextual accuracy of data. During this final part of open coding, research comments and questions were reviewed. The comment was either expanded or referenced to a specific portion of the participant interview to provide clarity of the quote through added comments about the context.

Step Three: Axial Coding

The third step of the analysis was "axial coding." Axial coding allowed patterns derived from open coding to coalesce into discrete categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). At this step, the researcher constructed a conceptual model to describe participants' perceptions concerning the role of the superintendent as learning leader. This conceptual model was based both on the framework areas derived from literature review and confirmed during the initial pilot interviews. Data were initially placed in one of the four framework areas or remained in the original verbatim transcript because there was a lack of fit to one of the framework areas in the conceptual model. The four framework areas were:

- Superintendent (principal) as learning leader

- Teacher as learning leader

- Outside agency as learning leader

- Student learning improvement—general (unidentified leader)

Patterns emerged from the axial coding through repeated sifting through the data. This provided for a greater and greater refinement of the meaning of interview commentary as well as the written word. The researcher identified participant responses that fit into more than one of the four framework areas. These data were identified in the analysis notes for further treatment in thematic coding and analysis.

During axial coding, framework areas identified in the literature review and pilot study were applied as a sorting tool of participant learning improvement perceptions. The four framework areas utilized as a data sieve were: (a) superintendent (principal) as learning leader; (b) teacher as learning leader; (c) outside agency as learning leader; and (d) student learning improvement—general (unidentified leader). The framework areas were identified through color-coded text specific to one of the four framework areas (see Appendix B).

During the first phase of axial coding, each annotated interview was processed using the axial coding regiment as identified by Strauss & Corbin (1990). The annotated and initially coded text was further segregated into one of the four framework areas by color coding specific text. Each interview was first read in its entirety and then analyzed for a specific framework area. For example, interview data were first evaluated for connection to superintendent (principal) as learning leader. Each framework area analysis required several replicate treatments. After analysis for a specific framework area was completed, the next framework area was utilized as a sieve for identifying text cogent to that framework area and appropriately color coded. The analysis process continued through all four framework areas with attention placed on the analysis

of framework area four, student learning improvement—general (unidentified leader), to ensure that a specific leader did not emerge through further analysis. If a specific leader was not identified when an interview was analyzed using framework area four, student learning improvement—general (unidentified leader), then the text remained color coded in blue.

After an interview was analyzed using the axial coding process, the interview was further examined with the color coded text in-place. This second phase of axial coding ensured that context was used in sorting participant comments. The researcher reviewed a previous axial coded participant interview prior to beginning an axial coding session. This process ensured that the focus of the axial coding maintained the same focus and fidelity and provided another analysis of the axial coding process. This process continued through all fifteen interviews until all of the textual data were coded.

The final phase utilized in the axial coding analysis process in this study was to place interviews in a random order and read text to ensure that the focus of each one of the framework areas did not vary and there was consistency in the coding process. Corrections and amendments were made when appropriate and checked for contextual accuracy. During this reviewing procedure, additional comments and questions were added to the annotation portion of each interview.

Step Four: Topical Coding

The fourth step of analysis was topical coding. This analysis method applied the common framework areas to the broad categories identified in axial coding. Common framework areas were cross-referenced between and among participant responses. This analysis method provided a sense of collective perceptions of superintendent as instructional leader. Atkinson and Delamont (2005) make clear identification ". . . not only in identifying the patterns, structures, and conventions that

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generate such activity but also in analyzing their moral and practical implications" (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, p. 830). Through increased examination of participant responses and the understanding the context of each statement, data were re-coded from initial coding to a more refined and holistic representation of the data. Both verbatim responses and the meaning of each participant response were placed with greater specificity into the four framework areas and further clarified.

After topical coding was completed, comments from the annotation were collected and sorted according to specific participant perceptions. Statements from participant interview text that supported particular perceptions were identified through analysis of free flowing text to assess relationships. These specific phrases and key words focused the identification and refinement of each perception. Similar statements were identified in other interview texts and in other locations of a single text to help create a cultural domain of like phrases that were described as a perception within a particular framework area. For example, there was a universal perception that state and federal assessment had changed K-12 education. However, there was a split whether the change was for the good, bad, or represented both good and bad aspects. Each framework area had similar perceptions that ran through most of the interviews. Common perceptions were connected to individual text and color coded to match the text referenced in the comment.

After a perception was annotated with supporting interview text, the perception was stated in a clear single statement. This perception statement connected participant data. Sorting and connecting each perception represented one of the learning improvement framework areas. The four framework areas were grounded in the data that directly connected text to one of the areas for many participants. This resorting and defining process provided clarity for the researcher when finding meaning in the data and lead to greater confidence in the findings reported in this dissertation.

Trustworthiness and Confidence

According to Glyn Winter (2000), "It is the intention of this section to assert that "validity" is not in any simple sense a unitary concept. There is no single form, construct or concept that can universally be claimed to define or encompass the term" (p. 324). To that end, validity, for the purposes of this study, is defined as the focused resolve to analyze participant perceptions according to the four response types. Data were grouped by these four response types and verified by another peer on several transcripts to ensure that initial coding yielded similar coding throughout the study. By using the four framework areas as a guiding construct, validity was assured through consistency of the structure of the coding process during analysis. For the purposes of this study, validity was strongly linked to plausible and sensible meaning-making from participant perceptions and was verified by feedback from a sample of participants after a review of the findings within the organizing framework. Furthermore, the same respondents verified the accuracy of the participant voice portrayed in the framework areas and validated accompanied findings.

The Researcher

The researcher, at the time of this study, was a superintendent of a small, rural school district in eastern Washington State. He completed a previous case study of similar focus and purpose two years prior to this study in a school district in central Washington State. The researcher is a learning leader in the school district where he serves. Researcher bias was reduced through the use of "member checking" by the participants to ensure that the coding and meaning-making was accurate and representative of their perceptions. Further, researcher bias was addressed through peer review from several superintendents from nearby school districts to ensure that coding and analysis was based on district realities.

Safeguards

The Washington State University Institutional Review Board Human Subjects Application was required prior to conducting research associated with this qualitative study. The Human Subject application was granted and contained information concerning the security, disposal, and protection of research materials. The conditions and detail outlined in the Institutional Review Board Human Subjects Form was an appropriate safeguard for this study. Anonymity of subjects and the school district are ethical considerations. It is important to establish safeguards by the use of a pseudonym for the district and participants. It is also of paramount importance to ensure the confidentiality of subject responses by the use of codes to represent individuals with security of electronic media regarding the transcribed interviews. The individual who transcribed the interview tape recordings signed a confidentiality assurance document. Any reported findings had all personal identifications and/or citations removed. Each participant had the opportunity to withdraw from the project at any time after the initial informed consent form was completed.

Chapter Summary

Data collection and analysis methods followed identified qualitative research methods for a phenomenological study. Research sites were selected by critical case protocol. Participants were selected in cooperation of the school superintendent based on the selection parameters for the study. After data had been transcribed from audio into textual format, data were coded in a progressive process. Data were placed in an annotated format and field notes and other data were added. The data were coded using a side-by-side analysis method and organized into a format of greater utility. The next step of the analysis process was to open code the data that provided for the clustering of phrases and participant commentary. The third step of the analysis process was axial coding. Axial coding applied the four framework areas to the data. Data identified as

pertinent to a specific framework area were identified through color-coding particular to that

framework area. The final step in the analysis process was topical coding where data were

viewed and manipulated across the four framework areas. Common perceptions were identified

and recorded for further treatment during analysis and the process of finding meaning.

Chapter Four: Data Analysis

The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning of instructional leadership practices and activities of school superintendents in small school districts in eastern Washington State to better understand how their work and roles impacted student learning and achievement within a framework for analysis. A broad literature review provided the framework for coding leadership roles for this study. The framework was: (a) superintendent (principal) as learning leader, (b) teacher as learning leader, (c) outside agency as learning leader, and (d) student learning improvement—general (unidentified leader) sorted participant responses about participants' student learning improvement perceptions.

Finding Meaning

The process of finding meaning in a collection of data is strong in the tradition of qualitative research. Creswell (1998) provided a definition of qualitative research that has an end point of constructing pictures from data.

> Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The research builds complex, holistic pictures, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducted the study in natural setting (p. 15).

Finding meaning was a slow and deliberate process that involved the researcher being immersing in the data and then returning to guiding research questions and framework areas to describe images that emerged from the data. The a priori framework resulted from the pilot study and literature and was:

Superintendent (principal) as learning leader

Teacher as learning leader

Outside agency as learning leader

Student learning improvement—general (unidentified leader)

Perceptions are presented under the framework across role groups.

Framework Area One: Superintendent (Principal) as Learning Leader

The common perception, from participant data, was that the superintendent was the leader for improving student learning. This perception manifested itself in several views. In many cases the superintendent and the principal were viewed as a team and the team role was to identify programs or processes that the district would use to improve student learning. A second view was that the superintendent and principal team would navigate the complex federal and state policies, mandates, and guidelines to form a clear vision of the district's responses to outside mandates. A third view was that the superintendent and principal team were the heart of instructional leadership within the district. The superintendent must be clearly committed to learning improvement and operate at a personal level with other educators. The fourth view gleaned from this prong of the framework area was that the superintendent was the keeper of the purse strings. The superintendent would purchase or fund particular initiatives or purchase materials that would then become the catalyst for student learning improvement.

The aforementioned views were not exclusive to a participant or a particular research site. In many cases the role of superintendent was modified by the participant to answer a given question. For example a secondary English teacher answered the question, "How is student learning improvement led in your school?" in the following manner:

I see superintendent and principal as having pretty much a facilitating role, making sure that teachers can get together to collaborate and I think they should also try to keep informed on what's happening in the educational world, with things like multiple

intelligences, stuff like that comes out. They need to have a … grasp of it so that when they are in a discussion and hear teachers talking about it, they know what they are talking about. The school board's goal, not to minimize, but seems like it is to oversee it, in the sense of being aware of it. They should probably be expecting evidence that shows the learning improvement is occurring.

The same participant answered the question, "Who are the leaders in student learning improvement?" with a focus on superintendent support of teachers' efforts is in the excerpt below. The phrase ". . . strongly supported by the superintendent. . ." sets the tone for the focus of the statement, ". . . [and] what it takes to get kids educated. . ."

I think it's the teachers, which are strongly supported by our superintendent especially, and also our principal. The superintendent expects us to kind of set the standard for our own instructional abilities and he expects us to know what it takes to get kids educated and that when we see a need, to let him know about it. I haven't had a single thing that he has turned down that I felt needed to happen.

As the coded data began to form around the common framework areas, the role of superintendent as learning leader manifested itself through a variety of participant commentary. There was a level of thoughtful contemplation when participants were asked to respond to the question, "How is student learning improvement led in "your" school?" In many cases responses began with the identification of a program or initiative, but then concluded that the superintendent or the administrative team was the agent(s) of learning leadership. Participants identified the superintendent immediately as the de facto learning leader of the school.

An example of the first type of response is shown in the excerpt from a secondary teacher. This participant clearly identified a need for someone to be a learning leader, but failed to name the person by title until the end of the response.

> There needs to be somebody who knows everything that's going on, all of the instructional approaches that are taking place. That person needs to know what those things are. They need to have a basic knowledge of good instructional practices. A lot of superintendents, if they've been in the job very long, I think they really rely on their teachers to help them with that because they've gotten away from not only what it's like to be a teacher but newer strategies and methods. I see superintendent and principal as having pretty much a facilitating role, making sure that teachers can get together to collaborate and I think they should also try to keep informed on what's happening in the educational world, with things like multiple intelligences, stuff like that comes out.

In many cases the participant immediately identifies the role of the superintendent and principal as learning leader. The following excerpt from a second grade teacher indicated the indirect approach of the superintendent as a learning leader,

> (Superintendent) does a fabulous job of keeping his finger on the pulse of what's happening in politics, which I hate and many of the rest of the people here hate. So he knows kind of what's coming down the pike and will say I'm seeing it this way, what do you guys think? But there are never any directives that you guys are going to do this. It comes from within. I've always been supportive, and I don't know of anyone who is not supportive. I think (Superintendent) in particular tries to see that we're on the right track and then stay out of the way to see what we can accomplish.

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Another typical response that identifies the superintendent as the learning leader was provided by a superintendent participant at one of the school district sites.

> And I pick up my phone and I have all their goals for the year where I can look at them and talk to them, and ask them how are you doing on reaching your goals? How can I help you do your job better? The staff we have are strong enough, the majority of them are making active steps to improve what they are doing. So these little guidance to get together, they need to know they have the freedom to take a day and do their curriculum alignment. As an instructional leader, I facilitate. I actually don't want to be in there sometimes because I'm a distraction. They're the experts.

One of the commonly used term to describe the primary action as a learning leader was "facilitator." This term was modified to include similar terms like "maintaining the direction" and "getting out of the way." This latter term was usually delivered in a manner that indicated that participants were truly in need of direction and motivation, but the superintendent was called upon to allow another person or group to act as the learning leader for that specific procedure. As the data were coded and reviewed further, a common meaning emerged that the learning leader was expected to know more than other individuals in the process of leading the learning transformation.

Another meaning that became apparent as the data were completely coded was that teachers and paraeducators were much more likely to identify the superintendent or the superintendent/principal team as the learning leader than were the superintendents or principals themselves. Superintendent and principals minimized their leadership; however, there was clear indication from these leaders' responses that leadership expectations were present. A principal

participant explained the relationship between the superintendent and the principal in the following excerpt:

> Because we spend so much time just looking at the craft of teaching, we started out a few years by showing them films of other people teaching and had the teachers critique them. Now we're at the point where they're critiquing each other so it was non-threatening to start out. Everything we do, we have to do—I have to run by (superintendent) and he goes through my agendas and a lot of times makes adjustments based on the recommendations that he has. He helps me when I meet with the teacher leaders too. Then the financial part for (superintendent) is huge too. He's been awesome about providing professional development money for teachers.

The level of partnership between a superintendent and a principal, or between a superintendent and a group of teachers acting together as a coordinating group, was clearly manifested in nearly every participant interview in response to the question, "Who are the leaders in student learning improvement?"

The common phraseology utilized by participants to identify the relationships between superintendent, principals, teachers and paraeducators involved the use of terms that demonstrated a high level of trust, communication, and common vision. Every participant provided commentary concerning a district wide initiative to improve student learning. A second meaning discovered within framework area one was that superintendents or the superintendent/principal team were expected by other educators to have the capacity, experience, and determination to make learning improvement the primary focus of the school district. In nearly every interview of teachers and paraeducators, there were references to the need for superintendents to interact directly with educators in the classroom.

Framework Area Two: Teacher as Learning Leader

Teacher as a learning leader was a common framework area reported by each participant. Regardless of the perceptions about a specific leader dedicated to the improvement of learning, the teacher was identified as the individual who implemented and transformed the school district purpose to one of improving student learning. The following excerpts provide samples of the shared perceptions associated with teachers as learning leaders. This first excerpt is from a principal.

> The biggest thing I try to do when it comes to change is to get the teachers to buy into it and that they become leaders and advocates for it, and also to get the students to buy into it.

The previous excerpt by a principal was in response to the interview inquiry, "Tell me about change in school." A third grade teacher provided the following perception when answering the same query,

> It starts, of course, with the students, but the teacher has to be willing to go the distance. The teacher has to be willing to put in the time. Learning improvement is taking that child, sometimes it's just a matter of saying I know you can do this and I care enough that you and I are going to stay after school tonight until you get it done. But it's also a lot of in-service work by the district to get the teachers so they know what to do.

The preceding comments are shared by all of the participants in one manner or another and in response to a variety of interview questions. As interview data were coded to greater and greater specificity, there was a clear trend that superintendent/principal instructional leadership actions coupled with teacher actions both to student learning improvement and learning leadership.

The excerpts in the following section provide substantiation of the teacher as learning leader in the form of responses which identify specific groups of teachers or individual teachers who are seen as learning leaders for improving student learning.

We've got a pretty good group of teachers. They're all really good at accepting new ideas that they see. They've been collaborating with other schools with our half days off twice a month. They've been collaborating in (school district name) with other schools and seeing new things and if they think it would work in their classrooms, especially the elementary. They try to see if they can make it go here and see if it does anything for the kiddos.

This excerpt was provided by a paraeducator with eighteen years of experience in education at the same school. The participant responded to the interview question, "Who are the leaders in student learning improvement?" As the participant answered this question, the participant shared this information with a degree of pride. Voice inflection and erect posture was observed and recorded during the interview. This participant clearly articulated what was perceived as a positive, collaborative system that focused on student learning improvement and the best learning environment for students.

A second interview excerpt was provided by a third/fourth grade teacher with seventeen years experience in education and eleven years at her current school. The following excerpt was in response to the question, "What is your role in student learning improvement in (school district name) schools?"

I have [a] Masters in curriculum and development. I became really interested in … and all that when I was taking my masters, that was a billion years ago, but I've always kind of helped gently push us in the direction of let's just check it out, let's look at it, let's see. And when I came back from a conference, there was another teacher who went with me, she and I shared with (Superintendent) and (Principal). (Superintendent) and (Principal) had been reading about it too, and they were like do you think we're ready to try this?

And we said, "Yeah, we think we are." So we started analyzing to see what kind of

programs are out there that would fit us and we quickly figured out that being a small

school makes us different.

The participant clearly articulates how learning improvement is led in this particular school district.

The participant provides insight into how the superintendent/principal team interacts with teachers

and maintains the focus and commitment to continuous change. This participant responded with an

attitude of pride. When the statement, "And we said yeah, we think we are," the participant

responded with a smile, head lifted, and a strong speech pattern. The participant demonstrated

commitment to the team and motivation for change. This participant was a twenty-seven year

veteran, but spoke as a rookie teacher ready to change the world. This level of commitment and

excitement was prevalent among all participants.

Framework Area Three: Outside Agency as Learning Leader

The outside influence as the primary leadership agent was common to nearly all participants.

The level of frustration when speaking about standards, high stakes assessments and mandates from

the federal and state government was a factor in the testimony of all participants. In many cases

participants responded to the question, "What are the major challenges at (school name)?" with a

pointed response about state assessments, loss of programs due to state requirements, or the

constantly changing nature of standards, assessments, or mandates. Alternatively, every school

district site identified one or more programs that were being utilized to address student learning

improvement. The outside programs included character education programs, regional professional

development consortium and a nationally recognized student skills improvement program. While

these programs were coded as outside agency acting as the learning leader, unlike the other examples

in this area, these examples were seen as positive and progressive. It was important to note that when

participants were questioned further concerning these outside programs, the general response was about how their school districts have adapted the original program to fit their situation and work for their students.

State assessments and standards. The following excerpts are in response to the question, "What are the major challenges at (school name)?" The first response is a third/fourth grade teacher with seventeen years in education and eleven years in the school district.

> The state assessments are guiding in that we know where we are headed; we understand what the goals are. If they would stop changing them that would be really great but they probably won't for a while so at least that helps guide us to what we're aiming for but at the same time it's really the kids who are guiding it.

The participant demonstrated a level of frustration concerning the variable nature of the state assessments; however, the participant had an appreciation for the state learning goals and the assessments.

The following excerpt is from a principal who is tasked to coordinate the alignment of curriculum to standards in the school district. The principal was an eighteen year veteran in education who had been in the school district for the past nine years with four of those years as a K-12 assistant principal and K-12 principal.

> As far as instructional and those types of things, I would say that we're still paddling towards the wave in some areas. I think our RTI program is still paddling; we're still trying to figure out how that works and how to get them all together. Our elementary staff, as far as teachers, I think are pretty strong, and they might be a little bit closer to riding that wave than our in our high school. It fluctuates, math is paddling, and English is on the wave and a lot of the things we try to do is follow English as an example,

because they have done a lot with vertical alignment and those types of things through

training and stuff, where math has fallen back a little bit. Some of it, it's crazy to say, but

the state has changed its standards in the last three years so my math teachers are not

getting too excited over the new ones.

The response to intervention (RTI) program that the participant speaks about is a response to

assessment results that indicate that some students do not meet standard on state assessments.

Response to intervention is a program developed to provide teachers with a greater range of

instructional tools and a formative assessment philosophy to assess student learning along the way.

The participant clearly voices a level of frustration in the statement, "…the state has changed its

standards in the last three years …" The demeanor of the participant during this portion of the

interview indicated a level of frustration.

The meaning derived from comments concerning changing standards and changing

assessments throughout the coded data indicated to some level that the driver of learning

leadership was focused on state assessment scores derived from state standards. In the most

extreme cases, participants responded that learning was completely focused on meeting state

standards and accomplishing what was necessary to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and

refrain from falling into school improvement. The learning leader in this case was identified as

the federal or state mandate, standard, or assessment required for the current year.

Loss of program. Several participants shared their frustration with the loss of program

because of a shift in focus of the student schedule to remedial courses in the core content areas that

directly lead to a reduction or loss of programs in arts, career and technical education, and upper level

electives in the core subject areas. The following excerpt is from a superintendent with sixteen years

of experience in education and eleven years in the school district.

I'm not a real fan of outside standards; there's positive and negative. We could talk for

hours on that. We really try to focus on what does this child need, so they can be

successful. The state says we're failing because of that? That's their problem, that's not

my problem. If we're doing what's right for that kid, we're happy. We aren't going to get

rid of the arts, just so we can have another history remediation class. We aren't going to

get rid of the vocational classes.

While this superintendent is fighting the pressure to add remedial classes that replace other

classes in the schedule, it is clear that this resistance may place the school district in a tenuous

situation with meeting mandates established by the state and maintaining resources to meet all

demands. Furthermore, this participant undoubtedly questions the validity of an outside standard

to measure each child in every location. The participant goes so far to divorce the outside

standard from the mission of preparing each child for life. This superintendent voices an obvious

dichotomy between the current system of standardization and what kind of education is best for

each individual child.

A second example of the changing nature of the scope and sequence within a school

schedule is revealed in the following excerpt. This excerpt is from a paraeducator participant

who has been employed the school district site and working in education for the past eight years.

The following excerpt is in response to the question, "What are you most proud of about the

(research site) schools?"

Offering options, especially for high school students, letting them have more access to

different classes and ideas. We only have so many staff and we have so many

requirements that we are lacking in a few of our, I don't know, definitely foreign

languages or cultural studies, anything that doesn't have to do with core education is a

stress on our budget and head count. We already wear as many hats as you can fit.

While on the surface this perception can be attributed to any small school that strives to offer a

complete curriculum with rich electives, the focus of the comment is placed on the phrase ". . .

we have so many requirements . . ." The proposed meaning from this and other similar

perceptions is that pressure has been placed on the high school to offer rich curricular options

and still maintain the added courses required to meet standards and associated mandates.

Of many commentaries concerning the changing nature of the master schedule, the loss

of vocational (career and technical education) courses and art electives was identified most often.

During a tour at one of the school district sites, the superintendent identified a band room. The

superintendent shared that the band had consistently reduced both in size and number of sections

as the focus shifted to meeting requirements placed by Washington State and the federal

government. At a different school district site, the superintendent shared that the career and

technical education program was eliminating one half of their sections due to reduced

opportunity for students to participate in those courses. When asked about the location of those

students, the response was that students who were usually participating in career and technical

education classes were mandatorily placed in remedial core classes.

Changing demographics of the research sites. Participants, at all three school district sites,

spoke about the changing demographics of their school districts and their communities. The two

most common changes in the demographics had to do with a shift toward increasing families in

poverty and a changing family structure. One participant spoke about a small increase in a racial

minority; however, the speaker quickly made the point that the increase was from zero minority

students to five percent minority students. All three of the school district sites historically contained

predominantly European-American students from two parent families with a stay at home mother until secondary school.

The first excerpt is from a superintendent participant with twenty-eight years in education and eleven years at the school district site. The important element of this response is the reference to the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) which oversees the social services provided to the citizens of Washington State.

> (Research site) is economically a fairly affluent community with the last six to seven years a large group of social economically disadvantaged populations moving [here]for the cheaper housing so DSHS has filled in all the small communities around us and then it uses (site) as the next place to fill housing. So it's been a dramatic change for the staff and how they work with a different type of kid. Financially, it's been different for the district because we used to have parents that would pay for kids going to state and those kinds of things and now we're picking up the tab and so it's become a higher financial factor. We went from when I first came here in 2000 from less than 6% free and reduced lunch to 30% at the high school level. So the demographics are changing and staff is trying to learn how to change with those demographics.

Several key points that add a significant meaning to changes that are occurring at all three school district sites are (a) the clientele is changing, (b) a state agency (DSHS) preferentially is placing families in poverty in rural settings, (c) there is a financial cost to the district due to the changing demographics, and (d) staff were required to change their teaching styles to accommodate the new clientele.

The following excerpt is from a third/fourth grade teacher who had been teaching in the school district for the past eleven years and teaching for seventeen. The excerpt was in response to the question, "Is the school district the focus of the community?"

Good but changing. I'm noticing the core families that have always been very involved with the school and the parents who come in to help with sports and help in the classroom are still the same but the parents moving in from outside are different now. The level of support has dropped off in that area most definitely and they're the ones who are a little more stand-offish. They want us to take care of everything, and the older core families who have been here forever, are not like that. They're more like what can we do to help you.

A second grade teacher who had been part of the school district for four years and in the education field for eleven years answered the question, "What do you think are the primary challenges for (school district site) schools?"

One of my little guys, it's just where his family is, they're logging, they're farming, and they're not necessarily sitting down and doing those things. Although he came in not being able to read, he thinks and problem solves like no one else and has tried to teach me a thing or two about rigs and having some success, not all the time, but I look at that and I think, wow, how can we say that this child is not successful … because he has so much to bear. So it's the poverty thing, … red light … Ruby Payne's poverty … when you first have to eat and make sure you have a roof over your head.

This participant continues to voice the concern that in a changing society where both mother and father work long hours, more and more of the early learning occurs only after the beginning of

school. This second grade teacher continued with an example of how the support of children's learning from home has changed in recent years.

It's the same one, last year he came to school, yup, my mom got arrested, cops came and cuffed her and stuffed her, and those were the exact words out of his mouth. That should not be his worry. For fall conferences, mom had never been to any of the programs at school and she was going to come, he talked about it for two weeks, she was coming, and the day of the program he says, nope, I'm going to just have to tell mom she can't come. And I said why not? Her license is suspended and if she drives and the cops stop her, then she will be going back to jail.

Meaning derived from the aforementioned excerpt and many other of the same ilk is focused on the changing nature of the family structure. Districts may not be prepared financially, teachers pedagogically, and communities in their support systems to intervene with services usually supplied by the family.

Outside programs used to improve student learning. At every research site, participants provided data concerning the use of programs or initiatives that participants perceived as the driving agent in the mission to improve student learning. The level of commitment to a particular outside program or initiative provided for a common perception that the program or initiative was providing the leadership for the school district. In several cases the perception shared by the participants rose to a level that indicated that the program or initiative was not a tool in the mission of improving student learning, but had become the solitary and penultimate treatment for student learning improvement. As the data were analyzed and processed, the unambiguous meaning materialized that school district staff were utilizing programs or initiatives as the driver for change in the district. This meaning also

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suggested that a program or initiative replaced the superintendent as the learning leader in the school district.

The first example of an outside program applied to the task of improving student learning and effectively providing leadership is provided by a superintendent participant who has been employed in the school district site for eleven years and was a sixteen year veteran in education. The following excerpt was in response to the interview query "Identify activities that guide student learning improvement."

> The AVID is driving a lot for us and the training. All of our staff but maybe two teachers, grades 5-12, have been to summer institute. So we're starting to get a common language. The (regional) Consortium is guiding a lot. We just got back from a science and language arts curriculum alignment where all the teachers got together for the region and stayed the day after to work on that. Those are the two things that are really driving it.

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) is an elementary through postsecondary college readiness system that is designed to increase schoolwide learning and performance. The AVID program includes student leadership, study skills development, goal setting, and success planning. Several participants at the two school district sites identified AVID as a cornerstone of the student learning improvement efforts.

A second example of an outside program or initiative serving as the leadership cue to improve student learning is provided in the following excerpt from a participant who has been with the school district site for nine years and involved in education for sixteen years. This participant spoke about the same program as the first excerpt in this section; however, this participant is from a different school district site.

We have an AVID site team so we are using Cornel notes 7-12, the Wicker Strategy 7-12,

so every teacher with the exception of one, has been to some type of AVID training

whether it was summer conferences or their own individual subject level. We had those

conversations at the staff meetings and teachers share some of the things they do.

The previous excerpt is from a principal who later shared during a walk to my vehicle that AVID

became the vehicle where conversations about any area could begin. The principal shared that until

AVID, there was not a common training for all teachers in the district.

A third example of an outside program or initiative serving as the leadership cue to improve

student learning is provided in the following excerpt from a principal participant with ten years

service at the research school district site and thirty-four years in service to education. This excerpt

represented a single example from a collection of eight separate references by participants from all

three research sites to a student character development initiative. The response from the interview of

this participant demonstrates the perceived connection between student character development and

professional development efforts with the staff.

So most of what we do has been centered around our professional development and our

character education program. I think when we first got into the program, we were like a

lot of schools, we still have some high maintenance things going on, but the staff bought

into it. We did a book study on a book called *Character Matters* by Thomas Lacona and

the staff bought into the paradigm that there was going to be a direct correlation between

character education and academic achievement. The higher character you have in your

school, the better your kids are going to do. They're going to try harder in their classes;

they're going to be more honorable students. It has worked out that way. The more we

emphasis character education, and the more students have bought into it, the higher our

academic achievement has gone. It's been a pretty direct correlation.

As in the case with AVID, this school district site coupled character education with student learning

improvement efforts. The statement, "The higher character you have in your school, the better

your kids are going to do," was supported by the principal when asked a follow-up question. The

principal stated that only one student during the previous semester received a failing grade in one

class. The principal further explained that students requested before and after school study

sessions and provided leadership in developing a recognition program for students on a semester

basis.

Meaning derived from the effect of outside programs is that a program focusing on the

development of strong character traits provides both for the development of the individual

student and fostered student learning improvement efforts by students and staff. Moreover, there

was a direct connection between character development initiative and professional development

for staff.

Framework Area Four: Student Learning—General (Unidentified Leader)

A significant mass of the data were coded and placed in Framework Area Four: Student

Learning Improvement—General (unidentified leader). This framework area represented general

participant perceptions and did not provide direct connections to any of the other framework

areas. The meaning derived from the analysis of these perceptions is that student learning

improvement just happens in some instances. The further meaning derived from these

perceptions was that student learning improvement developed autonomous transformation of a

school district and staff when it became the clarion call for action. This means that in the

perceptions shared in the excerpts below, each participant will identify an attitude or commonly

held belief that becomes the driver for improvement or the unidentified leader for improvement of student learning.

The first excerpt is from a seventeen year elementary teacher veteran who had taught for eleven years as a third/fourth grade teacher and had been a member of the learning improvement team. This excerpt was in response to the interview question, "What does student learning improvement mean to you?"

> For us it means working together. It means working together to analyze what we're doing and make changes accordingly and that can go from as large as our CSGs and the early releases and meetings we have to the simple me going to the 5th grade teacher and saying this year the state standards have now dropped fractions of the … down to my 3rd and 4th graders, can you help me prepare them, what strategies do you use, do you use any special graphic organizers, all of those kinds of things. That is also part of our culture. Our culture is we will help each other get where we need to be. We also analyze what we're lacking and no one takes offense. If the 5th grade teacher says to me I really need your kids to be a little stronger in this next year, I don't take offense to that. I say okay what are they're doing, show me what you see. Do you have any ideas for me, how can I make this different. So we've got that whole flow in a larger sense and in a more direct sense too.

In many cases participants spoke about a collective ownership, a culture, or a district focus. Many perceptions shared by participants provided a picture of a unified staff with a clear vision. At the same time, when pressed about the leadership role, the common response tended to identify the entire staff or make a blanket statement similar to, "That is just how we do things here."

The second excerpt is tendered by a paraeducator with eight years teaching experience all at the same school district. This excerpt was in response to the interview query, "Do you consider (school district site) progressive? Why?"

> I think that it is a forward-thinking place. We're always looking for change and improvement. I think that it's a place where it's easy to make a difference. There's not so many of us that your voice is lost when you notice something, an improvement that can be made. It's easy to just speak up and either be corrected by someone else, because we all know each other. It's easy to just talk freely and use each other as sounding boards and I just don't feel like I ever get lost around here.

This paraeducator participant speaks in terms that Phillip Schlechty (2009) would characterize as "transformational". The participant spoke succinctly about a system that continuously strives for change targeted to student learning improvement. The participant spoke further about maintaining the focus on the "new way" of thinking about learning.

Framework Area 4, Student Learning Improvement — General (unidentified leader), initially posed some difficulties in finding meaning. As the data were further analyzed, without attempting to identify a learning leader, the meaning emerged that participants identified a culture of transformation where the focus of learning is on how to change the nature of learning, rather than become more efficient in the present system. Both of the examples listed in the preceding section identified character development initiatives that focused on improving the students' self value and involving the students as partners in their learning. One teacher, who spoke to me after the conclusion of the scheduled interview, said to me while standing in the hall watching the migration to lunch, "We do not have any passengers here, all of the students and adults are part of the crew."

Overlapping Framework Areas

Participant interview responses were put through a sieve of the four framework areas. The phenomena of overlapping framework areas surfaced after all data were coded and reviewed and then re-coded by the researcher. While all three school districts were unique learning environments, the focus was to identify agents that impacted student achievement through deliberate student learning improvement actions. In addition, the phenomena of overlapping framework areas provided a glimpse of the process of finding meaning through the coding, analysis, and the deliberate sorting of participant perceptions. An overlap between the four framework areas was most prevalent between (a) Superintendent (Principal) and Teacher Framework areas and (b) Outside Agency as Learning Leader and Other Framework areas.

Superintendent (Principal) and Teacher Framework Areas

As perceptions within particular framework areas emerged through analysis, a connection and relationship appeared between the superintendents (principals) as learning leaders and the teachers as learning leaders. The relationship between framework area one, superintendent (principal) as learning leader and framework area two, teacher as learning leader, was much greater and suggested a tighter relationship than with the other framework areas.

There were a number of perceptions shared by participants found in both superintendent (principal) as learning leader and framework area two, teacher as learning leader framework areas. The level of overlapping perceptions of leadership networking provided the connection or disconnection of the framework areas to one another. This suggested a more holistic view of student learning improvement and learning leadership by participants. A further analysis of specific participant data identified the superintendent and principal as the participants who made the greatest

number of connections between teacher learning leaders and superintendent or principal learning leaders.

These overlaps became a signal that participants from the same school district held a common vision for student learning, student achievement, and learning improvement. In one research site where there was a high degree of overlapping between framework area one, superintendent (principal) as learning leader and framework area two, teacher as learning leader, participants spoke succinctly about commonly held values, specific programs or initiatives, and a collective sense of ownership of learning improvements. Participants tended to use phrases that indicated the plural when responding to questions concerning, "Who is the learning leader in the school district?" For example, one participant represented a commonly held vision for learning improvement and described the learning leadership culture in the following manner:

> Our philosophy has been there has to be somebody who knows what's going on but at the same time that person doesn't have to be the driving force behind it. Our philosophy or paradigm has been to try and get the teachers to buy into being leaders themselves. I think the downside of that is that it has taken longer but I think the buy-in is deeper. We depend heavily on teacher-leaders and we give the teachers a lot of responsibility so they have to buy-in to it. But it did take us about four years to get there.

While this example was from the interview with a principal, this same vision in was shared by all of the participants from this school district site in a variety of commentary and answering a variety of questions during the interviews. Shared perceptions that ran through all of the responses were (a) a sense of shared leadership, (b) leader cultivation, (c) commonly held visions for student learning improvement, and (d) dedication to a specific program or initiative. A paraeducator in the same school district described learning leadership in the following manner:

I think (superintendent) and (principal) and the [district student learning] groups all have

our own ideas and feel about where the teachers might be but when it comes down to it,

we all try to work together so that way we're all on the same board. So I think that all

three of us help give input to what we think is important. When it comes right down to it,

if (superintendent) and (principal) need something done, we'll do what they say, there's

no doubt. But they've been very open about the fact that in the first couple of years of our

(district student learning) they wanted us to move a little bit faster than the teachers were

capable of doing yet. They listened to us, they aren't there yet, they will get there, but

they're not there yet. And they let us take that time to build the trust and build the things

that we needed to get forward. So everybody is working together.

The use of terms like "our", "everybody", and "together" are indicators of shared leadership and a

level of trust between all of members of education team at this school district site. Moreover, a sense

of common mission emerged through these participant perceptions and others at this research site.

Outside Agency as Learning Leader and Other Framework Areas

There was a dearth of common perceptions or related perceptions between framework

area three, outside agency as learning leader, and the other three framework areas. The most

commonly held perception of learning leadership that ran counter to student learning improvement

were state and federal assessments, standards, and policies. Every participant from each site shared a

perception for the need for standards as a means to drive student learning improvement. Every

participant made a similar comment that the current policies, assessment regiments, and practices

detracted from improvement of student learning and decreased opportunity for emergence of learning

leaders. In nearly every interview, Washington State assessment practices or Federal Adequate

Yearly Progress (AYP) policies were used as a reason why learning improvement was stalled and the

overall health of learning was at risk. One participant, a principal, described the influence of an

outside agency directing learning leadership within the school district as a "top down" process.

> From my standpoint the change I've seen has been quite profound, as you mentioned
>
> before from the top down so to speak, like OSPI down to the schools, with state
>
> assessments and you've got to have this to graduate and do this and that and the other
>
> thing, and what that does to the individual teachers and schools. I know a teacher that
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> taught 3rd grade but had the MSP and is now teaching second and going I'm not worried
>
> about the MSP, that's their mentality. We kind of do because we have to make sure they
>
> are ready for the next grade but I can see they're like ah, I get out for three weeks each
>
> year and I don't have to worry about the test scores and when I get back, did they pass or
>
> not, I'm horrible, I'm good, they move on.

This level of frustration and angst demonstrated by this participant was a common perception

observed from every participant. Some perceptions were similar to the previous statement that

identifies a shift in the primary focus of learning from a student learning focus to a student

assessment focus. The emotions most associated with each participant as s/he spoke about an outside

agency were frustration, dissatisfaction, hopelessness, and anger.

A second common perception associated with the outside agency emerged as a key

perception was that learning improvement and learning leadership in the district was blunted by

Federal and State policies surrounding Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). A second grade teacher

answered the question, "Who is the learning leader in the school district?" in the following manner:

> I kind of have an issue with the AYP anyway because when I look at my kids, they're not
>
> numbers and statistics; they are little people who come to me needing to learn. So when I
>
> think of AYP, I can't look at that number and say we're successful or we're not

successful based on that number. I am successful or I'm not successful whether I can take

every single kid in that class and help them to make a year or year plus gain and that's

what my goal is. AYP is important but that's not what I focus on.

A paraeducator participant spoke about Adequate Yearly Progress as a matter of "not in trouble with

the state" and "having a good record."

We've some fluctuations with that, we're not in trouble with the state, so that's a good

thing. We did have some problems with math scores last year and it seems like the

common denominator has to do with number … Our kids are really good at, I should say

we have a good record with, reading and writing. The writing tests seem to fluctuate.

A final common perception within the framework area of outside agency as learning leader

concerned standards. Nearly every participant in each of the three sites had comments directly

concerning learning standards that came to the school district from a federal or state mandate. A

superintendent from one of the school district sites shared the following perception about standards:

We have the national standards, let's be done with it. Education as a government agency

needs some outside forces to help it improve and standards has done that, but the amount

of wasted time and money, it makes me sad. So let's be done with it, set the standards,

get me out of the business of all this so I can focus with my staff, our staff here, and do

the work we do, which is instruction, how we meet the needs of these kids. We spend

way too much time on these issues. Yes, it has helped; I can see the benefit of it. We need

standards to help raise the rigor in education; we have not done the job as an institution

that we need to do. Standards will never measure the things we want to measure. The

most important thing we want to measure, it won't measure. It's a tool, and long as it

stays a tool, I'm okay with that. Unfortunately right now, it is a hammer more than

anything else, and that's not okay.

The same superintendent continued concerning how standards have dramatically changed the school schedule and the way this superintendent reacts to mandates,

> We aren't going to get rid of applied math; it does too much positive for the kids. We'll take the problems from the state and the feds. I'm trying to say that my job as superintendent of a small district is to figure out which laws to break and which ones to follow.

The following statement from a high school teacher concerning "governmental interference" was indicative of the frustration that all participants demonstrated.

> I think that sometimes it becomes harder because there's more and more government control over what we're supposed to be doing and how we have to do it and so the freedoms and choices that we used to have when I first started in education aren't there anymore and our time is so segmented into you have to have x amount of hours for reading and math and sciences and that, that's all fine and good except that it's taking out some of that human element of education in its own way.

The excerpt from a third grade teacher provided insight into the changing nature of learning standards, state assessments and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements and the aggravation that uncertainty and variability has caused.

> We're doing very well with it. I think that the entire state testing, the accountability, I think it's taken a bad rap in the press. I think that there've been a lot of people who've wanted to be experts and are not. Teaching has improved. Children are learning more. Right now I'm very fearful. At lunch today we were talking about standards and what we're expected to do. Every year we're expected to do more with less funds and

materials. So that concerns me. We're doing well as far as AYP. Last year we had a little

bit of a problem in the 7th grade and then when the tests came out from last year, we were

one of the top schools.

Chapter Summary

Finding meaning in a collection of interview data provided the researcher with a clear view

of overlapping perceptions and the awareness of common framework areas about learning leadership

and student learning improvement. This chapter provided a glimpse of the analysis process and the

teasing of data from a variety of locations and a range of educators at each site. This chapter

demonstrated of the weaving of common perceptions within the framework areas regularly cited by

participants. The chapter began with a discussion about the process of finding meaning from the data.

Each major framework area was confirmed and authenticated through example and the process of

finding meaning was delineated. The identification of overlap between framework areas and the

relationship between framework areas was the next section in this chapter. The final focus for finding

meaning was to seek to find associated perceptions that were not certified as supportive of one of the

three framework areas that identified a specific learning leader, but provided insight and support to

one of the three primary framework areas. This final section of the chapter described "outside

agencies" as fulfilling the learning leader role.

Chapter Five: Conclusions

Discussion

The small school superintendent has an imperative to create an environment where every member of the school society has a focus on student learning. Within the literature search, a great deal of attention was placed on the superintendent acting as the lead change agent. Under this paradigm, the superintendent instructed their immediate subordinates to act as learning leaders and then to direct building principals to enact learning mandates in their schools. During this study, the small school superintendent engaged in the learning process as both a learning leader and as a member of the learning staff. In all cases, the superintendent rejected the traditional position of imparter of policy and keeper of the purse strings and worked directly with teachers and principals individually and in groups for the purposes of improving student learning.

Phillip Schlechty (2009) speaks a great deal about the difference between a first-order change and a second-order change. The heart of the difference between the two philosophies is a fundamental change in the focus of the school culture. Schlechty maintains that schools must look differently at the process of schooling and that school cultures must become transformed into learning organizations for second-order change to occur. He maintains that first-order change merely improves efficiency of current practices. During this study, I listened to school staff members speak passionately about school improvement in terms of student learning. There were discussions about student achievement and standardized assessments; however, both were identified as tools to help change the school to meet students' learning needs. Each participant clearly articulated the culture of their district's collective vision. This vision was not a memorized mantra, but usually shared in simple terms. The most common shared vision from all three sites can most simply be stated as, "We will do whatever it takes to work together to improve student learning."

At each of the school district sites, there was a focus on character development and a focus on building student skills for goal-setting, collaboration, study, and planning. In all three research sites, the character education and skills development initiatives were connected to initiates to improve student learning. One principal made the connection between student learning and character in the following manner, "The higher character you have in your school, and the better your kids are going to do. They're going to try harder in their classes; they're going to be more honorable students. It has worked out that way." Each participant identified the character/skills development initiative and coupled it to the learning improvement initiative.

Of all of the participant data and field notes reviewed, the most prevalent outlook that emerged was one of commitment to student success and a better education system in the future. Each participant interviewed shared their conviction that improved student learning was a continuing focus and was the driver in their schools. While many voiced frustration concerning standards and assessments from the state and federal level, there was an attitude that focused on success for their students regardless of the impediments placed in their way by others.

Findings

The meaning that emerged from the considerable review and sorting of participant interviews, field notes and other information were organized into four findings. The focus of the findings centered on the role of the superintendent as learning leader; however, in many cases it was difficult to clearly identify any single person in the school district as the learning leader. Findings followed four broad themes:

1. Superintendent Understands Role of Learning Leader

2. Superintendent Nurtures a Network of Learning Leadership

3. Superintendent Focuses on Transforming Activities

4. Superintendent Creates an Attitude of Buy-through

Finding One: Superintendent Understands Role of Learning Leader

In all three research sites, the common perception that emerged from the data was that the superintendent in each district was knowledgeable in student learning improvement activities. The superintendent was viewed by others within the organization as a master teacher and an accomplished learning leader. Part of the learning leader role required that superintendents have a current understanding of scholarly work pertaining to pedagogy, best practices, and student learning improvement activities. The learning leader role had been defined by each superintendent as a facilitator of the process, rather than the take charge, follow me leader archetype.

Much of the literature surrounding the superintendent as learning leader focused on the role as initiator and trainer of the principal or another staff member to train other staff. I found that this was far from the case for the superintendents in this study. All three superintendents were perceived as part of the learning team by the other participants and by the superintendents themselves. The finding from this study counters the perception found in the literature that the superintendent creates the mechanism and the urgency for change and then directs that change from the remote edifice of the superintendent's office.

Finally, the superintendent must understand and have the capacity to communicate the vision of transformation of the school district organization to the staff, students, school board, and patrons. To change the culture of the school required an understanding of the second-order change process, forward thinking and patience. The three superintendents in this study were at different points in the transformation process; however, each articulated a vision of transformation that was accepted and communicated by each participant interviewed in each of the three school district sites. A central

finding was that the vision of transformation was the central guiding principle for each of the school districts and the superintendent in each district was perceived as the keeper of the vision by staff.

Finding Two: Superintendent Nurtures a Network of Learning Leadership

A finding prevalent to each of the three school district sites was that there was a learning leadership network in place. The most common perception communicated when participants were asked, "Who are the leaders of learning in your district?" were resounding replies of, "We all are." The learning leadership network that emerged from the analysis of the data was one dedicated to the vision of student learning improvement. The manifestation of the learning leadership network was a flattening of the school district organization. The traditional leadership hierarchy of school district organizations had been replaced by the concept of multiple leaders. The participants also shared the perception that various staff members had accepted the role as learning leader for a particular initiative or activity, but that everyone filled-in when there was a need to take charge of the process.

When I first began to analyze the data I had an initial view that the learning leadership network represented a leaderless organization. However, upon further analysis the learning leadership style that emerged, there was one group of educators where all members of the organization were committed to the vision. The learning leadership network was a manifestation of the commitment of staff to the priority of improving student learning, rather than merely a professional involvement. One participant responded to the question concerning identifying the leaders of learning in the district in a most eloquent manner, "There are no passengers here; we are all crew members." This level of commitment both supports the concept of a learning leadership network and is supported by the network.

The superintendent in each school district site had been able to nurture the learning leadership network and allow for a leadership vacuum for others to fill. This perception of

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stepping aside was a perception of the superintendent and principal at the school district sites, but the teacher and paraeducator perceived it more as building a team and giving the staff authority. Regardless of the perception, each superintendent cultivated a network of learning leaders through intentional acts focused on the overarching vision of student learning improvement.

Finding Three: Superintendent Focuses on Transforming Activities

The primary principle that guided superintendent decision-making processes was to gauge all decisions against the impact of the decision on the primary mission of improving student learning. The concept that superintendents made day-to-day decisions about resource distribution, curriculum development priorities, and staffing assignments emerged from the data from the interview of superintendents and principals in this study. The focus of the superintendent was on activities that would improve student learning and thereby continually transform the school district culture.

Of particular focus was the level of commitment to a larger community of learners. Superintendents in each of the three research sites were committed to a county wide or regional consortia of districts dedicated to improving student learning. In several cases, the superintendent was one of the primary architects of the regional or county wide consortium. This focus on building a collaboration base for teachers beyond the confines of the schoolhouse walls provided for rich professional development and furthered the cause of transforming their school district.

In all three school district sites, the superintendent was committed to a student personal development or a character education initiative. What emerged from data analysis in this study was a connection between improving student learning activities and the implementation of character education and/or student personal development activities. In one school district there appeared to be little separation between the two initiatives; moreover, there was a perception that both initiatives depended on the other to succeed. Student learning improvement would not occur without improving

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student ownership of the process through character education or student personal development activities.

Regardless of the type of initiative or program, the superintendent sought activities that supported the primary vision of improving student learning and when there was a need to create an activity, the superintendent became the architect for its creation. Through actively seeking activities that supported the vision, the superintendent provided opportunities for the school district staff and students to remain committed to transformation their culture into a learning culture.

Finding Four: Superintendent Creates an Attitude of Buy-through

One of the most common phrases found in the literature associated with school change surrounds the idea of teacher buy-in. The premise is that the superintendent of a school district will roll out an initiative and create a sense of urgency, and then instruct the principal about how to lead the change. What emerged from this study was a transformation of the focus toward the vision of student learning improvement and a sense of buy-through. The buy-through philosophy required that people in the school district organization commit to the ideal of learning improvement and not necessarily to a particular person or enterprise.

One of the expressions of this buy-through philosophy was the use of collective nouns when speaking about student learning improvement. Participants did not speak about "the study" or "the superintendent's project"; rather, they demonstrated ownership through the use of "our vision" or "we believe" phrases. The sense of ownership and commitment to a larger vision emerged as data were analyzed. The buy-through philosophy was fostered by the superintendent and the ownership and commitment to the vision became the means for transformation.

What resulted from analysis of the data was a question whether the buy-through philosophy resulted from the learning leadership network? Or, was it the result of the leadership network?; or,

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both emerged in tandem as superintendents and their staff members proceeded through initial transformational activities surrounding student learning improvement. Regardless of the connection between the buy-through philosophy and the learning leadership network, the buy-through philosophy expanded and maintained the learning leadership network and the resulting flattening of the leadership hierarchy.

Implications for Small School Superintendents as Learning Leaders

The small school district superintendent has a unique opportunity to transform their school districts into a learning organization. The Superintendent must understand the role of learning leader and how to foster a network of learning leaders throughout the school district staff. Small school superintendents must also become the keeper of the vision who clearly focus day-to-day teaching and learning on the larger goal of improved student learning.

Collaboration

The small school superintendent must first realize that all the needed resources to transform their school district into a learning organization do not reside within the boundaries of the school district. In every case for this study each school district was involved with a larger consortium of school districts in a collaborative effort focused on improving student learning. In two of the three sites, the superintendents were the leaders in developing this level of collaboration with other school districts. In the other site the principals of the consortium were the leaders for this activity. Regardless of the initiator, participants spoke about a rich collaboration that they enjoyed with teachers of similar grade level or content area teachers from other neighboring or regional school districts. This level of collaboration was identified as one of the driving factors in the schools change in culture. The small school district superintendent needs to view their learning organization as one that extends beyond their school district boundaries.

Diffuse Leadership

The second implication to small school superintendents is that they need to create the atmosphere to enable leadership development. To truly transform schools into learning organizations, superintendents need to abandon the idea of select leaders for learning. The organizational leadership structure requires flattening the school organization as the standard model. When a course change or refocusing is required, then the superintendent must be ready to acknowledge the leadership necessity and then disengage at the first opportunity. The concept of diffuse leadership requires that a leadership vacuum exists for a short time so that others within the organization can ply their talents and their leadership contribution.

This release of authority is uncomfortable and requires a high degree of trust from all members of the school district. The small school district superintendent must be the first to trust and to be patient as the transformation proceeds. Transformation is a slow, deliberate and culture-changing activity. One of the greatest requirements for small school district superintendent is to wait for her or his colleagues to make the journey toward transformation.

Buy-through Philosophy

Superintendent learning leaders in small school districts will be faced with changing their leadership paradigm from one that seeks to garner buy-in for a particular initiative to buy-through. In a buy-in leadership style, the superintendent would make the case for an initiative, gather support from the staff by providing the rationale, and then enact the initiative. In the buy-in leadership style, the owner of the initiative is the superintendent and the staff who support the initiative. In the buy-through leadership approach, the superintendent would identify the need to improve student learning in the school district. The superintendent would then provide initial leadership to provide all staff the resources to make the journey of understanding and at the same time open the door for leaders to

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emerge. Buy-through is focused on the process of an initiative like improving student learning, rather than a product usually garnered through the buy-in leadership approach. The small school district superintendent must change their leadership paradigm to one that invites all the members of the learning team in a district to enter the journey of transformation.

Recommended Actions for Small School Superintendents

Small school district superintendents can begin the journey toward transformation of their school district in an organization dedicated to student learning improvement on their first day in the school district. These recommendations are predicated on the assumption that the superintendent is willing to change her or his leadership paradigm and has the courage to do so for the long haul. The following are recommended actions for small school district superintendent learning leaders:

- Publicize your decision-making framework where student learning is the razor for making all decisions.
- Create the time for teaching staff to meet and openly discuss student learning. Have the patience to take as many meetings as is necessary for all to commit to the journey. During these meetings ask other staff to facilitate the discussions.
- Expand collaboration to a regional or county consortium. Every staff member needs to have a group of individuals that are their colleagues in content and grade level. In small schools many teachers represent the only person in a particular content and/or grade level.
- Make the center point of every meeting a focus on student learning improvement. When a tough situation arises, place the issue through the lens of student learning improvement. In many instances the issue is not as large or important when compared to the penultimate mission of improving student learning.

- Open as many avenues for staff to act as a learning leader at some time during every year; continuously foster the network of leaders in your school district.

- The superintendent must be the resource for knowledge concerning student learning improvement. The superintendent must maintain a refined knowledge base concerning scholarly work and best practices pertaining to improving student learning.

- The superintendent must encourage dissatisfaction with the status quo. Each incidence of staff dissatisfaction is an opportunity to explore a transformative action.

Recommendations for Superintendent Training

One of the purposes of this study was to provide insight for colleges of education dedicated to superintendent preparation. To that end, findings were reviewed and applied to this purpose. A common recommendation, regardless of where a superintendent is in her or his career, is a need for continued training in transformational change in a school district toward an organization clearly committed to improving student learning.

Pre-service Training

Pre-service superintendent preparation programs need to expand their focus on the job of the small school superintendent. While there are a great deal of common roles and knowledge required for a superintendent, regardless of district size, there is a specific skill set for a small school superintendent as a learning leader. It is important for all superintendent preparation program students to have training and knowledge in leading the learning in their school districts. Specific recommendations include:

- Review school district transformation activities that require superintendent learning leadership and/or facilitation.

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- Focus on transformation activities that flatten the organization and actively propose discontentment with the status quo.

- Practice leadership development activities for all staff in small school districts.

- Review character education and student personal development programs that are associated with student learning improvement initiatives.

- Examine scholarly work for best practices that create the sense of a collective philosophy for learning and a commitment to student learning improvement as paramount purpose of the organization and the members therein.

In-service Training

In-service training is a more difficult process to accomplish superintendent training. Superintendents of small school districts are very busy people and have limited time and opportunity for in-service training; therefore, the greatest opportunity for this training will be in the form of regional, county, or athletic league meetings. There are a number of superintendent groups formed around an educational service district region, a county, or an athletic league. In many cases these meetings are dedicated to sharing information or planning for events that affect all of the schools in the group. In-service training recommendations to aid current superintendents of small school districts include:

- A book study of current scholarly work in transformation leadership for the school organization.

- A book study focused on the development of a professional learning community (P.L.C.) within their school.

- Develop a regional, county, or league learning improvement consortium dedicated to networking staff from small schools in a larger professional learning community with a focus of improving student learning.

- Expand the knowledge base of learning leadership through sharing best practices and those practices that did not produce results.

- Create a professional learning community among the superintendents that focus on specific initiatives for student learning improvement.

- Model learning within the superintendent professional learning community and report findings to their school district staff.

Further Study

This study was limited to three locations and represents the perceptions of fifteen school staff. Further study should focus on a greater number of locations and an increase in the number of participant interviews. The scope of this study should be expanded to include a greater geographical area in eastern Washington.

The coincidence of a character education or student personal development initiative and learning improvement initiative deserves further study. All three school districts utilized the coupling of these two initiatives and participants spoke enthusiastically about the success of connecting the two. While there is some good research on the concept of improving student skills and focusing on student character issues, the usual connection is how student assessment performance improves. A further study should focus on the improvement of student learning as a function of a deliberate connection with a character education or student personal development initiative. Of special consideration is how the focus on character education of student personal development changes the perception of staff as well as students.

The final recommendation for further study is to determine the connection between school districts with rich involvement in collaboration efforts in a regional or county consortium and the focus of staff and students to learning improvement. Moreover, the study should analyze student accountability measures over time in school districts participate in consortium collaboration and those districts that do not participate. This study would need to be a long-term research project as cultural transformation requires time to bear fruits.

Conclusions

The meaning that emerged from this study was derived from the examples of school districts in their capacity as transforming organizations. In all three school districts learning leadership existed as a network of leaders. Therefore, the singular role of learning leader became diffuse and shared. This shared learning leadership was nurtured by the superintendent and resulted in a flattening of the organizational hierarchy. The superintendent's primary role was to foster learning leaders from the school staff and to ensure that each decision was predicated on the support of student learning. In this way the superintendent placed student learning at the center of the school district's mission.

There was a clear connection in this study between student personal development initiatives (character education, goal-setting, and skills development) and improving content learning. All three sites made the deliberate decision to connect student personal development and improved student learning. This approach focused on transforming the culture of the school. The meaning that emerged from the data clearly suggests that the three schools in this study were successful at transforming their schools into organizations dedicated to improving student learning.

The superintendent must initiate the focus of improving student learning as the primary mission of the school district. A buy-through philosophy must be developed and modeled and a learning leadership network must be nurtured and developed within the school district. To make

changes to the school district culture the superintendent must develop a collaborative attitude that extends beyond the confines of her or his school district boundaries. The superintendent must change the focus from individual ownership of a change initiative to a collective ownership of transformational activities. The superintendent of a small school district must be able to step aside and patiently cultivate dissatisfaction, among his staff, with the status quo.

Superintendents in small school districts need to be agile, knowledgeable, and dedicated to the vision and practicality of student learning improvement. Small school superintendent have a unique situation to actively lead the process of transformation in their school districts from a model predicated on teaching content to one predicated on continuous learning improvement. In all three school district sites studied as part of this research, the superintendent left the superintendent office and ventured into direct leadership of specific learning improvement activities. In all research sites, the superintendent worked directly with principals, teachers and paraeducators.

Superintendents in small school districts need to have the capacity to make every decision in the school district with student learning improvement as the razor. Each decision, regardless of the nature, must be processed through the question, "How will this decision support or detract from student learning improvement?" If a decision supports learning improvement it passes the test of fit to the overarching vision. If a decision detracts from student learning improvement, then it must be reconsidered and modified to either support the mission of student learning improvement or to minimize the detracting nature of the decision to the greatest degree possible.

Finally, superintendents in small school districts cannot operate in isolation. Successful superintendent learning leaders will create a broader network of professional learning

communities within their school districts and coordinate with neighboring or regional school districts to foster a focus on student learning improvement. Superintendent learning leaders must create opportunities for teachers, principals and paraeducators to work closely with their colleagues in other school districts of similar size to improve their craft and pedagogy with a clear focus on improving student learning.

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INTERVIEW GUIDE

The Role of Small School Superintendents as Instructional Leaders

William J. Wadlington

Washington State University - Spokane

Interview Guide

Subject Name _____ Code # _____

Position in District_____ Years in District ____ Years in Education_____

Age____ Ethnicity _____ Gender: Male_____ Female____

Date of Interview _____ Place of Interview _____

General Background

1. Tell me about yourself.
    o Why did you get involved in education?
    o Why do you teach at ____ school district?
    o If you were independently wealthy, would you still be in education?

2. Tell me about the _____ school district.
    o Is the district gaining or losing enrollment?
    o How does the school board govern the school district?
    o Is the school district the focus of the community?
    o What is the Adequate Yearly Progress status of the school district and buildings?
    o Do you consider _____ school district progressive? Why?

3. What are you most proud of about the _____ schools?
    o Academics?
    o Sports?
    o Caring Environment?
    o Community Support?
    o Students?

4. What do you think are the primary challenges for _____ schools?
    o Academics?
    o Sports?
    o Caring Environment?
    o Community Support?
    o Students?

Improving Learning Perspective

5. What academic challenges and successes do students in _____ schools face?
   o Dropout rates? College success? After High School success?
   o Movement of students into and out of the school district?
   o Change?
   o Teacher training?

6. What does student learning improvement mean to you?
   o Standardized Assessments?
   o Instruction? Assessment? Curriculum?
   o Can you define Learning Improvement?

7. What is your role in student learning improvement in _____ schools?
   o Leader? Participant? Reluctant Participant? or Disengaged?
   o What is the last major learning improvement that you have been a part of in _____ schools?

8. Who are the leaders in student learning improvement?
   o School Board? Superintendent? Principal? Teacher? Other?
   o Is it important for a clear leader to set the course and be responsible for instructional improvement? Why or why not?

Superintendent Learning Leader Perspective

9. How is student learning improvement led in _____ schools?
   o Does the improvement process come from the central office or school board?
   o How do teachers and paraeducators fit into the learning improvement process?
   o Do all members of the educational family understand the plan for student learning improvement?

10. How has the role of educators changed during your career in education?
    o Content and subject area?
    o Classroom Environment?
    o Assessments?
    o State and Federal standards?

11. Identify activities that guide student learning improvement.
    o Policy?
    o Professional Development?
    o Reaction to data?
    o Is student learning improvement and other change part of the culture?

12. Tell me about change in schools.
    o Does _____ school district embrace change?
    o How has the rate of change altered in your teaching career?
    o Is change a good thing? Why or why not?

<u>Closure</u>

13. What other information about student learning improvement in _____ schools are important for me to know?
    o What would students say about learning improvement efforts?
    o What would parents say about learning improvement efforts?

The figure below is a concept map of participants in the study and the influence and connection to school culture as a unifying lens to view instructional leadership practices.
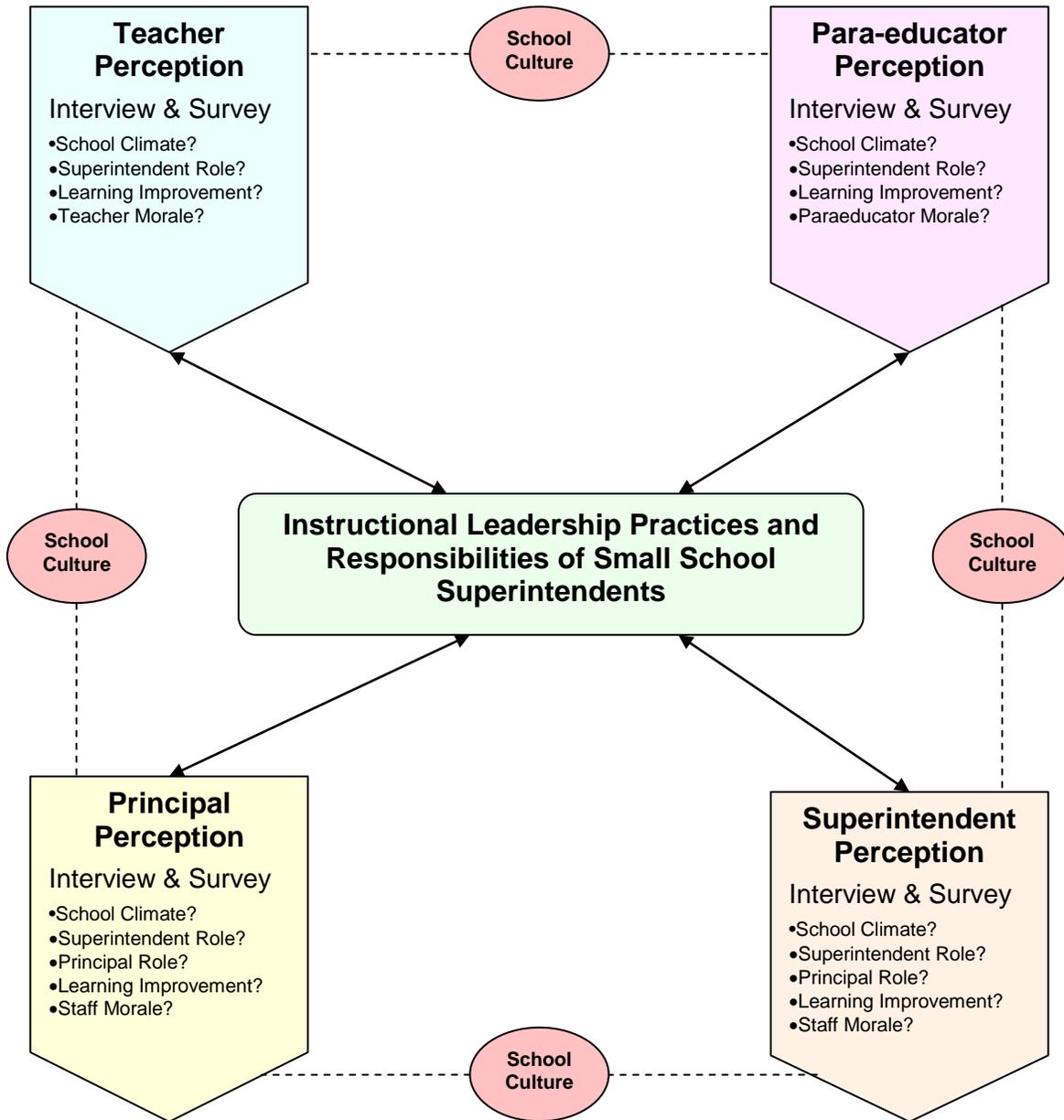
APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

All participants completed a consent form as part of the requirements of the Human Subject Research authorization.

«DATE»

William J. Wadlington
Superintendent/Principal - Creston School District
485 Southeast 'E' Street; P.O. Box 17
Creston, WA 99117

Dear «TITLE». «LAST NAME»,

My name is Bill Wadlington of the Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling Psychology at Washington State University. As I discussed with you on the phone, I am a student studying the role of school superintendent as instructional leader and currently enrolled in EDAD 537 Advanced Qualitative Research. As part of the course and research that may lead to my dissertation, I am conducting interviews and field observations about the superintendency. This form is intended to provide you information about the study and to acquire your consent to participate.

I request your permission to observe you on one or more occasions and to conduct one or more interviews. The interview will require approximately one hour and the observation will require between one and two hours according to your schedule. I will endeavor to establish observation and interview sessions according to your schedule and well in advance. Tapes of the interview will be transcribed and then erased. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from it at any time. There is not any anticipated risk of embarrassment or harm as a result of your participation in the interview or observation. Your identity will remain confidential. You will not be identified, nor will your comments be connected to you, in this study. You may freely withdraw from with study at anytime.

Your participation is greatly appreciated. I will be happy to answer any questions you might have about the project at any time. I can be reached at 509-421-1170 (cell) or 509-636-2072 (home). You may also contact my program chair, Michele Acker-Hocevar at 509-358-7568 or ackerhoc@tricity.wsu.edu. If you have questions or concerns regarding your rights as a participant you may contact the WSU Institutional Review Board at 509-372-7251.

_____   _____
        Participant's Name   Date

_____   _____
      William J. Wadlington   Date

Annotated Observation Notes	Comments
We're a K-12 system and everything we do kind of is K-12. We share staff in most buildings. We are kind of a model in this area for professional learning communities. We started probably five years ago and trained two staff members on the critical friends model, that's the present model we use. That has been our model for professional development and I think that's been one of the things that has allowed XXXXXX to be recognized for a lot of the success we've had. When I first came here, we were like in the bottom ten percent for achievement scores and since we've really focused on professional development, we have two half days every month that we do professional development, one day is dedicated to district needs, district concerns, district goals. **The other one is the critical friends model and we have two teams, the blue team and the gray team, and they meet and they work on a lot of different things. It all has to center around instruction; they look at student's work. Right now we've in the last two years both the critical friends teachers leader group and the district have been focusing on implementing the powerful teaching and learning strategies. When I go in and observe teachers, and when teachers go observe teachers, we have teachers who observe each other a lot, every year they have to observe at least two or three teachers and they have to use the same, we developed a template.** Actually XXXXXXX, used to be in Wenatchee, came and helped us reduce it from a five page document to a one page document. **When I go in and observe, I still take … notes but I use that form as indicators of student engagement and the critical friends use the same model.** So what we're talking about is the craft of teaching. **We spend almost all of our professional development on the craft of teaching and I think it's been good because our staff has bought into it from the standpoint that we try to focus on what the students are doing as compared to what the teachers are doing.** It's kind of a different mindset. When I go and observe classes I tell the	**The participant demonstrates ownership for a model for professional development.** **The participant uses the 'we' both as an identifier of the collective staff, but as well for the superintendent-principal team that leads student learning improvement.** **Critical Friends?** **How is Powerful Teaching and Learning used in the PLC?** **A template for observing teachers?** **Evaluation tied to the process of improving student learning is an earmark identified in the literature for transformative learning practices.** **The focus returns to the efforts and buy-in by teachers and the focus on the staff movement toward a goal. The 'we' is focused back on the collective staff.** **An earmark identified in the literature for transformative learning practices.**

CODING: Superintendent as Learning Leader   Student Learning - General (Unidentified Leader)
                Teacher as Learning Leader   Outside Agency as Learning Leader