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How Principals Manage Time, Mindsets, and Communities to Benefit Children of Poverty

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HOW PRINCIPALS MANAGE TIME, MINDSETS, AND COMMUNITIES TO BENEFIT CHILDREN OF POVERTY

by

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Under the Direction of Jami Royal Berry, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

As university professors and district leaders attempt to hire or coach leaders and teachers to work in high-needs schools, examining leadership characteristics that contribute to increased student learning from the stakeholders' perspective is imperative. The purpose of this study was to examine the characteristics of leadership in a high-needs, high-performing school through the voices of a principal, teachers, and other leaders who interacted within the school setting. The rationale for this dissertation was to explore personalized descriptions of experiences that contribute to developing a learning culture in one high-needs school. Elements of organizational, instructional, and task distribution theories thread this study together and provide a theoretical framework to describe the intricacies of a principal's role as an advocate, lead learner, and strategist creating a culture of learning. This dissertation presents a case study utilizing

participant and observer relationships, various data sources, and summative analysis. The data collection included personal interviews, document analysis, and intimate focus groups. The research site is one elementary school touting a Title I Georgia Reward School designation for high performance. The results provide strong support for the following themes: (a) high quality relationships, (b) school improvement, and (c) high expectations. The analysis adds to the body of literature on high-needs schools and the collective work of the International School Leaders Development Network (ISLDN).

INDEX WORDS: High-needs schools, Leadership, Pre-service leadership, Distributed leadership

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TAMEKA OSABUTEY-AGUEDJE

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Atlanta, GA

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CHAPTER 1

QUALITIES OF LEADERSHIP CRITICAL TO LEADING HIGH-NEEDS SCHOOLS

The purpose of this literature review was to examine the characteristics of a principal in a high-needs, high-performing school collaborating with stakeholders who fostered a culture of learning. These stakeholders included teacher leaders, parents, county office personnel, after-school staff, business and industry, community leaders, and churches. The literature review addressed the following major themes: (a) the principal as an instructional leader, (b) characteristics and qualities of high-performing principals in high-needs schools, and (c) the principal as an advocate for community development.

This dissertation defined *high-needs* by the Title I benchmark of 40% or more of the school's students receiving free or reduced lunch (Epstein & Hollifield, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This was a case study that engaged an interpretivist epistemology; the International School Leaders Development Network (ISLDN) High-Needs School Group Protocol was followed because it provided the appropriate discourse data. This dissertation focused on leadership qualities of school personal, particularly the principal. Outlining the theoretical framework is the foundation for justifying knowledge and methods to carry out research (Carter & Little, 2007). This literature review provided the theoretical foundation for the dissertation as it examined major leadership themes (a) the skills necessary for instructional leadership, (b) enhanced organizational leadership, and (c) student advocacy in particular. The literature review was organized to reflect the themes featured in the research questions. Likewise, the themes are also reflected in the focus group and interview questions used in the ISLDN High-Needs School Group Protocol.

Guiding Questions

The following research questions are addressed:

1. What fosters student learning in high-needs schools?
2. How do principals and other school leaders enhance individual and organizational performance in high-needs schools?
3. How do internal and external school contexts affect individual and organizational performance in high-needs schools?

Review

Instructional leader.

The first theme for the review highlights the principal as an instructional leader who can transform a school's culture into one that develops teachers and students (Zimmerman, 2014).

Instructional leaders transform the culture with their guidance in professional learning communities, student support structures, and curricular decisions to improve student achievement. Bloom (2007) Hallinger and Heck (2010) demonstrated how principals who value instruction are in the forefront of increasing teacher expertise that leads to student learning. The principal is charged with making the driving decisions to redirect the instructional focus.

Ylimaki, Jacobson, and Drysdale (2007) and Jacob and Ludwig (2009) described how principals who take on the primary responsibility to foster a culture of learning in all socioeconomic settings, in spite of deplorable conditions or failing scores, succeed by improving student achievement.

This literature review details and highlights how an instructional leader can transform a high-needs school into one that focuses on student learning by nurturing the cognitive capital of teachers (Bloom, 2007; Zepeda, 2014; Zimmerman, 2014).

Moreover, instructional leadership is pivotal for fostering a culture of learning (Zepeda, 2014). The research questions help to identify and display how a school's practices, shaped by instructional behaviors, ultimately lead to improved student achievement. For the purpose of this dissertation, researchers (Bibbo, & d'Erizans, 2014; Harvey & Holland, 2011; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004) distinguished how a learning culture is fostered using the tenets that follow to support the importance of the principal as an instructional leader.

Researchers highlighted specific skills that principals used to affect the school culture and foster high student achievement. Initially, a principal must demonstrate over time how he or she uses a core set of beliefs that reflects a dedication to student learning (Starratt, 2005; Valli, Stefanski, & Jacobson, 2013). Principals' formal training can only be valuable if they truly believe they can make a difference (Kafele, 2015; Shields, 2014). In a high-needs school, the principal must model servitude and integrity to cultivate those qualities in the students and staff. In addition to character traits, a principal must be able to clearly articulate and communicate concerns, delegate work to responsible parties, and develop next steps from a consensus. Birks and Richardson (n.d.) asserted that a principal should be able to complete a comprehensive evaluation of the current school culture. Insights learned from that evaluative information helps as a whole to manage risks and celebrate the successes of teachers and students. The principal's ability to remain approachable, trustworthy, and open to the ideas of staff, students, and parents keeps everyone focused on what the students can achieve. Church (2009) described how a principal skillfully exhibits emotional intelligence to manage the complexity of relationships to protect the culture of learning. Principals who nurture relationships between staff and students, as well as assist parents in connecting with their children, can begin to foster a learning culture (Blankenstein, 2004).

Further, a principal's ability to respond in reflexive ways to multiple crises requires confidence and the ability to think critically, while in action (Dunaway, Bird, Flowers, & Lyons, 2010).

Reflecting on the aforementioned skills, the literature sheds light on additional nontraditional approaches placing some high-needs schools under the designation: academically exceptional.

Blank, Jacobson, and Melaville (2012) asserted that a principal's instructional decisions should also support the increased performance of teachers who serve impoverished students. There are a variety of challenges that teachers face when working with students in high-needs schools. Jackson and Marriott (2012) also insisted that instructional leaders assist teachers in discarding old patterns of decision making that focused on philosophy, habit, tradition, and/or routine. Then, teachers and the principal could collaboratively focus on the effects that current instructional practices are having on student learning and achievement. The process that principals use to guide the implementation and evaluation of instructional decisions sets the stage for the next theme: organizational leadership.

Organizational leadership.

Organizational leadership is the second theme centered on motivating people, providing accountability, and maintaining distributed leadership (Birks & Richardson, n.d.; Leithwood et al., 2004; Picucci, Browson, Kahlert, & Sobel, 2002). The skills, attitudes, and characteristics effective principals utilize to increase the productivity of teachers, support staff, and students in a high-needs environment must be focused on increasing stakeholders' capacities to deal with the daily uncertainties.

Principals who demonstrate the skills to improve collaborative structures within their building, as well as influence the effectiveness of their district leadership network, can not only initiate

change but also sustain it (Kraft et. al, 2015). Leaders with this skillset have commonly carried the turnaround moniker to each school in desperate need of compassionate organizational leadership.

The leader's attitude for creating norms, common goals, and responsive structures, irrespective of middle class values, aids the work of navigating school improvement teams and planning. Social life comes packaged with stereotypes and bias toward particular groups. The leader's attitude should convey a competency that assumes this student is my son or daughter: what can I do to help them? The increasing need for cultural competency in school leaders arises from the need to build awareness among teachers, non-instructional staff, and community members. The power struggles within classroom structures not only develop from teacher-student interactions, but also from student to student interactions. Forcing the evaluation of underlying beliefs on diversity and culture through in-depth, intentional relationship building allows the principal to be of greater service to the children of poverty (Lucas & Baxter, 2012). The leader's sphere of influence within a high-needs school relates to the effectiveness of creating structures, devising processes, and communicating his/her values that develop a learning culture.

Contextually responsive leadership is also a characteristic of principals who place the socioemotional well-being of leaders, staff, parents, and students at the forefront, often requiring non-traditional organizational structures (Reed & Swaminathan, 2014). The positive and constructive interactions among these groups affect the success or failure of any and all efforts at organizational improvement designed to increase performance.

Emotional outbursts by students or teachers that are negative or abusive are counterproductive to the positive learning environment needed to provide interventions for students with severe academic or behavioral needs. Although some educators may rationalize a student's lack of emotional intelligence as a result of the stressors in the low-income environment, research supports the need for teachers to act as advisors to build those *all-in* relationships (Boylan, 2016). If the members within the school have the ability or understanding to manage multi-level social interactions and respond with the appropriate emotion, that school leader serves as the primary driver for efforts leading to socio-emotional improvement. Students and teachers have distinct strengths, and these strengths should be cultivated in an environment of caring, not of competition by the principal (Noddings, 2015). The ability of the principal to swiftly support capacity decisions, and not make excuses based on the emotional needs of the entire social system, accounts for the daily, yearly, and long range wellness goals of a school community.

Influential organizational leaders forge partnerships and build consensus, when possible, to leverage the experiences of the staff (Church, 2009). In a school with limited resources, a leader's ability to convince others to change their behavior or creatively use their skills for the benefit of students can be more valuable than funding. Creating a vision and collaborating with teachers and parents sets the stage for enhanced performance (Blank et al., 2012). Leading others in key instructional and student support changes using collaborative decision making techniques are successful practices of leaders in high-needs, high-performing schools (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins 2008; Schmoker, 2006). Leaders have moved away from fear tactics to encouraging teachers to comply with instructional decisions. DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2004) and Grissom, Loeb, and Master (2013) chronicled how leaders of high performing schools clearly outline expectations, support reflection and review, and provide effective feedback.

Accountability measures that use a transparent and fair approach can increase staff motivation. Moreover, principals who systematically review school processes and procedures to ensure that they empower students and teachers with clear expectations and transparent efforts remove barriers to success (Jensen, 2012).

Advocacy.

The third theme of this review, advocacy, focuses on the ability of the principal to create an alliance with stakeholders to manage internal and external contexts affecting school performance (Bast, 2015; Day, 2014; Kafele, 2015). Schools face a variety of complex issues that impede student learning, but the likelihood of succeeding is made possible by relational trust. Students can benefit from principals who effectively cooperate with multiple entities to identify resources and form supports that remove barriers to success (Sun, Frank, Penuel, & Kim, 2013). Hence, the principal develops communication channels among the central office personnel, school staff, community members, and parents that must be navigated with compassion and efficiency grounded in a learning imperative (Kerr, Marsh, Ikemoto, Darilek, & Barney, 2006; Terosky, 2014).

Organizational performance relies on a positive culture that is prepared to collectively respond to the specific needs of individual, small, and large groups of students with different socioeconomic backgrounds. The financial constraints and emotional health of a family affect students cognitively, leaving gaps in emotional intelligence. If a student carries a lot of personal “worry,” it takes up their mind and affects their ability to learn and participate in class. A student’s emotional health is important for self-worth and motivation (Parrett & Budge, 2012; Payne, 2013; Sharkey, Patrick, & Elwert, Felix Elwert, 2011). It takes a highly skilled leader to form, build the capacity of, and properly support a team of teachers, parents, and stakeholders

that continuously desire to overcome social situations related to poverty. Furthermore, leaders who encourage their staff to want change for poor children, also create the organizational structures and protections to do so (Noddings, 2015). The heartfelt, strategic, and daily message of positivity, extra classroom resources, or even the occasional surprise winter coat demonstrates stakeholders' commitment to serve children in poverty. For example, housing changes in a student's family may require leaders reaching out to the district resources to receive additional support, correctly identifying the family's needs, and maintaining continuous education for the student. Educational continuity as a priority is evident in the school's grading and assessment policies, non-punitive home visits, and blended learning modifications. The leader who passionately models and supports school improvement everyday, provides the emotional encouragement a staff needs to solve increasingly common problems.

The development of community partnerships, that combat the effects of poverty and achievement gaps, include government entities that create policies impacting the surrounding neighborhood. "It is argued that the design of better economic and social policies can do more to improve our schools than continued work on educational policy independent of such concerns" (Berlinger, 2013, pg. 1). Schools that are used for job training, community college satellite campuses, and parent academies are examples of the way the school can collaborate with external partners to provide the skills and information parents need to bridge those gaps. Likewise, community support such as parent math helpers and local police or fire employees teaching or mentoring, also provide socio-emotional learning that impacts student achievement (Benson, 2014). This collective approach, by an empowered school leader, changes the occasional success of a few children of poverty to the consistent high performance of a culture focused on learning.

Leadership with a laser-like focus is required to provide continuity in curriculum, instruction, assessment, and student support in order to scaffold a learning culture. Leaders who remain concerned with quality teaching and learning manage all other processes around this key objective with the protection needed for success (Gibbs, 1989; Steiner & Kowal, 2007). Research shows that principals who strategically and intentionally plan for student growth sustain academic achievement (Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, & Poston, 2004). The proportion of time in classrooms focused on student experiences and supervision far exceeds the time completing mandatory evaluations. The visibility of classroom learning and real-time student data become the collective baseline of all the stakeholders to quickly address concerns and hold one another accountable. He or she must become entrenched in teacher professional development that provides teachers with the remediation, intervention, or enrichment of pedagogical skills they need to help students self-regulate their learning (Bush, 2007; Zepeda, 2014). Simultaneously, the leader effectively and frequently models strategies, technologies, and data analysis to drive short-term action plans. Additionally, the care and concern is authentically revealed by planning celebrations of student goals met as well as taking the time and having the courage to stop an initiative that is not working. At all times, the principal should lead the effort to evaluate the state of the school. These are exceptional steps a principal can take using these tenets to demonstrate their commitment to developing a learning culture in a high-needs school.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was developed through the lens of theories that often intersect in education: distributed, instructional, and organizational leadership theory. The conceptual framework provides researchers with greater context and a lens through which they can understand the phenomena being studied (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Ravitch & Riggan, 2011). Miles and Huberman (1994) defined a conceptual framework as a product that explains, sometimes in narrative form, the key factors, concepts, and the presumed relationships among them. Instructional, organizational, and advocacy responsibilities of school leaders are governed by interrelated concepts, assumptions, and expectations of organizational learning, instructional, and distributed leadership theories that support and inform this research and the study design (Bennett, Wise, & Woods, 2003; Elmore, 2000; Noble, 2014; Robson, 2011; Spillane, 2006).

Outlining this theoretical framework is the foundation for justifying knowledge and methods used to carry out the research (Carter & Little, 2007). Themes that are influenced by factors both within and outside of the school must be considered when understanding the instructional principal's role in distributing leadership duties among teachers, parents, and other leaders in critical organizational structures that narrow the achievement gap. The interconnectedness of distributed, instructional, and organizational leadership often highlights the shortcomings of many leaders placed in high-needs schools. Although public blame is indirectly related to policy, socioeconomic, or racial disparities, the literature clearly points to these key leadership theories that when thoroughly understood and applied appropriately by school leaders can create high-performing, high-needs schools.

Distributive leadership theory.

Distributed leadership theory asserted that leadership is conceived of as a collective social process emerging through the interactions of multiple actors (Lichtenstein et al., 2006). Hallinger and Heck (2010) supported by the work of Harris and Spillane (2008) described distributed leadership theory as having a significant impact on school improvement through collaborative groups within a school that has multiple leaders. The prescriptive uses of the theory in education often center on stakeholders working within professional learning communities, school councils, or Title I committees to create a learning culture within the school community. The counter argument to that definition was raised by Mayrowetz (2008) who cited no link among increased school improvement, leadership development of school personnel, and distributed leadership. Tian, Risku, and Collin (2015) continued to build on the work of Bennett, Wise, and Woods (2003) to firmly conceptualize the primary functions of educational leadership, school improvement and capacity building, as successful outcomes of distributed leadership theory.

Instructional leadership theory.

Murphy (1988), as cited in Bush (2007), believes instructional leadership theory proposes that the principal conceptualizes themselves as leaders of learning by performing leadership functions in order to influence student learning via teacher behaviors. Establishing goals and expectations among students is often seen as a first step for successful classroom environments, but in actuality the foundation must be set with academic short-term plans with faculty and staff. This can include instructional frameworks, professional learning community norms, and the evaluation of student work for communicating progress.

Using resources strategically should be embedded through the teaching and learning routines and practices communicated to staff throughout the year in order to utilize educational materials more effectively. Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development is another facet of the principalship that has mushroomed as a result of the transition from manager to instructional leader (Hallinger, 1992).

In high-needs schools the focus on providing extensive modeling, feedback, prevention and intervention supports are spread across assistant principals, multiple instructional coaches, and district personnel. In contrast, coaching and supervision methods in traditional schools are top heavy with primarily the principal evaluating and reacting to minor areas of needs for a few teachers. Evaluation cycles must be maintained with additional support, and leaders must avoid the punitive, subversive, *gotcha nature* so many teachers flee from even if they care for the students (Morris, Crowson, Hurwitz, & Porter-Gehrie, 1982; Downey et.al, 2004).

High-needs, high performing principals have to accomplish the same instructional leadership theory tenets and encompass the challenges faced by their schools. Gillett (2016), Ylimaki et al., (2007), and Payne (2013) also cited such correlates of poverty as poor nutrition, inadequate health services, high rates of illiteracy and criminal activity, including drug and substance abuse, as existing in the communities of high-needs schools. Subsequently, more time invested in teacher coaching, effective and timely evaluation and feedback, and developing the school's educational program are required to predict the positive achievement gains needed in high-needs schools (Grissom et al., 2013; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). This context often requires different kinds of approaches from those that apply to organizations operating in less complicated and stable conditions. Therefore, effective principals must exercise flexible leadership to generate creative approaches to tackling highly complex problems (Elmore, 2000).

For example, principals may more strongly invest in the leadership capacity of all stakeholders through the creation of a mission and vision based in the harsh realities in the community.

The instructional leadership theory supports principals generating a belief by all stakeholders that all students have the capacity to learn at high levels, and misconceptions of permanent cultural deficits are dispelled. The role of relational trust and collaborative structures have an increased value in high-needs schools because emotional barriers created by stress, underperformance, and instability are typical for that environment (Scott & Halkias, 2016). Considering the distinctive environments in which principals must guide these instructional tenets, there is typically a moral component that supports the advocacy role discussed in this literature review.

Organizational leadership theory.

Organizational leadership theory underpins this study by linking the effectiveness of the collaborations among teachers, parents, and leaders within a school, district and community system (Johnson et al., 2014). The duality of organizational leadership relies on schools and the community to do what is best for individuals as well as the long-term improvement of the school. The organizational processes to inventory intangible and tangible resources a school has can influence and empower stakeholders who may have previously believed the school was in a constant state of conflict to begin with. Organizational conflicts often arise in schools when the importance of each individual in the system (teachers, students, leaders) is pitted against the other(s).

The alternate views of organizational leadership theory in high-needs schools emerge from conflicting or non-existent job descriptions, teacher turnover, relational deterioration among stakeholders, and central office inefficiencies.

Jackson & Marriott (2012) discuss conflicting views of whether policy makers believe district leaders can hold authentic conversations with teachers or principals about how their performance impacts instructional decisions. The usage of district or school funds based on a department's traditional budget, instead of the student data, is another example of inconsistency to make systemic decisions based on the needs of students (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Central office and building leaders have to make strategizing for consistency as a primary, inexpensive, anti-bureaucratic method for improving high-needs schools.

Lichtenstein et al. (2006) proposed:

Organizational leadership [as opposed to leaders] can be seen as a complex dynamic process that emerges in the interactive 'spaces between' people and ideas. That is, leadership is a dynamic that transcends the capabilities of individuals alone; it is the product of interaction, tension, and exchange rules governing changes in perceptions and understanding. (p. 4)

The responsibility of creating an interactive, positive organizational culture ultimately belongs to the principal. By nurturing school-wide practices that demonstrate that the principal is staying true to shared goals, the decisions of the organization continue to shield staff and students from distracting initiatives from external factors. An effective organizational leader unleashes the capacity of individuals so that they work harder for the goals of the group, rather than self, under that protective umbrella of purpose (Picucci et al., 2002). This homegrown, systemic organizational leadership is used to identify how teams of school leaders (formal and informal) undergird school improvement, increase effectiveness, and spread the process of mutual influence (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001; Margolis & Huggins, 2012).

This type of multi-level, systems thinking leadership is needed within the organization in the current context of global education reform of schools with poor children. The organizational, instructional, and distributed theories thread this study together to describe the intricacies of the high-needs principal's role as an advocate for community schools, lead learners, and strategists creating a culture of learning.

Connections to the literature.

The literature mentions how a principal in a high-needs school uses unique approaches to drive school improvement. Leaders in high-needs schools encourage teachers to use socio-emotional strategies based on students in poverty often learning to entertain a group of friends with their personality as a coping skill (Jensen, 2012). Instructional frameworks that incorporate collaboration, creativity, and community connections, capitalize on the social aspects of some students and families. Principals of high-needs schools are charged with creating a safe haven for students in the community (Harper & Associates, 2014). Leading the charge in identifying the resources needed for survival outside of their schools, such as rummage sales and free medical clinics, are ways to remove intangible barriers to student learning that leaders of privileged students may not relate to. Some choices that principals make could be criticized as extreme, or not in the best interest of their careers (Elmore, 2000). For example, a principal with close personal relationships in the community may be the first to receive information about families that could allow the staff to provide food, temporary housing for students, or personal resources. Hence, leaders leverage instinct and serve as problem solvers undergirded by an ideology that they have "been caught" by life experiences, not "taught" in graduate courses (Haberman & Dill, 1999). They become familiar with the dynamics and social structures in low-income neighborhoods.

The complex interpersonal skills, essential for principals to be successful in high-needs schools, are difficult to develop; yet doable. (Epstein, 2010). To build relationships and gain understanding, the principal may need to attend non-school sponsored events, which serve the needs of children of poverty as a sign of unity and understanding.

Closing the skills gap across students and staff should be a priority for fostering a culture of learning (Bast, 2015; Kerr et al., 2006). Effective teaching, measured as a cross function of student needs-assessments, prescribed interventions, and re-evaluation of the growth of students and teachers' skills, could systematically reduce those gaps. Although schools in poverty-stricken communities may not attract top teaching candidates, leaders adjust their hiring practices by recruiting nontraditional educators through relationships, business interactions, and branding (Henderson, 2013). Instructional leaders coach all teachers, regardless of their formal training, by bringing the attention back to what the learner can do. High-needs schools require an instructional leader who cultivates capacity building that is inherently needed in social interactions for instructional decision making (Day, 2014). Therefore, maintaining a laser-like focus to mold everyone in the school into a mindset that produces a culture of learning is the foundation of a high performing, high-needs school (Jensen, 2012). Building an environment committed to overcoming the educational barriers is necessary.

Connection To The Study

This literature review examined the importance of the principal's role in developing a culture of learning, organizational consistency, and advocacy in a high-needs, high performing school. This study explored those actions through stakeholders' interactions and reflections on working towards continuous school improvement.

The principal, with the vision of increased student achievement, must work with all stakeholders within the context of poverty to build, foster, and maintain a culture of learning (Bush, 2007; Downey et al., 2004). Some educators have developed into instructional leaders who are capable of addressing the needs of underachieving children of poverty. The literature review recounted how a principal plays the decisive role in the implementation of school improvement efforts to improve student achievement and school culture. Hoy, Tarter, and Hoy (2006) asserted, "Schools are about teaching and learning; all other activities are secondary to these basic goals" (p. 435). Instructional decision making and positive learning environments are the underpinnings in creating high performance in a high-needs school.

Instructional leadership focuses on shifting from managerial priorities to the difficult task of making academic outcomes the focus of the daily work for everyone (Mar, 2016). Therefore, the distributed leadership practices examined, as it relates to teacher satisfaction and motivation, creates a platform for students in poverty to achieve success at high levels (Heck & Hallinger, 2009). Others point to the organizational struggles that many urban principals face that indicate that authoritarian leadership is not enough to impact change (Grubb & Flessa, 2006). The connection of all three theoretical frames is justified by the interconnectedness of the hands-on, heartfelt, headstrong leadership required to sustain a high performing, high-needs school. Literature analysis points to ways a principal in a high-needs school should manage time, mindsets, and communities; this study seeks to ascertain how the skills, attitudes, and decisions expressed in the literature review relate to the study's findings.

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CHAPTER 2

IMPROVING THE CULTURE OF LEARNING IN HIGH-NEEDS SCHOOLS

The literature review examined prevalent qualities principals possess that contribute to improving the culture of learning in schools. This study fills gaps in the educational leadership literature that places the principal at the humanistic epicenter of general management in a bureaucracy (Morris, Crowson, Hurwitz & Porter-Gehrie, 1982; Wilkey, 2013). It uncovers the multifaceted, interpersonal discourse that occurs when principals effectively distribute leadership (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Walhstrom, 2004a). Sebring and Bryk (2000), Outhouse (2012) and Prichard (2013) fleshed out this interpersonal dialogue by qualitatively describing decentralization and specific principal interactions that are critical factors in determining if a school moves forward to improve learning opportunities for students. The rationale for this study was to explore personalized descriptions of experiences that contributed to developing a learning culture in one high-needs school (Berry & Baran, 2013; Lauer, 2001; Mooney, 2011). This study, that presents a rich, complex, and detailed account of the interconnected work of educators, adds to the body of educational leadership research (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Guiding questions.

The following research questions were addressed:

1. What fosters student learning in high-needs schools?
2. How do principals and other school leaders enhance individual and organizational performance in high-needs schools?
3. How do internal and external school contexts impact individual and organizational performance in high-needs schools?

Conceptual framework.

The conceptual framework provides researchers with a context and a lens through which they can understand the phenomena being studied (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Ravitch & Riggan, 2011). Miles and Huberman (1994) defined a conceptual framework as a base that explains, sometimes in narrative form, the key factors, concepts, and the presumed relationships among them. Instructional, organizational, and advocacy responsibilities of school leaders are governed by interrelated concepts, assumptions, expectations, and beliefs about organizational learning. More briefly, instructional, and distributed leadership theories informed this dissertation and the study design (Robson, 2011; Spillane, 2006). The first step was to outline the theoretical framework as a foundation for justifying knowledge and the methods used to carry out the research (Carter & Little, 2007). When investigating dialogue, themes that are influenced by factors both within and outside of the school must be considered in order to understand the principal's role in distributing leadership duties among teachers, parents, and other leaders who are focused on narrowing the achievement gap.

The perspectives shared by the participants in this study were then analyzed through theoretical lens so that the researcher could interpret the results within the conceptual framework of organizational, distributed, and instructional leadership theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Harris & Spillane, 2008; Mayrowetz, 2008). This need to interpret influenced the researcher's choice to engage the case study methodology used by the International School Leaders Development Network (ISLDN) High-Needs School Group Protocol. Elbousty and Bratt (2010) and Sergiovanni (2004) showed how effective distributed leadership avoided the pitfalls of collaborative structures that are strategically useless, inequitable among peers, and unfocused on the purpose of improving student achievement. The underpinnings of distributed leadership

theory assert that schools should decentralize their leadership to build fluid and innovative formats with multiple key contributors (Gronn, 2000; Hord, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994). If they are striving for high organizational performance, principals in high poverty schools cannot simply be independent messengers who are responsible for all leadership activities. In addition to being an effective school manager, today's principal in a high-poverty school must possess the skills to fashion or participate on teams that can tackle the increased state and federal accountability constructs for the instructional leader. Research shows that principals must understand their role as being more than a good manager; they must move into the critical realm of true leadership as facilitators for instructional team efforts (Elmore, 2000; Sebring & Byrk, 2000).

Stakeholder visibility within the collaborative structures, instructional setting, and in the community make organizational learning within a collaborative context authentic. Mayrowetz (2008) and Outhouse (2012) also examined how the foundations of distributed leadership rely on leaders learning to distribute roles to others within their organization so that they will be able to evaluate the curriculum, instruction, and assessment in greater depth so as to meet student performance goals. The organizational and distributive framework accommodates a participant-observer relationship, which allows for qualitative data collection and analysis to create a case study (Creswell, 2013). The personal interviews, document analysis, and intimate focus groups provide a picture of what effective distributed leadership looks like in terms of dialogue and discourse.

This researcher worked within these collaborative structures (Prichard, 2013). This study focused on a particular school and the leadership tenets and practices of the principal and the stakeholders as they work together to foster a high-performance culture of learning in spite of high poverty enrollment (Amerson, 2014). Drawing from the literature that examines how a learning culture is fostered, there is significant evidence that leadership effectiveness through collaborative structures drives student performance (Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, & Wheeler, 2006; Dufour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; Fullan, 2009). This study presents the voices of stakeholders working with a principal in a high-needs school.

Purpose of the study.

The purpose of this study was to examine the norms and characteristics of leadership in a high-needs, high-performing school through the voices of a principal, teachers, and other leaders that interacted within the school every day. The research design and theoretical perspectives used to address the research questions are presented. The International School Leaders Development Network (ISLDN) Group Research Protocol guided the methodology, participant sampling techniques, data collection, site selection, and analytic procedures.

Significance of the study.

This study built a collective view of the patterns and social interactions that a principal leading a high-needs school encountered within one school community that supported high performance. The ISLDN group study protocol highlights the importance of concisely outlining specific skills that a principal serving a high-needs school should use to affect the school culture and foster high student achievement. Preparing skillful leaders for the challenges they will face in a high-needs schools has been difficult (Bibbo & d'Erizans, 2014).

This study gives an in-depth account of one principal's experiences using the protocol questions, which explored how principals make decisions and their ability to increase the capacity of others to lead. University professors and district leaders hire or coach leaders and teachers to work in high-needs schools. This study contributes to the literature on the reflective successful characteristics that contribute to increased student learning in a high-needs school.

Literature review.

Several authors described how a learning culture is fostered (Harvey & Holland, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2004a). Mainstream tenets of organizational, instructional, and distributed leadership were used by the researcher to frame the participant responses around a conceptual framework of a culture of learning. Organizational tenets are strongest when a leader is known for strategically planning for growth, utilizing awards and celebrations, as well as discontinuing unsuccessful initiatives. Protégés are often sent to high-needs, high-performing principals to learn how to set clear expectations and effectively communicate across multiple mediums. The leader creating a culture of learning focuses not only on the school, but also on the community in order to be proactive for the long-term educational success of the students (Fusarelli, Kowalski, & Peterson, 2011). Tenets of instructional leaders are often honed from teacher preparation in collaborative environments.

The high quality educator is concerned with teaching and learning that focuses on student experiences. Distinguished leaders, dedicated to exceptional professional development, are not tied to what is popular and focus on addressing teacher and student needs. The pinnacle characteristics that set high-performing principals apart in high-needs schools are respect and adoration for building a network of caring professionals in challenging contexts.

The act of distributing leadership duties is used to “skillfully create a discomfort with the status quo, and promote change as something essential to the sustainment of professional growth for the students and the educators” (Wilkey, 2013, p. 2). All collaborators use real-time scores, value the descriptive, and consider historical feelings in order to make data-driven decisions for accountability. Elbousty and Bratt (2010) describe leaders in these intense settings who confront stakeholders who overtly reject collaboration or who passively accept the failure of any student. The processes, structural development, and feedback systems are based on the determined leader’s trust that all members of the organization will manage time to maintain the culture of learning (Deschaine, & Jankens, 2017; Prichard, 2013). Even parental engagement elicited by a high-performing principal is important for creating a learning culture for students. This research will support a group of international educational leaders seeking to determine the varying qualities of leadership exhibited in the complex settings found in high-needs schools (Berry & Baran, 2013). This study combed through the oral and written descriptions of the people who worked within a school environment in order to examine and determine the part that stories, actions, and deeds played in their social interactions.

Methodology

The case study method allows for a comprehensive assessment of a particular site or phenomena. This study, in conjunction with the ISLDN protocol, contributes reflective data to answer the research questions: What fosters student learning in high-needs schools? How do principals and other school leaders enhance individual and organizational performance in high-needs schools? How do internal and external school contexts impact individual and organizational performance in high-needs schools? The results of this study can be used to contribute to the larger study implemented by the ISLDN, which has the overarching goal of

creating new theory. The conclusions, which will help identify the norms and characteristics of successful leadership, will be important for educators in order to avoid a lack of progress in other high-needs schools (Brazer & Bauer, 2013).

Type of design.

The researcher utilized an in-depth qualitative case study design based on Yin's (2002) work. Yin described an empirical inquiry that provides an insider account of attributes or features among members of a community within a real-life context. The direct questioning in the ISLDN protocol that relates to student learning, such as "Please give examples of how learning is supported in your school," allowed the researcher to collect data about the leader's role in fostering a culture of learning. This conceptual framework allowed for meaning to arise from the social situations of the participants, and allowed the researcher to theorize the significance of the patterns, their broader meanings, and implications (Patton, 1990, 2005).

Case study methods were used to collect the personal interview and group responses of the school's stakeholders (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2013). School artifacts and the principal's reflections were also used to identify how the leader contributes to improved performance in one high-needs school. Even though norms, that is expectations about behavior (and beliefs) for a particular identity come into play, this study sought to theorize, not identify motivation or individual psychologies. The emphasis was on the voices of educators in order to understand the various internal or external factors and structures that foster learning in the school (Braun & Clark, 2006). The ISLDN High-Needs Schools Group Protocol was used exclusively, including the probing questions, which helped to identify how the principal promoted a culture of learning.

Participant selection criteria.

Purposeful sampling was used because “one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance” examining the leader’s ability to foster a culture of learning in a particular high-needs school (Suri, 2011, p. 68). Criterion sampling, the fifth strategy of Patton’s (1990) evaluative approach, was used to conform to parts of the ISLDN High-Needs Schools Group Protocol and narrow the sample to a single high-performing school. This study examined *Special Place Elementary School* (pseudonym) composed of 750 students and 55 certified staff members in a suburban, east metropolitan Atlanta school district with at least 50% of its students eligible for Title I funding. This research defines *high-needs* by the Title I benchmark of 50% or more of the school’s students receiving free or reduced lunch (Epstein & Hollifield, 1996). In addition to location and socioeconomic status of the students, the student achievement data was an additional criterion. Based on the 2014-2015 Georgia Department of Education Reward School designation, elementary schools were evaluated to create a population of schools from which to select the site of the study. John Barge, former Georgia State Superintendent, described how the educators, parents, students, and communities came together to move high-needs schools forward to become reward schools:

A Highest-Performing Reward School is among the five percent of the state’s Title I schools with the highest absolute performance, over three years, for the “all students” group on the statewide assessments. A school may not be classified as a Highest-Performing School if it has been identified as a Priority, Focus, or Alert School (Cardoza, 2014 [Press Release])

The state of Georgia’s College and Career Readiness Index (CCRPI) was used to select schools that meet the criteria of a score of 80% or higher, as the student achievement criteria.

The school site that was selected has a 2014 CCRPI score of 87.5. The logic of criterion sampling is to review and study all schools that meet the predetermined criterion of importance. The purposeful sampling techniques helped the researcher to select an individual principal and stakeholders for the study's use of the ISLDN High-Needs Schools Group Protocol by choosing

Table 1

Self-Reported Demographic Comparison

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Title	Position	Years of Service	Years in Position	Years in District
Participant 1	M	W	Principal	Leader	28	11	20
Participant 2	F	W	AP	Leader	18	2	2
Participant 3	F	W	Teacher 2 nd	T-L	32	32	32
Participant 4	F	W	Teacher 5 th	T-L	9	2	2 (local private school)
Participant 5	F	W	Teacher 2 nd	T-L	19	19	19
Participant 6	F	B	5 th Gr. Chair	Teacher	18	3	16
Participant 7	F	W	Teacher 5 th	Teacher	6	6	6 (former student)
Participant 8	F	W	Teacher 1 st	T-L	30	30	28
Participant 9	F	W	Rtl/Title	Leader	20	1	17
Participant 10	F	B	Counselor	Leader	11	7	7

one school from among several that fit the criteria. The individual teachers and members of the leadership team as well as opinions from parent surveys all contributed *voices* to the observed actions that address fostering a learning culture.

The study focused on Special Place Elementary School because it met all four of the participant selection criteria previously described. Elementary settings are supportive in their philosophy of building the groundwork for a student's educational future. This particular site has a reputation in the community of collectively holding the bar for achievement high for all students.

The school opened in 1996, the year of the Olympics, to serve the students in a metropolitan area. It is nestled in a somewhat rural community with neighborhoods of single dwelling families and homes with open acreage. There is little commercial property and no apartment communities in the school zone for registration. The faculty and staff (including secretarial, paraprofessionals, cafeteria, and custodial) have remained highly stable since 1996 when the school opened with approximately 20% of the original teachers present. Thirty percent of the faculty has been in place for 10 years or more, and 40% have worked in the setting for 5 years or more. The faculty and staff is 87% Caucasian and 13% Black. The demographics of the students in the school have changed somewhat over the past five years.

- Black population has grown from 49% in 2011 to 60% in spring of 2014 and is currently 58%
- Caucasian population decreased over the past three years from 40% in 2011 to 34% in 2014, and currently stands at 29%
- Hispanic population remained a stable 4% from 2011 to the 2015, with the exception of an increase to 7.2% in 2016.
- Asian population has experienced a decrease from 3% and to 1.0% currently.
- Students with more than one ethnicity has shown a consistent 4% over the past five years and is currently at 4.7%.

- Students receiving free and reduced lunch services has steadily increased from 35% in 2011 to a current rate of 49% as of November 30 per Peggy Lawrence, Director of School Nutrition.

Despite these changes, Special Place Elementary continues to meet the needs of its students with the guidance of a late-career principal who does not fit the typical ready to retire mold. Although he could rest on the laurels of achievement, he is actively present in the instructional network in his school community. He provides a strong vision, but is also a worker, friend, and father figure in the day to day solutions for the parents, staff, and students. Mulford, Edmunds, Ewington, Kendall, Kendall, D., & Silins, (2009) stated, “successful school principalship is an interactive, reciprocal and evolving process involving many players, which is influenced by, and in turn, influences the context in which it occurs.” The leader of Special Place Elementary is the epitome of that statement.

The school published a goal/compact with the community that included a target that at least 90% of all students in all subgroups and all tested subjects would meet mastery levels. In addition to diversity in students’ backgrounds, there was also some variance in student overall ability levels. This Title I school consistently commits to additional professional learning opportunities for teachers and staff to address the needs of the students. Therefore, students consistently meet their goals as they relate to exceeding the state mastery levels of English/Language Arts, Reading, and Writing. Barnard (2004) and Jeynes (2005) research suggests Title I elementary schools have documentation demonstrating increased parental involvement in relation to the school’s instructional goals compared to secondary schools.

Although they have increased students referred for intervention services (see Table 1) and a decreasing trend of parental participation in the classroom, the targeted nature of the support they receive from parents, staff, and community members assists them in their high-performance objectives. Special Place Elementary has been a GOLD Award winner from the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) in 2005, 2009, and 2010. In addition to top honors they have earned the SILVER Award in 2006, 2008, and 2011.

Data collection procedures.

Interviews and teacher focus groups explored a range of oral perspectives on fostering learning, organizational leadership, and leading in within different school contexts.

Table 2

Enrollment in Instructional Service Models

Service Enrollment	Number of Students
Response to Intervention (RTI) Tiers 2 and 3	92
Early Intervention Program	166
Special Education	60
Gifted Education	127

Three interviews, two teacher focus groups, and document analysis were conducted between July and December of 2016 (Berry & Baran, 2013). Participants verified individual interviews for reliability using stakeholder checks that allowed comment on or assessment of the research findings, interpretations, and conclusions (King, Cassell, & Symon, 2004; Thomas, 2006).

In semi-structured interviews and focus groups, the researcher asked a series of open-ended questions (see Appendix A for the ISLDN Protocol), with accompanying queries that probe for more detailed and contextual data (Creswell, 2013; Schmidt, 2004). Focus groups and interviews were recorded and then transcribed by TranscribeMe.

With this data, the researcher used the five-step method of data analysis developed by McCracken (1988) for long interviews. The various perspectives were analyzed using an open coding process as validation of the descriptions of characteristics that contributed to the school's increased learning outcomes for students (Kraft, Papay, Johnson, Charner-Laird, Ng, & Reinhorn, 2015; Krueger, 2009).

The principal shared his resume and completed a demographic collection survey before participating in two, one-hour interviews. The additional leaders representing the school and certified staff members completed a demographic collection survey and participated in two, small, separate, semistructured (40- to 60-minute) focus groups. Additional leaders were selected based on their involvement in one or more of the following achievement improvement groups between 2011-2016:

- Building Leadership Team (B.L.T.)
- Teacher Leadership Initiatives
- Administrative Team
- Title I Plan Membership
- School-wide Response to Intervention Team
- Strategic School Improvement Team

Evidence to support a performance culture was found in the examined documents demonstrating an emphasis on learning, such as Milestone Performance Bands Reports, Title I Checklist, Title I Plan, Parent Council Minutes, and Building Leadership Team (BLT) minutes. The richness of data collected from documents relies heavily on the school's culture of learning (Bowen, 2009). Parent involvement survey data were utilized to capture the parents' view of the educational aims of the school and their impacts. A selection of student support and school improvement plans were reviewed in addition to documents identifying the instructional frameworks of the school. Their selection was helpful during the identification and familiarization stage of the data collection process (See Table 3). The information provided Title I requirements, school improvement research, and district requirements that a focused on instruction (Epstein & Hollifield 1996; Jeynes, 2005).

Methods for trustworthiness.

The researcher's similar characteristics as a female leader in a high-needs school contributed to receptiveness and acceptance into site location; however, to control for bias the Protocol was strictly followed. To increase the trustworthiness of the study, detailed field notes of significant decisions by the participants and interpretations of discoveries in transcripts or documents were maintained. Limiting the contact time in the field with each participant to less than 4 hours supports the validity of the claims asserted in the analysis (Richards, 2005). Due to the specificity of a single school case study, the results are not transferrable to other school settings. Without the consolidated results of all the researchers using the ISLDN Group Protocol, further research cannot be extrapolated to draw generalizations to other similar settings. The research followed the Protocol as an aid to limiting bias. However, this study could be used in a meta-analysis based on its adherence to the ISLDN protocols. King (2004) supported the use of parallel coding progressively through the various studies to establish an overlap of the central themes used as categories.

Instrumentation is standardized among all users for the ISLDN High-Needs Schools Group Protocol (see Appendices). The researcher maintained a participant-observer role during the data collection to build relationships, trust, and increase the knowledge of the participants related to the rationale of the study. Printed materials regarding the purpose of the study and informed consent documents were provided to ensure participants that involvement did not used in their professional evaluations or the evaluation of the principal.

Data analysis procedures.

After coding the data into the nodes of prevailing concepts (see Table 3 Phases of Coding), the participant researcher interpreted the interview responses, focus group data, and artifacts to construct a description of the categories supporting a culture of learning (Glaser, 1978 & 1992). Data collection and evidence-based insights were facilitated by NVivo 11, a Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). The researcher used inductive open coding analysis to compile the initial data from the participant interviews and focus groups (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011; Lofland, 1995; Khandkar, 2009). The researcher avoided an anecdotal approach, working systematically through the data with full and equal attention to all items, and coded for as many potential nodes as possible (Braun & Clark, 2006). The decision to use qualitative content analysis evolved from processes supported by the research protocols and the goal to contribute new theory.

The findings were interpreted using classifications that were analyzed in relationship to the guiding question stems: fostering student learning, organization leadership, internal and external contexts of their school community. The use of qualitative content analysis (QCA) aims to “systematically describe the meaning” of data in a certain respect that the participant researcher specified from research questions (Schreier, 2012, p. 3; Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen, & Kyngäs, 2014). The use of the demographic data collected regarding teaching/district experience, race, gender, or level of interactions with the principal was quantified to align preliminary or add additional categories that surfaced through the analysis (see Table 2). Document analysis was used as a focus for examining school artifacts that reflected on the principal’s leadership (Peters & Wester, 2007; Cho & Lee, 2014).

The phases of coding (Table 3) assisted the researcher with identifying connections among the participant responses and developing patterns contributing to the findings of this study. Observations at the manifest level were integrated to produce a codebook of the initial nodes to develop the emergent themes that were utilized when reasoning the findings

Table 3 *Phases of Coding*

Coding Phase	Process	Themes/Categories/Clusters
Phase 1 Familiarization (McCracken 1)	Sampling strategy, protocols, and units of analysis identified; Researcher familiarized herself with the data using line by line coding (selection rationale, utterances, and multiple transcription review); Transcripts sent to participants for review (Elo et. al, 2014)	School Improvement Plans, Title I Plan, Title I Checklists, Parent Survey Summaries, AdvancEd Executive Summary, Site Strategic Plan BOE Summary, Primary Grades Focus Group Transcript, Upper Grades Focus Group Transcript, Leader Interviews
Phase 2 Initial Nodes from Associations, Assumptions, and Incidents in the data (McCracken 2 & 3)	Documents, Interviews, and Focus Group data uploaded into NVivo 11; Initial nodes were identified in the data based on the key words of the protocol stems and components of the Title I checklist (Peters & Wester, 2007)	Advocate, Collaboration, High teaching expectations, Instructional Leader, Instructional supports, Learning Culture, Negative External Factors, Negative Internal Factor, Organizational Leadership, Positive External Factors, Positive Internal Factor, Quote, Relationships, School Improvement
Phase 3 Categories identified by grouping the nodes (McCracken 4 & 5)	Review of the field notes, broad labels of the data (Cho & Lee, 2014) and produced clusters from the connections and developing patterns	High Expectations High Quality Relationships School Improvement

(Wolfswinkel, Furtmueller, and Wilderom, 2013). The basic clusters developed from the meanings that ran through all or most of the data that carries a heavy emotional, factual, and instructional impact on fostering a culture of student learning (Piercy, 2004).

Bendassolli (2013) cautions that there is a psychological component in this knowledge-building process that requires long and tedious review to facilitate connectedness in the data. Making sense of the personal accounts and reflections by interpreting the clusters of connections will contribute a rich dialogue to an international study. In order to increase the credibility of the findings of a study, several strategies were used, such as triangulation, member checking, showing representative quotations, and peer debriefing (Cho and Lee, 2014). The findings contributed to an understanding that answered the initial research questions. The purpose of this analysis was to determine varying qualities of leadership essential for leading high-needs schools, within contextual factors, to high performance. The process also served as a reflective experience for the principal by identifying characteristics that are successful, should be continued, and shared with other aspiring or practicing leaders.

Results

The results of the analysis of the research data are presented in this section. The three themes that emerged from the data were analyzed in relation to the research questions and the study focus (see Table 4). Research question one focuses on the learning culture of the school. The emergent theme of setting high expectations among the school community describes the learner, staff, and parental behaviors that support the culture of learning established at the school. In the analysis phases the teachers and leaders utilized incidents and reflections to describe the characteristics of high expectations for students and staff, as a way to respond to the challenges they face. Research question two focuses on enhanced leadership practices demonstrated in the school. The emergent theme of school improvement takes on a focus of a shared connectivity of stakeholders to whole-heartedly contribute their skills to sustaining or maintaining the learning environment.

There were assumptions and descriptions in the document analysis and participant responses that explained their beliefs in playing a valuable role and being placed in the “best fit” to contribute to the learning and socio-emotional goals of the staff, students, and parents. Research question three focused on the contextual factors influencing how they overcome change, focus on the mission of the school, and maintain a positive culture.

Table 4

Research Questions with Themes

Question	Nodes	Data Source	Emergent Themes
Q1	High teaching expectations, Learning Culture	2 focus groups 4 leader interviews SIP	High Expectations
Q2	Collaboration, Instructional Leader, Instructional supports, Organizational Leadership, School Improvement	Web, Twitter Parent Feedback from Title I survey Title I Plan SIP	School Improvement
Q3	Advocate, Negative External Factors, Negative Internal Factor, Positive External Factors, Relationships, Positive Internal Factor	Board of Education Summaries	High Quality Relationships

The emergent theme of high quality relationships details the encouragement, support, and potential in everyone who is a member of the school community. One of the participants described that they have a “vested interests in diving into one another’s efforts at success.” Because the entire system is now experiencing high poverty, many of the participants provided examples explaining why their school community values education and sees it as important.

Theme one: high expectations.

Research analysis showed a consistent theme in each artifact indicating a predilection to “teaching to the top” in order to provide the support for all students to exceed the academic standards. The internal learning supports in the responses address the needs of students by creating a goal oriented culture. This is demonstrated in the return of retired, certified Special

Place teachers who implement the standards-based, at-risk student small groups at every grade level. Professional Learning Communities go to great lengths to vertically team in order to personalize students' schedules based on their enrichment or intervention needs. The selection of certain district initiatives and resources or the total disregard of others by the school improvement team maintains the focus on using the best research based strategies or tools for their students. This was acknowledged by the upper elementary focus group: "The answer is always in the room to make our instructional supports fluid so that even struggling students know that their friends, teachers, and parents are going to immediately provide a way for them to be successful."

The decision to add more early intervention teachers with lower classes and enlarge the class sizes of 4th and 5th grade to address gaps early on. The leaders and teachers describe the expectation for all teachers to be masterful in their content, pedagogy, or intervention expertise in order to benefit "our children". The principal reflected on the school hiring practices compared to other resource allocations, "I'll take the highly effective teacher over anything else any day. The staff all agree that they have fewer stay at home parents, but their approaches to individualized learning at home and school have changed to accommodate student growth goals using technology." Parents also contributed their feedback which has assisted the staff to respond with workshops that address the social and academic needs of the families. The response contributes to the learning culture that includes movie nights, test prep presentations, computers in the parent center for technology tool help sessions, and community helpers that fill in the gaps in the core curriculum. The room parents that are engaged provide small group instruction, additional snacks or school supplies for those in poverty, and assistance with individualized skill practice in weekly communication folders as internal learning supports.

Even the secretary described how she schedules students who want to see the principal to show him how they have improved their work because the students know “he cares”. All of the participants speak to the “Special Place Way” as never lowering the standards that have created the learning culture of the school. While the participants and documents were unanimous in this particular theme, this level of agreement was unique to the High Expectation theme.

Theme two: school improvement.

This theme was a direct output of the performance culture stems in the protocols (See Appendix A1, questions 4, 5, 6, 7 and A2, questions 3, 5, 6). The participants consistently describe how the leadership delegates duties, assumes support roles, or protects instructional time to remain focused on high quality instruction. The vision and mission were also intertwined into the evaluations “mentioning them even in the observations, so they (teachers) think that man, these (actions) are very important”. The lower grade focus group, principal, assistant principal, and the RtI/Parent Liaison concurred in their reflections that their school continues to improve because they supported finding everyone’s best fit. The staff not only felt the effect of the strategic placement, they described their experiences with the principal to make decisions based on the needs of the students. The RtI coordinator reflected:

He will go to different people, based on their strengths, and say, "Can you do this for us? Collect this data," or, "Put this into a chart," or-- he's very good at delegating things to people based on their strengths.

The upper grade focus group described how most staff members support a club, participate on committees, or provide professional learning to one another. They were more transparent about their initial fears when new grade levels were proposed:

We have to say too, as far as putting you some where, this school is all about relationships. We're such a family here. He'll hire someone and then he's like, "Hey, I just hired someone for third grade, and you guys are going to get along so well. I can't wait for you to meet one another." So you come in and he helps you build those relationships when it's kind of awkward like, I don't know who this girl is.

This specialness is described in the way the principal's actions facilitated a teacher's decision to help one student on the-first day:

Right now we've got a student who did not want to walk in the first day of school. He had an awful year last year. His mother and his father were in prison, and his home life was about as bad as you could possibly draw it up. So first day at school as all the families are coming in, he's sitting in the conference room, unwilling to go to fifth grade hall, "I'm not going into class. I'm not." So here's what happens. A teacher that doesn't even have him on her roster happens to walk by, sees him, and this happens more times than I can remember, this concept they're all my kids. Here's what the teacher said. Now, she's already got a couple in her class. They're going to be a challenge. She said, "Can I have him? Can I have him? I want him." I said, "[Participant 6], we balanced out this class out already." "I think I can get him. I think I can." I said "All right. Because I could sense, man, she was going to pour it on that child.

Outhouse (2012) pins the selection of teachers, parents, and students for leadership roles in your school that address the best fit as one of the most important actions to move the school as an organization forward. One of the upper grade participants said the hiring season is "ceremonial" and used the following analogy:

One thing he does well is hiring. He goes, "That's not a good draft. It's like a good draft to get the best players. You got to start early." He has a strong understanding of the importance of drafting the best teachers, not starting in April and May, so that you're ready for the year.

Although income is traditionally used as an undercurrent predictor of school success, the servant leader can inspire the same movement of contribution. The leadership is described as kind, “keeper of their word,” respectful, and thoughtful:

So you want to know what's different here? We have a supportive administration that encourages us, and trusts us, and gives us the ability to be leaders.

Those same characteristics are used to make decisions regarding professional development to address the needs of high-needs students. The leadership has made a thoughtful commitment to support the new teacher/retiree relationship that is unique to the district. The school improvement team made a collaborative decision to use professional learning funds to contract retired “Special Way” teachers to implement their internal induction program. The grade level teachers saw this as a kind way to remove them from the paperwork duties of the district Teacher Support System to support the teacher on daily school improvement and instructional goals. In order to address other professional learning initiatives, the staff acknowledges that they have a highly skilled and professional staff. Participant 5, a former teacher of the year stated, “People are great at what they do, and they're willing to share what makes them great.”

Echoing those sentiments, many of the participants felt no reason to go outside of their own expertise. For example, the administration realized that District Technology and Curriculum Initiatives this year would likely push some of their veteran staff over the edge. One of the veteran participants remarked, “They can't even sign into ITS learning because the numbers are so long. If they leave off a period, they can't get in. My lesson is over” The school lost 5 veterans last year, citing similar top down decisions, the most the school had ever lost in one year.

The decision was made to ask five (5) tech savvy teachers to learn the targeted skills simultaneously from a pilot school. The principal shared a reflection on this counter-district decision:

I'm trying to keep our teachers in a healthy frame of mind. So every week I'm thinking of, "What can I do to make this not just a palatable journey, but a joyful journey for the faculty?" I want them to enjoy being here

The "Tech Team" collaborated with the Digital Learning Specialist to use the additional planning time provided by the administration to individually coach the rest of the staff on a weekly basis instead of doing a school-wide rollout. Similar decisions to "shelter" the teachers, students, and parents were applied to required posted student-work and commentary, and a delayed specialty/choice program mandate.

The principal is known for focusing in on and nurturing teachers' personal and professional characteristics to enhance the quality of instruction instead of monitoring an intense amount of duties (White-Smith, 2012). He is always reading educational literature, sharing his reflections with the staff, and has not given up the encouragement, not compliance, to support summer book studies. The principal's supervision of their work was discussed as reflections, not directives, and were considered thoughtful or helpful. Participant 3 and 8 referred to him never immediately saying no or using the phrase "Let me think on that" and actually coming back to them with a well-thought out version of how their suggestion could work. This is congruent with his thoughts: So the way that we inspect what we expect is through serving, is through serving and it's not to catch them. It's to grow them and to truly-- because we care for them.

They are the true experts and the moment that I stop seeking their counsel and listening to them, they need to feel like they can be transparent with me, and I'm listening to them.

The principal's governance style begins and ends with decisive and deliberate focus on maintain the constructive relationships needed to move the students to their goals.

Theme three: high quality relationships.

The third theme that was prominent in the data was the intentionality of building, repairing, and sustaining positive relationships. The participants described the environment as welcoming, safe, and family oriented. As the principal said, "a school is an elongated shadow of its principal." Although he exudes excitement, communicates intimate feelings, and speaks of inspiring possibilities, it is the characteristics of cheerleader, protector, and always seeing the best in someone that sets him apart. The principal poignantly stated the lens in which he communicates shows his stakeholders, "That's going to be our goal. It's going to be to come together, and there's a certain comfort level in that as a teacher and as a parent, as a student. They can come in, we'll work through it." His staff follows through on that commitment. The participants all used the phases "getting into the wheel barrow" and "lean in" to describe the "Special Place Way" of removing their personal biases or middle class values to address the needs of the families. Participants described ways that parents transformed their support after negative experiences in other schools or when they were in school. The support of several church groups has helped in responding to the needs of the students to have what they need socially, emotionally, or tangibly.

The lower grade focus group had a parent who orchestrated distributing the old laptops of her neighbors to provide low-income students computer access at home before the 1 to 1 technology

initiative. The participants all view themselves as leaders in their own right mirroring the principal's commitment to serve the students who attend their school now, regardless of the past demographics.

Although the principal sees himself as a servant leader, those characteristics were validated by other participants with the words: "we all feel valued", "he creates a family", and "he believes in me as an expert. They also spoke to his unwavering support they received during personal crisis. Participant 3 had the entire room in tears describing the days after her husband's death; she will never forget how "This family jumped up and just provided things that I didn't even know that I needed and so it's a sense of being that you cannot find anywhere else but here." Lower elementary focus group participants spoke to performing for the principal to maintain the learning culture, because they appreciated that he had been very trusting of them as teachers over the years.

Both focus groups, Response to Intervention (RtI) Liaison, and the Assistant Principal lauded the positive internal culture that the principal promoted. They described how that could include prayer at meetings, the sunshine committee encouraging more than monetary donations for life events, leaving positive notes in faculty mailboxes, and the exclusiveness that means "treating everyone like family". A positive external culture was present, with the exception of district interactions of monitoring and support. The assistant principal described the county office as "not thinking that what Special Place Elementary does can be done anywhere else." The lower grade focus group zeroed in on county initiatives, "Everything that's new, our county is going to try it. But yet, we haven't worked through the kinks and then you can't find help and you just-- that part can be kind of frustrating."

The RtI/Parent Liaison cautioned the dangers of top down forces on their environment:

Here's the other interesting thing. Would you ever ask a teacher to treat every kid in your class exactly the same? Would you say, "You're going to teach Johnny. I don't care if Johnny is already reading a chapter book, and Cee-Cee doesn't know ABCs. You must do this exact same thing with everybody in here." You wouldn't do that. You know that's not good teaching. You know that's not good instruction. So then why would you ask every school to do the exact same thing? Every school is not the same, and it's not because of the population.

Luckily the churches, parents, businesses, and local feeder schools all support the “Special Place Way” even when it gets the principal on the hot seat. The internal and external stakeholders admire his long track record of making decisions that are in the best interest of the students at his school even when it is unpopular. Early in the first interview, the principal said, “I believe that encouragement is the most effective tool that a leader has, and it's the most underused.” He seeks the consult of all who will be affected by his decisions and he can remain consistent with the mission of the school based on the strength of the relationships he’s encouraged.

Discussion.

The complexity of characteristics a high-need, high-performance leader possesses illustrates the intricacies of the theoretical framework intertwining instructional, organizational, and distributed leadership theories. The interconnectedness of instructional, organizational, and distributed leadership underscores the talent of leaders placed in high-needs schools that maintain a high-performance culture of learning (Deschaine & Jankens, 2017; Lochmiller & Chesnut, 2017).

The study results produced three themes - high expectations, school improvement, and high quality relationships. These themes were reinforced by the theoretical framework demonstrating the need for strong characteristics from instructional, organizational, and distributed leadership theory supporting the complex work.

Instructional leadership theory at the study site featured core elements of instructional expectations and a lead learner developing the resultant high expectations theme discussed across stakeholders. Districts and stakeholders expect that principals work with teachers to promote high expectations for the teaching and learning process by identifying and prioritizing instructional leadership behaviors and focusing on their time on instructional activities (Talat Al-Samadi & Hendawy Al-Mahdy, 2016). Effective structures, systems thinking, and relational trust were the elements of organizational leadership theory that undergird the sustained staff and student performance constituting the school improvement theme from the participants. School leaders deploy integrity-based strategies such as consensus building and accountability models for the development of relational trust to facilitate school improvement efforts (Kraft et. al, 2015; Scott and Halkias, 2016).

There were leaders and teacher-leaders exhibiting the high quality relationships theme by sharing stories of intrinsic motivation, productive collaborative groups, and mutual influence that are fundamental elements of distributed leadership theory. Distributed leadership practices in which the principal expresses appreciation shapes an atmosphere built on satisfaction, accomplishment, and a sense of community. (Harris, 2006; Mar, 2016).

In closing, the discussion that follows links the theoretical framework to the resulting themes of visibly instructional leaders in negotiated structures through collectively valued experiences. The principal's ability to manage time, mindsets, and the community has produced a prominent impact on the success of the staff and students at Special Way Elementary.

Table 5

Theory to Results Continuum

	Theory	Elements	Theme
Question 1	Instructional Leadership	Academic Expectations; Lead Learner	High Expectations
Question 2	Organizational Leadership	Systems Thinking; Relational Trust; Structures; Processes	School Improvement
Question 3	Distributed Leadership	Collaborative Groups; Multi-Level Leaders, Motivation	High Quality Relationships

The connections among some of the results and the literature are also explored while addressing limitations and proposed recommendations for school districts, preparation programs, and leaders. This discussion provides a critical analysis of the consolidated conceptual framework and themes that address the research questions of this study. The purpose of this study was to examine the characteristics of leadership in a high-needs, high-performing school through the voices of a principal, teachers, other leaders, and parents that interact within that context every day. The findings are important because the evidence of an emotionally holistic approach require the leader to impact more than the instructional goals, structures, and duty assignments (see Table 6). The findings suggest that principals utilize their organizational leadership skills to effectively distribute leadership based on the validity of their instructional capabilities and personal character.

Theme One: High Expectations.

The leaders and staff postulated that their school is beating the odds because everyone realized that setting the bar so high means they have to do “whatever it takes” and “make a way out of no way” for all of their students.

Table 6

Study Highlights

Research Question	Theme	Exemplars
RQ1- What fosters student learning in high-needs schools?	High Expectations	“teaching to the top”, “changing the game of school, so more kids can play”, “A learning place is a happy place”, “Avoid that lost feeling”, visionary
RQ2 -How do principals and other school leaders enhance individual and organizational performance in high-needs schools?	School Improvement	“We matter”, “Potential in all people”, “Make a Way”, “Avoid 1 more thing”, “kids first”, “15 minutes of a parents time makes a difference”, “Are you in your sweet spot”
RQ3 -How do internal and external school contexts impact individual and organizational performance in high-needs schools?	High Quality Relationships	“all in”, “wheel-barrow”, “knowing what each other thinks”, “Our Children”, “Didn’t sign my life away”, “in our hearts”, “fruits of the spirit”, “never annoyed by helping others”

For Research Question 1 the findings support the presence of a growth mindset and a dedication to a learning culture. The principal provided an in-depth response to focusing on the long-term goals of the school to maintain excellence and minimize learning gaps (see Appendix A). The principal was committed to the school’s vision and strategic plan to create a caring environment that centered on child development and supported academic achievement (Blankenstein, 2004). His staff reiterates their motto for high expectations for every student by giving each student personal attention. The researcher recognized a commonality among the staff’s critical stances on educational leadership deeply rooted in their school culture that distinguish them from more traditional approaches such as the district’s culture (Quantz, Cambron-McCabe, Dantley, & Hachem, 2016). He also expressed a dedication to a multi-year approach that prioritizes quality in their instructional obligations. The principal took proactive ownership from the very first year of his tenure and those decisions and actions are demonstrated in his long-standing commitment to limiting the staff’s focus to what works best for the students at his school.

The additional participants echoed that focus on holding one another accountable to using the supports that are impactful to the learning at their school in questions 4, 5, and 6 (see Appendix B). The principal also exhibits a flexibility, self-actualization that gives him the ability to hold a confident yet realistic assessment of what he needs to direct, and what he needs to distribute to empower others.

Theme Two: School Improvement.

This school leader expressed the necessity of having a guiding coalition, a group of teachers with conviction to stay true to their school's course of action. For Research Question 2 the study espoused the commonality, harmony, openness, and listening as the performance enhancing skills needed to improve this school. The lack of personal ambition propels the leadership team above short-term personal benefits that can create a corrosive culture (DuFour et. al, 2004). With the formal structure of the Building Leadership Team (BLT) and Title I team, the principal shows his appreciation for the results and efforts of teachers who play a leadership role in their own sphere of influence. The constant scaffolding of systemic structures to create the multiple circles of trust that allow the community to respect the decisions of each teacher is an essential contribution by the principal. The principal asks teachers to stay focused on planning exemplary instruction and maintaining a positive classroom environment in the face of adversity (Calvert, 2016; Terosky, 2014; White-Smith, 2012). Therefore, the principal and those in leadership support roles focus on removing barriers that teachers express in formal and informal documents or discussions (Abbasi, Rashidi, and Naderi, 2015; Noddings, 2006).

Leaders must be willing to serve in the smallest capacity. That includes entering class rosters into the technology tool now being required to be respected and demonstrate the follow through that solidifies collective dedication to the group goals.

Boylan (2016) describes a hyper-vigilant work culture in which everyone provides an effort within in their professional strengths to contribute to the goals of the team. The consequence of leading by example is that collective goals and collaborative efforts create an informal system of embedded professional learning (Hord, 2009; Kraft et. al, 2015). Although the principal provides an open-ended list of opportunities for teachers to grow and learn; the teachers appreciate his role in setting the tone that they all must offer their expertise with one another in order to benefit the students.

Theme Three: Strong Positive Relationships.

Shields (2014) discussed how principals tend to experience a loneliness that prevents many of the ethical characteristics of authentic trust, endearing support, and loyalty from developing amongst a staff also dealing with the needs of students in poverty. For Research Question 3 the quality indicators regarding the principal of Special Place Elementary School exposed what the researcher describes as a “fruits of the spirit atmosphere.” His creation of that atmosphere is how he measures his time developing relationships in and outside of the educational goals of his school. The Christian spiritual undercurrent was not predicted by the literature, in contrast humanist and social justice theories were abundant in high-needs, high-performance leader characteristics (Abbasi, Rashidi, and Naderi, 2015; Darling-Hammond and Friedlaende, 2008; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995. Reed and Swaminathan, 2014). For reference the following traits are commonly associated with the King James version of the Bible’s reference to the fruits of the spirit: Joy, Love, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Generosity, Gentleness, Self-control, Faithfulness. The absence of artifacts required exhibit character in school leadership preparation programs points to the need for ongoing recommendations to the performance-based certification model.

Woods (2007) shares the importance of spiritual experience as a phenomenon which enables leaders to be better resourced with a deeper meaning to internally provide significant influence in schools as vital to preparing leaders. His focus throughout the principalship has been on exhibiting those traits throughout the course of the day, spending time serving the people who do the work with students. The principal in this study valued purposeful presence to move obstacles out of the way by actions and deeds over minutes counted in observation paperwork. Danny Steel (2017) discussed true improvement as, “creating the conditions where teachers can improve themselves”. In spending his time investing in people’s personal goals and livelihood, he in effect developed the social capital to create a legion of change minds to change the community.

Janke, Nitsche, and Dickhäuser, (2015) and Hoy, Tarter, and Hoy (2006) postulated that a positive goal-oriented learning culture replicates the actions and characteristics of the principal as a role model. The principal of Special Way school consistently walked a tight rope with the county office because he believed in supporting the teachers as experts on student learning. The human capital management and school climate indicators of quality leadership require patience with the internal and external factors affecting the school. Initiatives proposed by external factors, such as the county office, went through the principal’s circle of teacher leaders. This joint decision-making process, while swift, was only tolerated because the performance remained steady or improved. The principal’s ability to make decision under pressure and his faithfulness to introspection of himself in alignment to the school goals places him on a pedestal in his community and amongst his peers. Moreover, some participants’ narratives opened a window on their conceptions of their responsibilities toward students, especially Black students, which intersected with their own experiences of race, gender, and spirituality (Witherspoon & Taylor, 2010).

Hassan, Mahsud, Yukl, and Prussia (2013), Noddings (2010), and Finnigan and Daly (2012) make assertions that successful leaders need ethical approaches to deal with high-needs schools as a dominant skill coming into senior leadership positions, and the current reality is that many school leaders may not promote ethics. The convergence of organizational and distributed leadership makes the goal of being a successful high-needs principal based on those authentic relationships very difficult (Fullan, 2009). The principal's level of trust in teachers to be professional, capable, and gentle enough to make decisions by maintaining a balance of pedagogy, self-control, and kindness was indicated in the participant data because that's what the principal of Special Place Elementary School models.

This section includes a presentation of the findings that emerged from the previous analysis. Additionally, the themes were supported by a connection to literature and the instructional, organizational, and distributed theories composing the conceptual framework.

Limitations and suggestions for future research.

There are limitations to this single case research study. This case only included one elementary school in a small district with less than 15,000 students. The study findings are not transferrable to other schools fitting the site selection criteria set forth in the methodology because readers cannot extrapolate to draw generalizations and conclusions to similar settings with a single case. More importantly this case study was primarily focused on contributing to a larger study of schools around the world as a component of the International School Leaders Development Network Group protocols. Although this research allowed for an in-depth examination of this school's learning culture in the current context, the implications will gain additional validity as a component of the other 15 cases in the ISLDN group.

Despite the limitations, there are suggestions for further research at the local and international level. The study results highlighted the importance of the leader building organizational sensitivity to culture and diversity to build an equitable school (Amerson, G, 2014). One next step would be to examine the characteristics of the leaders at the other two schools in the district fitting the research selection criteria (Cardoza, 2014). As well as racial consciousness, Green and Dantley (2013) explored the notions of White privilege in urban school reform, discuss race, and racism in American schools. Further study of other schools within the same district with a minority leader, may point to a nexus of privilege that requires additional behaviors within their schools.

Examining the parallels and contrasting the gender and race differences among the leaders and staff with Special Place would provide the district with valuable qualitative and quantitative information for their aspiring leader preparation program. Next, it would only be appropriate to conduct the study in a school that was failing for consecutive years before achieving the academic and cultural characteristics mentioned above that foster a learning culture (Queen, Peel, and Shipman, 2013). There was considerable discussion in the second principal interview pertaining to the role that school success plays in driving teams towards additional success. Finally, the goal of the researcher should be to conduct the study in another country with another ISLDN researcher in an effort to evaluate the protocol responses without American or compulsory schooling lenses.

Additionally, this study can help educational leaders acquire the professional and personal characteristics that develop a high-performance culture, which are in addition to credentials and degrees. This may require that educators pursuing leadership positions in high-needs schools may have to chart their own professional development and examine, their own

personal philosophy, and make adjustments in order to acquire the vitality, humility, and trust required for difficult student populations. Leader preparation programs are advised to place leaders in high-needs schools in the performance phase of their academic programming to expose successful styles and practices before assuming the principal position (Brazer and Bauer, 2013). This preparation should also include ideas, strategies, and self-management tips from practicing leaders in that context.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to examine the norms and characteristics of leadership in a high-needs, high-performing school through the voices of a principal, teachers, and other leaders that interacted within the school every day. Several nodes emerged after interviews, focus groups, and an examination of school strategic plans. Those nodes were collapsed to yield three final themes. Those final themes (see Table 5) are (a) High Quality Relationships (b) High Expectations, and (c) School Improvement.

The study provided personalized descriptions by participants implementing school improvement measures for low-income children with the support of a principal with moral fiber, the ability to distribute leadership, and sustain a positive culture (Amerson, 2014; Pillay, 2015). Finally, the findings indicated that the principal himself acknowledges the role his strong relationships play in the support for enhancing and making an impact on fostering a learning culture in his school.

Key Findings.

The participants described the principal's listening skills, ability to delegate, and visibility in all structures of the learning environment as key leadership characteristics. Cobb (2014) concurs that principals provide the core belief system that all students can meet the highest of expectations and they provide model interactions for a positive learning environment. In contrast to prominent literature focused only on instructional leadership, the personal character of the principal, was a pervasive motivator for school improvement work amongst participants (Noddings, 2010). Staff reflected on the warmth of the interview process, personalized mentoring, and intentional relationship building with each individual teacher. He established a welcoming induction process for new faculty. The principal respected the expertise brought to the organization as it related to the level of performance expected at the school. The principal addressed family concerns of the staff with compassion and tangible support efforts. He was often described as modeling self-care and demonstrating that his family was a personal priority so that the staff would follow suit. The study provided details supporting the literature of the principal as a lead learner who shares articles, provides continuity of support to staff and students, and provides a sanctuary from organizational dysfunction.

Teacher-leaders' strong relationships with the principal and one another were a significant internal factor to maintaining professional structures that maintain a learning culture. Smith, Hayes, & Lyons' (2017) research supports the descriptions of teacher leadership exhibited at Special Way Elementary as explicit expectations in which teachers intentionally influenced the instructional practices and growth of their colleagues through a complex social dynamic. In addition, the principal maintained political capital by promoting all successes internally and externally to fuel the dedication to a learning culture through demographic shifts.

The current principal faced community barriers after replacing the successful, incumbent principal before the high-income school experienced a socioeconomic downturn. His appointment was a response to requiring a leader already exhibiting community-based and instructional leadership behaviors (Khalifa, 2012).

The principal also used social capital to promote the professional actions of staff that enhanced the performance culture. The participants collectively considered themselves leaders, regardless of their titles, and key contributors to the success across all grade levels. The study also found that teachers widely accepted one another's unique roles in sustaining high-performance. There was a common understanding that the principal underscored how everyone's contributions varied and relational trust helped them value one another's experiences.

The perspectives shared by the participants in this study were analyzed through theoretical lenses of organizational, distributed, and instructional leadership theory. Moreover, the study converged all three theories that developed through common high expectations, accountability based on integrity, and servitude to students highlighting systems thinking that moves the school forward. The participants held a core belief that Special Way Elementary's leaders supported their professionalism and hired new teachers who believed in the same responsiveness, modeled similar instructional practices, and exhibited intense care for all types of students (DuFour, R., et. al, 2004). Leaders and teacher leaders verbalized effective, collaborative, school improvement strategies referenced in educational leadership as "their way". The study found that this principal's skills utilized a variety of characteristics from the core leadership tenets in his work.

Inspiration, collaboration, and consultation were three of the four core characteristics rated most effective by Yukl (2010) and support the distributed and organizational leadership theories framing this study. A blend of each of the leadership theories, over time, increased the chances of positive outcomes in the context of this high-needs school (Naicker, Chikoko, & Shoko, 2016).

Recommendations.

With the findings of this study in mind, the researcher suggests the following recommendations to encourage leaders to acquire the characteristics and norms represented in this case study. Training and evaluation of principals should include a concerted effort to develop authentic relationships with every staff member in every interaction. This next step goes beyond ethics modules and nebulous moral turpitude clauses. Preparation and selection of leaders should focus on digging deeper into acts of kindness, a history of compassion-centered decisions, and unwavering actions to build a positive culture. The principal has to develop skills relating to building political and social capital that supports autonomous teams and buy-in to achieve high expectations. Pre-service leaders should develop the skills to align the top-down decisions of external initiatives to staff members who have the capacity to have an effect on student achievement upon redelivery through prescribed experiences (Bibbo & d'Erizans, 2014). This type of selectiveness makes addressing site-specific school improvement goals with the professional learning goals of the staff rank above compliance with external factors.

Changing demographics and uncertain international external factors will alter the population of future classrooms. Resources that assist Title I schools in paying for the education of low socio-economic students will likely decrease. The effectiveness of instructional technology and scarcity of candidates will continue to make the personal interaction provided by passionate school leaders questionable. In response, Mardell Maxwell's research (2017) on emotional intelligence as a characteristic of effective leadership among educational administrators and teacher-leaders includes leading with high expectations, collaborative structures, and strong character will continue to be a priceless essential.

Scope for further research.

More extensive research in the future should aim at exploring the role of teacher-leaders in Title I schools and their contributions to sustaining instructional expectations, performance, and mediating external and internal factors that impact relationships. Boylan (2016), Brazer & Bauer (2013), and Zepeda, Bengtson, & Parylo (2012) encourage school leaders that actively portray their own passion for leadership to serve as models to encourage aspirant leaders and grow their own leadership pool. This is important to explore because high-performing principals who turn around a high-needs school or resist declines are often promoted or reassigned to other needed areas. Orphanos & Orr (2014) and Kafele (2015) protest that leadership preparation programs are only effective if they are based on successful current practices and what should be mastered to prepare effective, innovative change agents for high-needs schools.

The researcher completed this study in an effort to enhance high-needs schools' outcomes by outlining the described actions and characteristics of a high-performing principal. This study also contributes to the databases in the field as a part of the International School Leaders Development Network (Berry & Baran, 2013).

The implications for improving the preparation of school leaders to stabilize the often turbulent state of affairs in many urban schools and increase student achievement are also supported by the work of Crow & Whiteman (2016), Garza, Drysdale, Gurr, Jacobson, & Merchant (2014), Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004b). Students, teachers, and communities can benefit from continued research on high-needs, high-performance leaders overcoming the contexts as a result of social-economic and policy issues. The resilience required and personal motivation to sustain school improvement efforts in difficult contexts is derived from a commitment to making a difference as substantiated in the data presented in this research study.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A : INTERVIEW PROTOCOL QUESTIONS FOR PRINCIPALS

Appendix A.1

Interview 1

Research Question 1: Focus on Learning Questions: 8

Research Question 2: Focus on Leadership Questions: 4, 5, 6, 7

Research Question 3: Focus on Context Questions: 1, 2, 3, 9, 10

Facts about the principal (demographics):

Gender, age, education background, education background in leadership and management training, total years as a principal, number of years in current school, number of years as principal of the current school, leadership positions before becoming a principal, experience outside of education.

1. What is the background of this school?
 - probe for the story and history of the school
 - probe for a rich and detailed discussion; emphasis on school improvement, principal longevity, community involvement
2. Describe the current mission and vision of the school.
3. Describe the culture of the school.
4. What were your reasons for applying for the principalship?
 - What were your initial impressions of the school's culture of learning?
 - What were your initial intentions and give examples of what you did in the first few months of your appointment to support and develop the culture of learning?
 - Where do you see the school in five years, ten years?
5. What are your most significant leadership contributions to this school?
6. How do you contribute to a culture of learning in this school?
7. How do you contribute to individual and organizational performance in this school?

- Probe: if not explained, how the principal influences teaching and learning
If only teaching and learning is mentioned, ask if there are other aspects of performance that the principal contributes to.
8. What long-term learning goals have you set for the school?
 - Probe: academic
 - Probe: other (social-emotional)
 9. What challenges does the school face in strengthening a culture of learning?
 - Probe: sustainability or creating a culture for schools that may be at different levels of implementation of change, such as initiating, implementing and sustaining.
 10. How does the internal environment of your school impact learning?
 - Probe: examples of what works and what's missing

*Appendix A.2***Interview 2**

Research Question 1: Focus on Learning Questions: 2, 4,

Research Question 2: Focus on Leadership Questions: 3, 5, 6,

Research Question 3: Focus on Context Questions: 1, 7, 8

1. How does the external environment of your school (parent, community, policy, political and system/central office stakeholders) impact learning?
 - o Probe: examples of what works and what's missing
2. What are examples of internal or external support for learning in your school?
 - o Probe: student, self, staff
3. How is leadership distributed in the school, and what has been your role in this?
 - o Probe: examples of principal development as well as all stakeholders
4. What short-term/long-term goals have you set to build staff capacity in the school?
5. How do you help develop the capacity of self and others in attaining those goals?
6. Please give evidence of progress that you are making toward reaching these goals.
7. How does the internal environment of the school influence leadership structure, practices and processes?
 - o Probe: examples of what works and what's missing
8. How does the external environment of the school (parent, community, policy, political and system/central office stakeholders) influence leadership structure, practices and processes?
 - o Probe: examples of what works and what's missing
9. Some culminating questions: Are there any other ideas that you would like to share that have not been covered?

Appendix B

Interview Protocol Questions for Staff

(Includes Leadership and Teachers other than the Principal or Head of School)

Research Question 1: Focus on Learning Questions: 4, 5, 6

Research Question 2: Focus on Leadership Questions: 7, 8, 9, 10

Research Question 3: Focus on Context Questions: 1, 2, 3, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15

Facts about the staff (demographics):

Gender, age, education background, education background in leadership and management training, total years as a principal, number of years in current school, number of years as principal of the current school, leadership positions before becoming a principal, experience outside of education. How long have you been a teacher at the school? Have you worked in any other schools?

1. What is the background of this school?
 - Variations: What is the story of this school? What is the school's history?
2. Please describe the current mission and vision of the school.
3. Please describe the culture of the school as it pertains to learning.
4. What supports are in place to impact learning in your school?
5. What are examples of internal or external support for learning in your school?
6. How do you contribute to learning in your school?
7. How is leadership distributed in your school?
 - Probe: Who are the leaders in your school?
8. How do you view your role in the school? What support systems exist to nurture and develop your leadership?
9. How do leaders support and sustain the culture of learning in your school?
 - Probe: What else do you feel is needed?
10. How do you feel your school leader models and encourages continuous learning?

11. What challenges/barriers do the school face in strengthening a culture of learning?
 - Probe: sustainability or creating a culture for schools that may be at different levels of implementation
12. How does the internal environment of your school impact learning?
 - Probe: what works/ what's missing
13. How does the external environment of your school (parent, community, policy, political and system/central office stakeholders) impact learning?
 - Probe: what works/ what's missing
14. How does the internal environment of your school influence leadership practices and processes?
 - Probe: what works/ what's missing
15. How does the external environment of your school (parent, community, policy, political and system/central office stakeholders) influence leadership practices and processes?
 - Probe: what works/ what's missing

Some culminating questions: Are there any other ideas that you would like to share that have not been covered?

Appendix C

NVivo 11 Node Word Cloud

