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AN EXPLORATION OF FACTORS THAT FOSTER COLLABORATION BETWEEN

SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADERS AND PRINCIPALS

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By

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Abstract

Education researchers claim collaboration between school district leaders and principals is one of the key factors in successful school districts. Collaboration creates alignment and coherence throughout the organization. Factors that foster this collaboration are limited throughout education literature. This qualitative study explored factors that fostered and inhibited collaboration between school district leaders and principals. A phenomenological study was designed to capture the lived experiences of school district leaders and principals as they participated in collaboration about instructional and organizational decisions. Interviews with eleven school leaders and observations of meetings provided insight into the phenomena that occurs when school district leaders and principals interacted during collaborative decision-making. Study findings revealed factors that foster and inhibit collaboration between school district leaders when making instructional and organizational decisions. In response to the findings in this study, a collaboration model was developed to address systematic changes in the decision-making process. This study provided practical implications to building trust and implementing collaborative structures that create coherence throughout an educational organization.

Keywords: collaboration, school district leaders, principals, collaborative structures, instructional decisions, organizational decisions, district administration

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my greatest champions in life. First, to my husband, Thomas Miles, who encourages my every dream and aspiration. Second, to the ladies who molded me into a woman of tenacity, compassion, and vision: my mother (Karen Stevens), aunts (Cathy Nelson and Susan Eitzen), my late grandmother (Catherine Hunt), and lifelong mentor (Cathy Allie). Thirdly, I dedicate this dissertation to my beloved children and nephews (Katelyn, Isaiah, Santino, Frankie, and Cole). May you always remember that your choices determine your future and define your destiny.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The burden of accountability for school improvement weighs heavily on principals despite their membership in a larger system responsible for student learning (Marzano et al., 2005). Even with extensive research focused on factors that influence school improvement, schools and districts fail to attain proficiency standards on state assessments and perform lower than other advanced countries on standardized tests. In response to the results, policymakers developed legislation that placed the onus of student achievement on teachers and principals (No Child Left Behind, 2001; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).   Education researchers reinforced educator accountability by determining the most influential factor on student learning as the classroom teacher (Hattie, 2008; Marzano, 2003). Marzano (2003) claimed a poor teacher may cause a student to decline academically by up to 1.5 years, while a great teacher may cause up to 1.5 years of academic growth. In addition to the teacher, research contended that the role of the principal contributed to the effectiveness of schools on student learning (Marks & Printy, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005; Tschannen-Moran & Garies, 2014). Principals that established trust with teachers (Tschannen-Moran, & Garies, 2014), fostered safe learning environments (Robinson et al., 2008) and increased collective teacher efficacy (Moolenaar et al., & Daly, 2012) improved student achievement. Although research demonstrated schools are successful when these conditions are present, achievement inconsistencies remain among schools within the same districts.

Over the last decade, education researchers shifted the examination of student learning to include the context of school districts as organizations. Marzano and Waters (2009) examined the relationship between district leadership and student

achievement. Though the influence was indirect, researchers determined that district-level leadership had a significant, positive influence on student achievement when collaboration with principals was present (Marzano & Waters, 2009). When school district leaders and principals collaborated on goal setting, aligning resources, and monitoring achievement, there was an effect size of .25 (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Another study found collaboration on organizational decisions and professional development between school district leaders and principals increased collective leader efficacy and student achievement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Although research is limited, the evidence demonstrated influential factors of school district leadership on student learning especially in relation to the collaboration with principals.

Statement of the Problem

The enactment of Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) required local education agencies to support teaching and learning using evidence-based practices and data-based decisions for school and student improvement. This shift necessitated the demand for school districts to transition from compliance-oriented management to collective leadership focused on instructional practice and student achievement. Historically, district administrations functioned in a managerial and operational capacity by regulating federal, state, and district policies and mandates (Honig, 2008). In a time when legislatures and policymakers criticize public education for lack of student learning and growth, it is imperative for school district leaders and principals to collaborate on the implementation of coherent practices and structures to meet student learning needs throughout the system (Fullan and Quinn, 2016; Marzsno & Waters; 2009; Szczescuil, 2014).

Research on school and district effectiveness in relation to student achievement described specific conditions of leadership. Ni et al. (2017) found collective leadership between school district leaders and principals strengthened the coherence of decisions made about curriculum and instruction, professional learning, and discipline policy. Other studies determined a positive relationship between the collective leadership of school district leaders and principals in student achievement at the school level (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008). On the other hand, when school district leaders fail to collaborate and communicate with principals, initiatives for change and improvement were misaligned and distrust pervaded throughout the system (Lawson et al., 2017).

Leading researchers agreed effective school districts contain the evidence of specific characteristics: setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Leithwood et al., 1999; Leithwood, 2010; Marzano & Waters, 2009). School districts that exhibited these qualities cultivated a culture of collaborative decision-making between school district leaders and principals. The research, however, did not present factors that foster collaborative decision-making between school district leaders and principals.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the factors that foster collaboration between school district leaders and principals when making instructional and organizational decisions. In addition, the study explored inhibitors to collaborative decision-making among principals and school district leaders.

Research Question

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of school district leaders and principals in the context of collaboration on decisions made at the administrative level. Specifically, this study was focused on how school district leaders and principals collaborate on instructional and organizational decisions. The following research questions guide this qualitative study: What factors foster collaboration between school district leaders and principals? What factors inhibit collaboration between school district leaders?

Aim of the Study

Leading education researchers consistently demonstrated the importance of collaboration between school district leaders and principals to align goals and resources (Marzano & Waters, 2009), provide coherence throughout the organizational system (Fullan & Quinn, 2016), and develop the professional capacity of educators (DeFour & Marzano, 2011). School improvement was leveraged when district administration and school buildings functioned holistically as a systematic organization as opposed to a top-down administration with compliance-oriented directives (DeFour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan, 2011). While the research emphasized the importance of collaboration between school district leaders and principals within the organization, the research does not explore the factors that foster or inhibit collaboration between the groups.

The aim of this qualitative study was to make recommendations that create environments and structures conducive for school district leaders and principals to make collaborative instructional and organizational decisions. The significance of this study was intended to guide school district leaders and principals in the development of a

coherent organization through collaborative relationships between school district leaders

and principals.

Definition of Relevant Terms

In education, terms used to describe organizational structures and instructional

practices vary between agencies. The following terms were used operationally within

this study:

Central office: A group of individuals that oversee the management and

operations of instructional and organizational functions for a school district.

District administration: A group of instructional and/or organizational leaders

that execute decisions for the school district as an organization.

District-level leadership: Leadership group that consists of associate

superintendents, assistant superintendents, program directors, coordinators, and

principals.

Instructional leadership: Leadership focused on the instructional and managerial

functions needed to improve teaching and learning (Marks & Printy, 2003).

Instructional decisions: Decisions that address the core practice of instruction:

setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, managing the

instructional program (Leithwood et al., 1999)

Organizational decisions: Decisions that address the operations and management

of the school district: human resources, food services, transportation, student support,

and/or facilities management.

Principal: School leader responsible for the instructional, operational and

managerial leadership of a preschool, elementary, secondary, or alternative school.

Proficiency standards: Learning targets for students established by the federal, state, and/or local government.

School district leader: Member of a school district holding positions that influence districtwide leadership, operations, and supervision, and includes associate and assistant superintendents, directors and assistant directors, and curriculum coordinators.

Student achievement: Proficiency levels associated with assessment data for student learning.

Urban-fringe: Community on the outskirts of the urban core.

Methodology Overview

This study was designed to explore the experiences of school district leaders and principals when making instructional and organizational decisions collaboratively. In order to capture the essence of the experiences (Creswell, 2014), the researcher utilized the phenomenological design method in one mid-sized, metropolitan midwestern school district. Qualitative research was appropriate for this study because it explores the phenomenon that occurs between school district leaders and principals when collaborating on instructional and organizational decisions (Creswell& Poth, 2018).

Participants/Data Sources

The participants were selected using purposeful sampling, which assisted the researcher in exploring the experiences of school district leaders and principals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants included school district leaders (two associate superintendents, one assistant superintendent, and two directors) and principals. Each of the participants were employed in one midwestern school district for a minimum of five years. The participants were involved in instructional and organizational decisions that

influenced one of the following categories: setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program.

Data collection included interviews, observations, field notes, and organizational documents. Interviews were conducted in the participants' natural setting using a semi-structured protocol. The interview protocol contained instructions for the interviewer to follow standard procedures, two general information questions, and eight questions about collaboration between school district leaders and principals in regards to instructional and organizational decisions. Observations were recorded using field notes (Creswell, 2014). Social environment details were part of the observations, which included seating configurations, utilized technology, and room décor. Participants were observed in their natural setting and included the following activities: instructional leadership meeting with school district leaders, secondary principals meeting, elementary principals meeting, and professional learning meeting. Organization documents reviewed in data collection were meeting agendas and district instructional goals.

Analysis of the data was a continuous cycle throughout the collection process. As interviews were completed, the recordings were uploaded and transcribed using Rev.com. Each transcript was printed and read carefully for impressions. General themes were written in the margins of the transcripts, field notes, and organizational documents. Reflections about each interview, observation, and organizational document were maintained in a journal. In the first cycle of coding, transcripts were uploaded into MAXQDA and *in vivo* codes and phrases were identified (Saladana, 2008). Codes were then categorized into themes in the second cycle of coding. Finally, a composite description was written to capture the "essence" of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014).

Delimitations, Limitations, and Personal Biases

Delimitations delineate the limits used to narrow the scope of this qualitative study (Roberts, 2010). The time frame of the study was May 2019 through September 2019. The location of the study was a low-socioeconomic, urban-fringe school district in one mid-sized, metropolitan midwestern school district. The sample of the study was limited to school district leaders (associate superintendents, assistant superintendents, program directors, and district coordinators) and school principals in this district. Teachers and parents were excluded from the sample as this study focused on the collaborative experiences of district-level leadership. Finally, direct observations were bound to meetings and interactions among leaders that make decisions about setting direction, developing people, solving problems, and modifying practice.

This phenomenological study presented three primary limitations. The first limitation was the use of interviews as a data collection instrument. Experiences and perspectives were filtered through the viewpoints of the participants. The researcher may have contained potential biases about the information and responses presented in the interview (Creswell, 2014). The second limitation was the use of direct observation as a data collection tool. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), participant observations risk intrusion of the natural social environment. Participants may manipulate or mislead the experience by providing incomplete, inaccurate, or biased information. Third, the review of organizational documents was limited to agendas, meeting notes, and curriculum goals available during the observations of activities.

Due to the role of the researcher in qualitative research, it was essential to identify personal biases (Creswell, 2014). At the time of study, the researcher was a principal in

the school district from which the participants were solicited. Perceptions of school

district and collaborative decision-making were shaped by the researcher's personal

experiences. The researcher's tenure as an elementary principal in the school

district was seven years at the time of the study. Prior to this leadership position, the

researcher taught in the school district for five years. Awareness and knowledge of the

context in the school district enhanced the researcher's understanding of the benefits and

challenges present when school district leaders and principals collaborate on

instructional and organizational decisions.

In order to prevent misleading data and lessen the potential for bias, the collection

process contained information from multiple data sources: interviews, observations, field

notes, and organizational documents (Hutchison, 1986). Triangulation allowed the

researcher to confirm themes through the convergence of sources (Creswell, 2014). Data

triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing were employed as validation

strategies. Personal bias was guarded against through bracketing personal assumptions

(Creswell, 2014). A journal was maintained throughout the study to identify and reflect

on assumptions and/or personal biases as they arose during the study.

Reflections of the Scholar-Practitioner

"Go forth and set the world on fire." – St. Ignatius of Loyala

These words by St. Ignatius resonated in my heart as I looked upon the flame

sculpture on the Creighton University campus for the first time. It was as if God uttered

those words to me, not the saint who blazed a trail of Christ's passion, love, and healing

centuries prior to my heart igniting for justice and goodness in the world. I knew my

dissertation topic might be a work that catapulted education into a dynamic institution

that embraced change for the entire learning community. That burning flame was how the journey started.

As I considered topics of study, my flame slowly dwindled into small embers as I realized the problem that impeded the growth of staff, students, and my leadership was the ever present change strategy to address the declining student achievement in my school district. Even though the data at my school continued to improve, my staff and I were required to yield to the direction of the district and modify our strategies for improvement. There was a sense of defeat as teachers and I tried to integrate the best of the district demands into the collaborative path we chose for our community. We sacrificed innovation and creativity in lesson planning, learning activities, and authentic assessment to accommodate the external pressures of the school district.

Feeling the conflict between the two dynamics, I concurred that the problem was a lack of collaboration between school district leaders and principals. Both the school district and buildings were making decisions based on research-based strategies proven to turn around schools and inspire learning. Strategies for success were evident, however, the lack of vertical alignment and horizontal coherence caused "initiative fatigue" making it difficult to focus (Reeves, 2011, p.1). Even when I tried to buffer the external demands, teachers felt an obligation to the larger organization to integrate strategies.

As I started my dissertation, I struggled with the notion that the topic was not addressing a matter of social justice. However, I was unable to ignore the problem. The embers sparked every time a new initiative was shared by a school district leader, or teachers received a conflicting directive from curriculum coordinators. As a teacher, I was part of a turnaround school. I experienced the power of collaboration and collective

efficacy. I embraced Covey's Sixth Habit of synergy, the sum is better than all its parts.

I wanted my staff and my district colleagues to experience the same feelings of efficacy.

This is what's best for students: the belief that together we can overcome factors such as

socio-economic status, achievement gaps, and learning deficiencies.

As I started my literature review, a common theme began to emerge. School

districts that failed to meet proficiency standards were often members of an urban top-

down organization. There was a tremendous amount of external pressure from the school

districts, unions, and states to reform the educational system. School districts that

collaboratively focused their resources into one or two efforts were making a difference

in the lives of students. The flame was reignited into a blaze.

My hope, my desire is to shed light on the impact collaboration might have on

school districts. It feels like common sense. On the surface, building a culture of

collaboration appears too simplistic. It is only simple if members of the educational

organization collaborates by going through the motions. A culture of collaboration

requires the development of trust, energy to develop structures, and time to engage in the

process. Coherent school districts have the sphere of influence to transform the lives of

students.

Summary

The current chapter was an introduction to the topic and a brief overview of the

important role that collaboration between school district leadership and principals can

play in providing effective direction for student learning. In addition, included in this

section were the purpose of the study, research questions, aim of the study, overview of

methodology and data analysis, and reflections of the researcher. Chapter Two includes a

brief history of the organizational structure of school districts and the functions of

instructional leadership at the district administration level.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the enactment of No Child Left Behind (2001), researchers have dissected school leadership, curriculum, and instruction to determine how to improve student learning and close the achievement gap between majority and minority groups. States and school districts established policies to guide the development of accountability measures and learning standards to emphasize continued growth in reading and mathematics achievement (Honig & Rainey, 2014; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). In response to accountability measures, principals and teachers implemented improvement goals in professional development, curriculum, and instruction to address the strengths and weaknesses revealed through standardized achievement data (Durand et. al, 2016; Farrell, 2015). Despite the extensive research of effective schools and school leadership, schools continued to struggle to meet the proficiency standards in achievement on state assessments.

Educational leadership research primarily focused on the role of principals and the school as a unit of study until sanctions from No Child Left Behind (2001) required school districts to intervene with underachieving schools (Finnigan & Day, 2010). As the education system continued to struggle, education researchers started to examine how district-level administration influenced school factors and student achievement (Honig, 2008; Leithwood & Janzti, 2008; Marzano & Waters, 2009). Researchers found support from school district administration was critical to the success of reform in schools (Honig & Rainey, 2014; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Leithwood & Mascall, 2011; Ni et al., 2017). This transition in the educational landscape required a collaborative approach between school district leaders and principals to solve problems and implement strategies

in lieu of top down directives from central office to address achievement concerns (Anderson et al., 2010; Durand et al., 2016; Finnigan & Day, 2010; Fullan, 2005; Rusch, 2005).

The following literature review presents findings on the evolutionary role of school districts, organizational and educational collaboration, and core practices of shared instructional leadership. The literature review presents connections between transformational leadership, shared instructional leadership, and efficacious beliefs. Finally, following the review of collaboration literature, information about the professional setting is reviewed to provide context for the real-world problem.

The Evolutionary Role of School Districts

With the implementation of the Elementary and Secondary School Act of 1965, local education agencies were entrusted with the execution of mandates and policies from federal, state, and local governments. District administrators primarily fulfilled the organizational functions of human resources, fiscal budgets, facility operations, and transportation (Honig, 2012; O'Day 2002; Rusch, 2005), while schools were entrusted with the teaching standards and student achievement (Leithwood et al., 1999; Lezotte, 2001; Marzano, 2003; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Research and practice supported the trend of site-based management at the school building level claiming that individual schools were capable of improving student achievement independent of larger system (Lezotte, 2001; Lezotte, 2011; Weick, 1976).

In 1966, the National Center for Educational Statistics released *Equality of Educational Opportunity* also known as the Coleman Report, which triggered the

examination of schools as a unit of study. Coleman et al. (1966) measured the

effectiveness of schools on students' achievement specifically in terms of the racial or

ethnic background and regions within the United States. The Coleman Report (1966)

determined several significant conclusions that served as an impetus for educational

change for several decades. First, Coleman et al. (1966) determined the motivation to

graduate from high school was similar between white and black students. This desire

was greatest in the southern region of the United States for both groups. Second, white

students performed higher on the standardized achievement tests than minorities

beginning in first grade. As students continued throughout the educational system, the

achievement gap increased between the two groups. Third, Coleman et al. (1966)

concluded the greatest factor in student achievement was not the school but the family

background of the student. Further, white schools and minority schools did not differ in

their effectiveness on student achievement. The claim that schools were not a

determinate of student achievement launched the examination of influential factors on

education for the next 50 years (Lezotte, 2001).

School Districts as Loosely-Coupled Organizations

Initially, education research focused on factors of success in individual schools.

In response to the Coleman Report's (1966) claim that schools were ineffective

determinants of student achievement, researchers studied the characteristics of high-

performing schools in contrast to low-performing schools in large urban areas

(Brookover et al., 1978; Edmond, 1979, Weber, 1971). Trends emerged from the high-

performing schools that provided a foundation for effective schools and served as criteria

for school improvement for the next two decades (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Lezotte,

2011). Edmond (1979) initially concluded schools contained four key factors of

effectiveness: principal leadership focused on instruction and learning, teacher beliefs

that all students are capable of meeting high expectations, a safe and positive learning

environment, and continuous monitoring of student progress. Case studies involving

high-performing urban schools with one or more of these factors demonstrated increased

student achievement despite low socio-economic factors and neighborhood demographics

(Brookover et al., 1978; Edmond, 1979; New York State Office Review, 1974; Weber,

1971). As school reform research progressed throughout the next two decades, education

researcher Lezotte (2011) built on the original correlates established by Edmond (1979).

The characteristics were refined and developed into seven correlates of effective schools:

instructional leadership, clear and focused mission, safe and orderly environment, climate

of high expectations, frequent monitoring of student progress, positive home-school

relations, and opportunity to learn and student time on task (Lezotte, 2011).

Effective schools research assumed schools were the primary unit of study

independent of the school district (Lezotte, 2001; Lezotte, 2011). This assumption was

confirmed as education researchers examined the actions of teachers (Goddard et al.,

2000; Marzano, 2003; Ross et al., 2004), effectiveness of principals as instructional

leaders (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Marks & Printy, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005), and focus

on student achievement (Hattie, 2008; Marzano, 2003; Burch & Spillane, 2003). Hattie

(2008) and Marzano (2003) concluded that the most influential factor in student

achievement was the teacher. Based on the effectiveness of a teacher, a student may

increase or decrease in academic achievement up to 1.5 years (Marzano, 2003). The

development of collective efficacy among teachers increased student achievement despite

low-socioeconomics (Goddard et al., 2000; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). Principals

that embodied shared instructional and transformational leadership qualities were more

effective with establishing a clear mission, collaborating with teachers, and monitoring

student progress (Marks & Printy, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005; Robinson et al., 2008).

Teachers and principals collaboratively engaged in data-based decisions and professional

learning to ensure student growth in reading, mathematics, and other state standards

(DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Marzano, 2003). Even though there was extensive research

on the factors that improved success, inconsistency in student achievement continued to

prevail throughout school districts.

Prior to the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), school districts were described as

loosely-coupled organizations (Orton & Weick, 1990; Weick, 1976). Loosely-coupled

organizations implied that different schools, departments, and positions within the school

district were connected; but they remained autonomous in the larger system (Weick,

1976). Loose-coupling allowed for adaptations and modifications to some units while

others remained stable or stagnate (Weick, 1976). Based on this organizational structure,

schools were permitted the autonomy to implement effective schools research to improve

principal leadership, teacher effectiveness, and positive climate independent of the school

district (Edmond, 1979; Lezotte, 2001). The loosely-coupled model allowed district

offices to function primarily as a compliance-oriented regulator of policy and mandates

(Honig, 2009), while schools implemented initiatives for improvement. School district

leaders focused on the evaluation of programs, support in data interpretation, feedback on

student progress, and improvement in achievement data using assessments (Massell,

2000).

The loosely-coupled organizational structure presented systematic problems for school districts during this time of school reform. First, site-based management at schools posed conflicts in roles and responsibilities between school boards, district offices, and individual schools (Wyman, 2000). Even though schools were responsible for developing and implementing improvement plans, school boards approved and school districts supported the reform initiatives. Conflict arose as goals and priorities of the multi-leveled system were misaligned and prevented full implementation of reform efforts (Chrispeels et al., 2008; Wyman, 2000). Second, the loosely-coupled structure of school districts promoted potential rivalries between high- and low-performing schools within the same system. Rusch (2005) described how school district leaders failed to acknowledge the accomplishments and growth of high-performing schools within the organization for fear of isolating the lower-performing schools. As a result, school district leaders avoided dialogue with and between school leaders causing feelings of isolation and frustration among the successful schools (Rusch, 2005). Thirdly, school districts were less likely to buffer new information and initiatives for schools. The inability to filter through knowledge and resources caused lack of focus for some schools and reliance on traditional strategies for veteran teachers (O'Day, 2002). School districts operated within this context until the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) required interventions for schools that received sanctions for failure to meet performance expectations (Burch & Spillane, 2003; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008).

School District as a Centralized Organization

The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) was designed to improve student learning and close the achievement gap between the majority and minorities in reading and

mathematics. No Child Left Behind policymakers assumed that schools were equipped

with the resources and methods needed to close the achievement gap (Daly & Finnigan,

2010). As the number of sanctioned schools increased, school districts adopted a more

centralized role in education to influence improvement in student achievement (Adams &

Miskell, 2016; Burch & Spillane, 2003; DeBoer, 2012).

The centralization of educational organizations allowed school districts to address

school reform with systemwide initiatives and supports (Honig, 2009; Finnigan & Day,

2010; Kochanek & Clifford, 2014). The school district dictated the policies and

procedures for reform throughout the system (Davis et al., 2012). Modification to

operations allowed school district leaders to communicate and distribute information

more effectively and efficiently (Davis et al., 2012; Honig, 2009), while providing

systematic support in the areas of evidence-based decisions, curriculum alignment,

professional development, and targeted interventions (Anderson et al., 2010; Daly &

Finnigan, 2010; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012).

The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) required school districts to make evidence-

based decisions using scientifically-based research and achievement data shifting school

districts into a centralized, supportive role (Anderson at el., 2010; Honig &

Venkateswaran, 2012). Researchers found district administration highly influenced the

data used in schools to establish goals and monitor student progress (Honig &

Venkateswaran, 2012; Farrell, 2015).   District administrators had quick access to reports

for principals and teachers to disaggregate and analyze statewide standardized tests

(Farrell, 2015). Using the standardized data, school district leaders assisted principals and

teachers with interpretation of data and identification of targeted interventions for

remedial instruction (Farrell, 2015; O'Day, 2002; Massell, 2000). With the guidance of district administration, schools developed improvement plans and linked accountability measures to district goals (Anderson at el., 2010; Farrell, 2015; O'Day, 2002).

District administration ensured curriculum and instruction aligned throughout the system to state standards and standardized assessments (Daly& Finnigan, 2010; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). Teachers and principals with the assistance of district administrators developed pacing guides, benchmarks, and end-of-the-year assessments to monitor student achievement (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Farrell, 2015). Low-performing schools established accountability measures for district administrators to monitor progress and provide continuous instructional support (Anderson et al., 2010).

Evidence-based decisions also applied to the development of coherent professional learning throughout the organizational system (Anderson at el., 2010; Fullan, 2005). District administrators utilized achievement data to address strengths and weaknesses in instructional practices and provided human or resource capital based on the evidence (Chrispeels et al., 2008; Szczesiul, 2014). School district leaders organized coherent professional development programs to target underperforming students, and provided ongoing support for teachers through the use of instructional coaches (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010).

Although the centralization of school districts created supportive systems for school reforms, this organizational structure exposed barriers in communication, rigidity, and decision-making. In a centralized system, information flowed unidirectionally from the top down with the principal as the liaison (O'Day, 2002; Daly & Finnigan, 2010).

Weak social ties between district administrators and school personnel limited

opportunities for dialogue about innovation and problem-solving perpetuating the

isolation of schools (Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Rusch, 2005; O'Day, 2002). District

administrators experienced frustration with teachers failing to fully implement district

initiatives, while teachers felt stifled by the district's rigid expectation to focus instruction

on standardized test data as opposed to creativity and good instruction (Johnson &

Chrispeels, 2010; Farrell, 2015). Data-based decisions determined by district

administrators contributed to the top-down relationship and limited the integration of new

initiatives into current systems (O'Day, 2002; Farrell, 2015). To maintain efficiency and

effectiveness, school district leaders resisted establishing collaborative structures and

resisted changing patterns in decision-making (Daly et al., 2011; Rusch, 2005; Farrell,

2015).

In 2015, the Obama administration reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary

Schools Act of 1965 as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. ESSA (2015)

removed the sanctions for underperforming schools, and encouraged local education

agencies to establish performance measures to meet state's accountability systems. In

order to accomplish this, leading education researchers identified factors that established

characteristics for coherent school districts (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Marzano & Waters,

2009; Schmocker, 2016).

School District as Coherent Organizations

In current educational research, the influence of district-level administration on

student achievement was equivalent to the influence of principals on student achievement

(Marzano & Waters, 2009). Education researchers promoted a tight-loose balance as opposed to loosely-coupled or centralized organizational structure (Adams & Miskell, 2016; Marzano & Waters, 2009). In the tight-loose structure, school districts determined the organizational focus by collaboratively setting the direction, aligning instruction and curriculum, monitoring student achievement, and building capacity with coherence throughout the system (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2016; Marzano & Waters, 2009). Within the larger context, schools tightly aligned their priorities to the school district, but differentiated the execution of the organizational focus to meet the diverse learning needs of students (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2016; Marzano & Waters, 2009).

Fullan and Quinn (2016) defined coherence as "a shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work in the minds and actions individually and especially collectively" (p.16). Collaboration between school district leaders and principals was a reoccurring factor in the development of coherent organizations (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2016; Lawson, 2004; Leithwood & Azah, 2017; Marzano & Waters, 2009). Although the literature explicitly claimed collaborative decision-making between the district and school levels was critical, there was limited research on factors that foster collaboration between school district leaders and principals.

Collaboration

Collaboration literature varied in definitions, but consistently described collaboration as a formal structure involving diverse stakeholders that work toward a

common goal or purpose (Bronstein, 2003; Lawson, 2004; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992;

Thomson et al., 2007). Mattessich and Monsey (1992) defined collaboration as "a

mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more

organizations to achieve a common goal" (p.11). Lawson (2004) broadened this

definition and conceptualized collaboration as "interdependent, autonomous stakeholders

with their respective competency domains mobilize resources, and both harmonize and

synchronize their operations to solve shared problems, meet common needs, capitalize on

important opportunities, and obtain prized benefits" (p.228). In addition to the

definitions, there were common characteristics of collaboration.

In the organizational context, collaboration research gained momentum in the

1990s as organizations, governments, and communities worked together to solve complex

problems in society (Olson & Simerson, 2015). Researchers demonstrated that

collaboration was a process that required a shared commitment to time and energy to

accomplish a task, develop a new project, or determine the best outcomes (Hord, 1986;

Lawson, 2004) The following section reviews organizational research on characteristics

and inhibitors of collaboration.

Characteristics of Collaboration

Relationship-oriented

Throughout the research literature, relationships based on trust, reciprocity, and

interdependence were critical for successful collaboration. Researchers identified trust as

a precursor for collaboration, and a key factor in the effective operation of an

organization (Dirks & Finnigan, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2001; Zand, 1972). There

were many definitions of trust, however, Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) defined trust as "an individual's or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, and open" (p.189). High trust levels promoted solving problems, taking risks, and engaging in conflict (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Zand, 1979). Trust also minimized risk in sharing ideas and resources (Lawson, 2004).

Reciprocity referred to the mutuality between members of collaboration (Thomson et al., 2007). Individuals represented different interests, tensions, positions, experiences, and organizations; however, it was essential to develop mutual respect (Lawson, 2004; Thomson et al., 2007). Treating others with fairness and justice superseded positions of power or levels of supervision (Lawson, 2004). Taking time to understand the cultural context and how others operate developed reciprocity (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992).

Interdependence in collaboration implied individuals maintained autonomy of their interests and beliefs, but depended on others to know roles, fulfill responsibilities, and accomplish tasks (Bronstein, 2003; Lawson, 2004; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Informal and formal interaction between members of the group established interdependence over time (Bronstein, 2003; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Promoting positive social interactions between members also increased willingness for others to engage in interdependent relationships (Kramer & Crespy, 2011).

Collective Ownership

Collective ownership implied members of the collaboration shared the vision, responsibilities, resources, goals, and outcomes (Bronstein, 2003; Hord, 1986; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Collaboration required a clearly developed vision and goals through consensus of the group (Lawson, 2004; Psencik & Brown, 2018). Each member willingly owned successes and failures throughout the process (Bronstein, 2003). Solving problems and resolving issues included all members of the collaboration (Lawson, 2004; Mattessich & Mattessich, 1992). Collective ownership resulted in increased implementation of the change or initiative with greater commitment to the goals (Tschannen-Moran, 2001).

Communication

Establishing a system for communication was imperative throughout collaboration literature (Bronstein, 2003; Gilley et al., 2009; Lawson, 2004; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Thomson et al., 2007). Mattessich & Monsey (1992) recommended establishing formal and informal tools for information flow and group cohesion. Written communication was reliable for information flow, but development of networks was vital for group cohesion and personal ties (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Communication strategies needed to reflect the diversity of the group and multiple levels (Hord, 1986; Lawson, 2004). Gilley et al. (2009) suggested communication tools might integrate coaching, information sharing, and feedback to establish continuity and growth within the group. In addition, Lawson (2004) proposed the development of conflict resolution structures to mediate potential problems and issues among members of the group.

Reflection

Researchers encouraged the use of reflection throughout the collaboration process. Protocols and self-assessment for reflection were developed to strengthen the process (Bronstein, 2003). Reflection processes that monitored flexibility, adaptability, and success were critical to measure the impact of collaboration (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Psencik & Brown, 2018). Self-assessments allowed participants to monitor contributions, attitudes, and motivations (Psencik & Brown, 2018; Szczesiul, 2014). Researchers claimed participants need to monitor negativity and barriers in the environment to prevent an unsuccessful experience or outcome (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Lastly, reflection created opportunities to consider the perspectives of others to modify future decision-making and performance (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2008).

Inhibitors of Collaboration

Collaboration literature also identified several inhibitors to the process. First, a lack of previous experiences hindered collaboration as stakeholders failed to understand the time, energy, and structure needed for success (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). When stakeholders do not understand the commitment to the process, trust and interdependence were not established and impeded the outcome (Tschannen-Moran, 2001). Competitiveness within the environment was detrimental to collaboration (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Lawson (2004) explained stakeholders enter into collaboration with their own intentions or personal agendas, but those should become secondary to the collective work of the group. Rigidity and rules encumbered collaboration. With the establishment of collaboration and communication tools, there was a risk of adhering to the minutia of

the experience versus engaging in the process (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Finally, the leaders' involvement hindered collaboration. Some leaders failed to relinquish control, or dismissed input from others (Kramer & Crespy, 2011). In other collaboration situations, there was little or no change based on the collaborative decision-making process (Tschannen-Moran, 2001). Despite these potential inhibitors, collaboration remained an effective strategy to implement new ideas, solve complex problems, and modify existing initiatives.

Collaboration, Leadership, and Efficacious Beliefs in Education

Literature in education primarily focused on the behaviors and benefits of collaboration in the school setting. Collaboration entered into the educational context as a teacher empowerment tool to improve instruction and increase shared decision-making (Marks & Louis, 1997). Ideally, collaboration motivated teachers to abandon the isolation of the classroom, and integrate into the collective decision-making of the school community (Dufour et al., 2005). At the leadership levels of the school district, collaboration was evident in shared instructional leadership behaviors and decision-making between school district leaders and principals. The following section presents the literature on teacher, principal, and district collaboration; then synthesizes shared instructional leadership and collaborative decision-making between school district leaders and principals with collective efficacious beliefs.

Teacher Collaboration

Teacher collaboration ranged from informal conversations about classroom problems and issues to structured meetings for data analysis and instructional

modifications. Collaboration afforded teachers with the opportunity to discuss challenges

and adapt their instructional practice (Tschannen-Moran, 2001). Dialogue through the

collaboration process provided teachers with the chance to learn the strengths and

expertise of their colleagues (Chrispeels et al., 2008). As relationships developed trust,

teachers engaged in informal collaborative conversations about behavior or instruction in

informal settings like the hallways and teachers' lounge (Burch & Spillane, 2003). These

collaborative conversations resulted in changes to improve a lesson or modify undesired

student behaviors (Hallam et al., 2015).

The demands of evidence-based decision-making transitioned teacher

collaboration into a more formalized structure. Teachers engaged in Professional

Learning Communities (PLC) as a reform initiative to analyze data, examine practice,

improve instruction, and increase student achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Trust

and openness were critical to collaboration in schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002;

Tschannen-Moran, 2001). The processes required vulnerability as teachers examined

assessments, celebrated successes, and evaluated weaknesses (Hallam et al., 2015).

Collaboration also encouraged teachers to share new ideas, express different perspectives,

and take risks with their colleagues (Hallam et al., 2015; Supovitz & Tognatta, 2013).

When teachers collaboratively participated in school reform, implementation was

integrated producing more efficient results (Supovitz & Tognata, 2013).

Teacher Collaboration and Collective Efficacy

Benefits of collaboration about teaching and learning resulted in improved student

achievement and increased collective teacher efficacy (Goddard et al., 2015; Moolenaar

et al., 2012; Ross et al., 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). Bandura (1993) defined teacher collective efficacy as the ability of the whole group to promote academic learning. Collective teacher efficacy was described as one of the most powerful influences in student achievement.   Researchers found that schools with high collective teacher efficacy continually increased reading and math achievement on state standardized assessments (Goddard, 2001; Goddard et al., 2000; Tschannen-Moran, & Barr, 2004).

Teacher collective efficacy transcended the impact of socio-economic status, ethnicity and race (Goddard, 2001). Several research studies examined the predictors and consequences of collective teacher efficacy. In elementary schools, collective teacher efficacy was the single construct that united the concepts of group competence and task analysis (Goddard et al., 2000). When researchers compared the variance between schools on state assessments, previous successes in reading and math achievement was a predictor of collective teacher efficacy (Goddard, 2001; Ross et al., 2004). Collaborative school processes contributed to collective teacher efficacy by influencing teacher cognition through mastery experiences, providing vicarious experiences through peer-observations, encouraging social persuasion using peer coaching and mentoring, and protecting teachers from dysfunctional effect of negative emotional states (Ross et al., 2004). Collective teacher efficacy positively related to trust among colleagues, parents and students, while negatively relating to teacher powerlessness (Goddard et al., 2000; Tschannen-Moran & Bar, 2004).

Principal Collaboration, Instructional Leadership, and Efficacious Beliefs

The primary functions of principal collaboration with teachers were shared instructional leadership decision-making about the vision of the school, adapting instructional practice, developing common expectations, and monitoring student progress (DuFour & Marzano, 2009; Goddard et al., 2015; Leithwood et al., 1999; Marzano et al., 2005). Principals with high-social awareness encouraged collaboration with their openness to delegate work and communicate information (Pierce, 2014). Openness to shared decision-making demonstrated the trust in teachers' knowledge and expertise (Tschannen-Moran, 2001). Goddard at al. (2015) found strong instructional leadership from the principal increased teacher collaboration about improving instruction and monitoring progress. Principals participated in collaboration with teachers to provide guidance on instructional decisions and feedback about student progress (Blase & Blasé, 2000; Goddard et al., 2015; Hallam et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2008).

Instructional leadership referred to the instructional and managerial functions needed to improve teaching and learning (Marks & Printy, 2003). Researchers determined principals that integrated transformational and shared instructional leadership produced school conditions that promoted teacher collaboration and student learning (Marks & Printy, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2001). Conditions such as shared decision-making and collaborative instructional goals provided opportunities for the development of collective teacher efficacy through mastery experiences, group competence and task analysis (Goddard, 2001; Goddard et al., 2000; Marks & Printy, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Schools with high collective efficacious beliefs experienced higher achievement

scores despite the demographic factors such as race, ethnicity or socioeconomics (Goddard, 2001).

Principals participated in collaboration with other principals as professional learning. As principals engaged in collaborative conversations with other principals, changes in practice and outcomes occurred (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Tschannen-Moran, 2001). Principal collaboration also provided opportunities to share ideas that worked in other schools and brainstorm solutions to problems at the leadership level (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). Collaboration with principals throughout the district enabled vertical and horizontal alignment in shared language, norms, and skills (Lawson, 2004; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Psencik & Brown, 2018).

School District Collaboration

Collaboration literature at the district level of an educational organization was limited. The literature, however, presented consistent information about the influence of collaboration on the alignment and coherence throughout the organization. Setting collaborative goals with principals created alignment between school and district focuses (Szczesiul, 2014). When school district leaders and school leadership participated in a three-level collaborative structure to implement reform, there was greater coherence in progress toward goals and data collection monitoring (Leithwood & Azah, 2017). Organizational literature supported the conclusions about coherence and alignment. Lawson (2004) claimed collaboration enabled vertical and horizontal alignment creating more coherent systems and effective communication. Another organizational researcher

found collaboration increased the ability for frontline workers to meet standards and

produce results (Longenecker & Neubert, 2000).

Shared Instructional Leadership

In the last decade, researchers defined school districts as change agents in the

educational landscape (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Successful school district administrations

contributed more to the student learning than as a keeper of the data, support in

professional development, and alignment of instruction. Successful school districts

worked collaboratively with principals and school leadership teams to ensure coherence

throughout the system (Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Leithwood et

al., 1999; Marzano & Waters, 2009). Characteristics of these school districts included

collaborative decision-making in the core practices of instructional leadership: setting the

direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the

instructional program. The results of this collaborative work led to increased student

achievement and collective efficacious beliefs.

Setting Direction. Setting direction involved activities that move the organization

in a specified direction by establishing shared beliefs and collaborative goals (Leithwood

& Seashore-Louis, 2012; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Robinson et al., 2008). Leithwood

(2010) determined high-performing school districts established shared beliefs and goals

based on student achievement and school improvement. The shared beliefs and core

values of high-performing school districts were upheld throughout the system from the

top of the organization to the teachers in the classroom (Leithwood, 2010). The

development of collaborative, concise goals allowed organizations to make data-based

decisions and focus improvement strategies to meet performance measures (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Marzano & Waters, 2008).

Goal setting has an indirect, but educationally significant effect on student achievement (Robinson et al., 2008). Goal-setting provided a foundation for collaborative work between school district leaders, principals, and teachers to meet the learning needs of students and refine instructional practices of teachers (Chrispeels et al., 2008). When collaboratively determined, goals provided direction for school district leaders to allocate resources appropriately (Marzano & Waters, 2009), and buffered external distractors for principals and teachers (Honig, 2008). In addition, when school district leaders clearly articulated goals through a collaborative process with principals and teachers, coherence was evident throughout the system as district priorities were in alignment with school goals (Szczesiul, 2014).

Education researchers asserted that setting direction was more than setting a goal for improvement. Setting direction included limiting initiatives and focusing change strategy throughout the district (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Reeves, 2011; Schmoker, 2016). According to Reeves (2011), principals and teachers experienced "initiative fatigue" from the numerous programs and interventions implemented by school districts to improve student achievement (p.1). School district leaders were responsible for removing these barriers for educators to focus on specific targets that produced the best results in student learning (Reeves, 2011). Schmocker (2016) confirmed this finding with examples of districts that focused on one of three areas: curriculum, literacy, or instruction. Each district closed the achievement gap and increased student results by setting, clarifying, and systematically monitoring the direction. In addition to focusing the goals and

communicating the direction, Fullan and Quinn (2016) declared setting direction included

the collaborative development of change strategy based on an organic process of

innovative diffusion and continuous learning.

     Developing People. Developing people using systematic, evidence-based

professional development was emphasized throughout educational research. This core

practice encompassed the actions taken to build the capacity of leaders and teachers by

developing skills in target areas (Fullan, 2005), modeling desired behaviors (Honig,

2008), and providing feedback for improvement (Robinson et al., 2008). Fullan (2011)

described developing people as "any strategy that increases the collective effectiveness of

a group to raise the bar and close the gap of student learning" (p.33).

     Transformational leadership components, specifically individualized support and

intellectual stimulation, were found critical to the growth of educators (Leithwood &

Seashore-Louis, 2012). Teachers increased their commitment to the organization and

demonstrated greater willingness to take risks when principals integrated

transformational and instructional leadership (Marks & Printy, 2003). Individualized

support suggested school district leaders and principals understood the strengths and

needs of teachers and students in the learning community (Leithwood et al., 1999).

School district leaders and principals developed an understanding of how to support as

they listened and collaborated with various stakeholders (Leithwood et al., 1999).

Intellectual stimulation implied school district leaders and principals recognized how to

motivate educators intrinsically and develop competency skills needed to achieve

targeted goals for school improvement (Fullan, 2005). Robinson et al. (2008) emphasized

the critical role of a leader as a learner when motivating teachers to engage in

professional learning. This factor encouraged teachers to actively participate and implement learning into instructional practice.

The core practice of developing people aligned with the assistance relationship structures, modeling and joint work, in socio-cultural theory (Honig, 2008). School district leaders deepen levels of principal participation by modeling desired behaviors and providing feedback for improvement (Honig, 2008; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Modeling required dialogue with participants to reflect on practices and expand competencies in the area of leadership and instruction (Honig, 2008). When school district leaders acted as facilitators and engaged principals in joint work, both parties developed a sense of collective responsibility in a common endeavor. Joint work activities developed the learning capacity of both school district leaders and principals as they mutually engaged (Honig, 2008; Honig & Rainey, 2014).

The alignment of developing people and setting direction provided school district leaders with the ability to embed learning on the job, monitor progress toward improvement, and support educators' implementation of resources (Leithwood & Azah, 2017; Leithwood et al., 1999; Marzano & Waters, 2009). Marzano and Waters (2009) described job embedded professional development as action research. In this learning, educators collaboratively identified problems in their practice and instruction (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Teachers observed and provided feedback, while administrators protected the time needed to observe and engage in dialogue about the experience (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Professional development was developed based on research and student achievement data and aligned with district goals.

Redesigning the Organization. Redesigning the organization referred to engaging in activities that transform the culture and organization conditions of the district (Leithwood et al., 1999). One of the primary ways to redesign the organization was to develop a culture of collaboration (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Leithwood et al., 1999). Collaborative cultures removed the sense of isolation between teachers, schools, and districts (Leithwood & Azah, 2017), and created a greater sense of purpose to stakeholders (Tschannen-Moran, 2001).

An organizational culture of collaboration encouraged participation in school district decisions (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Readiness for change was evident when district leaders focused on building collaborative relationships with principals and establishing system wide structures for change (Durran et al., 2016). Additionally, researchers found collaboration between school district leaders and principals supported risk-taking and professional discretion with the implementation of change (Durran et al., 2016). When engaged in collaboration, principals and teachers demonstrated a greater commitment to the goals and increased motivation for success (Gilley et al., 2009). Collaborative decision-making increased diversity of perspective and efficiency in implementation (Supovitz & Tognata, 2013).

Collaboration structures allowed school district leaders and principals to make decisions that set direction for student achievement, develop the capacity of educators, and manage the instructional program. Collaborative cultures and participation in school district decisions were developed through systemwide communication. Lawson et al. (2017) demonstrated a culture of communication and collaboration between school district leaders and principals enabled discussions about setting direction and developing

people. Collaborative cultures in school districts developed relationships among leaders and teachers, confidence in abilities, and active listening (Lawson et al, 2017). Another study reported that districtwide collaborative structures between and among schools, principals and school district leaders created a culture of risk-taking, responsiveness to data, and monitoring of instructional practice (Davis et al., 2012). In contrast, the schools in districts lacking collaborative structures lacked resources, support, and network ties (Daly & Finnagan, 2011; Lawson et al, 2017).

Managing the Instructional Program. Managing the instructional program delineated the steps taken between school district leaders and principals to monitor instructional practice and student achievement (Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2012; Marzano & Waters, 2009). Marzano and Waters (2009) contended managing the instructional program as a systematically aligned approach to instruction, assessment, and analysis. Collaborative goals established the expectation for all student learning in the school district (Leithwood, 2010; Marzano & Waters, 2009). School district leaders and principals established criteria for data collection and analysis (Farrell, 2015; Honig & Vankateswaran, 2012; Marzano & Waters, 2009).   Principals and teachers then utilized formative data to inform instruction (Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). Robison et al. (2008) confirmed the value of instructional leadership in the management of instructional programs. In their study, leaders of high-performing schools were involved in the coordination, oversight and observation of curriculum and instruction (Robinson et al., 2008).

Leader Efficacy and Student Learning

The nature of work between school district leaders and principals was to ensure students are meeting state standards through the development of improvement plans, implementation of change strategies, and examination of outcomes in context of student learning. Researchers connected this work at building and district levels to Bandura's social learning theory (Goddard, 2001; Goddard et al., 2000; Leithwood & Jantizi, 2008). As educators execute improvement plans and experience success or failure, groups develop efficacious beliefs about their ability to make a difference in student learning and instructional practice (Leithwood & Jantizi, 2008). Collective efficacy developed at the building level among teachers and district levels among leaders have a positive, significant influence on student achievement (Goddard, 2001; Goddard et al., 2000; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

McCormick (2001) defined principal efficacy as "one's self-perceived capability to perform the cognitive and behavioral functions necessary to regulate group processes in relation to goal achievement" (p.30). At the principal level, two types of leader efficacy existed: management and instructional efficacy. Management efficacy related to the procedural tasks of principals such as creating schedules, implementing policy and conducting investigations (Daly et al., 2014). Instructional efficacy beliefs included one's own belief to improve instruction through mastery experience in achieving academic goals, developing teachers through vicarious experiences in professional learning, and providing constructive feedback through verbal persuasion (Leithwood et al., 2007). Researchers found a weak but significant relationship between principal

efficacy and student learning classroom conditions, which confirmed the indirect

relationship between the principal and student learning (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

Principal efficacy was influenced by district leadership and organizational

conditions. Leithwood and Janzti (2008) examined the relationship between school

district leadership and principal efficacy in the context of the core instructional practices

and organizational conditions to find a moderate, positive relationship between principal

efficacy and school district leaders' collaborative management of instructional programs.

Despite Bandura's (1993) claim that setting and accomplishing goals increased

efficacious beliefs, school district leaders' involvement in setting direction had the

weakest relationship in influencing principal efficacy (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

Instead, emphasis on teamwork and focus on the quality of instruction were district

conditions that positively correlated with principal efficacy (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

Consistent with the findings on teacher efficacy and collective teacher efficacy, collective

leader efficacy had a stronger influence on student learning than principal efficacy

(Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

Collective efficacy was defined as "a group's shared belief in its conjoint

capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels

of attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 477). Researchers examined district conditions and

instructional core practices to determine if the collective efficacy of school leaders

influenced student learning (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). The collective group consisted

of school district leaders and principals. The researchers found collective leader efficacy

had the greatest influence on collaborative decision-making which strengthened district

culture and changed professional learning communities (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). In

addition, two district conditions demonstrated strong correlation to collective leader

efficacy: school district leaders' concern for student achievement and targeted focus on

improvement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Unlike leader efficacy, collective leader

efficacy positively related to student achievement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

In the organizational context, Chen and Bliese (2002) found the climate of upper

level leadership was a predictor of collective efficacy among groups of workers. Upper

level leadership had a greater influence on collective efficacy than lower level leadership

(Chen and Bliese, 2002). In comparison, Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) found the upper

leadership of districts, school district leaders, indirectly and positively influence student

achievement by working with principals to redesign the organization and establish clear,

targeted goals. Based on the evidence, it might be concluded that increased collaboration

between district and school leaders is a link to improved student achievement.

Increased student achievement as a result of collective efficacy might be

explained by Bandura's (1993) conclusion about the cognitive process of perceived

controllability. Bandura (1993) explained efficacious beliefs influence an individual's

ability to control the environment. Individuals and groups with low efficacy were limited

by the environment and failed to meet performance standards. Those with high

efficacious beliefs modified the environment through ingenuity, perseverance, setting

challenging goals, and overcoming difficulties.

School districts that continue to operate as a top-down organization minimize

opportunities for teachers and principals to influence the environment through mastery

experience, vicarious learning, social persuasion and affective states. School district

leaders and principals' collaborative decisions in setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program provides opportunities for development of collective leader efficacy and positive influence on student achievement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

Literature about the Professional Practice Setting

The professional practice setting in this study is an urban-fringe, Title I school district in a Midwestern metropolitan area. The hierarchical organizational structure of the district is seven board of education members and one superintendent, two associate superintendents, five assistant superintendents, 20 school principals, and 3 curriculum coordinators. The current superintendent is serving his tenth year as leader of the school district. Turnover in district leadership positions is minimal over the last three years. At the end of the 2017-18 school year, however, the associate superintendent of curriculum and instruction retired causing leadership and position changes. Due to reduced student enrollment, various district positions including one assistant superintendent and eight curriculum coordinators were eliminated from the organizational chart. This resulted in an organizational restructure and additional responsibilities for district leaders.

The school district serves approximately 8,900 students (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.). The demographics of the student population are 49% black, 13% Hispanic, 6% multi-racial and 30% white (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.). Sixty-six percent of students receive free and reduced lunch status (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education,

n.d.). Due to the location of the district and demographics that represent the urban core, the district is categorized as urban-fringe.

Although the district has maintained accreditation, achievement scores drastically declined with the introduction of new learning standards (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013). In 2011, district leaders anticipated the adoption of Common Core State Standards. As a proactive measure, district leaders decided to align curriculum and instruction to the new standards (Durand et al., 2016). District leaders initiated the work to develop a coherent, aligned curriculum in collaboration with principals and teachers. After much controversy, the state decided to revoke the adoption of Common Core State Standards due to public opinion (Berry, 2014). As a result, the district experienced a dramatic drop over five years in achievement scores, especially in mathematics. Since 2012, achievement scores have slightly increased in English Language Arts and mathematics (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.). The district continues to struggle, however, to increase student achievement throughout the system.

Summary

The role of the school district as an organization evolved significantly with the implementation of education policy. In the beginning stages of school reform, districts functioned primarily as compliance managers for federal, state, and local policies and procedures. Individual schools were responsible for improving teaching and learning to increase student achievement. As more schools failed to meet federal and state proficiency standards, school districts served as a support system for principals and

teachers to implement improvement plans and reform strategies. Educational researchers, however, determined successful school districts developed coherent systems that aligned organizational goals, professional development, collaborative structures, and instructional practice to a shared vision.

Collaboration played a critical role in reform efforts and increased student achievement. As different levels of the organization collaborated, implementation of change strategies were more efficient and comprehensive. Efficacious beliefs about the impact of education on the student learning was a critical consequence of collaboration. Coleman et al. (1966) concluded that socio-economics were the greatest determinant of student achievement, but collective efficacious beliefs among teachers and leaders nullified this conclusion. As teachers and leaders collaborated and improved instruction, the belief that education impacted students' achievement increased.

This review examined the educational literature of school districts as an organization. As the role of the school districts evolved, education researchers provided more insight to the school district conditions that produced a more congruent organization. While leading researchers emphasized the importance of collaboration between district administration and schools, the literature in this area was limited.   The review of education literature revealed that collaboration as a reform strategy increased student and collective efficacious beliefs throughout the system, yet there was limited research on factors that foster collaborative decision-making between school district leaders and principals.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study focused on how school district leaders and principals collaborate when making instructional and organizational decisions. Instructional decisions included setting directions for student achievement, building capacity of educators, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program. Organizational decisions encompassed collaboration between school district leaders and principals regarding human resources, student supports, facilities management, transportation, technology and food services.

This phenomenological qualitative research design explored the factors that foster collaboration between school district leaders and principals in one midwestern urban-fringe school district. Specifically, this study focused on the experiences of school district leaders and principals when collaboration occurred on instructional and organizational decisions. This chapter presents the research questions to guide the study, study methods including a description of the research design, participants, data collection tools, and data collection procedures. Finally, ethical considerations are presented in this section.

Research Question

The following questions guided the phenomenological study: What factors foster the collaboration between school district leaders and principals? What factors inhibit collaboration between school district leaders and principals?

Method

Research Design Overview

Educational researchers limited the study of collaboration between school district leaders and principals to the factor that influences student achievement (DuFour&

Marzano, 2011; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Marzano & Waters, 2009). Creswell (2014) discussed the relevance of utilizing qualitative research to explore phenomena with limited available research. In order to capture the essence of lived experiences, phenomenological research design was used to describe a common meaning of collaboration on instructional and organizational decisions between school district leaders and principals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The intent of the study was to understand "what" and "how" school district leaders and principals experienced the interactions during the collaboration process when making decisions about the implementation of instructional and organizational initiatives (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants

The study was conducted in a Title I, low-socioeconomic school district in one midwestern metropolitan city. The school district was purposefully chosen (Creswell, 2014) based on student demographics and geographic location. The study subjects, five school district leaders and six building principals, were purposefully selected (Creswell, 2014) based on their years of experience and leadership positions in the district. Each participant was a member of the mid-size, urban-fringe school district in one midwestern, metropolitan area.

Prior to beginning the data collection, the researcher obtained permission of the instructional review board (IRB) to ensure the study design contained ethical research procedures. To recruit the research participants, the researcher obtained approval from gatekeepers in the chosen school district using a proposal for the research study (Creswell, 2014). Invitations were sent via email to school district leaders and principals to participate in the interviews and observations. Each participant received a

Bill of Rights for Research Participants (Appendix B) in the invitation and prior to the

interview. Procedures to ensure anonymity and confidentiality were reviewed with the

participants prior to the interview (Creswell, 2014).

Data Collection

Data Collection Procedures

Before conducting this qualitative study, the researcher received approval to

conduct the study in a school district with participants that met the purposeful sampling

criteria. Once approval was obtained, school district leaders and principals were invited

to participate in qualitative interviews and observations. Interviews and observations

were conducted in the natural setting using a protocol, audio recording, and field

notes. Consent was obtained from interviewees using a consent form containing an

explanation of the purpose, procedures, and confidentiality of the data

collection. Permission to audio record the interview was requested. At the beginning of

the interview, the researcher reviewed the purpose of the study, time parameters needed

to complete the interview, the right to withdraw, and intended use of the

results. Interviews were transcribed and prepared for the coding process using

Rev.com.

Observations were conducted during five meetings. During the observations, the

researcher was seated at the table with the participants but abstained from

interacting. Agendas were provided to the researcher prior to the observation of

the meeting. Copious descriptive notes were taken in chronological order for the duration

of the meeting. Notes included drawings of seating arrangements, technical devices, and

district artifacts. The researcher recorded reflective notes to document who and how

decisions were made during the meeting. Reflective notes contained observations of body language and nonverbal responses.

Artifacts reviewed for this research study were limited to the school district website and organizational documents used in the meetings. The researcher reviewed the home page, district info, board of education, and community categories on the school district website. Agendas and items utilized during the observed meetings were collected for the organizational document review. The agendas included notes transcribed by a member of the meeting. Meeting notes were shared with the researcher and members of the meeting using a collaborative digital platform.

The research site was within the researcher's work context, which presented possible power concerns and personal biases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Historical and cultural knowledge of the school district served as the rationale for conducting the study in the researcher's work context. To guard against potential power concerns, the direct supervisor and evaluator was exempt from the individuals invited to participate in the study. Bracketing was used to safeguard against bias. Prior to interviews and observations, the researcher recorded assumptions, perceptions, and prior experiences in a journal. This allowed the researcher to enter into the data collection experience with a clear mind free from bias (Moustakas, 1994).

School district leaders and principals were provided with full disclosure of requirements and procedures to ensure anonymity in data collection, data storage, and destruction of data sources (Moustakas, 1994). Participants were notified that they may withdraw from the interview at any given time. Prior to the interview and observations and throughout data collection, the researcher engaged in the bracketing process to clear

my conscience of prejudgments and prejudices about the topic. This allowed the researcher to hear and observe the experience of participants with openness and new knowledge (Moustakas, 1994).

Member-checking was employed as a validation strategy to ensure authenticity and credibility. This strategy allowed participants to review interviews and determine accuracy of information (Creswell, 2014). Participants were provided the information via email. Follow-up interviews were conducted as necessary to provide an opportunity for participants to comment on the findings and clarify any misconceptions (Creswell, 2014). Most of the participants responded to questions and provided clarifying statements via email. Additional information was assimilated into the existing body of data for review and analysis.

To ensure reliability, peer review was implemented as a validation strategy. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested selecting a peer who is familiar with the phenomena and researcher. The peer reviewed the methods and interpretations for clarity. Questions and feedback were provided to the researcher in debriefing meetings.

Data Collection Tools

Data collection tools for this phenomenological study included in-depth interviews, observations, and review of artifact. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured protocol (Appendix C). Interviews provided the researcher with the thoughts and perceptions of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2014). The interview protocol contained standard procedural instructions, two general information questions, and eight questions about the collaboration between school district leaders and principals on instructional and organizational decisions. The interviews were conducted

face-to-face in the participant's natural setting within a 30-40 minute time frame. With

the participant's permission, the researcher audio recorded the interview. Field notes

were taken during the interview.

Observations were conducted from the perspective of observer as a

participant. An observation protocol (Appendix D) was utilized to collect field notes

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). The protocol contained two headers, descriptive and reflective

notes. In the descriptive notes section, the researcher recorded a chronological list of

activities that occurred during the observation as well as descriptions of the physical

setting including seating arrangements, utilized technology, and district

artifacts. Reflective notes detailed the observations about the process and reflections

about the activities.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research was interactive in practice representing a

spiral process (Creswell, 2014). As interviews and observations were conducted, the data

was prepared and organized for analysis. This included transcribing interviews, reading

through collected data, sorting information sources, and maintaining a journal of

assumptions (Creswell, 2014). Interviews were transcribed using Rev.com. Transcripts

were read through several times to gain a general sense of meaning. Field and

observation notes were transcribed into electronic text to maintain data in a centralized

location. Memos were written in the margin to record emergent ideas creating an audit

trail (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The next steps of the phenomenological analysis were outlined using the approach

presented by Creswell and Poth (2018). The first step was participating in a bracketing

process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher bracketed or cleared the consciousness of any judgements, biases, or preconceived notions by writing about experiences working with school district leaders when collaborating on instructional and organizational decisions (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing prejudices, predispositions, and past events allowed the researcher to understand the experience of participants with new knowledge and open-mindedness (Moustakas, 1994).

The second step of analysis was horizontalization of the data using coding software, MAXQDA (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During this step, significant statements from each interview and observations were listed. The significant statements list contained words and/or phrases from the participants, called *in vivo* codes, that describe the experience. Babbie (2017) described this step as open coding or the classification and labeling of information into general codes. Identified codes contained numerous concepts. Open coding or initial coding were identified by entering the transcripts into a qualitative research software program, MAXQDA.

In the third step, statements were clustered into meaning units or themes. Themes were identified and analyzed into general descriptions and formed complex connections (Creswell, 2014). Detailed discussion of the themes was developed and included a visual to convey the concepts (Creswell, 2014). Textual and structural descriptions were written to describe "what" district leaders and principals experienced, and "how" they experienced the context of working through the decision-making collaboratively (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, a composite description was written to represent the "essence" of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

During data collection, one ethical concern was analyzing and reporting findings of qualitative research using subjective judgements (Babbie, 2017). This qualitative study used three validation strategies to ensure accuracy: member checking, peer debriefing, and bias clarifications for bias (Creswell, 2014). Member-checking was utilized to provide participants with the opportunity to review the interview transcripts for accuracy and potential concerns about transparency and trustworthiness (Creswell, 2014). Procedures were established for follow-up interviews and opportunities for participants to comment on findings (Creswell, 2014). Peer debriefing was a process used to enhance the accuracy of the qualitative study (Creswell, 2014). A peer familiar with the phenomenon reviewed and asked questions about the study. By employing this strategy, the researcher ensured the interpretation made sense to people outside the research. To address bias, personal values, background experiences, and assumptions were presented (Creswell, 2014). The researcher also adhered to established procedures and techniques outlined in the research design (Babbie, 2017).

Regarding the use of humans as data collection instruments, one of the ethical concerns about qualitative data collection was confidentiality and anonymity (Creswell, 2014). To counter this concern, the interview and observation protocol contained safeguards to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants (Creswell, 2014). Pseudonyms were used to report findings and identifiable information (Babbie, 2017). Participants signed a consent document designed to protect the rights of human subjects (Creswell, 2017). Audio recordings were destroyed after transcription per IRB guidelines.

Summary

Due to the limited research available on this topic, the research design chosen for this study was phenomenology. The study was designed to develop a common meaning in the experience of school district leaders and principals when collaborating on instructional and organizational decisions. This chapter contained a description of the participants, data collection tools, data collection procedures, and ethical considerations. In chapter four, the findings from the collected data are presented through detailed descriptions of two major themes: Factors that Foster Collaboration and Factors that Inhibit Collaboration.

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CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the factors that foster collaboration between school district leaders and principals when making instructional and organizational decisions. In addition, the study explored inhibitors to the collaborative process among principals and school district leaders. For the purpose of this research, school district leaders were defined as employees with a role in central office, including associate superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors, and coordinators. Principals were defined as leaders of early childhood, elementary, or secondary school buildings. The units of analysis for this study were school district leaders and principals involved in collaboration on instructional and organizational decisions. This study was conducted to determine the factors that foster collaboration when school district leaders and principals make decisions. The aim of this qualitative study was to make recommendations to school district leaders and principals to develop environments and structures conducive to making collaborative instructional and organizational decisions between school district leaders and principals.

The central questions that guided this study were: What factors foster collaboration between school district leaders and principals? What factors inhibit collaboration between school district leaders and principals?

The researcher collected data using interviews, observations, and organizational documents to capture the essences of the lived experiences of school district leaders and building level principals in one medium-sized Midwestern school district. Five school district leaders and six principals accepted invitations to interview in their natural setting

using a 10-item semi-structured protocol. Additionally, the researcher conducted

observations of four meetings that included school district leaders and/or principals.

Meeting agendas, presentation slides, and the school district website were the

organizational documents collected for analysis.

This chapter provides demographic profiles of the participants, an overview of the

data analysis process, and descriptions of themes that emerged from the data. The themes

were divided into two categories in response to the research questions: Factors that Foster

Collaboration and Factors that Inhibit Collaboration. General themes contained 2 to 3

general themes and subthemes. The end of the chapter contains an analysis and synthesis

of the findings and summary.

School District Organizational Structure

The hierarchical, organizational structure of the district studied was as follows:

one superintendent, two associate superintendents, four assistant superintendents, five

directors, seventeen principals, and three district coordinators. Two assistant

superintendents reported to each associate superintendent. Three directors were

organizational; and two directors were instructional. Principals and coordinators were

supervised by the assistant superintendents of instructional practice; however, the

assistant superintendents on the organizational category implement processes and

procedures that impact the operations of principals (Midwestern School District, 2019).

The ratio from school district leader to principal was 1:1. As shown in Table 1, eleven

members of the school district participated in the study.

Table 1

Summary of Study Participants

Participant	Gender	Current Position	Past Years of Teaching Experience	Previous Levels of Teaching	Number of Years as Principal	Number of Years as School Leader
Zantana	Female	Assistant Superintendent	6	Elementary, Special Education	0	24
Kora	Female	Building Principal	12	Elementary	8	1
Orin	Male	Building Principal	6	Secondary	13	0
Mari	Female	Building Principal	8	Elementary, Special Education	11	0
Betty	Female	Director	10	Secondary	0	16
Diana	Female	Building Principal	8	Elementary	17	2
Bruce	Male	Associate Superintendent	5	Secondary	6	6
Beatriz	Female	Building Principal	14	Elementary, Secondary	17	0
Cindy	Female	Director	15	Secondary	4	6
Shayera	Female	Building Principal	4	Secondary	15	0
Barry	Male	Associate Superintendent	15	Secondary	4	12

Summary of Study Participants

Profile of Study Participants

For this study, five school district leaders (SDL) were interviewed. Positions ranged from associate superintendents to district coordinators. The average years of teaching experience was 10. Three of the five school district leaders (SDL) had previously served as secondary principals for an average of approximately five years. The average experience of school district leadership was 12 years. Two of the five school district leaders (SDL) were male; and three were female.

Six principals were interviewed for this study. The average years of teaching among the principals was nine years. The average number of years as principals was thirteen. One of six principals was a male. Two of the principals interviewed also had school district leadership experience. All principals interviewed held a building leadership position for five or more years in the district. Table 1 provides the profile of the participants of this study.

Presentation of the Findings

Factors that foster or inhibit collaboration were related to the experiences of school district leaders and principals when participating in collaboration on instructional and organizational decisions. School district leaders and principals participated in face-to-face interviews to attain their perspectives and views on collaboration between the two groups. Responses varied based on the participants' collaboration experiences. The perspectives of the school district leaders (SDL) then principals were presented to demonstrate the emergence of themes in the responses. Statements and phrases from the participants' interviews were provided to describe participants' perspectives in their own

words. Figure 1 provides an outline of themes and subthemes that emerged from the

data.

Figure 1

Themes and Subthemes

Experiences of Collaboration Themes and Subthemes

Factors that Foster Collaboration
- Trusting relationships
  - Shared Core Beliefs
  - Systematic Thinking
  - Communication
    - Reciprocal Communication
    - Openness
- Collaborative Structures
  - Essential Elements
  - Informal Process
  - Formal Process

Factors that Inhibit Collaboration

- Top Down Decisions
  - Reactionary
  - Ruse
- Distrust
- Negative emotions
  - Fear
  - Animosity

Theme 1: Factors that Foster Collaboration

Two major themes emerged from the all participants' descriptions of successful

collaborative experiences: 1) trusting relationships, and 2) collaborative structures.

Subthemes that emerged from within trusting relationships were core belief, systematic

thinking, and communication. The three subthemes that emerged from the collaborative

structures subtheme were essential elements, informal processes, and formal processes.

Trusting relationships

For the purpose of this study, trusting relationships referred to the connection

between individuals or groups based on reliability, integrity, and capacity. This factor

emerged in successful collaboration experiences described by all school district leaders

(SDL) and principals. When actions and words were congruent, trust was established

between the two parties. Trusting relationships contributed to an environment that

allowed school district leaders (SDL) and principals to express opinions, problem solve,

and explore possibilities. One participant stated that "collaboration is easier with

relationships." Another participant stated, "trust shows a willingness on both sides" to

make the best decision for students and the organization.

School district leaders (SDL) and principals shared the need for trust based on

three subthemes: shared core values, systematic thinking, and communication. The

descriptions of the theme and subthemes were presented from the perspective of the

school district leaders, then the principals. Although both groups attributed successful

collaboration experiences to trusting relationships, the development of those factors

varied based on the position.

From the school district leaders' (SDL) perspective, trusting relationships

developed over time with intentional interactions. SDL Bruce explained that school

district leaders cannot expect principals to blindly trust them without establishing a

trusting relationship. When SDL Bruce referred to this relationship building, he shared:

> To me the biggest thing is relationship trust. You must start with that. And that
> doesn't come easy. It's about the everyday interaction that you have with people.

It's about how you treat them. It's about listening to them. It's about building up that whole capacity before you ever get into collaboration.

SDL Barry agreed that developing a trusting relationship with principals takes time and conversation. Trusting relationships provided the "foundation for possibilities" in collaboration. When referring to the trusting relationship, SDL Barry explained, "when you trust in one another, you can overcome about any obstacle." SDL Zantana's perspective on trusting relationships supported her colleagues. She felt that the evidence of trusting relationships was the ability to "ask hard questions" and "provide honest feedback without fear of harming the relationship or breaking trust." In addition, SDL Cindy felt the demonstration of a trusting relationship between school district leaders and principals was the ability to share concerns without fear of ramifications. SDL Betty confirmed that "there is a need for trustworthiness and a need for trusting" for collaborative conversations to occur.

For principals, trusting relationships were dependent on how they perceived school district leaders (SDL)valued their skills and knowledge as the building leader. School district leaders (SDL) have the capability to use "power over" to implement change throughout the organization; however, Principal Kora said collaboration was fostered when both parties "work with and for each other." In her experiences, successful collaboration occurred when school district leaders (SDL) "trusted the principals' knowledge of instruction and capacity to lead." Principal Orin felt that trusting relationships were evident when school district leaders (SDL) allowed principals to "make mistakes and reflect on those mistakes without judgement." Principals Kora, Shayera, and Orin agreed that the evidence of a trusting relationship was the willingness for both parties to learn from each other and grow as leaders.

In an observation of a meeting between the elementary principals and school district leaders (SDL), there was evidence of a trusting relationship between the two groups. During the meeting, elementary principals expressed concerns about an organizational problem that was consistent at all buildings. The principals provided the school district leaders (SDL) with the problems and data; and school district leaders (SDL) responded with their course of action to address the problem. Principals offered some additional feedback; and school district leaders received the information. One of the elementary principals thanked the school district leaders (SDL) for providing support in this area. The other principals agreed with "yes, thank you" and other affirmations. In this example, it appeared that the principals and school district leaders (SDL) trusted each other to solve problems and find solutions to an organizational dilemma based on the verbal and nonverbal communication.

Within the context of trusting relationships as an essential factor of collaboration, participants described additional elements that contributed. Core belief, systematic thinking, and communication emerged as subthemes to strengthen the establishment of trusting relationships conducive to collaboration.

Shared Core Belief. At the foundation of a trusting relationship were shared core beliefs. This value was the essence of what connected and drove the individuals within the groups. School district leaders (SDL) and principals described core belief as common vision, mission, and/or purpose. When a core belief was present in the trusting relationship, collaboration resulted with a sense that members were "moving toward" the same goal and/or outcome.

From the perspective of school district leaders (SDL), a shared core belief was critical to making collaborative decisions with other school district leaders (SDL) and principals. As SDL Cindy reflected on a successful collaborative experience, she stated that everyone was moving in the "same direction" and believed it was "valuable for staff and students." SDL Barry described the district leadership as follows:

> We have a common belief that our students and our staff will be successful and can be successful, if we support them appropriately. And it's about the support and success of the kids, and the staff that bring us there. That's our common ground. That's our common belief and our common value that we bring.

SDL Barry explained that collaboration was successful when school district leaders (SDL) and principals have a common "why" guiding their decisions.

Principals supported the essential element of core belief as a characteristic of trusting relationships with their perspectives and experiences. Like SDL Barry, Principal Mari confirmed the importance of a common "why." She felt the "success of the students and staff was the common purpose" of school district leaders (SDL) and principals; and trusting relationships were at the "core of achieving big results." Principals Kora, Beatriz, and Orin each described positive collaborative experiences and attributed the success to a common core belief between school district leaders (SDL) and principals. Specifically, in the context of collaboration, Principal Diana described belief as "the agreed upon values and beliefs about what we are doing and why we are doing it." He argued that collaboration was difficult when team members had "personal agendas" and/or "conflicting values."   Different opinions, perspectives, and experiences were welcomed, but "common belief and common values" were nonnegotiable for a team to move forward in the same direction.

In an observation of a collaborative professional learning activity, elements of share core beliefs were evident in the interactions between school district leaders (SDL) and principals. The professional learning was centered on one of the school district's professional learning goals, "Provide numerous high-level questions to students in formats that encourage active participation in order to improve students' depth of thinking in all classes" (Midwestern School District, 2019). School district leaders (SDL) and principals engaged in conversations about the use of questioning techniques in videos of classroom instruction. A school district leader (SDL) set the direction of the discussion by connecting the learning to the goal and the shared core belief that questioning increases rigor during instruction. Throughout the meeting, principals and school district leaders (SDL) discussed how to improve questioning based on the core belief that this direction is good for students. In the wrap-up discussion, the school district leader (SDL) requested thoughts and feedback. Participants in the meeting made comments like "our teachers are using multiple questioning techniques to increase rigor" and "my colleagues challenged my observations of a particular technique" indicating a willingness to support the belief in the common direction of the district.

Shared core belief in a common vision, mission, and purpose contributed to the next subtheme, systematic thinking. Without a common core belief in the vision, mission, and goals of the district, the understanding of the decision-making power and position was convoluted. Trusting relationships and systematic thinking respected the positional power of school district leaders (SDL) and principals in decision-making.

Systematic Thinking. For this study, systematic thinking referred to the ability to discern and understand the decision-making power and responsibility of individuals or

groups. Both groups recognized there was an appropriate time for collaborative decision-making between school district leaders (SDL) and principals. The level of collaboration was dependent on the level of impact, knowledge, and expertise of the members. With the foundation of trusting relationships, school district leaders (SDL) and principals were more likely to discern the appropriateness of a collaborative decision.

School district leaders (SDL) agreed their decision-making responsibilities were based on a global perspective, board policies, and external pressures that are beyond the principals' realm of influence. SDL Cindy shared that school district leaders (SDL) make instructional and organizational decisions that "apply to all levels of the system from preschool to high school education." There were times when these decisions start from the top, but transition to a collaborative experience when gaining commitment from principals. SDL Bruce explained, "there are times when you got to go with the directive...out of necessity...out of efficiency." As SDL Bruce reflected on a collaboration experience, he also acknowledged sensitivity to "wasting" principals' time. If decisions have high impact on the building and principals have a higher degree of expertise, then school district leaders (SDL) engaged principals in collaboration. If there was a low impact to the building, then school district leaders (SDL) made the decision. SDL Barry confirmed, "there are times when we're going to make a decision, and there are times when you're going to make the decision...but there are times when I have to make the decision."

SDLs Cindy, Zantana, and Betty agreed that there was a delicate balance in discerning the time to collaborate. SDL Cindy believed that her role as a school district leader (SDL) was to "support principals and buildings" but doing that sometimes required

top-down decisions. SDL Zantana explained systematic thinking as one of the challenges

of being a district administrator and maintaining trusting relationships:

> You have to speak to the emotional piece; then there is the efficiency for the district. Best times they meld together, and you can do both...there will be things that I have to represent as a district, because we all have parameters of what we have to work within.

For this reason, SDL Zantana reiterated the importance of a foundation of trusting

relationships when making district decisions. She believed "honest and reflective"

communication provided the security for school district leaders (SDL) to "pull rank" in

certain situations. SDL Betty explained this balance in terms of "give and take."

Sometimes, the school district leaders (SDL) needed to "give" opportunities for

collaboration so that trust was maintained in a "take" or top-down decision. In a difficult

time for the district, SDL Bruce reflected that school district leaders (SDL) needed to

make the decision and "leave it at that... we're (school district leaders) going to remove

the stress and strain from everybody by making this decision from a central position."

For principals, systematic thinking emerged as understanding the difference

between district versus building and school district leader (SDL) versus principal

decisions. In line with SDL Betty's thoughts, principals Mari and Kora agreed there was

a "give and take" in the trusting relationship and collaboration based on the position and

power of leaders. Principal Kora understood that "different positions have to make

different decisions. I can't be involved in every decision that a higher-up makes." The

power of trusting relationships and shared core belief, however, provided understanding

for their perspective and motives. Principal Shayera stated, "I don't have to like every

decision they [school district leaders] make, but I respect those decisions because I

believe that they are acting in the best interest of the students." For Principal Orin, systematic thinking was a matter of acknowledging school district leaders do not always "get it right." There were times when school district leaders (SDL) made decisions without collaboration that were "frustrating," and there were other times when decisions were "very collaborative and supportive." Principal Orin expressed the trusting relationship he had with school district leaders (SDL) allowed an element of understanding when decisions were made without collaboration. Lastly, Principal Kora explained that school district leaders (SDL) had the perspective of the whole organization, while principals were limited to their buildings or departments. Based on the position, school district leaders (SDL) "have a wider perspective because they see on a grander scale."

While systematic thinking was important to defining and creating collaborative opportunities among school district leaders (SDL) and principals, communication emerged as a critical element of collaboration and maintaining trusting relationships. There were two subthemes that emerged in communication: reciprocal exchange of information and openness.

Communication. Communication emerged as an essential component of trusting relationships in collaboration. There were two facets in the communication subtheme. The first characteristic of communication was a reciprocal exchange of information. This exchange included characteristics of giving and seeking information. Information-giving referred to principals receiving information from school district leaders (SDL) about instructional and organizational direction or decisions from central office. Information-seeking, on the other hand, referred to school district leaders (SDL) gaining input and/or

data from principals to refine or modify direction or decisions. The second characteristic of communication was openness. For this study, openness was defined as the willingness to listen to different opinions, ideas, perspectives, and points of view. School district leaders (SDL) and principals referred to open communication as a factor of trusting relationships, but principals unanimously agreed that openness was necessary to determine the best collaborative instructional or organizational decisions.

Reciprocal Exchange of Information. This subtheme primarily emerged through observations of principal meetings and review of organizational documents. During principals meetings, activities between school district leaders (SDL) and principals were predominantly focused on the reciprocal exchange of information. School district leader (SDL) provided information to the principals, and principals responded with clarifying questions or feedback for modifications. The review of organizational documents, specifically meeting agendas, confirmed this exchange of information.

According to three school district leaders (SDL) and four principals, opportunities for a reciprocal exchange of information was preferred in person. One school district leader (SDL) stated that other communication mediums do not provide the opportunity for principals to "ask questions and clarify perceptions." While principals identified reciprocal exchanges of information as a form of collaboration, the influence in decision-making appeared limited.

Four of the five school district leaders (SDL) reported clear communication is a critical element of collaboration with principals. SDL Cindy emphasized that it was important to let principals "know as much in advance as possible" and to "ask for their

input" when school district leaders (SDL) make decisions. SDL Bruce confirmed advanced notification of decisions with "it's important to give the correct news up front as much as possible. Even if it's bad news and hard to swallow." SDL Betty shared that this upfront information was important in communicating the "direction you're planning on going." SDL Zantana felt relationships were stronger with communication and feedback from principals.

During the observations of principal meetings, principals received information from numerous departments in the school district. In the secondary principals' meeting, there were six items on the agenda. Four of the six activities were assistant superintendents, directors and/or coordinators giving information about new positions, programs, or initiatives. During two of the agenda items, secondary principals were provided an opportunity to provide feedback. One topic led to a collaborative discussion and resulted in an alternative outcome. In the elementary principals' meeting, there were fourteen items on the agenda. Eight of the fourteen were school district leaders (SDL) giving information, and three led to collaborative discussions. Although the focus of the meetings was informational in nature, the experience provided principals with the opportunity to clarify and ask questions in order to assimilate information into current practices.

Openness. Openness emerged as a term to describe communication as a two-way conversation or dialogue. This was a universal attribute but with greater emphasis for principals. Principals expressed a need for open conversation in collaborative instructional and organizational decisions. Two subthemes emerged from openness:

differentiation and diversity. Each subtheme demonstrated a different vantage point that validated the different perspectives, opinions, and experiences.

For school district leaders (SDL), openness emerged as a willingness to ask questions and listen to principals' voice. This was more than the input of information and/or data. Openness engaged school district leaders (SDL) and principals in conversations around problem solving, program modification, or best practices. SDL Cindy explained that this was as simple as asking principals, "how could this possibly look?" As SDL Cindy reflected on the implementation of an initiative, she shared that "it went much better once we had buy-in. They [principals] were more open to the professional learning and best practices" once collaboration occurred. When discussing the achievement of district goals, Bruce shared, "I would much rather give everybody the tools of what to do, discuss the best direction...and head out from there talking about best practices, giving everybody the opportunity to talk about what that means in their specific individual settings." SDL Zantana felt that even when there was a government mandate or program recommendation, school district leaders (SDL) needed to say, "here's what it says, do we think we can do this? What does this look like in your buildings?" SDL Betty described this openness in trusting relationships as "so authentic...being authentically respectful o one another would mean that you could say anything and I'm willing to listen."

It was not enough for school district leaders (SDL) to communicate information and trust principals to implement directives. Principals wanted to be part of the solutions and plans that impacted their buildings. For example, Principal Kora described an instructional decision that involved a decline in kindergarten and first grade reading data.

In previous experiences of declining or low data, school district leaders (SDL) excluded principals from the action planning conversations to address deficits. Principals were provided a plan of action to implement without dialogue about the goals or interventions. Principal Kora shared, in this experience, school district leaders (SDL) and principals engaged in a dialogue about possible solutions, made a decision, and immediately implemented the plan. Principal Kora described the collaboration as "an authentic conversation that people recognized as a need, and we worked together as a team for the greater good of our kids."

The desire to provide input and be heard was highly valued by all principals. When instructional and organizational decisions impact their buildings, principals expressed a strong need for school district leaders (SDL) to listen. One of the examples of successful collaboration on an organizational decision provided an opportunity for school district leaders (SDL) to listen and principals to voice their thoughts. Human resources addressed an issue with the number of workdays for secretaries. Instead of making the decision independently, school district leaders (SDL) requested input from principals. Principal Kora described this process as being "heard." She said, "I felt like it [my feedback] was considered. I felt like their reasoning for not moving in that direction was valid. I think it was a positive experience." Even though the decision was contrary to Principal Kora's feedback, she felt "valued" based on her ability to share her thoughts.

Principal Diana described a similar experience between school district leaders (SDL) and principals. Schools were experiencing a significant amount of disruptive and disrespectful behavior from students. School district leaders responded to principals'

needs by introducing a new behavior philosophy to the school district. School district leaders (SDL) "facilitated the conversation and provided a venue for people to speak and got some of the resources and the background that was important to keep the conversation going." Principal Beatriz described the same experience as:

> …an example of [school district leaders] truly listening and responding, and really desiring to want to make it better for kids and teachers, wanting to create a district where teachers feel safe and kids want to be here.

In each of the experiences described, the principals expressed feelings of "value" and "respect" when engaged in an open dialogue about instructional and organizational decisions. Several participants connected this openness to the need for different viewpoints, thoughts and experiences to make the best decision for students and the organization.

Diversity. Diversity emerged as the differences in experiences, perspectives, and backgrounds. While this might include diversity in the physical features of the collaborative participants, this was secondary to differences in roles, viewpoints, and administration levels.

School district leaders (SDL) and principals consistently identified diversity in perspectives, opinions, and experiences as one of the fostering factors of collaboration. Principals stressed that collaboration must have people that "bring different backgrounds, different experiences, different skillsets, different personalities to the discussion." Having a diverse group for collaboration allowed members "to explore all options, even the ones that seem really crazy initially, because a lot of times those are the ones that end

up being the best." Principal Mari expressed that diversity among the group of

collaborators "opens the perspectives of others."

Principal Shayera explained that diversity brings about constructive conflict. She

described this factor of collaboration as follows:

> You don't want people to always come to the table in agreement. You want to be
> able to hash things out. But it's just fostering that environment that it's healthy
> conflict. I always call it constructive conflict when we come to the table…I don't
> want everybody to come to the table saying yes, but be ready to constructively
> share your concerns or disagreement.

Principal Shayera's description confirmed the other participants' determination that

diversity challenged the thoughts, perspective, and opinions of others.

The subtheme, diversity, was not limited to different viewpoints, opinions, and

thoughts. Through this theme, participants also honored the diversity brought by the

level of leadership experience in the district. Kora described her respect for the

experiences of school district leaders (SDL) as follows:

> As the building leader, my lens has grown again and it's expanded to teachers,
> support staff, and my community. And so, I have to believe that people at our
> central office, their lens has grown more. They have a wider perspective because
> they have an opportunity to see it on a grander scale. And so I understand what
> might seem logical to me, or to the elementary principals, or a group of people
> isn't always feasible because it's not that same level of understanding or
> perspective.

Each principal participant expressed an understanding that school district leaders

(SDL) have a wider perspective of the needs of the organization and provide a different

vantage point of knowledge and understanding. However, school district leaders (SDL)

demonstrated value when they honored principals' input about decisions that have a

"high impact" on their buildings and validated the differentiation required to meet the

needs of different learning communities.

Differentiation. Differentiation referred to school district leaders (SDL)

understanding and acknowledging the different needs of individual buildings based on

the tenure of the principal, turnover of staff, and/or status of student achievement. For

principals, it was only through openness that school district leaders (SDL) understood

how to apply a universal goal or direction to the different levels of the organization and

learning communities across the district.

School district leaders (SDL) recognized the need to differentiate the

implementation of instructional and organizational decisions based on the needs of the

school buildings. SDLs Bruce and Barry described the process of working with

principals to determine the physical needs of the school buildings during bond issues. It

was important for principals to voice their opinions and contribute a wish list to school

district leaders; therefore, they participated in different collaborative activities to address

the greatest needs.

SDLs Zantana and Cindy referred to differentiating instructional decisions based

on the tenure of the principals and the achievement of students. SDL Zantana described

an experience between school district leaders (SDL) and elementary principals when

making a collaborative decision on instructional minutes. For years, school district

leaders (SDL) executively made the decision on the distribution of instructional minutes

for all elementary buildings despite student achievement scores. When elementary

principals approached school district leaders (SDL) about adapting instructional minutes

to meet the learning needs of students based on data, school district leaders (SDL) were

open to modifying the schedule. SDL Zantana described the experience:

> It's always kinda scary to make sure we are making a good decision. If we give
> you that ability...are those 10 individuals going to make a good decision? That's
> my job to figure out how I can check on that. How can I ask questions and talk to
> you as a building to say, is it working?

SDL Zantana determined through her reflection that differentiation based on need was

"doing what's best for teachers and kids." Open communication and trusting

relationships with principals served as the avenue for accountability. SDL Cindy

described a similar situation with the district's curriculum and instruction goals. She

explained, "you've got principals at different [experience] levels, building at different

levels;" therefore school district leaders (SDL) must differentiate their professional

learning to meet the various needs.

Principals highly valued collaboration with school district leaders (SDL) that met

the needs of the different buildings. Four of the six principals described experiences in

which school district leaders (SDL) were open to discussing the differences between

buildings and modified implementation of a specific initiative. Like SDLs Bruce and

Barry, Principal Shayera discussed the collaboration with school district leaders (SDL) on

the building needs for the bond issue. She said, "I had an opportunity to walk through

with them [school district leaders] and talk with them about what I felt like was priority

versus what they saw."

Principals Beatriz and Diana shared a common experience when principals

directly accessed school district leaders (SDL) to problem solve disruptive behavior in

buildings. School district leaders (SDL) differentiated how they met the specific needs of

the principals based on the problem and/or skillset. According to the Beatriz and Diana,

principals brought real time issues with parents, students, or teachers to principal's

meetings. School district leaders (SDL) and principals discussed how different aspects of

the problem, then role played the situation to develop communication and conflict

resolution skills.

The foundation of trusting relationships between school district leaders (SDL) and

principals was also demonstrated through the next overarching theme, collaborative

structures. In the next section, descriptions of collaboration structures were components

of a trusting relationship: core belief, systematic thinking, and communication.

Collaborative Structures

The second overarching theme, collaborative structures, emerged in examples of

successful collaboration between school district leaders (SDL) and principals. The

collaborative structures varied between informal and formal processes based on the

nature of the instructional or organizational decision. Regardless of the formality, school

district leaders (SDL) and principals consistently identified goals and commitment as key

components of the collaborative structure. Principals, more than school district leaders

(SDL), valued opportunities for the structured collaboration processes. Three subthemes

emerged for the data: essential elements (goals and commitment), informal process, and

formal process.

Essential elements. Goals and commitment were essential elements that were

present in descriptions of collaborative experiences between school district leaders (SDL)

and principals despite the process structure. Although essential elements were not

explicitly identified by all eleven participants, they were interwoven throughout the examples of instructional and organizational collaboration.

Goals were defined as the direction or outcome desired from the collaboration to address a problem, implement a program, or develop professional learning. School district leaders (SDL) recognized the need for goals within collaboration. One school district leader (SDL) stated, "The stronger the relationship is with communication and feedback and goals that we do together between district office and principals the better the district is gonna be." Of the eleven successful collaboration experiences, ten were initiated and planned by school district leaders (SDL) with a specific goal to accomplish. Three of the experiences were to implement new programs within the schools, while the other eight shifted the philosophy of educators' instruction. Within those experiences, a clear goal was "established and set" and a "plan of action was set in advance."

Commitment referred to the decision to support a common direction, goal, or action. The presence of disagreement did not deter or impede the commitment. All five school district leaders (SDL) discussed commitment as an essential part of the collaboration process. SDL Zantana claimed, "you have to have the buy-in. It is critical to success." Reflecting on successful shared experience, SDL Betty stated, "we were able to come to an agreement in what that would be, the goal that we had." SDL Cindy felt commitment was "one of the most important things you can do as a principal...feeling the passion behind it, knowing why it's important, and sharing that with teachers."

For principals, commitment also meant they might agree to disagree. There were three experiences of successful collaboration that required principals to shift their mode

of operation or perspective. For example, Principal Orin committed to implement and train his teachers in a district initiative; however, he did not agree to the conditions. He was able to determine "non-negotiables" and negotiate an understanding with school district leaders.

Informal process. Informal process emerged as a collaborative structure when there was a problem to troubleshoot, need for support, or feedback for modifications. This process might be initiated by the school district leader (SDL) or principal within various environments and/or settings. Of the twenty-two examples provided, six of the collaboration experiences were informal.   Four informal collaborations were observed in the secondary and elementary principals' meetings. Two of the six addressed instructional concerns, while eight informal collaborations focused on organizational modifications.

Despite the informality of the process, school district leaders (SDL) and principals implicitly followed the same collaboration structure. There was a defined rhythm to the process. In all the informal descriptions, a school district leader (SDL) or principal initiated a conversation about a problem in instructional practice or organizational procedure. Discussion occurred between school district leaders (SDL) and principals. Different perspectives, opinions, and ideas were offered until there was agreement on an outcome. In all six descriptions and four observations, the outcome was a modification to an existing program or procedure.

During an observation of a secondary principals meeting, school district leaders (SDL) and principals engaged in an informal collaboration process to address a concern

about sharing technology personnel between buildings. The meeting included six secondary principals and six school district leaders (SDL). The problem was presented by a district curriculum coordinator. Discussion followed the presentation of the problem in which principals asked questions of the director of technology. Principals and school district leaders (SDL) offered alternative solutions and provided feedback. Although the group was unable to determine an outcome due to time constraints, the director of technology accepted the feedback and provided the team with her next steps. The director of technology committed to meet with principals before determining the outcome.

Another informal collaboration process occurred in the observation of the elementary principals meeting. Twelve principals and two school district leaders (SDL) were present at the meeting. One of the principals initiated a discussion about the procedure for cell phone usage at the elementary level. School district leaders (SDL) requested additional input from the other principals; and then opened the floor for ideas and solutions to the problem presented. School district leaders (SDL) acknowledged the need to modify the current procedure for addressing misuse of cell phones at school. The outcome was determined by consensus of the principals. Next steps were outlined, tasks were delegated, and a timeline was determined.

For school district leaders (SDL) and principals, the informal process provided opportunities for the groups to identify needs, engage in dialogue, and determine outcomes together for the betterment of the students. SDL Zantana explained that in an informal process about instructional minutes school district leaders gained understanding for the principals' "need for some flexibility of the instructional schedule based on

building data." This modification was determined based on the principals presenting

"information and justification on behalf of their teachers and buildings." In another

informal process, Principal Kora explained that school district leaders (SDL) and

principals addressed an achievement deficiency in a short amount of time because

principals felt "heard" and there was "a problem-solving attitude" toward the needs of the

students. When school district leaders (SDL) and principals decided to hire administrative

interns for buildings, Principal Diana explained that success was due to "the combined

goal and then the agreement on the need and the support."

Informal process compromised thirty percent of the successful collaboration

experiences. Although goals and commitment were not explicitly stated as components

of the process, they were implied in the outcomes of the collaboration. In the next

subtheme, the collaboration structure was more formal in approach and process.

Formal process. Formal process emerged as a multi-step structure to make

changes in direction, programs, and/or initiatives. This process of collaboration was

initiated by school district leaders (SDL) and followed a predetermined structure. There

were clear goals, specified roles, dialogue opportunities, and outlined outcomes.

Commitment to the process, goals, and outcomes were critical to success. Feedback and

modification followed the formal collaboration process. Nineteen of the successful

collaborative experiences were formal processes. The nineteen collaborative experiences

related to four district decisions: data team review, behavior prevention/intervention,

curriculum adoption, and bond issues.

In the formal process of adopting the programs and/or initiatives, there was an explicit structure for collaboration described by school district leaders (SDL) and principals. Each experience was initiated by a school district leader (SDL). The associate superintendent of curriculum and instruction initiated the process for instructional decisions, and organizational collaboration started with the associate superintendent of operations. Goals were presented by the facilitator of the collaboration. Roles and responsibilities of the school district leaders (SDL) and principals were clearly defined. From this point forward, the groups were engaged in a series of collaborative experiences that provided opportunities for input and feedback. The experience concluded with an outcome determined by consensus.

School district leaders (SDL) and principals agreed that the formal process involved common characteristics. The first was the evidence of "being in this together." SDL Bruce described the formal process for the bond issue as "an outstanding example of bringing everybody together to make a solid decision moving forward." Principal Shayera confirmed the collaboration around the bond issue "provided an opportunity for people from all different aspects of the school community to have input on something significant." In a reflection about an instructional decision, Principal Beatriz said, "The leaders in charge did a good job of organizing us around the thought of how to move forward."

Secondly, formal collaborative processes provided clear goals and commitment. In a collaborative instructional decision about professional learning for teachers, SDL Betty shared, "we all had a vision of what we hoped to gain from the day and so we were able to come to an agreement on what that would be, the goal that we had. It was very

clear." Principal Mari expressed that the attributes of successful collaboration around the adoption of the science curriculum were "an established goal" and "getting support for something hands-on."

The third characteristic was the opportunity for voice. SDL Betty described an organizational collaboration in which school district leaders (SDL) and principals worked together to create, recruit, and implement a new position for elementary math specialists. She shared, "administer pre [principals] were willing to share their opinions and their expertise, be a part of the hiring process." Regarding the bond project, SDL Barry explained that there were several opportunities for school district leaders and principals to "share input as to what's going to happen in those projects." When explaining the successful collaboration around data review teams, Principal Shayera shared, "I think that was successful because district leadership understood that the teachers played a role in the process, that building leadership played a role and that everyone had a voice at the table in the best interest of kids."

After the implementation of a successful collaboration on a behavior prevention/intervention program, SDL Cindy shared, "we could see the difference in culture and behavior with kids that put it into place." This instructional decision included clear goals and commitment from all stakeholders throughout the collaboration process. There were other decisions experienced by school district leaders and principals that did not have the same successful outcomes.

Synthesis of Factors that Foster Collaboration

The first research question explored how school district leaders (SDL) and principals experienced successful collaboration when making instructional and organizational decisions. Five school district leaders (SDL) and six principals were interviewed to gain perspectives of their lived experiences. Two overarching themes emerged from the data: trusting relationships and collaborative structures. Within trusting relationships, three subthemes emerged to deepen the understanding of factors that fostered collaboration: core belief, systematic thinking, and communication. Analysis of the data focused on the descriptions of the participants, not the interpretation of the researcher (Creswell, 2017).

All school district leaders (SDL) and principals explicitly identified trusting relationships as a factor that fostered collaboration. The perspectives of the school district leader (SDL) encompassed general descriptions of trusting relationships. Each of the school district leaders (SDL) explained that trusting relationships were based on intentional interactions, and the relationship was foundational to engaging in collaboration with principals. School district leaders (SDL) expressed that the foundation was developed through a common core belief in the intentions and purpose of each member. Although there was a consensus that different perspectives, experiences, and demographics were important, a common core belief was critical to successful collaboration and the relationship. Communication was an essential component to provide principals with the knowledge and understanding needed to make decisions in alignment with the direction and goals of the district. All five school district leaders (SDL) discussed, and observations confirmed communication in terms of reciprocal

exchanges of information. Four of the five school district leaders (SDL), however, emphasized the importance of engaging principals in conversations, listening to their ideas, and gaining their perspective to modify decisions and/or direction.

Like school district leaders (SDL), principals identified trusting relationships as an essential element of collaboration. The perspective of the principals, however, described the relationship more in terms of a feeling. Principals wanted to trust their school district leaders (SDL), but they also needed to feel trusted. The foundation of the trusting relationship for all six principals was a common core belief in the vision, mission, and goals of the district. That common core belief provided the trust needed to honor the school district leaders'(SDL) discernment in systematic thinking. The key difference between the experiences of the school district leaders (SDL) and principals' perception of a trusting relationship was communication. Each principal expressed a need to receive and provide information to trust in school district leaders (SDL). Although this exchange of information was imperative, the opportunity for openness with school district leaders (SDL) was a priority to all six principals. When school district leaders (SDL) listened to the different perspectives, opinions, and ideas, principals felt valued and trusted. Furthermore, principals expressed a strong desire for school district leaders (SDL) to acknowledge the diversity among the principals and allow them to differentiate decisions according to the needs of their buildings.

Collaborative structures was the second overarching theme for fostering collaboration between school district leaders (SDL) and principals. The descriptions of successful collaborative experiences revealed a defined flow to the process. First, there

was evidence of goals and commitment to the outcome in all the experiences provided. The range of formality was the differentiating factor in the collaborative process.

School district leaders (SDL) and principals described a structure that emerged as an informal process. The informal process occurred when there was a problem or issue that required the perspectives and input from both school district leaders (SDL) and principals. The goal was usually implied, but the commitment to an outcome was explicit. Within the informal process, school district leaders (SDL) and principals had the opportunity to share thoughts and work through the problem together. The outcome was generally a modification to a current practice, program, or procedure. Informal collaboration processes provided principals with a sense being heard and valued.

A more formal process transpired when school district leaders (SDL) and principals collaboratively made decisions about a new program, implementation, and/or initiative. This process was formally initiated by a school district leader (SDL) but involved all levels of district administration. The goal was clearly established, and commitment was gained throughout the multi-step process. Within this process, roles were defined, and opportunities were provided for all members to express their perspectives and opinions. The result of the formal process was an action plan with opportunities for modification and feedback. School district leaders (SDL) and principals expressed that the formal process brought everyone together to make a decision "in the best interest of kids." Com

Theme 2: Factors that Inhibit Collaboration

Factors that inhibit collaboration were 1) Top-Down Decisions, 2) Distrust, and 3) Negative Emotions. The researcher conducted fact-to-face interviews with school district leaders (SDL) and principals to obtain their perspectives and views on experiences of insufficient collaboration or no collaboration within the school district. Responses varied based on the experiences. Statements and phrases from the participant interviews were provided to describe the perspectives of school district leaders (SDL) and principals. Subthemes that emerged from top-down decisions were reactionary and ruse.

Top-down Decisions

Top-down decisions emerged as the greatest inhibitor of collaboration between school district leaders (SDL) and principals on instructional and organizational decisions. All participants described top-down decisions as an experience in which a leader said, "This is what we are going to do," or "it was decided." There was not an opportunity for input, questions, or feedback. School district leaders (SDL) and principals were expected to "be good soldiers" and implement the decision without regard to the consequences. In addition, seven out of the eleven participants noted that top-down decisions were made without data.

 In the previous section, principals recognized the necessity of systematic thinking, and acknowledged the discernment used by school district leaders (SDL) to provide opportunities for collaboration. Top-down decisions were contrary to this systematic thinking. Principals described top-down decisions as an action "done to them." The scenarios described in this theme excluded principals from the conversation

despite high impact on the building and need for "input from the practitioner" (principal

and/or teacher). Phrases and words used to convey top-down decisions were "that wasn't

an option," or "it was mandated," or "the gods that be." Instructionally, top-down

decisions described by the principals involved the responsibilities of school personnel

that undermined building leadership, and implementation of programs or professional

learning that shifted direction at the district. Principals described organizational top-

down decisions in the area of budget cuts, policy implementation, and personnel

reductions.

    In an example of insufficient collaboration about an organizational decision

about budget cuts, a building principal, Principal Diana, shared "they [school district

leaders] didn't bring us in to ask us for feedback, they just brought us in to tell us. Don't

whine about it. Don't complain about it. We have our agenda." Principal Beatriz

described her experience as principals were "left out of the loop" of personnel duties even

though the district decision impacted building responsibilities. SDL Betty experienced

top-down decisions in which she was required to communicate with principals. She was

told, "you can say this, but you can't say this." In her reflection, SDL Betty felt like she

was "keeping secrets" from the principals and other school district leaders.

    Three of the six principals and one school district leader (SDL) attributed top-

down decisions to a "fear of losing control." When a decision was made about the

elimination of a building resource, one school district leader (SDL) said, "they were

basically showing that they had the power to do whatever they wanted to do and that we

really didn't have a right to ask." Regarding an instructional decision, Principal Shayera

described her perception of the school district leaders (SDL) as "I sit up here and I have

all this knowledge and I'm going to tell you what we're gonna do." She continued with

"they don't really want our perspective on curriculum and instruction because all of that

control has been given to three people." In response to a procedure school district leaders

(SDL) designed for principals and teachers, Principal Orin said, "I find no validity really

as a leader in mechanisms of control...the agendas are the new data team review control

mechanism." These experiences of lack of collaboration left participants feeling

frustrated and helpless.

School district leaders (SDL) did not want principals to feel like decisions were

made without their input; however, they acknowledged this was a reality. Top-down

decisions were sometimes made in circumstances that the district was under pressure to

address issues like budget cuts, personnel reduction, and program implementation.

School district leaders (SDL) reflected on their experiences with top-down decisions.

SDL Cindy remembered feeling like, "that's not something that I really want to do with

my folks, but it's something I'm being forced to do." SDL Barry viewed his experience

with a leader who consistently made top-down decisions as "not being

successful...collaboration was not there." The result was a "mass exodus" of

administrators from the district. In reference to the implementation of a program, SDL

Bruce made a top-down decision and justified it with "at times you have to move beyond

collaboration to direction. But you sure don't want to go there very often."

Two types of top-down decisions emerged from the data: reactionary and the ruse.

The two subthemes demonstrated different levels of control by school district leaders

(SDL) over the principals. These top-down decisions differ in response to a problem,

modification, or implementation.

Reactionary. Reactionary emerged as top-down decisions that were a quick response to a problem, policy, or observation without any input from principals. School district leaders (SDL) claimed these types of decisions should have "had everybody involved on the front end" and "included principals." Principals described the decisions as school district leaders (SDL) feeling like "we just need to make a decision" or "we make decisions just so that it's easier."

Five of the six principals described reactionary top-down decisions in organizational examples. Two of the principals referred to district-wide budget cuts. Principal Kora felt like school district leaders had a "lack of understanding of the position, or the need, or really even the awareness of the actual population attending our schools." Principal Diana thought the positions cut were "rash decisions based on little information." One principal, Beatriz, described a personnel issue with librarians. A school district leader "made decisions on behalf of library specialists without input from any building leaders." Principal Beatriz felt like school district leaders (SDL) "didn't have an understanding of what they were getting themselves into because they hadn't really ever listened to the building administrators' side of it, and so it got convoluted." Principals Shayera and Orin both experienced reactionary decisions to student behaviors. Both principals said school district leaders (SDL) "lack understanding and awareness" of the situations principals encounter in their buildings.

School district leaders (SDL) recognized the negative consequences of reactionary top-down decisions. In SDL Zantana's reflection of a reactionary decision about instruction, she shared "It hits us a lot. We often want to jump in and make a

decision and go. But it backfires if we don't include the principals at a minimum."

Further reflection revealed:

> Some district administration...make quick decisions because of some potential outside factors. We have seen it work at one place, so then it becomes this, "Quick, let's do this. Everybody needs to do it." And then we may not have known all the facts behind that. We didn't know what was involved in that and expected everyone to go forward instead of talking it through.

SDL Zantana explained that these "quick decisions" caused anger and frustration with the

principals because of the "stop and go" nature of the experience. It also "potentially

created some untrusting...an environment that doesn't feel so good."

Another reactionary example of insufficient collaboration was described by

school district leader, Cindy. Two district coordinators went to a math conference and

experienced instructional methods that addressed the learning gaps in the district's

student achievement. The district quickly purchased the resources needed to transform

instruction, but "people didn't see the value of it." SDL Cindy explained, "I think

sometimes we get it backwards." School district leaders (SDL) reacted to a deficiency in

student achievement by implementing change through coordinators and specialist instead

of working with principals to influence the transition. Although principals eventually

committed to the execution of the new instructional strategies, lack of collaboration

"slowed down the process."

In the reactionary subtheme, principals generally felt that school district leaders

(SDL) made a decision with lack of understanding and awareness to the problem or

situation. School district leaders (SDL) acknowledged principals' input to decisions with

high impact on the building was necessary to ensure success. While reactionary

decisions caused feelings of frustration and anger, the "ruse" prevented principals from wanting to collaborate with school district leaders in the future.

The Ruse. The ruse emerged as the term to describe the process of school district leaders (SDL) participating in discussions or requesting information from principals, then dismissing the input without any rationale or communication about the outcome. School district leaders (SDL) and principals agreed that this was detrimental to the collaborative process.

For principals, one of the greatest contributing factors to inhibit collaboration was the idea of "fake collaboration," or school district leaders (SDL) going through the motions of collaboration even though a decision was made. Principal Shayera expressed frustration with this process:

> Because most of the time I sit through those meetings and say, "We don't do this. So why are we talking about it?" If we were really doing it, it would be a fantastic initiative that would really build stuff. But we're not… We walk out of that meeting and I'm like, "But they don't. They don't want to know what our perspective is. They are not willing to let go of the control… So why are we wasting our time doing this?"

Principal Kora expressed that "saying let's collaborate on this and there's no intent to use it" jeopardized any future collaboration. Principal Beatriz described the ruse as "they're hearing, but really not listening. They're giving you time, but you kind of feel the unwillingness" to collaborate.

One school district leader (SDL) expressed a desire to avoid engaging in collaboration that felt "false" to principals. SDL Bruce recognized the consequence of the ruse, as "it's just a false exercise for everyone. They're not really participating with you in the process. Because collaboration takes risk. And folks aren't going to risk

unless they trust." Another school district leader (SDL), however, explained how the "ruse" happens. Specifically, there was a ruse in relation to an evaluation tool designed by school district leaders (SDL). As she recalled, "principals gave their input, but then we decided this is what the walk-through form was going to be. It wasn't caressed [modified] in any way" based on the feedback from principals. The process was a "waste of time" for principals and school district leaders (SDL).

Principals described the ruse as a collaborative process that felt "fake" or "misleading." One principal, Mari, summarized the consequence of the ruse best with, "I may be compliant, but still in my operation, I don't know what you are trying to do to me. So I don't trust you. Compliance doesn't get results." Principal Diana agreed when this type of decision-making occurred, "trust is destroyed," leading to the next inhibiting factor of collaboration, distrust.

Distrust

Distrust emerged as a breakdown in relationship between school district leaders (SDL) and/or principals when there was lack of collaboration in the decision-making process. Ten of the eleven participants explicitly identified distrust as an inhibitor of collaboration between school district leaders (SDL) and principals. Distrust was created when school district leaders (SDL) and principals "speak out of both sides of our mouths."

School district leaders (SDL) identified distrust in general terms. SDL Bruce explained that distrust occurred when there was a "sense of chaos, or lack of direction, or direction that doesn't make sense." Distrust resulted in principals "always questioning.

Why are we going this direction? Why is he making this decision? It is kind of an us

versus them mentality." SDL Barry felt that distrust was a result of "folks being at the

table for different reasons...the why is different." SDL Zantana concurred that distrust

developed when there was a conflict about "the mission of what you are doing." In the

experiences of school district leaders (SDL), this distrust existed between school district

leaders and toward principals.

Principals described distrust in school district leaders (SDL) and lack of trust from

district leaders toward principals. These feelings of distrust caused a reluctance to "want

to do that [collaborate] again." Principal Mari said, "and when trust is broken, then

there's no relationship…relationships lead and drive everything and anything you do." In

Principal Mari's reflection of an insufficient collaboration, she stated school district

leaders (SDL) "keep punching me in my face... that's what it feels like for everybody. So

again, the lack of trust in the relationships." Principal Kora claimed that there was a "lack

of trust with our district leaders and the elementary principal group to let us make that

decision. I think they would anticipate that things would get out of control" if school

district leaders (SDL) trusted principals to make collaborative decisions.

Principal Shayera described broken trust between her and school district leaders

(SDL) based on a top-down decision made about discipline. The principal made a

discipline determination that made a parent angry. When the parent complained to school

district leaders (SDL), the principal was directed to overturn the decision in favor of the

student. Principal Shayera explained the experience as

> …lack of understanding on the part of the supervisor. The fact that they believe
> the parent and didn't try to seek to understand…that they didn't care what process

we had gone through or what practice we had in place. This top-down decision
caused feelings of distrust with school district leaders; and left the principal
feeling like district leaders did not trust my ability to make the best decisions for
my building.

Another example of distrust involved the instructional minutes for elementary

classrooms. Principal Kora explained that the elementary principals kept "trying to bring

[instructional minutes] up, and have a discussion about it, but there seemed to be an

unwillingness to entertain the discussion." The elementary principals made a proposal for

instructional minutes to be based on the needs of the building demonstrated by

achievement data. Despite the rationale of the principals, the school district leaders

(SDL) wanted "some form of uniformity" and provided principals with the standardized

expectations for instructional minutes. The participant expressed that it feels like "there's

a lack of trust in our group."

Top-down decisions and distrust were not the only consequences of insufficient

collaboration. Negative emotions also contributed to the lack of desire to participate in

collaboration between school district leaders (SDL) and principals.

Negative Emotions

Eight of the eleven participants identified a negative emotion as an inhibitor of

collaboration between school district leaders (SDL) and principals. Negative emotions

included fear and animosity. Such feelings were related to insufficient collaboration

opportunities between the two groups. Each participant described individual experiences

of negative emotions as consequences of top-down decision-making and broken trust

among school district leaders and principals. Negative emotions led to participants

shutting down in current situations and resisting future collaboration.

Fear. An element of fear was described as an inhibitor of collaboration by eight

of the eleven participants. There were two types of fear discussed in the experiences.

The first was the fear of losing a position due to budget cuts and personnel reductions.

SDL Cindy shared, "everyone in the whole district is worried about their job." SDL

Bruce confirmed the fear related to staff reduction with "you're fearful for your position"

and "it created a lot of angst." The second type of fear was related to behaviors of school

district leaders. This fear created "a culture where people are afraid to speak up" or

people were "putting up a guard because they are exposed to a kind of power." Another

principal described it as a "fear of retribution, fear of being misunderstood, a fear that

you'll look silly or kind of be scoffed at." This fear "leaves a bitter taste for many."

SDL Betty and Principal Mari described the same experience of an organizational

decision that created fear from their different viewpoints. A decision was made to

eliminate a position that directly impacted 10 individuals and curriculum and instruction

at the building level throughout the district. Betty, a school district leader, was meeting

with this group of individuals for curriculum training. A higher-level school district

leader (SDL) interrupted the meeting to deliver the news that their position was

eliminated, but the teachers still had an opportunity to take classroom positions in the

district. SDL Betty described this experience as a decision made in "secrecy" and behind

"closed doors." In addition, Mari, a principal, stated that she felt "devalued" and

"defeated" at the announcement of this decision. She explained her thoughts as she

reflected on the experience:

> And then I thought, well, for me it confirmed that it didn't matter what experience
> I have from other districts, and what I thought I could offer. It wasn't going to be
> accepted. I mean, you asked what I thought, and I remember thinking like it's not

gonna make a difference. Because it wasn't the Midwestern way that had been developed by either silos or individuals, or who I call the gods to be, everybody above you. If it didn't come from that pot, it didn't matter?

Both participants described this experience as one that evoked "fear of retribution" and "fear of just uncomfortableness." There was no openness, information, or rationale provided. The decision was made and executed.

Animosity. In another example of insufficient collaboration, Principal Beatriz described a time when library media specialists were empowered by school district leaders (SDL) to establish boundaries for their roles in the buildings. Principals were not informed about the changes made to the position; and it created a sense of "animosity" between principals and library media specialists. When principals addressed the lack of communication and expressed concerns about the decision, the feedback was not well received by school district leaders (SDL) and they were "met with resistance." Principal Beatriz explained:

> And then what happens is principals keep speaking out, so then school district leaders, go back to the library specialist. What it created is this kind of animosity between building leaders and…library specialist because they're never at the same table.

 From Principal Beatriz's perspective, the animosity continued for years and members of both groups demonstrated "an unwillingness to see it from another's perspective, so we've put up walls".

The consequence of negative emotions experienced by participants ranged from feelings of being devalued to possible departure from the school district (SDL). In the experiences described, many of the participants desired an element of communication to create clarity and understanding.

Synthesis of Factors that Inhibit Collaboration

The second research question explored the experiences of school district leaders (SDL) and principals when there was insufficient or no collaboration on instructional and organizational decisions. This question explored the inhibitors to working collaboratively. Three primary themes emerged from the lived experiences: top-down decisions, distrust, and negative emotions. Within the top-down decisions theme, two types of experiences emerged from the data: reactionary and the ruse. The inhibitors of collaboration between school district leaders (SDL) and principals emerged from the descriptions of participant interviews and observations.

School district leaders (SDL) acknowledged that top-down decisions were detrimental to collaboration with principals. Top-down decisions were generally made in response to factors beyond the control of principals or possibly school district leaders (SDL).   The experiences described by school district leaders (SDL) that resulted in top-down decisions were in the areas of budget cuts, personnel reduction, and program implementation. School district leaders (SDL) explained that there were decisions made even though they highly impacted the building, and principals needed to trust the leadership. There were also times, however, when school district leaders (SDL) reacted to situations, and encountered resistance from principals causing a slowdown in the process. Three of the school district leaders (SDL) acknowledged collaborating with principals on these decisions would have resulted in better program implementation. School district leaders (SDL) expressed concern about engaging principals in the ruse, or fake collaboration.   The appearance of collaboration without action was detrimental to the process.

Principals agreed that top-down decision-making was an inhibitor to collaboration with school district leaders (SDL). Generally, principals described this theme as a need for control by school district leaders (SDL). When top-down decisions were made that highly impact the function and operation of the building at the instructional or organizational level, principals felt frustrated, devalued, and isolated. Principals described instructional top-down decisions about responsibilities of school personnel and implementation of programs that contradicted collaborative decisions of principals with teachers.

Organizationally, top-down decisions were made about budget cuts and staff reduction. The reactionary nature of top-down decisions demonstrated to principals that school district leaders (SDL) did not have an understanding or awareness of the needs at the building level. There was a general experience that these top-down decisions were made without information or data from the building level. The ruse or fake collaboration was the most frustrating and isolating top-down decisions for principals. One principal felt that school district leaders (SDL) were wasting the principals time. Overall, this type of top-down decision discouraged principals from wanting to collaborate with school district leaders in the future.

Distrust was the second inhibitor of collaboration between school district leaders (SDL) and principals. This breakdown in relationships was more adverse for principals than school district leaders (SDL). School district leaders (SDL) identified the reasons distrust impeded collaboration, while principals described the consequence of distrust. For school district leaders (SDL), distrust was the conflict that existed between individuals when there was a lack of alignment in beliefs and/or direction. Distrust was

not described as a feeling that occurred between school district leaders (SDL) and principals; it was the absence of trust vertically or horizontally.

On the other hand, principals described distrust as a breakdown of relationships between school district leaders (SDL) and principals, and a lack of confidence in the leadership capacity of the principals. In the examples of insufficient or no collaboration, all principals expressed an element of brokenness in the relationship; however, the severity of consequences varied among the participants. While one principal expressed his cynicism toward school district leaders (SDL) and collaboration, another felt like she was being punched in the face. The question of leadership capacity was the most substantial consequence of distrust. From this perspective, principals felt like school district leaders (SDL) questioned their motivation and intention. It was troubling to most of the principals that school district leaders (SDL) did not trust them to collaborate on instructional and organizational decisions that highly impacted the building and required their expertise and knowledge.

The final inhibitor of collaboration was negative emotions. This subtheme emerged during times of uncertainty such as budget cuts and staff reductions, or in situations when principals were afraid to voice concern. Eight of the eleven participants identified fear as a negative emotion experienced when there was a lack of collaboration. Some participants feared for their job, while others feared negative consequences of having a different perspective or opinion. One school district leader (SDL) desired a culture "free from negative ramifications for expressing my opinion." Another negative emotion experienced was animosity. Feelings of "us versus them" appeared in situations

when there was not enough communication or information provided to principals.

Overall, the lack of communication made them feel devalued and unappreciated.

Summary

This current chapter included a summary of the themes that emerged through the data collected in interviews and observations. The themes were formed through the shared experiences of school district leaders (SDL) and principals. Collaboration between school district leaders (SDL) and principals on instructional and organizational decisions was the phenomena identified in this study. The phenomenological data analysis steps were outlined and detailed. Then, the findings were presented as "Factors that Foster Collaboration" and "Factors that Inhibit Collaboration." Finally, the discussion. Chapter Five includes the purpose of the study, aim of the study, proposed solution, implications, and summary.

CHAPTER FIVE: PROPOSED SOLUTION AND IMPLICATIONS

Throughout the last five decades, policymakers and education researchers have

attempted to increase student achievement and close the achievement gap through reform

strategies and school improvement literature. Despite the extensive research and reform

efforts, schools continue to fall short of proficiency standards on a national and global

level. Educational researchers claimed school districts need to function as a coherent

system not independent parts coupled together with loose connections (DuFour &

Marzano, 2011; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Marzano & Waters, 2009). Researchers

determined collaboration was an essential process to embed coherence through the

system (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Marzano & Waters, 2009), but literature was limited on

factors that foster collaboration between school district leaders and principals.

This chapter will summarize the findings of the study and literature that relates to

the findings; the aim of this qualitative study with a proposed recommendation to address

collaborative decision-making between school district leaders and principals. Research

related to support the recommendation and potential challenges of the recommendation

are presented. Descriptions for implementation, practical implications, and implications

for future research and leadership are provided. This chapter will close with a summary

and conclusion of this qualitative study.

Discussion

This study explored factors that foster and inhibit collaboration between school

district leaders and principals when making instructional and organizational decisions.

Collaboration between school district leaders and principals was considered a critical

function to obtain coherence and alignment within educational organizations (Fullan &

Quinn, 2016; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Marzano & Waters, 2009). The literature,

however, was limited in regard to factors that foster the collaborative process in

education institutions. The finding from this qualitative study highlighted key factors for

collaborative decision-making between school district leaders and principals.

Participants unanimously identified trusting relationships as the most important

factor to foster collaboration. The findings supported previous research on trust in the

collaboration process. Researchers claimed relational trust was a precursor to

collaboration and organizational effectiveness (Dirks & Finnigan, 2001; Tschannen-

Moran, 2001; Zand, 1972). Relational trust also allowed participants to risk vulnerability

with solving problems, sharing new ideas, and engaging in conflict (Bryk & Schneider,

2002; Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Zand, 1979). Study participants expressed trusting

relationships allowed them to express different opinions, offer solutions to problems, and

express concerns about different issues. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) defined trust

as "an individual's or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the

confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, and open" (p.189). This

definition confirmed the findings that trusting relationships were supported by shared

core beliefs, systematic thinking and openness. As the research demonstrated (Bronstein,

2003; Lawson, 2004; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992), these characteristics allowed

relationships to develop the interdependency needed for collaboration.

The findings of this qualitative study confirmed previous research on the need for

a collaborative structure. Organizational researchers asserted that structures needed to be

established for effective collaboration (Bronstein, 2003; Gilley et al., 2009; Lawson,

2004; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Thomson et al., 2007). Findings in this study identified common goals, commitment, and communication as elements of the collaboration process. In organizational literature, collaboration was presented as a formal structure (Lawson, 2004; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992), while education research suggested that collaborative conversations occurred in informal and formal settings (Burch & Spillane, 2003; Hallam et al., 2015). Findings from this study aligned with educational research in that the structure of the collaboration was dependent on the type of decision. This difference in organizational and education literature may account for discrepancies in outcomes between successful and struggling school districts. Reflection and monitoring the outcome was a reflection process to measure outcomes as well as environment, attitudes, progress, and relationships (Bronstein, 2003; Lawson, 2004; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). This is an area that did not emerge in the data. Reflection was implied, but not explicitly stated.

The inhibitors of literature supported the findings in this study. Research claimed that lack of experience, time, and energy hindered the collaboration process (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). School district leaders and principals shared that top-down decisions were made in reactionary response to problems or issues. Time or energy did not allow the members to engage the collaborative process. Top down decisions were also viewed by principals as the school district leaders' inability to let go of control. This aligned with Kramer and Crespy's (2011) claim that leaders hinder collaboration when they do not relinquish control or dismiss input from others. Distrust and negative emotions were not reviewed in the literature. However, it might be concluded that Daly et al. (2015)

research on difficult ties between school district leaders and principals might shed light on how distrust and negative emotions occur within the organization.

In the literature review, collective efficacious beliefs were identified as a consequence of collaboration among teachers, principals, and school district leaders. Collective efficacy was not acknowledged with any of the participants, even though it was identified through education research as one of the most critical factors of student achievement. Further research might reveal successful collaboration between principals and school district leaders influence future collaborative experiences and promote collective efficacious beliefs.

Aim of the Study

Leading education researchers consistently demonstrated the importance of collaboration between school district leaders and principals to align goals and resources (Marzano & Waters, 2009), provide coherence throughout the organizational system (Fullan & Quinn, 2016), and develop the professional capacity of educators (DeFour & Marzano, 2011). School improvement was leveraged when the district administration and school buildings functioned holistically as a systematic organization as opposed to a top-down administration with compliance-oriented directives (DeFour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan, 2011). While the research emphasized the importance of collaboration between school district leaders and principals within the organization, the research does not explore the factors that foster or inhibits collaboration between the groups.

The aim of this qualitative study was to make recommendations that create environments and structures conducive for school district leaders and principals to make collaborative instructional and organizational decisions. The significance of this study

was intended to guide school district leaders and principals in the development of a

coherent organization through collaborative relationships between school district leaders

and principals.

Proposed Solution

The proposed solution from this study is presented as a model to foster

collaborative decision-making between school district leaders and principals (Figure 2).

Descriptions of collaboration experiences between school district leaders and principals

revealed the need for trusting relationships and collaborative structures to promote a

coherent system. The recommendation aligns with these essential factors for

collaboration.

Recommendation: Continuum of Collaboration

Figure 2

Continuum of Collaboration

Informal   **Formal**

Resolution Collaboration	Procedural Collaboration	Learning Collaboration	Coherence Collaboration
• Informal structure • Low impact on the organization • Perspective seeking • Outcome: Solution to a problem, guidance on an issue, plan of action	• Semi-informal structure • High impact on part of the organization • Knowledge and expertise held by specialized position or department • Procedure presented and input received	• Semi-formal structure • High impact on part of the organization • Knowledge gained through learning together • Continuous feedback and reflection • Data collection: Self-assessment • Outcome: Improved practice	• Formal structure • High impact on organization • New knowledge and expertise • Systematic monitoring and reflection • Data collection: Systematic • Outcome: Changes the mode of operation in the

• Intermittent feedback and monitoring required • Outcome: Modification to procedure	in leadership and/or instruction	organization and/or instruction

The *Continuum of Collaboration* ranges from informal conversations to a highly defined structure. Figure 2 provides a representation with descriptors of the *Continuum of Collaboration*. The continuum is limited to collaboration that requires exchanges of information and defined outcome. Interactions that present information as a means of communication are exempt from the continuum. As the continuum moves from the left to the right, the collaboration requires more time, energy, and communication. Essential elements of goal setting, commitment, and reflection are necessary for each type of collaboration.

Resolution Collaboration

Resolution collaboration is an informal partnership between to school district leaders and/or principals. The purpose of resolution collaboration is to gain understanding, obtain guidance, or resolve issues. Roles and responsibilities are not defined. The outcome has a low impact on the organization, but might involve several members. Follow-up and monitoring may not be necessary for the outcome of this collaboration. Examples in this category might include a collaborative decision on disciplinary issues, updates on a handbook, or input on communication to teachers.

Procedural Collaboration

Procedural collaboration is a semi-informal partnership between school districts and/or principals. The purpose of this collaboration is to modify or adapt a current procedure, program, or initiative implemented in the organization. This collaboration may or may not be scheduled. The decision from this collaboration has high impact on a part of the organization and involves a specialized member. Roles and responsibilities are not explicitly defined; however, the stakeholders impacted by the decision are present. The specialized member of the group might present information, but input from other members may alter the final outcome. Intermittent monitoring and feedback are needed to evaluate continued implementation. Examples of procedural collaboration are changes to procedures for transportation discipline, implementation of an after-school lunch program, or utilization of curriculum specialists at the building level.

Learning Collaboration

Learning collaboration is a semi-formal partnership between school districts and/or principals. The purpose of this collaboration is professional growth in leadership skills, content knowledge, and/or organizational systems. The collaboration is scheduled and continuous. It may or may not involve external agencies. Roles and responsibilities are defined according to the engagement. Continuous monitoring and feedback are needed to measure growth and gauge future learning. Data collection is based on self-assessment and self-awareness of professional growth. Reflection is an opportunity to analyze metacognition. Examples of learning collaboration are book studies on trauma-

informed schools, instructional rounds to improve practices, or peer observations of data review teams.

Coherence Collaboration

Coherence collaboration is a formalized, continuous partnership between school district leaders and/or principals. The purpose of this collaboration is to implement one or two strategic organizational goals. The roles and responsibilities are well-defined. The collaboration is scheduled and continuous. Formal and informal communications are designed to meet different styles and needs. Continuous monitoring using systematic data collection and feedback are needed to measure growth and gauge future learning. Self-assessment and reflection are necessary to modify outcomes. Examples of coherence collaboration are execution of a teacher evaluation system, integration of argumentative writing at all levels in every content area, or implementation of socio-emotional learning strategies.

Literature that Supports the Solution

School district leaders and principals in this study identified a range of collaborative instructional and organizational decisions. With the exception of the formal processes, school district leaders and principals engaged in informal dialogues that were unpredictable and unplanned. According to organizational research, collaboration between groups requires structure to ensure collective ownership in the process, celebration of successes, monitoring of progress, and reflections on behavior (Lawson, 2004; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Psencik & Brown, 2018; Szczesiul, 2014). At the same time, the collaboration structure cannot be so rigid it hinders creativity, innovation,

openness, and communication (Lawson, 2004; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). The

continuum is designed to guide school district leaders and principals in planning and

organizing collaboration between levels and departments within the district.

One area of concern in the findings of this study was the lack of reflection and

monitoring data in the collaboration process. While these components were implied, they

were not explicitly identified. Organizational researchers asserted that reflection was

critical to the growth, continuity, and interdependence in the group (Bronstein, 2003;

Lawson, 200; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Intentionality in the area of reflection will be

critical to implementation of the collaborative decisions made by school district leaders

and principals. In addition, growth may occur as members reflect on their own

metacognition (Honig, 2008). Lastly, systematic data collection provides the opportunity

for analysis to strengths and weaknesses throughout the organization.

Embedded in the *Continuum of Collaboration* is an environment of trusting

relationships. Each collaboration category contains opportunities for risk taking and

sharing vulnerabilities with another person. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) defined

trust as, "an individual's or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based

on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and

open" (p.189). In order to engage with others at any level in the continuum, participants

must know that they will be treated with benevolence (Tschannen-Moran & Garies,

2015). This requires sensitivity to the strengths, weakness, and needs of others. To

engage at any level of the continuum, school district leaders and principals must trust in

the others' competence. Interdependence is a critical factor in collaboration (Lawson,

2004; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Participants must trust that the members have the ability to accomplish tasks and fulfill their role with competence.

One of the benefits to establishing a continuum of collaboration is the element of predictability and transparency. In the definition of trust presented by Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999), reliability, honesty, and openness were necessary for others to willingly take risks. The continuum provides predictability in decision-making through the structure, responsibility, outcome, and reflection of the collaboration (Tschannen-Moran, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2015). It also enables leaders to understand the time and energy constraints needed to implement collaboration. The trust component of honesty speaks to the integrity and authenticity of others in the relationship (Tschannen-Moran, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2015). The continuous monitoring and reflection allows members of the collaboration to consider their personal thinking and actions as well as to adhere to outcomes of collaborative decision-making. Finally, openness provides transparency to the collaboration. The collaboration structures provide an environment for participants to express concerns, share ideas, and offer solutions (Psencik & Brown, 2018).

Literature that Challenges the Solution

The first challenge of the continuum is the planning and organization of collaboration (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Implementation of the roles and responsibilities, communication mechanisms, and reflection protocols require time and energy. The structures necessitate continuous requests for feedback to refine the process for effectiveness and efficiency. Lastly, leaders developing the continuum must educate

and communicate the logistics of the processes and structures to create collective

ownership (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Without collective ownership, there is a risk of

leaders refusing to relinquish control, use their power to make top down decisions, or

dismiss others' ideas, perspectives, or experiences (Kramer & Crepsy, 2011, Lawson,

2004).

Rigidity and rules are a second challenge to the *Continuum of Collaboration*

(Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Collaboration requires a balance of structure with

procedures and freedom for creativity and innovation. Adhering to the rules and

procedures as a means of efficiency and effectiveness may impede the flow of ideas and

dialogue for some participants. On the other hand, some participants may not view

collaboration as valuable if discussions do not lead to goals and/or outcomes.

Lastly, maintaining trusting relationships is critical to the collaboration continuum

(Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2015). While the resolution collaboration requires few

interactions, learning and coherence collaboration contains numerous opportunities for

participants to engage. Trusting relationships are maintained as members function with

the components of trust (benevolence, reliability, honesty, competences, and openness)

and trustworthiness (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2015; Tschannen-Moran, 2015).

Specifically, when school district leaders and principals act with reliability, they are

acting with integrity (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Tschannen-Moran, 2015). They

'walk the talk.' When school district leaders and principals demonstrate trustworthiness,

others believe the individual displays behaviors and actions that can be trusted

(Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2015).

Implementation of the Proposed Solution

Based on the educational research, elements of collaboration are implicitly evident in successful school districts (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Marzano & Waters, 2009). The emphasis on teacher collaboration was evident in the 1990s with the introduction of shared decision-making and Professional Learning Communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Marks & Louis, 1997; Tschannen -Moran, 2001). By the 2010s, education researchers challenged school district leaders to collaboratively establish goals, monitor instructional practice, and improve student achievement (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Marzano & Waters, 2009). In addition, Reeves (2011) warned school district leaders against initiative fatigue for principals and teachers. Implementing the *Continuum of Collaboration* with all its components may appear as another initiative or program; however, it is a tool to refine the collaborative decision-making and increase coherence through the organization.

For the purpose of this study, implementation of the *Continuum of Collaboration* is integrated into Kotter's (2012) eight stages of change. The steps are as follows:

1. Establishing a sense of urgency

2. Creating a guiding coalition

3. Developing a vision and strategy

4. Communicating the change vision

5. Empowering broad-based action

6. Generating short-term wins

7. Consolidating gains and producing more change

8. Anchoring new approaches in the culture

Stage One: Establishing a sense of urgency

The *Continuum of Collaboration* provides a framework for school district leaders and principals to fully implement one organizational priority through coherence collaboration. The sense of urgency is created by the need to focus time and energy on one organizational goal (Kotter, 2012; Reeves, 2011; Schmoker, 2006).

Stage Two: Creating a guiding coalition

In the second stage, school district leaders gather a team with influential members that work together and balance each other's strengths and weaknesses (Kotter, 2012). The guiding coalition might also contain innovators, early adopters of innovation, and late adopters of innovation (Rogers, 2003). Innovators are willing to take risks and generate new ideas into the process (Rogers, 2003). Early adopters are members that consider the details and barriers of the change, and have respect and credibility among their peers (Kotter, 2012; Rogers, 2003). Lastly, late adopters are the skeptics of the group (Rogers, 2003). They may assist with identifying barriers and building rationale for implementation. Trust and commitment are critical to this development of team (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Kotter, 2012)

Stage Three: Developing a vision and strategy

In stage three, the guiding coalition creates a vision and plan for implementing the *Continuum of Collaboration*. During this stage of the change process, leaders develop a vision that is clear and concise. This vision also needs to appeal to the motivations of others (Kotter, 2012). Stage four also contains developing a logical plan for execution.

Steps, timetables, and communication mechanisms are established (Kotter, 2012;

Lawson, 2004).

Stage Four: Communicating the change vision

During stage four, communication mechanisms from stage three are employed.

The guiding coalition of school district leaders and principals use their influence to model

aspects of the *Continuum of Collaboration.* It is critical during this stage that

communication is simple, repetitive, and varied in form (Kotter, 2012). Reciprocal

information exchanges during this stage allows school district leaders and principals to

ask questions and provide input to the strategic plan.

Stage Five: Empowering broad-based action

During this stage, school district leaders and principals are encouraged to practice

using the *Continuum of Collaboration* for decision-making. Change leaders remove

barriers and align structures based on feedback from practitioners (Kotter, 2012). It is

also critical to address negativity and lack of skills during this phase (Kotter, 2012).

Stage Six: Generating short-term wins

Short-term wins for the implement of the *Continuum of Collaboration* needs to

celebrate successes of the collaboration process. Short-term wins might include

successful goal setting, improved communication, or feelings of validation during an

open dialogue. The guiding coalition also uses short-term wins to refine and modify the

change strategy (Kotter, 2012).

Stage Seven: Consolidating gains and producing more change

As the *Continuum of Collaboration* gains credibility, decision-making structures

and systems that do not align are eliminated (Kotter, 2012). Although the *Continuum of*

Collaboration does not include all types of decision-making in the district, the degree of

impact on the organization is the defining factor. When decisions influence the

leadership or management of different levels and departments, collaboration provides an

opportunity for collective ownership. Decision-making processes that violate this value

need to be modified, adapted, or eliminated.

Stage Eight: Anchoring new approaches in the culture

The *Continuum of Collaboration* is a tool adaptable to any level or department in

the organization. During this stage of the change process, it is imperative for the guiding

coalition to maintain celebrations of success and find different areas to implement the

Continuum of Collaboration. The participants of the collaboration are not limited to

school district leaders and principals. This continuum might be utilized in schools,

classrooms, and community partnerships until collaborative decision-making is

ubiquitous throughout the school district.

Factors and Stakeholders Related to the Implementation of the Solution

There are two primary factors to consider related to the implementation of the

Continuum of Collaboration, buy-in and trust. Collaboration requires time, energy, and

buy-in (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). As revealed in the findings and literature, top-

down decision-making is more efficient for leaders at the top of the organization (Davis

et al., 2012). If school district leaders do not value collaborative decision-making, the

Continuum of Collaboration could be used as a tool to contrive collaboration (Fullan, 2005). Lack of buy-in from school district leaders will impede short-term wins and implementation of the *Continuum of Collaboration*. In other words, involvement and support from the top leaders in the school district is vital to the implementation of the *Continuum of Collaboration* (Kotter, 2012).

The second factor to consider is trust. Trust is an integral part of the *Continuum of Collaboration*. Before implementing the *Continuum of Collaboration*, the guiding coalition needs to evaluate the levels of trusting relationship between school district leaders and/or principals and address possible threats. Allowing behaviors and attitudes that are untrustworthy will inhibit members from sharing new ideas, engaging in dialogue, and taking risks (Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2015; Lawson, 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Garies, 2014). The *Continuum of Collaboration* provides opportunities for school district leaders and principals to build trust through benevolence, reliability, honesty, and openness; however, difficult ties and distrust may impede efficiency and effectiveness (Daly et al., 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Garies, 2014).

Timeline for Implementation of the Solution

The timeline for implementation of the *Continuum of Collaboration* is two to three school years. In order to gain short-term wins (Kotter, 2012), it might be more effective to focus on implementing resolution and procedural collaboration first. This provides school district leaders and principals with the opportunity to build trust based on reliability, honesty, and openness without the rigidity of structures. Reflection and

feedback are embedded in the first two collaboration types, which affords school district leaders and principals an opportunity to practice reflection and self-evaluative behaviors.

It is also recommended that learning and coherence collaboration are not implemented at the same time. Both collaboration types require time and energy to plan, organize, and refine.   As school district leaders and principals experience success in the procedural collaboration, they might choose one initiative to study and build knowledge through learning collaboration. Once school district leaders and principals achieve goals and learning outcomes, planning and organizing for the initiative may enter into coherence collaboration.

Evaluating the Outcome of Implementing the Solution

There are three matrices for evaluation of the *Continuum of Collaboration*. The first is the measure of trusting relationships. Prior to implementing the *Continuum of Collaboration*, the guiding coalition should select a tool to quantitatively measure trust within the organization and pre-assess school district leaders and principals. Annual reassessment of trust levels using the same measurement should be integrated into the strategic plan.

The second matrix is embedded into the *Continuum of Collaboration*. As school district leaders and principals engage in collaborative decision-making, outcomes are established and results are monitored. Effective implementation of the *Continuum of Collaboration* should result in a body of data that demonstrates higher rates of implementation and reflection.

The third matrix is the evidence of coherence throughout the organization. School and district improvement goals should align. School district leaders and principals should analyze and make decisions with the same achievement data. Proficiency measures aligned to the district focus should indicate increased student achievement.

Implications

Practical Implications

This study was designed to explore the collaboration between school district leaders and principals when making instructional and organizational decisions. The first practical implication of this study is the importance of trusting relationships in the effectiveness of an organization. Trust is the precursor for organizational effectiveness and collaboration (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2015). Trusting relationships establish an environment for risk taking, new ideas, and solution finding (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Kutsyuruba & Walker, 2015). On the other hand, the findings from this study demonstrated that distrust, fear, and lack of communication were detrimental to the organization and collaboration process. When leaders refuse to relinquish control, disregard input, or react to problems without input, subordinates will not risk vulnerability in collaborative decision-making.

The second practical implication of this study is the importance of establishing collaborative structures and monitoring structures for effectiveness. The findings in this study demonstrated the use of informal and formal collaborative structures. Only the formal structures, however, included opportunities for reflection to monitor the

collaborative process. One of the key characteristics of coherence school districts was

the ability to monitor instructional practice and student achievement aligned to

organizational goals (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Leithwood & Azah, 2017; Marzano &

Waters, 2009). Without a formal structure, monitoring progress in student achievement

data may become secondary to the minutiae of everyday operations.

Implications for Future Research

The literature review and findings of this study revealed trusting relationships as a

precursor and collective efficacy as a consequence of collaboration. First, future research

might examine how the components of trust (vulnerability, benevolence, reliability,

honesty, competence, and openness) influence collaboration between school district

leaders, principals, and teachers. In order to ensure coherence throughout the school

district, collaboration on initiatives stretches beyond the school district leader-principal

relationship. Future collaboration may contain a multi-leveled collaboration effort, but

principals often buffer teachers from school district leaders. Understanding how trust is

established between school district leaders and teachers provides insight into creating a

more trusting organization and influence collaboration.

Second, future research might investigate how collaboration between school

district leaders and principals influences collective leader efficacy. Leithwood and Jantzi

(2008) determined core practices and organizational factors that influence collective

efficacious beliefs; however, the research does not include collaboration as a factor.

Goddard et al. (2015) determined teacher collaboration directly influences collective

teacher efficacious beliefs and student achievement. Future research on collaboration and

collective leader efficacy will expand the application of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1993).

Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice

This study explored the experience of leaders as they engaged in collaboration with other leaders. First, this study adds to literature regarding shared instructional leadership at the school district level. Based on the literature review, researchers intentionally applied shared instructional leadership to practices between principals and teachers at the school level without consideration to the role of the school district on student achievement (Leithwood et al., 1999; Marks & Printy, 2003; Robinson et al., 2008). Shared instructional leadership at the school level focused on setting a vision, building capacity of teachers, monitoring results, and establishing positive climate (Leithwood et al., 1999; Marks & Printy, 2003; Robinson et al., 2008). The literature showed an evolution of school districts as school district leaders shifted from managers to agents of change (Fullan, 2005; Leithwood & Janzti, 2008; Leithwood et al., 1999). This transition implies that school district leaders must integrate shared instructional leadership into their practice as well as create opportunities to implement the practices into collaboration.

Second, this study contributes to the literature of trust in education leadership. Trusting relationships were the most important factor to making collaborative decisions. In the findings, school district leaders implicitly expressed the need for trust and trustworthiness, but explicitly identified a relational link to trust which is supported by Bryk & Schneider (2002). Principals expressed a need to trust the reliability and

competency of school district leaders, but principals also desired confirmation that they

were trusted by school district leaders. Top-down decision-making despite collaboration

with principals was detrimental to the relationship and future collaboration. For leaders,

it is important to determine how top-down decisions without communication impacts the

trust and relationships within the organization (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-

Moran, 2014; -mor-Moran & Garies, 2015).

Summary of the Dissertation in Practice

This qualitative study explored factors that foster and inhibit collaboration

between school district leaders and principals. A phenomenological study was designed

to capture the lived experiences of school district leaders and principals as they

participated in collaboration about instructional and organizational decisions. The

sample for this study was members of one midsized, urban-fringe Midwestern school

district. Participants in the study held a leadership position at the district or school level,

worked in the district for at least five years, and participated in instructional and

organizational decisions. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured protocol.

The researcher also observed collaboration meetings, reviewed organizational documents,

and collected field notes. Data were collected, organized, and analyzed for descriptive

themes.

The findings revealed that collaboration between school district leaders and

principals on instructional and organizational decisions was critical to participants'

perception of satisfying interactions and initiative implementations. Successful

collaboration was founded on trusting relationships, systematic thinking, and

communication between school district leaders and principals. When these factors were present, the range of formality in the collaborative structures was conducive to clear goals and collective commitment to the decisions. In contrast, lack of collaboration on decisions that highly impacted schools was detrimental to future collaboration between school district leaders and principals. Top-down decisions that were reactionary or a ruse incited negative responses from principals. Negative emotions and distrust impeded the acceptance and implementation of programs or initiatives.

The implementation of the proposed solution requires systematic changes to the decision-making process. The *Continuum of Collaboration* provides school district leaders and principals with a reliable and predictable structure for making collaborative decisions. In order to effectively implement the continuum, school district leaders need to ensure trusting relationships are evident throughout the organization between district administrators and principals. Trust is a critical component of interdependence required for collaboration. To conclude, collaboration between school district leaders and principals ensures organizational goals and priorities are coherent throughout the system.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

**Creighton
UNIVERSITY**

DATE: April 10, 2019

TO: Danielle Miles

FROM: Creighton University IRB-02 Social Behavioral

PROJECT TITLE: [1420058-1] An Exploration of Factors that Foster
                               Collaboration Between School District Leaders and Principals

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: April 10, 2019

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The following
items were reviewed in this submission:

- Application Form - dmiles_DIPInterviewProtocol.docx (UPDATED: 04/9/2019)
- Application Form - 408 Information Letter_dmiles.doc (UPDATED: 03/31/2019)
- Application Form - milesd_IRBProposal_033119.docx (UPDATED: 03/31/2019)
- Application Form - dmiles_Letter of Agreement.pdf (UPDATED: 03/31/2019)
- Application Form - 402 Application for Determination of Exempt Status_dmiles.doc
  (UPDATED: 04/7/2019)
- Creighton - IRB Application Form - Creighton - IRB Application Form (UPDATED: 03/31/2019)

This project has been determined to be exempt from Federal Policy for Protection of Human
Subjects as per 45CFR46.101 (b) 2.

All protocol amendments and changes are to be submitted to the IRB and may not be
implemented until approved by the IRB. Please use the modification form when submitting
changes.

If you have any questions, please contact Kathleen Stibbs at (402) 280-2126 or kathleenstibbs@creighton.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Creighton University IRB-02 Social Behavioral's records.

Appendix B

Bill of Rights

Bill of Rights for Research Participants

As a participant in a research study, you have the right:

1. To have enough time to decide whether or not to be in the research study, and to make that decision without any pressure from the people who are conducting the research.

2. To refuse to be in the study at all, or to stop participating at any time after you begin the study.

3. To be told what the study is trying to find out, what will happen to you, and what you will be asked to do if you are in the study.

4. To be told about the reasonably foreseeable risks of being in the study.

5. To be told about the possible benefits of being in the study.

6. To be told whether there are any costs associated with being in the study and whether you will be compensated for participating in the study.

7. To be told who will have access to information collected about you and how your confidentiality will be protected.

8. To be told whom to contact with questions about the research, about research-related injury, and about your rights as a research subject.

9. If the study involves treatment or therapy:

a. To be told about the other non-research treatment choices you have.

b. To be told where treatment is available should you have a research-related injury, and who will pay for research-related treatment.

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol:

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer: Danielle Miles

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

Thank you for agreeing to interview for this research project that explores the factors that influence school district leaders when making decisions with principals about implementation of initatives in the core practices of instructional leadership. To facilitate my note-taking, I would like to audio record our conversation today with your permission. The information collected on the recordings are for my use only. Recording will be destroyed after they are transcribed. In addition, please sign the consent form devised to meet our human subject requirements. The document states: 1) all information will remain confidential and anonymous, 2) participation is voluntary, and 3) I do not intend to inflict harm. You may take a break or any questions at any time during the interview. At any time during this interview, you may withdrawal from the interview.

Questions:

Background:
1. What is your role in the school district?
   - How many years have you held this position?
   - Have you held any other leadership positions in the district?
   - If so? What are they and how long?
2. What is your teaching experience prior to your leadership position?

Collaboration questions:
3. What are the factors that foster collaboration?
4. What are the factors that inhibit collaboration?

5. Tell me about a time when principals and school district leaders successfully collaborated on an instructional decision. What factors contributed to this success?
   Probing questions:
   - Explain how both school district leaders and principals contributed to this decision.
   - How was the final decision determined?
6. Tell me about a time when principals and school district leader successfully collaborated on an organizational decision. What factors contributed to this success?
   Probing questions:
   - Explain how both school district leaders and principals contributed to this decision.
   - How was the final decision determined?
7. Give an example of a time when there was not sufficient collaboration in an instructional decision. What factors inhibited collaboration? What were the consequences?
   Probing questions:
   - Take me through your thought process at the time.
   - What was your reaction to the consequences of the decision?
8. Give an example of a time when there was not sufficient collaboration in an organizational decision. What factors inhibited collaboration? What were the consequences?
   Probing questions:
   - Take me through your thought process at the time.
   - What was your reaction to the consequences of the decision?
9. How would you describe the perfect relationship between district leaders and princpals when making decisions about instructional practice? What about organizational decisions?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add? Or is there something I have not asked that you think is important?

Additional questions for depth and breadth to the above questions:

Would you expound on that?

How would you describe that in a different way?

I would like to hear more about that.

Would you clarify that for me?

What was your reaction to that behavior?

Take me through your thought processes during that time.

Field Notes

Length of activity:

Description	Reflective Notes
	Map of Room

Appendix D

Observation Protocol

Observation Protocol	
Time of Observation: Type of Observation: Date: Place: Observer: Danielle Miles Participants: Position of Participants:	
Descriptive Notes	**Reflective Notes**