MID-CAREER MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL

IMPROVEMENT AND SCHOOL REFORM INITIATIVES

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine how successful mid-career middle school principals (a) make meaning of the changing cycle of school improvement and school reform initiatives; (b) negotiate those initiatives with teachers on campus and; (c) how career stage theory affects decisions made by the principal about the timing and implementation of those initiatives. The principals were identified as successful because their campus had received the Middle School to Watch award from the Texas Middle School Association.

An interpretivist's view was utilized for this study. Meaning was constructed from interviews conducted by the researcher with the principals and two principal identified teacher leaders on the campus. Each principal was considered one case study. Themes were utilized to write rich descriptions of each case study.

It was found when implementing change experience and commitment are important to teachers and principals. Additionally, it was found principals must build relationships with teachers, share/distribute leadership with teachers and develop the ability to reflect. Recommendations for practices and additional research were shared.

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Background

On the exhausting Friday afternoon before the start of the school year, Sara and I met to discuss her new position as professor and liaison between State University and Bell Middle School. These two educational institutions have partnered together for ten years to provide an enhanced learning experience for Bell Middle school students and State University students. Little did I know that Sara would motivate and inspire me to reflect on how school reform and school improvement impact the position of the school principal.

As a host site for State University's teacher education classes, Bell Middle School teachers and students receive the support of junior level education students. Sara, a professor at the university, teaches a class of approximately 33 college students majoring in Interdisciplinary Studies. The university class meets two mornings each week at the middle school. Expectations are for the university students to spend three and a half hours in the classrooms at Bell Middle School observing and supporting both teachers and students, and three and a half hours receiving direct instruction from the professor regarding classroom management and instructional strategies. Sara was a recently retired Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction from a neighboring school district. Due to Sara's experiences in schools, she and I talked frequently about issues in the school and the district. She shared with me that she had retired from education after 35 years because she felt "she could not be reformed anymore." Sara's comment made me wonder about and reflect on how school administrators manage the continuous cycle of school reform and school improvement.

Personal Reflections

During my nine years of experience as a middle school principal, I have seen several school reform and school improvement initiatives come and go. When I came to Bell Middle School, our teachers were implementing a strategy known as academic teaming, which assigns groups of students to an academic team of teachers. Each team included a teacher from English language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. These teams met daily during a conference period to discuss the academic and social needs of the students assigned to them. After my first year at Bell Middle School, budgetary constraints prevented us from continuing our academic teaming effort. If teachers wanted to continue academic teaming, we would have to do it without district support.

We believed academic teaming was crucial to our students' development and found a way to continue using it. First we identified academic teams of teachers who had a common conference period. Groups of students were assigned to these teams, and the teachers were able to meet twice a week during their common conference period to discuss the academic and social needs of their students. With the support of teachers willing to give up their conference periods twice a week, we were able to maintain our students' academic performance.

The following year, teachers requested they have their conference periods assigned by academic department. During the teachers' conference periods, they would discuss curriculum and instructional strategies related to their specific content areas. I agreed I would change the master schedule so the teachers would have their conference period with the academic department. Teachers agreed they would continue to meet as an

academic team once a week before or afterschool to discuss the academic needs and social needs of the students. By moving to departmentalized conference periods, we saw an increase in our student academic performance.

Adopting this departmentalized approach to conference periods marked the beginning of developing and administering common assessments to students to monitor their progress in the curriculum. Teachers quickly found that if they were going to give students common assessments, they would also have to teach a common curriculum. Teachers began using the district scope and sequence to plan lessons together. During classroom visits, I began to notice how closely aligned classroom instruction was becoming between teachers teaching the same grade level content. Students were getting a similar experience at Bell Middle School regardless of which teacher the student had for a particular core class. I was excited to see Bell Middle School was on the way to becoming a Professional Learning Community.

The following year, the superintendent approached me about the possibility of Bell Middle School piloting the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) on our campus. In order to learn more about TAP, I attended a state conference with another campus administrator. While we felt TAP might be an excellent fit for Bell Middle School we believed teachers still needed to learn more about the program. Three teachers and one assistant principal visited and observed another school district that was implementing TAP. During the visit, Bell Middle School teachers observed the other schools' teachers meeting in "clusters" discussing student work. Clusters were very similar to the department meetings that we were already doing weekly. Bell Middle School teachers were very excited about the process but, before we could begin, 80% of Bell Middle

School teachers had to agree to implement TAP. When teachers were asked to vote, all agreed they wanted to implement TAP on the campus.

TAP was a difficult process to implement because it was a prescribed program that the school had to implement a certain way. TAP required implementation of both common instructional strategies to improve our students' learning and a new teacher evaluation system. As a campus, we struggled during our first year of implementation and did not see any gains in student performance on the state standardized test. I remember one teacher became very angry during that first year of TAP implementation. She told me "I was here before TAP and I will be here after TAP!" I wondered if any of us would be there after TAP.

Bell Middle School operated according to TAP guidelines for three years. During that time, we saw significant gains in our student performance in the classroom and on the state assessment. Additionally, the teachers on the campus were using a common vocabulary to talk about curriculum, instruction and assessment. However, after three years, a new superintendent was hired by the school board and TAP was cut due to budgetary concerns. Even though TAP was a rigorous school reform model, teachers were able to see the benefits of TAP on student performance. I was confused about how the school would be able to continue to improve without TAP.

While we were busy operating under TAP guidelines, the school district adopted the TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) Resource System, a curriculum developed by Region 13, one of the Regional Educational Service Centers in Texas. Many teachers in the school district fought implementing the TEKS Resource System. Teachers in the district had written the curriculum that was already in place before TEKS

Resource System. Understandably, many of the district's teachers were angry because the curriculum the teachers had worked on so hard was replaced by TEKS Resource System. Roughly, 85% of school districts in Texas use TEKS Resource System, now considered Texas' State Curriculum.

At the time, principals in the district were told teachers must implement TEKS Resource System, or else. I am not sure what the "or else" was, but I tried my best to help Bell Middle School teachers make the transition. Together, the teachers and I combed through TEKS Resource System documents looking for meaning and relevance. We were looking for ways to not only challenge and engage our students but to help our students make connections in the learning process, as well. The principals in the district were given very little instructional support to coach teachers on the implementation of TEKS Resource System, but we were given new compliance tools to monitor teachers. Walk through forms had to be completed; teachers' data had to be analyzed to make sure teachers were implementing TEKS Resource System. The district became a very hostile place for teachers, school administrators and central office administrators.

The following year, our district began the implementation of mastery learning because of a change in the Texas Education Code which stated "a student's grades are to be based on the student's relative mastery of the concept" (Texas Education Code 28.0216, 2011). Mastery learning for students meant teachers would no longer be required to assign a minimum grade for an assignment. If the student earned an average of 35 for a six weeks' marking period, the teacher was required to assign the grade as 35, not a grade higher. If a student's six weeks' grade was this low, there was no way the semester

grade could average out to a passing grade. The district was concerned teachers would fail more students, resulting in higher numbers of both failures and dropouts.

As I reflect on the school improvement and school reform initiatives that I have helped to lead, I realize I had the ability to control or choose one of the initiatives, TAP, that was implemented. The other initiatives, teaming, departmentalizing, changes in curriculum and the change to mastery learning, were mandates to the campus from either the central office or the State. As a school administrator, I have struggled with the loss of TAP on our school campus. TAP was challenging to implement. Although we did not initially observer gains in test scores, the second two years of experience with TAP did show gains. It is a school improvement initiative that I know helped to improve our students learning.

Many of the strategies that we learned from TAP, we continue to use at Bell Middle School, possibly even using TAP as our frame of reference as to whether a school improvement initiative will improve our students learning. Thinking back to Sara's comment, "I cannot be reformed again," and reflecting on the reform initiatives of which I have been part, I wonder how administrators make school improvement and reform meaningful and manageable for both themselves and their teachers and further, how do school administrators negotiate these changes to produce positive impacts on student learning.

Statement of the Problem

Most people would agree our schools need to change if our schools are going to prepare our students for future employment and success. As school administrators strive to lead their schools toward success, leaders must face the ever-changing landscape of

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educational reform at the local, state and national levels (Kearney & Smith, 2009). Additionally, due to budgetary cuts at the local, state and national levels, school boards, district administrators and campus level administrators must carefully evaluate the effectiveness and cost of each school improvement initiative at the school level and the district level. At the same time, the role of the school principal has become more complex over the years because of multiple factors. According to Cooley and Shen (2003), principals find themselves in the "eye of the storm" as a society conditioned by instant gratification and change expects immediate results from the latest and greatest reform efforts. Principals are expected to increase student performance with minimal disruptions to smoothly running school operations (Williams, 2008).

With ever increasing demands from school stakeholders to continuously improve schools, how does the mid-career middle principal remain in his or her position and continue to lead school improvement and school reform initiatives? Additionally, what skills or strategies has the mid-career middle school principal developed to help him or her negotiate changes on his or her campus? The knowledge gained from this study will help to inform others on how to support current mid-career middle school principals and possible skills which can be developed in other principals before reaching mid-career.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how successful mid-career middle school administrators make meaning of school improvement and school reform initiatives. How do they lead, negotiate and manage school improvement and reform initiatives so student learning, teacher learning and administrator learning improve?

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The findings of this study may be used for administrator development and training. According to Mendels (2012), schools that have principals who remain in the position longer, have more student success. Principal preparatory programs may be able to provide aspiring principals additional training on how to manage school change. Additionally, professional development may be provided to current principals regarding management of school change.

Need for the study

Currently, there is significant literature regarding the importance of the school administrators' role in school improvement (Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Leithwood & Sun, 2009). However, there is limited research regarding how the career stage theory affects successful mid-career middle school principals' abilities to manage and negotiate school reform and school reform initiatives.

Oplatka (2010) identified six characteristics that are prominent in late career administrators: (a) high organizational commitment, (b) vitality and personal energy, (c) positive attitude toward school change, (d) greater sense of professional competence, (e) higher self and professional confidence, and (f) a participative leadership style. Likewise Oplatka (2012,) identified five characteristics of early career stage principals (a) lack of understanding of the principalship, (b) overemphasis on technical work, (c) inability to handle multiple tasks, (d) loneliness and fear of failure, and (e) uncertainty with staff relationships. Consequently, early career stage principals, who possess strong interpersonal skills, adapted quicker to the role of the principal (Wildy & Clark, 2008). There is a gap in the research regarding mid-career principals and how they negotiate school improvement and school reform.

This research is important because the experiences, perspectives and actions of the school principal may change over the course of the principal's career (Oplatka, 2004). These changes enable the principal to be more flexible in the principal's decision making and actions. By finding out how successful mid-career principals perceive the effect school improvement and school reform initiatives have had on their decisions during their careers, we can better understand the role of the school principal and the school principal's needs during the mid-career stage.

In particular, this study is important to me because I want to understand how successful school administrators make meaning of school reform and school improvement initiatives and how that influences their work. As English (2005) stated, "logically, it is the struggles of school leaders, not the interpretations of researchers who seek to understand practice that matter most here" (p.4).

Research Questions

Primary Question

How do successful mid-career middle school principals make meaning of the changing cycle of school improvement and school reform on the campus?

Secondary Questions

1) How do successful mid-career middle school principals negotiate school improvement and school reform initiatives with teachers on the campus?

2) How does career stage theory help explain how school principals determine when and how to implement school improvement and school reform initiatives on the campus?

Additional detail on the semi-structured interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

Definitions of Terms

1. Career Stage Theory – Theory based on a linear model of how principals' progress through their careers (Oplatka, 2010) but research supports teachers' careers may not be viewed as predictable linear stages. Teachers' careers are nonetheless affected by many factors in life such as age, gender, cultural issues and time (Datnow, 2000; Hall & Hord, 1987).

2. Case Study – A methodology which allows the researcher to explore "how" and "why" questions (Yin, 2009). Case study allows for rich description on a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009).

3. Constructionism – An epistemology or the way we know from which a researcher seeks to find meaning. According to Crotty (2003), "truth or meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities of our world" (p. 8). Through this way of knowing, different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in the same experience.

4. Interpretivism – The researchers approach to understanding. Interpretivism is used to "explain human and social reality" (Crotty, 2003, p. 66)

5. Phenomenology - Perspective which originated with the work of Edmund Husserl. Husserl believed "phenomenology is not an empirical science but an *a priori* science, one that uses empirical facts only as illustrations" (Noddings, 2007, p.70). Phenomenology is the study of everyday live and the social actions of people.

6. School Improvement Initiatives – Efforts to improve the school that are designed by the teacher or principals at the school (Rowan, Correnti, Miller & Camburn, 2009).

7. School Reform Initiatives – Efforts to improve the school that have particular components that are prescribed or mandated from outside the school (Rowan, Correnti, Miller & Camburn, 2009).

8. Schools to Watch Program – A National and State program developed by the National Forum to accelerate Middle-Grades Reform. Program focuses on four components: 1) academically excellent, school promotes high academic expectations for all students, 2) responsive to the developmental needs and interests of young adolescents, school promotes and address the unique and varying needs of adolescent students, 3) socially equitable, school is aware of social, and 4) organizational structures, systems that support student success

9. Successful Middle School Administrator/Principal – middle school principal from Texas whose school has been recognized by the Schools to Watch Program in Texas.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Chapter II begins with a review of the relevant literature regarding historic calls to school reform. Second, it defines school improvement and school reform initiatives. Third, the relationship between school reform and school improvements and their effect on schools is explored. Fourth, the changing role of the school principal and leadership styles are also discussed. Fifth, because of changing roles and expectations for school principals, a brief review of leadership stability and change are included. And lastly, career theory and the effect of career stage theory on the role of the school principal in the implementation of school reform and school improvement initiatives are reviewed.

There is a general agreement that continuous school improvement ought to be a priority in schools and principals should be leading school improvement (Supovitz, 2013). Americans would agree our public schools need improving if our schools are going to continue to prepare our students for the future. According to Ravitch (2010), Americans have argued for more schooling on the grounds that it would preserve democracy, eliminate poverty, lower the crime rate, enrich the common culture, reduce unemployment, ease the assimilation of immigrants to the nation, overcome differences between ethnic groups, advance scientific and technological progress, prevent traffic accidents, raise health standards, refine moral character, and guide young people into useful occupations. Since the beginning of the 20th century, school principals have been expected to lead and facilitate the implementation of programs to support the above goals (p. xii).

As school administrators strive to lead their schools toward success for all students, school administrators must face the ever-changing landscape of educational reform at the local, state and national levels (Kearney & Smith, 2009). This research study will attempt to identify and develop a theory of how successful mid-career middle school principals make meaning of the continuous change in school reform and school improvement initiatives.

Historical Calls to Reform Schools

School reform and school improvement initiatives have been ongoing components of public education policy and practice. Reforming public schools has long been a way for the United States to improve not just schools but also society (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). For our society and our nation to continue to compete globally, public education must prepare our students for both current jobs and unknown future jobs. Because of these demands on our school system, public education has long been the subject of debate and reform efforts (Lee, Grigg & Dion, 2007). As City, Elmore, Fiarman and Teitel (2009) said, if we continue to do the same thing, we will neither change nor improve.

According to Murphy and Adams (1998) school reform movements can be analyzed in multiple ways but political pressures must be included in any analysis. How does school reform and school improvement fit into the landscape of the times? It seems fitting to look back at how calls for reform have occurred and how these calls for reform have affected schools.

In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed by Congress. The Civil Rights Act required equal rights for all citizens. It allowed federal officials in various governmental agencies to sue local officials and business owners for monetary damages when it was

proven that a person or group of people was denied services based upon race. As a result of the Civil Rights Act, schools were forced to racially integrate ending separate and unequal services (Cuban, 2010). All students were to be educated in equal classes and equal facilities. The reality was schools continued to struggle with having to provide a free and adequate education for all students.

Even with the passing of the Civil Rights Act, there was still much work to be done in American schools because racially underrepresented students and students living in poverty were still not receiving an equal or appropriate education. In 1965, in response to Lyndon Baines Johnson's thought to build a "Great Society" and fight poverty in the United States, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed. ESEA would provide all students no matter race or economic status, an equal opportunity in school. ESEA established funding for elementary and secondary schools but limited the development of a national curriculum. Additionally, it established high standards and accountability in schools and it linked federal money (Title I) to school reform. American schools would have to educate all students, not just upper and middle class white students.

ESEA is considered one of the most far reaching educational movements by Congress (Spring, 2005). One of ESEA's goals was to decrease the achievement gap between students of poverty and all other students. Specific money (Title I) was designated to assist all schools, public and private, with closing the achievement gap for students from poverty. Even though there have been additional educational acts passed by Congress since 1965, ESEA, now known as No Child Left Behind, was a strong starting point to the call for modern day school reform.

In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* was published by The National Commission on Excellence in Education. This commission had been given the task to determine the progress of America's schools by T.H. Bell Secretary of Education. In this report, the Commission declared that:

> Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility. We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur--others are matching and surpassing our educational attainment (p. 9).

A Nation at Risk laid out to the American people the concern that students were not being prepared to compete in the global economy. The industrial world had changed, with the report noting that – "knowledge, learning, information, and skilled intelligence are the new raw materials of international commerce" (p. 10). If America was to remain strong in world economics, our schools would have to reform. "All students would have to be able to develop the skills to obtain gainful employment and manage their own lives thus serving the progress of society itself" (p. 11). Even though *A Nation at Risk* was not

a legislative mandate, it had a profound effect on America's view of schools and the urgent need to improve them (Ravitch, 2010).

When Congress reauthorized the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* in 1994 and again in 2001 with *No Child Left Behind*, they required states to develop and adopt a challenging curriculum, performance standards, assessments aligned to state content standards, and to implement an accountability system to measure both school and district progress in improving student achievement (EASE, 1994). Additionally, it required special education students and English Language Learners (students whose primary language spoken at home is not English) to meet the same academic standards as all other students. Schools were required to show continuous progress toward achieving adequate yearly progress (AYP), and schools falling short of AYP measures would suffer consequences. Lastly, Congress unilaterally declared that all students would be proficient in math and reading by 2014.

Additionally, educational bills and reports have spurred change within our nation's schools. Researchers have also categorized school reform into three distinct eras since the 1980's. The Intensification Era of the 1980's, followed by the Restructuring Era of the 1990's and the present Reformation Era (Adams & Ginsberg, 1994; Murphy & Adams, 1998). Each of these eras has established a slight change in our schools' focus on school reform and improvement.

During the Intensification Era of the 1980's, school reform began tightening the existing educational regulations and raising student academic requirements. The school day and year were extended and high school graduation requirements were implemented (Adams & Ginsberg, 1994). Higher graduation requirements did not affect college bound

students but, students that had traditionally enrolled in vocational classes were required to take additional classes in the core content. For example, enrollment in vocational courses declined considerably during this time (Lee & Ready, 2009).

The nation's students were going to be prepared to compete in the global economy. But, it was becoming evident there was a difference between how students in different socio-economic classes performed in school. If the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* was going to close the achievement gap between students of poverty and all other students, reform needed to address not only the quantity of classes, but more importantly the instructional quality of those classes.

Thus, the Restructuring Era of the 1990's ushered in a focus on raising academic standards and holding schools accountable for student performance. Additionally, school financing, teacher training and certification, and school choice all came under scrutiny. States shifted from educational inputs, such as per-student expenditure on instructional materials to educational outcomes, such as percentage of students attaining a score of "proficient" on state assessments (Adams & Ginsberg, 1994).

Schools and districts were allowed greater autonomy to improve school performance. Decentralization and site-based decision-making became part of the educational landscape. In fact, most states have mandated some form of site-based decision making (Murphy & Adams, 1998). In 1992, the Texas Education Agency mandated site-based decision-making in all Texas schools (Fuller, Young & Orr, 2007)).

According to Murphy and Adams (1998), it is difficult to draw the lines between the Restructuring Era and the Reformation Era of the 2000's. But, it has been during the Reformation Era we have seen three areas in education change or re-configure. Academic

standards for students have been adopted in content areas such as the National Math

Standards and National Science Standards. Professional standards for teachers have been

adopted by such as the National Board of Teaching Professionals and the National

Professional Development Standards. Finally the rights of parents to choose how to

educate their students: public education, private education, vouchers or homeschooling.

School Reform Initiatives

As clarified earlier, school reform for the purposes of this paper is defined as

efforts to improve the school that have particular components proscribed by an outside

source (Rowan, Correnti, Miller & Camburn, 2009). There are multiple school reform

initiatives on the forefront of education which have been imposed on public schools and

states from outside sources. School choice and charter schools, merit pay, testing and

accountability are three major initiatives that appear to affect most all public school

teachers and administrators (Ravitch, 2010). As states seek relief from *No Child Left*

Behind (NCLB), there may be additional reform efforts coming to public education.

School Choice and Charter Schools

School choice has been part of our educational practices since the beginning of

our school system. Parents have had the option to send their students to local schools,

private schools or "home school" their children. School choice is an easy concept to

understand; parents are able to choose the school for their child instead of the government

deciding for the child but it can be difficult for parents to negotiate and understand their

schooling options. Currently, in many school systems, students living in the same

attendance zone attend the same elementary school, the same middle school and the same

high school. School choice allows for students to attend any school of the parent's choice

but parents must be able to get their student to the school of choice. Prior to the 1954 decision by the United States Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* that resulted in the integration of public schools, some school districts in the South responded to the Court's pressure to desegregate by adopting 'freedom of choice' policies (Ravitch, 2010). Under these new policies, students could enroll in any public school their parent wanted the student to enroll in. White students enrolled in all-white schools and black students remained in all-black schools. When the government pushed states to integrate, parents responded by creating private schools for white families that did not want their students to attend integrated schools with minority students. Public schools responded by opening specialized or magnet schools to attract strong students (Ravitch, 2010; Weissberg, 2009).

In 1955, Milton Friedman wrote "*The Government's Role in Education*" arguing that, the government should fund public education but, the government should not run it. Friedman was against segregated schools but he had a stronger conviction for school choice. He believed competition would stimulate the development and improvement of public and nonpublic schools. Not only would public schools become better, competition would also make the salaries of school teachers more responsive to market forces (Ravitch, 2010). In a free choice system, all schools would operate autonomously, without government interference. The free choice system allowed parents to separate their students from other students (Friedman, 1955).

Up until the 1980's, school choice was almost exclusively an option for parents of the South who did not want their students attending schools with minority students. President Ronald Reagan was an advocate of school choice, especially school vouchers

(Ravitch, 2010). School vouchers allowed parents to use government money to pay tuition for private schools. Reagan's plan was for school vouchers to open the doors to private schools by enabling poor parents to pay the cost of tuition at private schools. Supporters of the plan believed losing these students would threaten public schools that would then be forced to improve their performance to compete successfully for bright students. Even though some parents took advantage of vouchers, vouchers still did not completely cover the cost of tuition thus not making vouchers a reasonable solution for school choice. Vouchers did help "to open the door for the spread of other forms of school choice, including charter schools" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 131).

Charter schools have been supported by every president since George H. W. Bush. Charter schools appeal to many Americans that see charters as the "antidote to bureaucracy and stasis and as the decisive change that will revolutionize American education and dramatically improve educational achievement" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 133). Charter schools are privately run schools with government money yet exempt from many of the requirements are imposed on public schools (Timpane, Brewer, Gill & Ross, 2001). Additionally, charter schools have been criticized for not enrolling student populations similar to the community from which the charter is located. Because many charters use a lottery system for enrollment, it is believed charter schools enroll students that are more motivated to succeed in schools. Parents and students typically sign an agreement with the charter schools agreeing to follow academic and behavior expectations or risk being removed from the school (Ravitch, 2010). This agreement is similar to a student code of conduct which parents and students sign with public schools

but the public school cannot remove the student permanently remove the student from the school (Jennings, 2010).

There are multiple studies on the effectiveness of voucher and charter schools (Wolf, Witte & Flemming, 2012; Rouse & Barrow, 2009; Buckley & Schneider, 2009). Some of the reports conclude voucher and charter schools outperform public schools while other reports show no differences. According to Finn & Hess (2004), some of the best schools he has seen are charter schools, some of which have extremely high test scores in tough communities. However, he also notes other charter schools have been some of the worst schools he has ever seen yet parents still choose them.

Merit Pay

Merit pay for teachers can be traced back to 1908 in Newton, Massachusetts but little is known about this system (Protsik, 1995). Merit pay as we know it today began with the launching of Sputnik and then again after the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (Ravitch, 2010). Both of these events encouraged the nation to push teachers' salaries to be professionally-competitive, market sensitive and performance based (Albright, 2011). If teachers' salaries improved then more people would be attracted to teaching, improving the applicant pool for teachers. If the applicant pool improved then the chances of hiring better teachers would also improve. Teachers have historically and continue to be underpaid in comparison to people in other professions with similar levels of education (Ravitch, 2010, p. 174).

As a reform, merit pay can be implemented in multiple forms. Currently, many school districts offer a signing bonus to teachers who agree to teach in difficult to staff areas such as special educational, English language learner, math and science classrooms.

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These areas vary depending on the school district and the district's geographic location in the country (Albright, 2011). The following classrooms are typically, hard to staff: special education, English language learners, and sometimes math and science. Also, if a school district or school is in a high poverty or urban area, teachers may be offered a signing bonus to sign a teaching contract with the district or the school. A signing bonus is a competitive way districts recruit strong teaching candidates (Albright, 2011).

Career ladder is another form of merit pay. Compensation within a career ladder system includes a combination of a teacher's years of experience, the teacher's performance in the classroom and professional development credits earned by the teacher (Eikenberg, 2007). As the teacher's years of experience increase, performance improves, the teacher is more likely to seek professional development and, the likelihood of earning a high salary also increases. In 1984, Texas adopted a career ladder system to compensate teachers but by 1993, the state discontinued the program due to funding (Eikenberg, 2007). Career ladder is believed to be a subjective form of merit pay. Teachers liked by school administrators received better evaluations thus these teachers received the merit pay. Even though teachers had the ability to earn additional money under career ladder, there was no evidence that career ladder improved student performance (Eikenberg, 2007).

During Barack Obama's first campaign for president, Obama was against merit pay for teachers. Once elected, President Obama's education plan included large sums of money to fund merit pay for teachers as an incentive to help increase student academic performance (Ravitch, 2010). Incentive pay can be given to either individual teachers or to groups of teachers. Individual teacher incentive pay programs have not been proven to

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increase student academic performance (Hodge, 2003). Additionally, there are concerns that individual merit pay programs encourage teachers to compete against one another for pay and encourage teachers to teach in isolation (Hodge, 2003).

Group based incentive pay programs have been used to reward teachers, administrators and support staff when the campus reaches it goals (Hodge, 2003). The goals are typically linked to student performance goals, drop-out rates and attendance rates. Hodge (2003) found schools with group based incentive pay programs tend to have better student performance, but it is unclear whether student gains result from teacher incentives, the collaborative nature of working toward a common goal, or fear of not performing well and letting the group down. Ravitch (2010) would argue, "Money to raise test scores encourages teaching to the test and teaching to the test narrows the curriculum" (p. 192). Teachers, like other professionals, need to feel competent, effective and admired (Sclafani & Tucker, 2006).

While teachers remain the most important factor in student learning, current research identifies the school principal as the second most important factor (Hodge, 2003). Due to the impact and support principals provide for learning, it is becoming more common for school principals to receive merit pay for increased student academic performance, increased student attendance and decreased student drop-out rates. Hodge (2003) found principals provide leadership for evaluating and improving teacher effectiveness, leadership in designing an environment that is conducive to teaching and learning and focusing on student achievement. Research has shown that school principals appreciate merit pay but merit pay does not necessarily change the principal's support of teaching and learning (Ballou, 2001).

Certainly the incentives provided by merit pay improve teachers' and principals' financial situations, but the connection between incentive and student learning remain obscure. It will be interesting to watch how the government, states and local school districts continue to design fair models of incentive pay programs.

Testing and Accountability

Like school choice and merit pay, testing has been a part of our educational system since the very beginning (Ravitch, 2010). Teachers have utilized tests to evaluate if students are learning the material and information the teacher has taught. In the early days of our school system, students who passed the test proved they understood the material and were allowed to advance in their schooling, while students who did not pass the test were encouraged to leave the school system.

According to Ravitch (2010), educational testing began to change in the 1920's, when the army employed psychologists to develop an intelligence test to help recruit officers from the enlisted ranks. The first intelligence tests given were essay exams. But, the psychologists argued essay exams were too subjective because different evaluators could score the test differently, making the scores invalid. Multiple choice tests, on the other hand, had only one right answer, allowing the test to be scored objectively. Additionally, the army found multiple choice tests could be scored faster and more efficiently compared to essay exams, thus began the use of multiple choice testing in the educational system.

Testing and evaluating students in the school system is not a bad thing (Ravitch, 2010). Teachers, parents, and students want to know how students are performing. Is the student learning the information the teacher is presenting, does the student need

additional help, and is the student scoring above, below or on average with the student's peers? But, tests are not perfect instruments. "Tests vary in quality and even the best tests may sometimes be error prone, because of human mistakes or technical foul-ups" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 152). Because tests are not perfect, it is difficult to use tests to make high stakes decisions. When high stakes testing is used to make crucial decisions regarding a student's future possible promotion to the next grade or graduation, a teacher's performance or evaluation, a principal's performance or evaluation or a school's performance or evaluation then test scores are being misused (Ravitch, 2010). *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), implemented by President Bush in 2001, encouraged using tests to make these decisions but, these decisions can be harmful to students, teachers, principals and a community.

In business, chief financial officers, boards and stockholders want to know their investments are being protected and handled appropriately. Similarly, the public wants the guarantee that federal, state and local monies spent on education are being utilized in the most effective and efficient manner possible. When NCLB was passed in Congress, it mandated all students be proficient in reading and math by 2014. Additionally, NCLB not only required states to test students in grades 3-8 annually, each state had to develop its own test and establish the criteria on which to score the test (NCLB, 2002).

Because states developed their own tests, there were questions concerning the validity and reliability of the tests (Ravitch, 2010). State lawmakers wanted their students to perform well on the assessments. The results of a state's assessment could have political and economic ramifications on states. Companies looking to expand their business seek out areas where there is a well-educated workforce (Ravitch, 2010). Just as

a school or teacher wants their students to perform well on the state assessment, states want their educational system to look good. To validate state test results between states, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is utilized. The NAEP is used to evaluate how students in grades four and eight compare with other students across the nation (Lee, Grigg, Dion, 2007). And, while some states have shown great gains on their assessments, those gains have not correlated on the NAEP. Lawmakers do not have the ability to cheat on the state assessments but they do have control of the passing standards on the tests.

At the school level, there are reports of superintendents, principals, teachers and students cheating on state assessments (Goldhaber, 2002; Ravitch, 2010). State assessments have become punitive instead of informative to schools. If a student does not perform well on the state assessment, the student risk being retained at certain grade levels. Teachers, principals and superintendents are evaluated on how well students in the building or district perform on the state assessments. Teachers, principals and superintendents with a history of low student performance on state tests, can be rated lower on annual evaluations. If they continue to produce low student performance on the state test, the teachers, principals and superintendents risk being terminated by the school district. There is significant pressure on students and schools to perform well on state assessments.

The goal of NCLB is admirable but may be unrealistic (Ravitch, 2010). As 2014 drawers near, the federal government has allowed states to request a waiver from NCLB. In a state's request for the waiver, the state must agree to follow specific curriculum standards, and revamp the teacher evaluation system. As to date, there are 34 states and

the District of Columbia that have requested a waiver from NCLB (US Department of Education, 2012). Texas has filed a letter of intent to apply for a waiver from NCLB. Texas plans to submit their waiver in January or February 2013 (Williams, 2012). The Texas Education Agency (TEA)

> believes by applying for a waiver the state and school districts will be provided with the flexibility needed to reduce duplication and unnecessary burden of two accountability systems, the state and federal system, while allowing school districts to focus resources on one system of accountability and improvement. (Williams, 2012, p.1)

TEA believes these "waivers will allow the school district the opportunity to increase the academic achievement of students by improving and aligning the quality of instruction with the state's college and career readiness standards" (Williams, 2012, p. 1). School principals will have to prepare for the change coming in the state and how it will impact their schools and jobs.

In 2010, Diane Ravitch, a nationally known educational historian and previous educational advisor to Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, published *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*. In her book, she charged that she had "changed her mind regarding school reform" (p. 2). In the decade following her support of the federal government, she had argued school choice, charter, merit pay and accountability would reform our schools (Ravitch, 2010). But, had these changes really improved our school system? There is conflicting evidence regarding the success of each of these reforms but these reforms continue to be factors school principals confront as the school principals lead their schools.

School Improvement Initiatives

For this research study, school improvement initiatives have been defined as efforts to improve the school that are designed by the school, itself, rather than an external program (Rowan, Correnti, Miller, & Camburn (2009). There are many school improvement initiatives schools undertake each school year and these initiatives may change each year. School improvement initiatives may include: advisory classes for students, scheduling priorities, common, collaborative planning times and many other initiatives. A school designed improvement initiative may begin with one teacher, many teachers or the school administration bringing a new idea to the school but, when the teachers and the administration buy into the initiative and work collaboratively to implement the initiative, school improvement can occur. The important factor to remember about school improvement initiatives is the teachers and administrators have designed instructional or organizational solutions to a practical teaching and learning issues (Rowan, Correnti, Miller & Camburn, 2009).

School Improvement to School Reform Initiatives

Even though there were a few school improvement initiatives identified in the above section, it is important to acknowledge some improvement initiatives may fall into both categories, school reform and school improvement initiatives. There are times when one school may implement an initiative and achieve great success with it. Because of this one school's success, many other schools may be mandated to implement the same initiative. Ravitch (2010) points out two such initiatives utilized by Community School District 2 in New York: Balanced Literacy and Technical Education Research Centers (TERC) Math, a constructivist math program. These programs were implemented in one

school district with the support and guidance of Anthony Alvarado, superintendent of District 2.

Balanced Literacy is a reading program that was developed to end the dispute over the best method to teach students to read. One group of educators argued for a phonics approach while another group of educators argued for a whole language approach. Balanced Literacy uses two approaches to teach reading. Phonics is used to teach students letters and the letter sounds, while a whole language approach teaches readers to use context clues to understand the meaning of unfamiliar words. According to Ravitch (2010), there were concerns regarding Balanced Literacy because "it focuses mainly on reading strategies and teaching children to identify and practice them" (p. 35). There were concerns students did not really comprehend the text but could use strategies to make meaning of the text. Students need to learn to be fluent readers.

The Technical Education Research Centers (TERC) Math program used by District 2 in New York was a constructivist math program that supported the idea students should focus on activities, processes and social interactions with other students to develop an understanding of math concepts (Ravitch, 2010). There were concerns from parents and teachers regarding students not learning basic computation skills needed for higher level math. For instance, parents of students in District 2 were concerned they would have to pay for tutors to help their students understand the math concepts.

Both programs were perceived to help District 2 achieve great gains on student achievement but, there are conflicting reports regarding those gains (Ravitch, 2010). Even with the conflicting reports regarding the gains in District 2, the district was regarding as an improved district. Alvarado moved on to become the Superintendent of

Schools in San Diego, California, where he implemented the same programs. As in New York schools, there was controversy in the San Diego schools. Teachers felt bullied into complying with the reading and math programs brought in by Alvarado. Additionally, there were concerns about the amount of money spent to implement the programs, money that could have been spent helping struggling students succeed (Ravitch, 2010).

The Balance Literacy and TERC math programs are used to illustrate how school improvement initiatives can become school reform initiatives. As one school implements a new program successfully, more schools want or are required to attempt to replicate the programs that may have brought the other school success. Balance Literacy and TERC Math have been utilized by multiple schools and districts across the nation in hopes that these programs would help other schools and districts increase student achievement (Ravitch, 2010). As Hargreaves & Shirley (2009) share, things that work locally do not necessarily work at scale, means school principals and teachers must work together to implement change.

Likewise there may be some initiatives such as professional learning communities (PLC) that originate as a school reform effort and then develop into a school improvement initiative. Hall and Hord (1987) shared, organizations do not change people do but working together teachers and principals can change schools. The components of a PLC are: share vision and mission, collaborative culture focused on learning, collaborative inquiry into best practice and current reality, action oriented, commitment to continuous improvement and results oriented (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008). In a professional learning community, teachers and principals must work collaborative to improve schools. DuFour, DuFour and Eaker (2008) caution that schools cannot just "do

PLC's", teachers and principals must be willing and committed to continuously improve. Additionally, as schools develop their PLC's, the PLC's may look different and function differently but it still must be about improving.

Historic Role of the School Principal

The role of the school principal has changed dramatically over the years. During the times of the one room schoolhouse, the teacher was responsible for curriculum, instruction, discipline and the physical management of the school, but as expectations of teachers grew more complex, the role of "head teacher" emerged to assist other teachers with managing students, the community, and the building (Brown, 2005). Not only did the head teacher assist other teachers, this person usually taught the upper grade levels as well.

Horace Mann (1957) listed the duties of the head teacher to include instruction in piety, justice, love of country, benevolence, sobriety, industry, frugality, chastity, moderation and temperance. Additionally, Mann (1957) proclaimed moral instruction was to be based on nonsectarian use of the Bible and common virtues, while political instruction was to include patriotic men. The head teacher was to be a man of good character that was to instill good characteristics into others. But, as our country's population grew and the number of students in our schools increased, it was becoming too much of a responsibility for the head teacher to teach and assist the other teachers (Brown, 2005). The role of the principal emerged as a position that did not teach students but as an administrative position to take care of the management of the school. In fact, it was at the beginning of the 20th century that a building administrator was found most the schools (Brown, 2005).

With westward expansion, immigration and urbanization, the number of schools increased and so did the purpose of schools. Previously, schools were designed to support the community in which the school was in but all schools needed to have a common purpose. Thus began the "common schools movement." It was hoped common schools would educate all students in the Protestant Anglo-American culture, reduce the tensions between social classes, eliminate crime and poverty, stabilize the political system and form patriotic citizens (Brown, 2005).

More than likely, the principal in the common schools was a male. Principals were expected to supervise, advise and instruct female teachers. Principals classified and disciplined students and enforced school safety to protect the health and morals of students. Principals were responsible for supervising and evaluating the janitors. They managed the school budget which included purchasing all educational and maintenance supplies. Parents sought the principal's advice and respected his decisions (Brown, 2005). The principal was well established and respected in the community and the role of the principal was increasing in status and expectations.

Around the time of Industrial Revolution, schools began to change. Scientific management was embraced in both work and school sectors. Schools were to become more efficient in how they ran and how students were educated. Schools were to prepare students for work. Additionally, students were to be prepared according to their abilities and destiny in life. The new vision of schools was of democracy in governance; a socially and economically efficient system (Tyack & Cuban 1995). The role of the principal changed from the role of evangelical, missionary and values broker to scientific manger and dignified social leader. Principals were responsible for planning, organizing, staffing,

directing, coordinating, reporting, and budgeting (Brown, 2005). Additionally, principal responsibilities included classroom visits and teacher rates.

As the result of World War II, the schools shifted away from the top-down scientific management style to a more democratic facilitative process of developing, supporting and coordinating cooperative group (Brown, 2005). Schools were beginning to promote democratic values. School administrators were encouraged to focus on the needs of teachers and students. According to Brown (2005), "people were important and their needs were real" (p. 2). Staff morale caused principals to shift from monitoring teachers to providing assistance to help improve instruction and student learning.

Not long after the launching of Sputnik, schools began to deal with racial tensions, substance abuse and teen pregnancy (Brown, 2005). These issues shifted the focus away from instruction. It is during this time that public confidence began to decline in schools and school accountability began to surface. School accountability caused principals to be less subjective in their supervisory roles and more clinical (Brown, 2005). School principals struggled to balance all the responsibilities required.

During the last twenty years, the school principal's position has continued to undergo huge changes. Principals have become instrumental in school designed improvement and school reform initiatives but at the same time the principal is a support to both teachers and students. "Principals are viewed as problem solvers, resource providers, instructional leaders, visionaries and change agents who manage people, implement policy, solved problems and provided resources to facilitate the teaching and learning process while guiding teachers and students toward productive learning experiences" (Brown, 2005, p.16).

Currently, the position of the principal is reportedly more difficult, time-consuming, and pivotal today than ever before (Jackson, 2005; Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003; Mazzeo, 2003). Today, the role of the principal has evolved to include many complex responsibilities. According to Lynch (2012), there are seven roles that a school principal must assume. First, as the manager of personnel, the principal ensures the hiring of highly qualified teachers and staff. Second, as the manager of students, the principal influences the moral character of students by implementing an effective discipline management system. An effective discipline management system creates an environment that fosters learning for all students (Colvin, 2007). Third, the principal influences state and community perceptions of the school. Fourth, the principal serves as the school advocate by securing resources and promoting the schools public image (Portin, 2004). Fifth, the principal manages the finances of the school by balancing the school budget, cutting costs and even raising funds. Sixth, the principal develops long-term plans that promote the school's vision, mission and goals (Portin, 2004). Finally, the principal manages the instructional and academic performance of the school. While each of these roles is complex in and of itself, nonetheless, the school principal must manage all of them at one time.

According to Mendels (2012), the Wallace Foundation has spent the last decade researching school leadership development and how school leadership can contribute to improved student learning. Educational research shows that most school variables, considered separately, have at most small effects on learning, but real payoffs come when individual variables combine to reach critical mass. Creating the conditions under which that can occur is the job of the principal. Mendels (2012) notes the Wallace Foundation

has "funded projects in 24 states and numerous school districts within them and the Wallace Foundation issued more than 70 research reports and other publications covering school leadership, on topics ranging from how principals are trained to how they are evaluated on the job" (p. 2). Through all their work, the Wallace Foundation has learned a significant amount about the role of the school principal, what makes an effective principal and how the principal can improve student academic achievement.

In The Wallace Report, Mendels (2012) identifies five key components of an effective school principal. First, it is important for the school principal to shape the vision of academic success for all students, based on high expectations. The principal must demand that all students, advantaged and disadvantaged students are being challenged at high levels. The goal is to close the achieve gap between both groups of students so that all are prepared for a demanding career. Secondly, the principal must create an environment "hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail" (p. 6). Students and teachers know the most important aspect of school is learning. And, learning must be protected for all students. The school must be a welcoming place for students and teachers. Thirdly, effective principals "cultivate leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision" (p. 6). Principals encourage, promote and share their leadership with others on campus. Teachers are empowered to lead and develop. Fourth, the effective principal "improves instruction by enabling teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their best" (p. 10). Principals are in teachers classrooms on a regular basis providing teachers with feedback regarding instruction. Additionally, the principal knows the professional development needs of their teachers and helps the

teachers to improve. Lastly, effective principals, "Manage people, data and processes to foster school improvement" (p. 12). The principal sets high expectations (plans), gets teachers on board (implements), encourages and supports students and teachers in meeting goals (supports), works to support struggling students with special needs (advocates), keeps parents informed of student and school goals (communicates), and keeps on top of test results (monitors) (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott & Cravens, 2007).

Leadership Styles

Just as the roles of the school principal have changed, so have the descriptions of leadership styles used to describe school principals. The traditional school principal's leadership style has moved from the authoritarian model to empowerment, participatory, transformational and distributed leadership (Taylor, Martin, Hutchinson & Jinks, 2007). Traditional views of leaders promoted the assumptions the school principal established the direction, held the decision-making capacity and was responsible for followers but these views are not necessarily accurate today. The principal's leadership style must be tailored to fit each individual leader's personality, experience and background (Greenleaf, 1996).

As principals moved away from the authoritarian form of leadership, principals worked to empower others in the building. By empowering teachers, principals were creating a sense of ownership and responsibility for outcomes of students at the bottom of the organization (Taylor, Martin, Hutchinson & Jinks, 2007). Teachers were able to contribute ideas and strategies to improve the school.

Such leadership styles as transactional leadership, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership have been areas of research on school leadership approaches that might more effectively facilitate instructional improvement in schools (Marks & Printy, 2003). Transactional leadership has been described as an exchange of reward for effort between principals and teachers (Bass, 1990). Teachers are rewarded or favored by the principal when the teacher actions are viewed positively by the school principal.

Unlike transactional leadership, transformational leadership focuses on appealing to the teachers' higher level of personal commitment to the organizational goals. The goal of transformational leadership is to transform people in mind and heart (Taylor, Martin, Hutchinson & Jinks, 2007). Followers move beyond their own self-interests to focus on the interests of the organization. Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) investigated the influence of transformational leadership in a large school district and found that it enhanced organizational conditions and student engagement. Student achievement increased because teachers were committed and encouraged to make changes to the system to improve the system. Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008) suggest a positive correlation between a principal's ability to focus their relationships with teachers, their work, and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning, with a greater influence on student outcomes.

Distributed leadership focuses on values of the organization but is not limited to the top of the organizational chart (Taylor, Martin, Hutchinson & Jinks, 2007). Any person in the organization may be the leader at any given time. Collaboration, intuition and relationships are strongly valued and cultivated in organizations that embrace distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002). According to Harris & Spillane (2008), principals

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engage in distributed leadership by delegating tasks and responsibilities to others in the building. Teachers take on leadership responsibilities in the building to encourage and support learning for both students and teachers.

The academic performance of all students is a major responsibility of the school principal. Parents and communities judge schools based on academic performance of the students but, Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom (2004) argues that principals must not just focus on student performance alone. Principals must also create positive environments, build strong relationships, secure resources, and develop teacher leadership. School principals cannot work in isolation; school principals must develop a system of support on campus to help balance their roles and responsibilities.

Influences of Change on the Role of the Principal

Over the last 30 years, there have been multiple school reform initiatives: standards based reform, restructuring reforms, instructional reforms, reforms in collaboration with external partners and school reform across entire large urban school districts (Cosner, 2009). But, "even after registering initial gains in test scores, even these tightly coordinated efforts seem to produce results that plateau after 2 years" (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006, p. 6). Additionally, there is abundant research on the role and importance the school principal plays in the implementation of school improvement and school reform (Cosner, 2009, Fink & Brayman 2006, Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Murphy and Datnow (2003) support principals are crucial to the success of comprehensive school reform by accepting and supporting reform, providing resources for reform and nurturing teacher involvement and leadership.

According to Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom's research (2004) on successful principals, it is evident successful principals are constantly communicating high expectations in all they do and say. Successful principals have a strong sense of agency, core sets of deeply held values and moral and ethical purposes and immense amounts of emotional understanding of themselves and others. Additionally, successful principals work long hours, are totally committed, have a clear well-articulated sense of purpose and individual identity, are able to build and sustain individual and collective capacity, are respected and trusted by the communities which they serve and, are persistently resilient (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Even though the school principal must be dedicated to the position and the school, there are many pressures school reform and school improvement place on the school principal. Because of the nature of the role of the principal, Lytle (2012) warns principals must be cautious and behave in conventional and unchallenging ways plus work within district policy when implementing change. Principals are expected to act as a buffer between teachers and the central office (Lortie, 2002) and as testing continues to dominate schools, "principals are being coerced into acting against their inclination to lead schools in a way to create the conditions that allow teachers to do good work, engage students and their parents, respond to community contexts and improve student outcomes" (Lytle, 2012, p.57).

Reflections can provide principals the opportunity time to slow down and evaluate the aspects of school improvement and school reform on campus (Shannon, 2007). It is important to distinguish reflection from thinking. Reflection is a disciplined and constructive process that allows principals bring in prior knowledge and experiences

to evaluate and plan for specific situations (Rodgers 2002). It also refers to using one's beliefs to interpret, to analyze, perform, discuss, or judge" (Kraft 2002). It is important to distinguish reflection from thinking. Reflection is a disciplined and constructive process (Shannon, 2007).

Additionally, principals may display critical assertiveness rather than compliance in response to the sustained externally imposed reform cultures in which they and their colleagues work. Principals must manage a number of agendas, without themselves becoming negative. These principals were able to maintain hope and hopefulness.

Traditionally, principals have been expected to have all the answers but due to the complexity of the principalship, principals must work smart and with others to solve campus issues (Lytle, 2012). To help the school principal maintain hope, Wright (2009), suggests principals implement reflections as a way to engage in personal knowing, political activism and sustainable practices necessary for school improvement. Reflections can provide the principal the opportunity time to slow down and evaluate the aspects of school improvement and school reform on campus.

Additionally, many school principals are beginning to collaborate with other principals in the same district or in other districts to create support systems or networks (Lytle, 2012). Principals are forming principal professional learning communities. Just as teachers are expected to open their doors to other teachers and share, principals must also open their doors to share with other principals.

Leadership Stability and Change

It is difficult to say that school reform in itself has influenced principals to exit the position. However, Fuller, Young, and Orr (2007) found in Texas, 50% of building leaders leave the principalship within five years and 75% leave within ten years. Additionally, gender seems to play a role as female principals leave their positions at a higher rate than males (Fuller, Young & Orr, 2007). Age also seems to play a role in the exit behavior of principals in Texas; principals under the age of 46 are more likely to stay in their building positions (Fuller, Young & Orr, 2007). Interestingly, principals serving low SES schools in Texas are more likely to be promoted to district level positions, which results in a greater chance that there is less experience at both the building level and the district level in urban schools (Fuller, Young & Orr, 2007).

In the Wallace Report, Mendels (2012) states, "a rule of thumb is that a principal should be in place about five to seven years in order to have a beneficial impact on a school" (p. 13). It has been found that higher principal turnover is linked to lower academic student performance on math and reading scores (Mendels, 2012). Schools which experience constant principal turnover have a difficult time focusing on any one school improvement effort long enough to make a difference. The public needs to remember school improvement will not happen overnight. "Principals need time to learn to lead schools with the support of reflection and coaching" (Lytle, 2012, p. 56).

Theoretical Framework: Career Theory

As the concept of work is continually undergoing a global change, employees must redefine their own vocational careers. Although employees may be able to adapt successfully to today's work environment, employees may struggle with the satisfaction

of their work output. This dissatisfaction has the potential to lead to other issues in their career development and their overall psychological welfare (Fouad, 2007).

It is believed all employees will go through multiple career stages throughout the employee's career. Career stage theories support that people progress through a series of distinct occupational stages during their careers and each stage is characterized by differences in work, attitudes and behaviors, different types of relationships, employees' needs, and aspects of work valued by the employee (Hall, 2002; Slocum & Cron, 1985; Super, 1992). Different employees at the same career stages attempt to satisfy their work related needs in similar ways (Gould & Hawkins, 1978; Greenhaus & Callanan, 1994; Mount, 1984). For example, late-career teachers have expressed negative attitudes toward school change across multiple school sites (Hargreaves, 2005; Huberman, 1993). Late-career teachers may be in the "been there, done that" mode. They may be tired and wanting to slow down in their careers.

It can be assumed that underlying these theories is the possibility of differentiating developmental change processes into observable career stages (Super, 1992). Thus, employees may have different goals and expectations at various times in the employee's career, and the employee's desire to reach out for more information, knowledge, expertise, and technical competence may vary according to the employee's career stage.

Empirical support for this assumption comes from a variety of studies that have used "career stage" as an independent variable (e.g., Aryee, Wah-Chay, & Chew, 1994; Mehta, Anderson, & Dubinsky, 2000; Oplatka, Bargal, & Inbar, 2001; Pogson, Cober, Doverspike, & Rogers, 2003; Sturges, 1999). Kakabadse, Kakabadse, and Myers (1998),

for example, found that organizational demographic factors, such as tenure and the age of managers, has considerable influence on shaping the philosophy, attitudes, and behavior of managers in organizations.

According to Hargreaves (2005), when educational change occurs or is attempted, not all teachers respond in the same way. The teachers' gender (Datnow, 2000), subject specialty and personal orientations to change (Hall & Hord, 1987), can all affect how teachers respond to specific educational changes and to change in general. "Among the most important of these influences is teachers' age, as well as their stage of career (Hargreaves, 2005). Oplatka (2005) notes as changes are imposed on teachers, teachers must reflect on what is best for students.

Levinson (1986), attempted to define life stages through his *Seasons of a Man's Life* and later *Seasons of a Woman's Life*. Both theories reflect predictable stages of adult life and explain how these stages interact with a person's career. Multiple educational researchers have used Levinson's work to help define and interpret the stages that teachers may go through in their careers (Huberman, 1993; Sikes, Measor & Woods, 1985). Even though teachers' careers may be viewed as predictable linear stages, their careers are nonetheless affected by many factors in life such as age, gender, cultural issues and time.

Career Stages and the Principal

In the abundant literature covering career stages of teachers, several models have been developed to explain the stages principals experience during their career cycle (e.g. Day & Bakioglu 1996; Ribbins 1999; Weindling 1999). Lynn, (2002) uses the terms: induction, competence building, and enthusiasm and growth, stability, and wind-down to

define the career stages of principals. In this study, principals could move back and forth between the stages. Additionally, Kremer-Hayon and Fessler's (1992) studies revealed that at a time of major educational reform, principals did not have to change positions in order to rejuvenate themselves or acquire new challenges. This coincides with the current situation in which schools prefer stability over change.

Huberman (1989) uses the terms: (a) career entry, (b) diversity and change, (c) stock-taking and conservatism and, (d) disengagement. While these stages may be more linear than other theories this theory identifies possible needs and supports the principal may encounter during his or her career.

Despite some differences in these models, a number of common key stages have been identified through which many school principals are perceived to move through during their careers. According to Oplatka (2010) there are four career stages of the school principal: the induction stage, the establishment stage, the maintenance vs. renewal stage and the disenchantment stage.

In the *induction stage*, a new principal undergoes socialization into the school and the role of principal. He or she has to navigate many issues and difficulties, such as attaining acceptance from teachers, parents and the community, learning the organizational culture, and establishing ways to overcome the insecurity of inexperience in order to develop a sense of confidence (Oplatka, 2010).

The *establishment stage* is characterized by growth and enthusiasm. By this stage, the principal begins to feel in control, competent and confident in his or her ability to manage the school. The principal experiences a transition from an ideal view to a realistic view of the school's reality and of the role of manager (Oplatka, 2010).

The *maintenance versus renewal stage* usually takes place in the midcareer period between ages forty and fifty-five. At this time, the principal may have very few opportunities for professional growth, and some principals may experience feelings of stagnation and disenchantment and a loss of enthusiasm for the role of principal. Other principals, however, may experience high levels of enthusiasm and job satisfaction, and feelings of self-fulfillment and self-renewal, these principals may seek new challenges in their roles and schools (Oplatka, 2010).

The *disenchantment stage* may be a characteristic of long-serving principals who feel they may be trapped and stagnating in a post, with nowhere to go. Sometimes, such principals slowly become autocratic in style, respond negatively to any change initiative, and experience decreased confidence and enthusiasm for their role as principal (Oplatka, 2010).

However, it is worth noting, career stages are not necessarily linear: Principals may move through the stages at different rates, and some principals may revert to previous stages (Hall, 2002). Career cycles are not always experienced in the same order, which means that for some employees, development in the profession or career may be linear, but for others, there are stages, regressions, dead-ends, and unpredictable changes of direction sparked by new realizations or for the school principal, a new reform effort (Hall, 2002). Some principals, then, may move backwards and forwards between stages during their career cycles for all sorts of reasons connected to personal considerations or social factors.

The career-stage perspective has not been without criticism, and there has been considerable debate about its usefulness and validity (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). It can be

argued that this view of career stages is based on rather static assumptions that make it hard to apply this perspective in practice. For instance, researchers have pointed to the lack of clear boundaries between the career stages and to unclear criteria for dividing one's career into stages (Wrightsman, 1988). From a different critical point of view, it is claimed that career-stage models fail to address issues of gender, discrimination, culture, and ethnicity, assuming that career stages are universal and cross-cultural (Cron, Dubinsky, & Michaels, 1988). Thus, in spite of the claims for the universality of these stages, career stages have been found to be more consistent with the culture of Western nations than with those of developing countries (Oplatka, 2010).

Career Stages and School Reform/School Improvement

When school reform and school improvement initiatives are undertaken at the school level, there is a certain amount of stress and anxiety that is expected. And, while there is considerable research on how school change affects the lives and roles of teachers (Hargreaves, 2005) little research has been done on how those same changes affect the life and role of the school principal.

Oplatka, (2010) and Mulford, Edmunds, Ewington, Kendall, Kendall, and Silins, (2009), researched school principals nearing retirement and most of these principals appeared to be disenchanted by school reform and school improvement. Principals nearing retirement had experienced many different changes on their campuses and were looking forward to an easy transition before retirement (Oplataka, 2004). Likewise, there is much research on the induction stage of the principal's career (Oplatka, 2010, Earley & Weindling 2007). Principals new to their position had little skill to manage change while they were still learning their roles (Oplatka, 2004). There is limited research on the mid-

career stage of the school principal. It is in this space, the researcher will focus. How do successful mid-career middle school principals negotiate school reform and school improvement initiatives?

Summary

We must be careful to remember that by challenging the status quo in schools and school districts and bringing in different school reform and school improvement initiatives, we are conducting experiments on schools and students. The results of the initiatives may determine educational procedure for years to come. Just as the enactment *of No Child Left Behind* in 2002, became a national focus, student learning and teacher accountability have now become the focus of schools across the country. However, with budgetary cuts coming from all directions, schools and districts are expected to make significant cuts to instructional programs and school personnel while continuing to provide a high quality education that will increase student achievement. Thus, due to limited resources, school administrators and teachers must work collaboratively and strategically to prioritize both teaching and learning on the school campus.

Over the years, the role of the school principal has become more demanding and complicated. The principal must be an instructional leader that understands curriculum and instruction (Brown, 2005). The principal is responsible for maintaining the safety and security of students and teachers on campus, ensuring an orderly learning environment. Additionally the principal must maintain the campus budget and even raise funds for programs that support student learning (Brown, 2005). The principal also shoulders the primary responsibility for fostering parent and community involvement to support student

learning. With all of these responsibilities, it is a wonder that any person would want to be a school principal (Brown, 2005).

Since the implementation of NCLB, the role of principal has become even more complicated. The goal of NCLB is for all students to be proficient in reading and math by 2014, but achieving that goal has added pressure to the principal's job. The school principal may lose his or her position if the academic performance of students drops on the campus. This added pressure makes it difficult for principals to remain at schools that have high numbers of minority students or students living in poverty because historically these student groups have performed lower than white and affluent student groups (Ravitch, 2010).

Even with the multiple job responsibilities and the changing job responsibilities due to school improvement and reform initiatives, there are successful principals that have learned to negotiate the wave of school change and still continue to improve the learning for all students on their campus. How do these principals negotiate the change and continue to improve their campus so that all students are successful?

III.   METHODS

Introduction

Chapter III explains the methods the researcher utilized to gather data during this study. The researcher studied how three successful mid-career middle school principals make meaning of school reform and school designed improvement initiatives on their campuses.

Research studies can be undertaken from a quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods approach. The approach to the research design is tied directly to the research problem and purpose (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Quantitative research is undertaken to test hypotheses, look at cause and effect, and make predictions. The findings of quantitative research are usually considered objective and generalizable due to the large sample size (Johnson & Christenson, 2008). Qualitative research is the process of collecting, analyzing and interpreting data by observing what people do and say. The findings of qualitative research are usually subjective and less generalizable due to the small number specific subjects of the study (Lichtman, 2006). A mixed methods approach would include both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A researcher may seek to view problems from multiple perspectives so as to enhance and enrich the meaning of a singular perspective (Plano & Clark, 2010).

This study was conducted as a qualitative study to develop an in-depth, context specific description of people and events. Qualitative research is suited to promote a deep understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Additionally, qualitative research assumes that realities are varied and numerous and are best understood through

interpretation of people's perceptions and interactions (Merriam 2009). Qualitative

research focuses on "local meaning" and examines events or phenomena in their natural

setting (Erickson, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994). By focusing on

"local meaning," I was able to study how three successful mid-career middle school

principals negotiate school reform and school improvement initiatives on their campuses.

Just as the research question shapes the type of research to be undertaken, the

theoretical perspective "provides a context for the process involved and a basis for its

logic and criteria" (Crotty, 2003, p. 66). Basically, there are different ways for viewing

the world and there are different ways of researching the world (Crotty, 2003). The

positivist view is linked closely to Auguste Comte, who believed that science could not

be speculated but must be grounded in direct experience (Crotty, 2003). Comte believed

in the scientific method and events being verified. Today, the positivist approach is

closely linked to empirical science and objective knowledge. Scientific knowledge can be

accurate and verifiable. "From the positivist's viewpoint, objects in the world have

meaning prior to, and independently of, any consciousness of them" (Crotty, 2003, p. 27).

The interpretivist view of the world is quite different from that of the positivist

view. Interpretivism is often linked to the thought of Max Weber, who suggests that, in

human sciences, we are concerned with understanding social phenomena. Interpretivists

view reality not as objectively determined, but rather socially constructed (Husserl,

1965). Thus, the interpretivist approach looks for culturally developed and historically

situated interpretations of the social life-world (Crotty, 2003). Additionally,

interpretivists believe there is no single, observable reality but multiple realities or

interpretations of a single event (Merriam, 2009). The assumption is that by engaging

people in their social contexts, there is greater opportunity to understand the perceptions people have of their own activities, and the multiple meanings of their work.

By its nature, interpretivism promotes the value of qualitative data in pursuit of knowledge (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994). In essence, this research paradigm is concerned with the uniqueness of a particular situation, contributing to the underlying pursuit of context rich description (Myers, 1997). However, while interpretive research is recognized for its value in providing context rich description, findings are often criticized by positivist researchers in terms of validity, reliability and generalization. Instead, qualitative researchers emphasize trustworthiness and transferability.

In quantitative research, the researcher is concerned with internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity (Rudestam & Newton, 2001) while the qualitative researcher uses trustworthiness to address the above procedures. According to Guba (1981) trustworthiness can be established by identifying the four following aspects (a) truth value; (b) applicability; (c) consistency; and (d) neutrality.

Truth value is established by the respondents not by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher accurately describes the research participants in the participants' words. The researcher will have the participants review the data analysis to make sure the research captured the participants' words and thoughts accurately.

Applicability is the degree to which the findings can be transferred to others (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through thick description of the case studies, the researcher will attempt to describe the participants experience so that the experience is completely understood.

Consistency is established by the ability of the study to be replicated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). There is more than one reality but there should be consistency so that another researcher could undertake a similar study and achieve similar results. Results may be different but there should be similar categories developed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher allowed categories to develop through the data.

Neutrality is established by keeping the findings solely a function of the participants, all biases, motivations and perspectives should be controlled as much as possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative researchers need to get close to the participants and the data but still be able to acknowledge their biases.

Transferability in qualitative research relates to generalization in quantitative research. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), transferability is the responsibility of the researcher, not the reader. The researcher must provide sufficient description to allow the reader to transfer the findings to another setting. This study provided an in depth description of the individual case studies.

In studying three successful mid-career middle school principals' perceptions of school improvement and school reform initiatives and how these principals negotiate school reform and school improvement initiatives with teachers on their campus, I utilized an interpretivist approach to the research.

Epistemology

The epistemology of a research design deals with the nature of knowledge, its possibility, scope and general basis (Hamlyn, 2000). It addresses the question of how we know what we know. Crotty (2003) identifies three epistemological approaches, objectivism, constructionism, and subjectivism although there are other approaches to

research, as well. Objectivism implies that meaning lies within the truth of an object. This approach is usually undertaken with quantitative research. In a subjective approach, "meaning does not come out of interplay between subject and object but is imposed on the object by the subject" (Crotty, 2003, p. 9). Within the constructionism approach meaning is not discovered, but constructed by the subjects. Epistemology helps ground the researcher's ability to identify, explain and justify the knowledge learned from the research.

This research was undertaken utilizing the approach of constructionism. Constructionism seeks to find how "truth or meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities of our world" (Crotty, 2003, p.8). Through this way of knowing, different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in the same experience. Crotty (2003) states that "there is no objective truth waiting for us to discover (p.8)", but reality is in the meaning we make with our experiences.

Successful mid-career middle school principals may have similar experiences in their careers, but each principal may construct different meanings through their own experiences. Similarly, as a mid-career middle school principal, my meaning of school change may be very different from the studied principals' meaning of school change. Because of the social nature of schools, it is important to pursue how school administrators interpret and construct meaning of school reform and school improvement initiatives and negotiate the initiatives with teachers on their campus.

Theoretical Perspective

According to Crotty (2003), "the theoretical perspective of a researcher provides a context for the process involved and a basis for the logic and criteria behind the research" (p. 66). Within the interpretivist paradigm, there are different perspectives such as hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism, and phenomenology. The same study could be undertaken from a different framework with different methodologies and different outcomes.

The hermeneutics perspective originated from the science and art of biblical interpretation. Hermeneutics underlies the theories, principals, rules and methods in the study of the bible. Additionally, hermeneutics can be used to interpret other pieces of literature, human practice, human events and human situations (Crotty, 2003). It is important to study how language is essential for understanding how people are situated and function together. It is difficult to separate text from the reader and the meaning. "The researcher must take into account the intentions and histories of the author and the relationship between author and interpreter, or the particular relevance of text to readers" (Crotty, 2003, p. 91) Hermeneutics links the shared meaning between communities and people. It allows for both practical judgment and common sense.

The symbolic interaction framework can be traced back to Max Weber's assertion that individuals act according to their interpretation of the meaning of their world. George H. Mead introduced symbolic interaction to American sociology in the 1920's (Crotty, 2003). Most of Mead's work was published after his death.

In Mead's explanation of symbolic interaction, there are two significant premises. The first premise is to indicate something is to extricate it from its settings, to hold it

apart, to give it a meaning (Blumer, 1969). This meaning becomes an object or symbol. It is important to note it is not a stimulus in which a person responds but a product of an individual's behavior. Instead of the individual being surrounded by an environment of pre-existing objects which play upon him and call forth his behavior, the individual constructs objects (meaning) on the basis of on-going activities (Blumer, 1969).

The second premise is the individual must construct or build up meaning. The individual has to take note of what he wants to do and how he wants to do it before he acts (Blumer, 1969). The individual must take into account the demands, the expectations, the limitations and the threats as they arise in situations. The individual is constructing meaning through this process. Consequently, the process of bringing these social realities into being is an ongoing process of interpreting and reinterpreting social realities. Unlike the natural work, social realities are meaningful by virtue of the very act that brings them into existence (Crotty, 2003).

The theoretical perspective underlying this study was phenomenology. Phenomenology is the study of the everyday life and the social actions of people. Phenomenology can be considered both a theoretical perspective and a methodology. The perspective of phenomenology originated with the work of Edmund Husserl. Husserl believed "phenomenology is not an empirical science but an *a priori* science, one that uses empirical facts only as illustrations" (Noddings, 2007, p. 70).

Phenomenologists want us to lay aside, the best we can, our own understandings of the phenomena and revisit the immediate experience of phenomena in order to develop new meanings (Crotty, 2003). This process is termed "bracketing" and it is used to define subjective features that can be found in multiple situations. Noddings (2007) uses caring

as an example of how there are multiple situations in which people demonstrate care for other people, but when the setting, remarks and feelings are set aside or bracketed, there are still characteristics of caring.

Phenomenologists are interested in the lived experiences of their subjects, and the phenomenological focus requires them to go directly "to the things they to turn toward phenomena which had been blocked from sight by the theoretical patterns in front of them" (Crotty, 2003, p.78). Husserl refers to this concept as "intentionality," which is the intersection between conscious subjects and their objects (Crotty, 2003). It is difficult to describe a subject separate from its object and the object separate from the subject.

Phenomenology encourages us to make meaning of our world. The researcher attempts to uncover the essence of an individual's experience (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, researchers are encouraged to focus on the deep, lived meanings that events have for individuals, assuming that these meanings guide actions and interactions (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The researcher attempts to describe the lived experience of the person as free as possible from theoretical or social constructs. The researcher is concerned with accessing the meaning of human phenomena as expressed through the individual.

Researchers must acknowledge their own biases when conducting research. It is common for a phenomenologist to become a co-creator of the narrative, generated typically through interviewing (Rudestam & Newton, 2001). As a mid-career middle school administrator, I was part of the implementation process of school reform and school improvement initiatives on a school campus. Therefore, I am likely to interpret my participants' perspectives partially through the lens of my own experiences of a school

principal responsible for implementing school change. However, my experiences are also shaped by my own social identities, and shaped by my experiences with the students and staff I work with. I am an Anglo female in my mid-forties. I have been in my current position as a middle school principal for 9 years. The student population on the campus is sixty percent Hispanic, thirty percent Anglo and ten percent African-American. Fifty four percent of the students qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch Program. The campus is ranked "Acceptable" by the Texas Education Agency.

I believed my role as a middle school principal helped me to develop a comfortable rapport they the participants. I understood the participants desire to improve their campuses but I continued to focus on asking the participants to clarify and give examples to explain their answers to the interview questions.

Methodology – Case Study

The methodology utilized in this qualitative research study will be that of a case study. The decision to "focus on qualitative case studies stems from the fact that this design is chosen precisely because researchers are interested in insight, discovery and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing" (Merriam, 2009, p. 42). Additionally, the case study approach was selected for its uniqueness, for what it did reveal about a phenomenon, knowledge to which we should not otherwise have access (Merriam, 2009, p. 46). The case study approach allowed the researcher the opportunity to become intimate with the person or event being studied to learn what makes this situation occur. Case study "comprises more detail, richness, completeness and variance" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 301) than other forms of methodology.

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Case studies may be utilized to provide a focused detailed account of one or more cases. According to Merriam (2009), "a case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 40). A bounded system is defined as the "what" of the research. The "case" is defined as the particular person or event being studied. The "what" of this research is the phenomenon of school improvement and school reform initiatives and the "cases" are three successful mid-career principals that will be studied.

Flyvbjerg (2006) notes that many people are concerned about the usefulness of case study as a scientific methodology and do not consider case study to be a sound research method. Flyvbjerb (2006), examined five common misconceptions about case study as a methodology to dispel the misconceptions of case study. The misconceptions about case studies are that: 1) "Theoretical knowledge is more valuable than practical knowledge" (p. 221), but case study can be more concrete and context specific in that it relates to human experiences; 2) "One cannot generalize from a single case; therefore, the single-case study cannot contribute to scientific development" (p.221), but case study does not have to be used to generalizes, one well developed example works well; 3) "Case study is most useful for generating hypotheses; whereas other methods are more suitable for hypotheses testing and theory building" (p. 221), but case study can provide an abundance of information from different perspectives and conclusions may be interpreted differently; 4) "The case study contains a bias toward verification" (p. 221), but case study holds no more biases than any other method of research; 5) "It is often difficult to summarize specific case studies" (p. 221), but a good case study should be read as a narrative.

According to Merriam (2009) there are three types of case studies: historical, observational and life histories. Historical case studies focus on the development of an organization over time. The researcher presents holistic description and analysis of the organization but presents it in from a historical perspective. Observational case studies rely on participant observations and both formal and informal interviews. Observational case studies are typically used to research a particular workplace or an aspect of the workplace. Lastly, life histories are case studies in which the researcher interviews one person to collect a first person story. The researcher utilized observational case studies to better understand the experiences successful middle school principals encounter in their daily lives.

Many researchers differentiate case studies by the type or function of the study and whether the case is a single site or multisite study (Merriam, 2009). Multisite case studies allow the researcher to collect and analyze data from several different sites. Each site must share common characteristics so the site can be bound together. By including more sites in a study, the researcher can build a strong case for the phenomenon under investigation. For this research, I conducted three studies of successful mid-career middle school principals. Each case will be described independently, followed by cross cases analysis to suggest possible patterns.

Research Design

Participants

The sample selection for this research was purposeful. According to Merriam (2009), purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the researcher wants to discover, understand and gain insight into a phenomenon. The purposeful sample allows

the researcher to learn the most about the phenomenon of how principals negotiate school reform and improvement on their campus in order to improve our understanding of how they implement and negotiate school reform and improvement initiatives.

The Texas Middle School Association recommended the participants for this research. Each of the principals has been the principal on their campus for a minimum of seven years. The number of years was chosen because school change takes at least five years to change a school (Dufour & Eaker, 1992). The principals are considered to be mid-career principals based on Oplatka's (2010) definition of career development. Additionally, the researcher considered these principals to be successful because their campus has been awarded a "Texas Middle School to Watch." This award focuses on four components of adolescent development: developmental responsiveness, academically challenging, empowering of students, parents and staff and social equity for all students, parents and staff (National Middle School Associations, 2003). These principals are the only three principals in Central Texas who schools have received the "Texas Middle School to Watch" award at the time of the study.

Following approval by the Internal Review Board of Texas State University (see Appendix B) each of the participants were provided detailed information on the purpose and background of this study. All participants acknowledged their voluntary participation by signing a consent form (see Appendix C). These signed documents have been secured along with the recorded interviews to protect the participants privacy and anonymity.

Trustworthiness

As English (2005) stated, "logically, it is the struggles of school leaders, not the interpretations of researchers who seek to understand practice, that matter most here" (p.

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xii). As an Anglo female middle school principal with nine years in the principalship, I wanted to learn how other middle school principals manage and negotiate school improvement and school reform initiatives. I was very interested in learning more about how other principals undertake this responsibility. Additionally, I was seeking ways in which I could improve my leadership skills and support other school principals in their positions.

According to Creswell (2013), there are ways to increase the trustworthiness of the research. To increase the trustworthiness of the research, I adhered to the following procedures.

1) I utilized triangulation, which is not a tool or strategy of validation, but an alternative to validation (Flick, 2002). Because all measurement is fallible and all theory revisable, multiple observations across multiple errorful sources afford a clearer perspective on a reality that always remains, to some degree, inaccessible (Trochim, 2006). To generate this form of triangulation, I interviewed, in addition to the school principal, two teachers selected by the school principal. These teachers had a trusting, honest and open relationship with the principal. These teachers acted as confidantes; individuals with whom the principal discussed confidential information and explored ideas and possibilities. The combination of multiple perspectives in a single study was best understood as a strategy that added rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to the inquiry (Flick, 2002). These differing perspectives helped to illuminate further dimension of the social reality being studied (Glesne, 2011).

2) I had the research participants review my transcripts and draft report to make sure that I am accurately recording and representing the participants' thoughts. I made appropriate edits based on the participants comments

3) I utilized a peer to review and debrief my transcripts, drafts and final report to receive additional input and reflection on my work.

4) I wrote rich, thick descriptions to allow the reader to feel as if they better understand the principal's role.

Information Collection and Procedures

To gather data, I reviewed current and past campus improvement plans to get an idea of campus priorities over the last three years. Campus improvement plans include student performance data by whole school and student groups. This data revealed the needs and initiatives to improve campus performance. Additionally, I was able to develop a timeline of campus initiatives. I clarified my interpretations of my findings with principals and teachers to validate my interpretations.

Interviews were conducted with campus principals and two principal selected teacher leaders from each campus. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect his or her identity. The interviews were utilized to: (a) gather data from the school principal regarding how principals make meaning of the changing cycle of school improvement and school reform on their campus; (b) understand how principals negotiate school improvement and reform initiatives with teachers; and (c) understand how career stage theory affects decisions about how to implement initiatives. There were two interviews with each principal that

lasted approximately one hour. The interviews occurred at a time and location agreed upon between the principal and the researcher. Both interviews were semi-structured.

Additionally, two teachers from each campus were interviewed jointly at a mutually agreeable time. The interviews were approximately an hour. These interviews were utilized to gather data on teachers' perceptions of how the principal (a) makes meaning of the changing cycle of school improvement and school reform initiatives; (b) negotiates those initiatives with teachers on campus and; (c) how career stage theory affects decisions made by the principal about the timing and implementation of those initiatives.

Interview Questions

In the first interview with the principals, I asked questions focused on learning about the principals and why they came to be a principal, how they came to their current position and why they have stayed in their current position. Additionally, I asked about what came to their mind when they tough about school reform and school improvement initiatives and to share how they present school improvement and school reform initiatives on the campus. Lastly, I asked them to share what was easy and difficult about implementing change initiatives on the campus.

In the second interview with the principals, I asked the principals to reflect back on their careers and share how they had changed. Additionally, I asked about what type of support and professional development they needed at this time in their career.

In the interviews with the teacher leaders, I asked the teachers to share about themselves and what role they have in implementing change on the campus. Additionally,

I asked the teacher leaders how they perceived the principal lead change initiatives on the campus.

Data Analysis

According to Glesne (2011), "data analysis involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so that you can figure out what you have learned and make sense of what you have experienced" (p. 184). The researcher audio recorded and transcribed all interviews. The data was analyzed simultaneously as the data was collected. This allowed the researcher to learn from the data and fine tune the study as the research continued.

Transcribed interviews underwent a line-by-line analysis. Line by line analysis allowed the researcher to be immersed in the data and discover concepts (Glesne, 2011). Concepts emerged into themes. I identified three themes in each case study. These themes were identified after looking for common words used in the line by line analysis.

Once themes were developed from each case, the researcher went back to the transcripts and identified similar themes across all three themes. Second, the new themes were reviewed to determine which research question the theme best answered. Third, the secondary research questions were answered from the identified themes. Lastly, the primary research question was answered from the identified themes.

Summary

This qualitative study was from the interpretivist's paradigm. The epistemology of the study was from the constructionism approach. Meaning was constructed from the interviews conducted by the researcher with three successful mid- career principals and with two teachers selected by the principals. Additionally, the research participants'

campus improvement plans were reviewed to determine campus priorities over the last three years.

The theoretical perspective underlying this study was phenomenology. The research was looking at how successful mid-career principals made meaning of school change and how they negotiated school change with teachers on their campus. Each principal was considered one case study. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Transcriptions were coded and categorized to develop themes. The themes were utilized to write rich descriptions of each case study.

IV.   DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Chapter IV reviews the data collected during the interview process. In addition to the three successful mid-career middle school principals who were interviewed to determine how they make meaning of school improvement and school reform initiatives on their campus, I also interviewed two trusted teacher leaders, identified by the principals, to triangulate the data. The data are presented in this chapter as three separate case studies. First, demographic information for each principal's campus is used to construct a contextual image for each case. Second, principals are introduced along with the teacher leaders. Third, Campus Improvement Plans (CIPs) are reviewed. Fourth, themes identified from the data are shared. Lastly, data regarding career development and the school principal are presented.

Case Study One: Douglas Middle School
Demographics

Douglas Middle School is part of a rapidly growing suburban school district in Central Texas located in an area comprised of older established homes, and a number of apartment complexes. Recently, the State constructed several toll roads around the school making the commute to the nearby city much quicker and easier. There are several businesses in the area ranging from a local childcare center to large national chains such as Wal-Mart and Target. There is also a large technology company located across the highway from the school, but within the boundaries of the district. The demographics of the neighborhood match those of the school.

According to the Texas Education Agency, Douglas Middle School serves approximately nine hundred fifty students in grades six through eight. Of the students

attending Douglas Middle School, 43% are economically disadvantaged and 4% are considered to have Limited English skills. There are 73 teachers at the school; five teachers are African American, 14 Hispanic, 51 Anglo, one American Indian and two teachers that identify themselves as Two or More Races. Douglas Middle School would be considered a Title I campus due to the school's high number of economically disadvantaged students, but the school district has made the decision to focus all its Title I efforts on students attending other schools in the district. The district made this decision because the campuses on the other side of the district serve an even higher concentration of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch and English language learner students This is not to say that the school district does not support Douglas Middle School because it does provide additional funding to the campus, but those funds are simply not designated as Title I funds. According to Texas Education Agency, 14% of Douglas Middle School's students are African American, 28% are Hispanic, 42% are Anglo, less than 1% is Native American, 7% are Asian, 2% are Pacific Islander, and 6% identify themselves as belonging to Two or More Races.

The State of Texas rated Douglas Middle School as "Met Standard" on the state's new accountability system, and awarded the school two distinctions for student academic achievement in 2013 (TEA, 2013). The first distinction was "Achievement in Reading/ ELA (English Language Arts)." This award is given to schools whose students achieve more than the expected progress on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) (TEA, 2013). The minimum expected gains on the Reading Test were 17%. Further, 22% of Douglas Middle School's students made more than the expected gains on the reading portion of the STAAR Test. The second distinction

awarded to Douglas Middle School was "Top 25 Percent Student Progress." This award is given to schools whose students score in the top 25% of comparable schools on the State's progress measure (TEA, 2013). While the state considers an acceptable progress measure to be 20%, Douglas Middle School came in at 43%.

Principal One: Jamie

Jamie is an Anglo woman in her mid-forties who was born and raised in Southeast Texas. The schools in her hometown were forced to integrate by the U.S. Department of Education when Jamie was in elementary school. She remembers her mother moving the family to an all-white community during integration. Jamie was embarrassed by her mother's decision, and did not understand the "big deal" with school integration. Jamie attended the local university in her hometown where she was "exposed to all different colors of people" in college which she found interesting. She remembers staring at an African American male student in class wondering "why was integration bad?"

Jamie has been the principal at Douglas Middle School for seven years. She began her career in education as a high school English teacher in Southeast Texas, followed by a move to Houston. These positions were followed by a move to Central Texas where she worked as a high school English teacher in a rapidly growing suburban school district.

Once Jamie made the decision to go back to school to earn her master's degree and principal certification, she resigned from teaching so she could attend graduate school full-time. While pursuing these academic credentials in Central Texas, Jamie was asked to cover at the previous high school where she had been an English teacher for an assistant principal (this individual was going to be out for the school year due to a motorcycle accident). Jamie eagerly agreed because the job was at her former school and

she knew many of the students, teachers and families. At the end of the year, the assistant principal returned to his administrative position. Encouraged by this experience, Jamie applied for several other vacant assistant principal positions at the school. And, although Jamie interviewed for these positions, she was not selected. The principal told Jamie it just was "not her time yet." Jamie was "hurt because I did not get any of the jobs but I knew I was ready."

Nonetheless, this experience was invaluable because Jamie now knew what she wanted to do, so she continued her search for an assistant principal's position in Central Texas. Happily, Jamie found a job in her current district, working as a high school assistant principal. After serving at this level for seven years, and with the support of the high school principal, Jamie applied for the principal's position at one of the middle schools in the district. As it turned out, there were two middle school principal openings and Jamie was invited to interview for both positions. She had "never considered leaving the high school feeder pattern" she was working in but she accepted the position at Douglas Middle School, a campus in a different feeder pattern within the school district. The principal's position at Douglas Middle School is her first as head principal and she has now been in the position for eight years.

Teacher Leaders

Jamie identified two trusted teacher leaders at Douglas Middle School to help with data triangulation (Glesne, 2011; Trochim, 2006). Both are part of the Douglas Middle School Leadership Team. Jamie asserts both teachers "challenge her to improving her leadership skills" and they play a major role on the campus, making significant contributions to the success of both students and teachers.

The first teacher, Mary, is an Anglo woman in her late forties. She has been at Douglas Middle School for five years. Before coming to Douglas Middle School Mary worked at an "affluent elementary school" in the district. She was originally hired as a literacy coach, but that position was dissolved because of funding. Mary believes her position "to be important to the overall success of the campus." Mary added Jamie has been "creative with the campus budget" to help maintain the literacy coach position which is now funded from campus allocations rather than district funds. Mary provides support for teachers with curricular and instructional issues. Mary has stayed at Douglas Middle School because she feels she is "needed by the students and teachers and she finds her work to be rewarding."

The other teacher Frank, an Anglo male, is in his mid-fifties. Frank has worked for the district for several years at the high school level. Prior to teaching, he worked as an executive in a large company. He has a "significant amount of management training." He decided to leave his position in corporate management because he "wanted to help others." He has earned a name for himself in the district for his "successful work with at-risk students." He teaches one eighth grade math class and then spends the rest of his day supporting the other math teachers on the campus. Additionally, Frank lives "very close to Douglas Middle School and all three of his children attended school here." Frank added he has "buy in at Douglas Middle School because his children did well here and he wants to pay the school back for his children's success."

Jamie and her trusted teacher leaders have a strong commitment to the students and teachers at Douglas Middle School. They want to be a "part of the success" at the

school. Three themes emerged from their data about how Jamie made meaning of school improvement and school reform initiatives on the campus.

Campus Improvement Plan

The campus leadership at Douglas Middle School is comprised of one teacher at each grade level, the school counselors, one teacher from each department, and the school principals. The vision and mission of Douglas Middle School is to "promote a positive and progressive community of learners and be an example of educational excellence for our community". The Campus Improvement Plans (CIPs) for the last three years from Douglas Middle School were reviewed. The intent of the CIP is to improve student performance on the state assessment. Additionally, there is a focus on encouraging all eighth grade students to complete at least one high school credit during their middle school years. Jamie explained how it is important for the students at Douglas Middle School to have a "jump start on high school and hopefully the students will have some confidence in their skills before going to high school." Jamie did not disclose any other information about the CIP, which appears to function for her more as a managerial document than a significant aspect of how she understands and implements school reform and improvement.

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Case Study One Themes

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Three themes were identified in the interviews with Jamie and her teacher leaders: a) acceptance of change, b) fit and match, and c) learning. Each theme is developed in the following section.

Theme: Acceptance of Change

The first theme identified from Jamie's data on how she makes meaning of school reform and school improvement initiatives was accepting the change. As shared earlier, school reform and school improvement are difficult processes to lead because they require administrators and teachers to do something different from the way they are accustomed to doing it. Administrators and teachers do not always accept change but Jamie does, going so far as to say she "embraces change." Jamie shares a view similar to that of City, Elmore, Fiariman and Teitel's (2009) stance on change. They point out that if we continue to do the same things we have always done, we will continue to produce the same results. According to Jamie, "our kids are constantly growing, changing and evolving, so we have to constantly be growing, changing and evolving too."

For Douglas Middle School, the demographic make-up of the students has been a significant area of change since Jamie came to the campus eight years ago. The number of African American students has steadily increased and a relatively new category, Two or More Races has also increased significantly. Jamie is concerned not all teachers accept and appreciate the changes in student demographics. The diverse contexts and needs of the students must be recognized and teachers must understand they "cannot keep teaching the same way they taught even five years ago let alone 20 years ago." Teachers must be responsive to student differences and needs and make adjustments to serve the students at Douglas Middle School like the focus of getting all 8th grade students to get at least one high school credit in middle school.

Jamie shares her concern about the increase of African American students and students identified as Two or More Races. Noting her own upbringing in Southeast

Texas, Jamie speaks of her "vivid memories of African American students being treated differently than Anglo students." She wants all students to have a fair and equal opportunity to be successful. School should be the place that accepts and embraces all students (National Middle School Association, 2003), and in the midst of evolving demographics within a school this acceptance often means changing practice and, even more fundamentally, beliefs (Guerra & Nelson, 2009).

Jamie feels she is very fortunate to work in her current school district but again, she is grateful for the experiences she gained from each of the districts she worked in. She believes her current district has plenty of resources to serve all the students. This financial viability makes it easier for her to accept the challenges of change because many "changes must have some financial backing to get started." Jamie added "if I need 500 calculators for the students, the district will get me 500 calculators to support my students." This illustrative statement underscores the fact that Jamie knows she could have "resources rapidly" if she needed them for her students. She believes having the support of Central Office makes it easier to embrace and accept change. Having resources available to help support change makes implementation easier (Ravitch, 2010).

Currently, Jamie's school district is focusing on "critical thinking skills, student and teacher collaboration and 21st Century Skills (communications, collaboration, creativity and citizenship)," which are "new ways of classifying students' skill development." Working in her district, Jamie believed these foci were the "norm for student skill development" but conversations with administrators in other school districts opened her eyes to the fact that her current district is on the "cutting edge in helping students' development critical skills." Two years ago, Jamie was "heavily recruited to

lead a low performing high school." This proved to be the turning point when she realized how much her district was on the cutting edge. The school district recruiting her did not have the same level of central office support for principals charged with implementing change. This left Jamie with the impression there was very "limited human capital" in the district. Further, it had the reputation of "embracing the status quo" so it was difficult for the district to implement change. Jamie added the "the district needed to be more committed to change and innovation" for her to make a move. Therefore, acceptance of change is important to Jamie not only for her personal leadership but also as a signifier of the type of district context within which she is willing to work and believes she can be effective at the campus level.

Likewise, Jamie discussed how technology can be "scary" for some teachers while our students are very comfortable with technology. The teachers must be willing to learn about and utilize different types of technology. "It is even okay for the students to lead technology change in the classroom" but teachers must try to keep up.

The teacher leaders from Douglas Middle School support Jamie's views on her ability to accept and embrace change. The teacher leaders know "Jamie is constantly looking for ways to improve student learning." Mary shared, "Jamie will attend workshops with us and bring information back to the school to share with other teachers."

Frank "enjoys the challenge of working" for Jamie because Jamie pushes teachers to do what is right for students and encourages teachers to accept change because the "change will help improve student academic success." Frank, shared, "I live in the neighborhood by the school. And I walk in the neighborhood, I want to make sure I

support Jamie and I can communicate the changes we are making to improve student learning."

According to Mendels (2012), one of the key components of an effective school principal is for the principal to demand that all students, advantaged and disadvantaged be challenged with high expectations. Jamie is able to challenge both teachers and students by accepting and embracing changes in student demographics. Additionally, Jamie accepts and embraces school improvement and school reform initiatives because she knows she has the resources to challenge the status quo and get even better results than before.

Theme: Fit and Match

The second theme identified from Jamie's data was fit and match. Mendels, (2012) asserts the school principal must share the vision and mission of academic success for all students. With so many initiatives claiming to improve student performance, it is difficult for schools, teachers and administrators to choose what is best for their schools and their students, but Jamie is very focused on the initiatives she brings to the school. She shares she is "very selective and any change initiative being considered must support the campus vision, mission, values and goals." Additionally, she uses data to help focus her decision-making on which school improvement and school reform initiatives will "add value" to Douglas Middle School. For example, last year she "noticed writing scores were low." As she reflected on why the data were low, she "talked to her English Language Arts teachers." They told her the English department was "only focusing on writing in seventh grade." Because the sixth grade did not require students to do much writing, they really only had one year to prepare for the seventh grade writing test. Based

on both the data and her conversations, Jamie decided the school was going to "implement writing across the curriculum." Writing across the curriculum encourages teachers to provide students with opportunities to write in all classes, across all levels.

As for school reform initiative directives from Central Office, Jamie is expected to implement those reforms on her campus, but she is still "very cautious about them." She looks at the campus data to see if the "school's data support the implementation of the district's initiative." Additionally, the "initiative has to fit with the campus vision, mission, values and goals." If Jamie does not see a fit with the campus vision and mission, she "goes a little slower with implementation." She "does not want to overwhelm teachers and she wants to get buy in from them." Jamie shares one of her favorite quotes from Maya Angelou (1997), "If you don't like something, change it. And it you can't change it, change your attitude."

Jamie cautions she must "know her teachers well" in order to successfully implement change. She gets to know the teachers at Douglas Middle School by being in the teachers' classrooms, attending PLC's and professional development with the teachers. Some teachers embrace change like she does but others hope to "wait it out." By knowing her staff's strengths, weaknesses and needs, she is able to support and encourage change more effectively. Sometimes she even has to "give a little push" to get some teachers to implement change.

The teacher leaders feel Jamie is very "driven by excellence." Jamie has high expectations of herself and those around her. The teacher leaders know Jamie would "never" implement any form of change without first evaluating how the initiative supports the campus mission and vision. Mary believes Jamie "buffers the campus from

some central office initiatives" because sometimes when the teacher leaders are at district level meetings, they hear others talking about initiatives "being pushed" on their campus by central office that the Douglas Middle School teachers have never even heard of. On those occasions, Mary has asked Jamie about these initiatives and Jamie's response was "I just did not feel it was for us."

Portin (2004) notes, the principal must develop long-term plans that promote the school's vision, mission and goals. The teacher leaders stated "Jamie is cautious of the initiatives she brings to the campus." She keeps her "focus on the initiatives that will support the campus vision and mission and improve student learning."

Theme: Learning

The third theme identified from Jamie's data was learning. DuFour, DuFour & Eaker (2008) declares education is about life-long learning. While Jamie says, "I am all about change" she is really all about learning—for her students, her teachers, and herself. She has high expectations for herself and those around her. Jamie's "passions" are school reform and school improvement because they are really about "learning and helping students." Jamie wants the students at Douglas Middle School to have the "greatest learning experience possible." An example of this can be found in the school's Campus Improvement Plans where there is a strong focus on preparing students for high school. The school is committed to helping every student obtain at least one high school credit before entering high school. Jamie believes "almost every one of their eighth grade students is enrolled in a high school credit course." She wants the students to be "ahead of the other middle schools' students by having high school credit in middle school."

Even with a strong commitment to academic excellence, Jamie wants "students to have fun while learning." Douglas Middle School has implemented an enrichment program that offers students other learning opportunities at school such as a "book club, Frisbee golf, art and knitting." The enrichment program is fun for students and teachers alike. It provides learning time "not focused on academics." When Jamie walks the halls during enrichment time, she "hears laughter coming from the classrooms." The laughter and fun is not just from the students but from the teachers too. Students and teachers are learning in different ways. Jamie asks herself, "Why can't learning always be this fun?"

The previous principal at Douglas Middle School was "very much about accountability" however, as Ravitch (2010) points out; there is more to schools than high stakes testing. Jamie "supports accountability" but she is more "concerned about student learning." She believes "if students are learning in their classes then students will do well on the state assessment." She wants to "empower" students and teachers to focus on their learning and not worry about the "test."

Jamie supports teacher learning, as well. As a campus principal, she has made the commitment to "support teacher learning in order to maximize student learning." In trying to maximize teacher learning, Jamie has tried different ways to utilize the teaching units at Douglas Middle School so as to give accomplished or master teachers free time to work with other teachers in their classrooms. Both Mary and Frank, the teacher leaders in this study, are two such teachers. Jamie makes sure these two teachers have "time to support other teachers and improve all teachers' learning" at Douglas Middle School. Jamie encourages teachers to "[attend] professional development and she attends with them." These are examples of Jamie's commitment to teacher learning and development.

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As a doctoral student, Jamie enjoys "learning and trying new things." Recently, she had to get a new computer. At first she was concerned about having to learn new programs, but once she bought her new computer that concern changed to excitement about all the new programs she was going to get to learn. Jamie "loves to learn." When asked why she has not left Douglas Middle School for a new school, Jamie responded, "I still come to school every day because I learn something each day."

The two teacher leaders at Douglas Middle School support Jamie's claim that she priortizes learning. Frank believe Jamie's "main goal is student learning." Also, the teacher leaders know Jamie supports her teachers they learn new ways to help their students become more successful. The teacher leaders expressed appreciation for Jamie's commitment to teacher learning. Mary reveled "Jamie attends training with us. Not many other principals in the district attend with the teachers." The teacher leaders consider Jamie as a teacher too, focused on learning.

Career Development

Jamie became an assistant principal at the age of thirty. She considered herself young and shared it was "difficult learning to supervise older teachers." Jamie reflected on how, at the beginning of her career, she was an "authoritative leader." She felt she had to be authoritative to "earn the respect" of the veteran teachers. With experience, though, Jamie has learned to be a "situational leader." Jamie added "it is easy for me to connect with both veteran and new teachers." As a more experienced leader, she is able to step back and evaluate individual situations and use the most appropriate type of leadership based on each set of circumstances. Jamie knows "experience has been a good teacher" in her role as a campus principal.

Jamie is an established principal on her campus but because of her age, she is considered to be in mid-career. Jamie feels she is "not near retirement" because she "loves her job and has much more to offer others still." It is not typical for a school administrator to remain in one position for eight years. When asked why she remains in her role, Jamie shared "I have a passion for my job." Jamie enjoys her position as principal at Douglas Middle School. She knows she is "learning every day." Jamie "learns from her students, teachers, parents and community members." Additionally, Jamie knows she "still contributes to the school." She believes she "helps Douglas Middle School be a better place for the students every day."

As Jamie shared earlier, she is focused on learning for the teachers, the students and for herself. When asked about her own professional development needs, Jamie laughed and said she has "none, because as a doctoral student, I am overwhelmed with learning already." Jamie shared "I want the district to look at the "disconnect between research and practice." If research tells us something works, then "why are we not trying to replicate the research and get the results in our schools?" Additionally, Jamie wants to learn more about the "achievement gap between student groups and how to work with diverse groups to improve academic focus."

Jamie would like more individualized central office support. She feels "the role of school principal has become so overwhelming" that other district departments must help the campus to be successful. Jamie wishes central office would "ask her what the school needs instead of making assumptions about the school." Jamie would like to see central office evaluate their role in supporting campuses and then make changes to support

campuses individually. "Each campus is different and each campus needs a different type of support."

When Jamie was asked about how her age, race and gender affected her ability to implement change, she had to reflect on the question. Jamie feels she is at a great spot in her career. She has a significant amount of personal experience to share. I have a "great wealth of experience. I have raised three children and I understand what our parents are going through." She knows "it can be hard to understand middle school students." Jamie was also quick to add she is not too old either. She can "still get out there and dance with the students."

As for her race, Jamie is very sensitive to diversity. She was raised in a poor area in Southeast Texas and was aware of racial tension in her community. Jamie shared a story of being in elementary school when schools were forcibly integrated. Balls were numbered with a one and a two. She and the other students had to pick a numbered ball from a bowl to learn which school they would attend. Jamie and her sister were assigned to different elementary schools. Jamie says her mother was furious about this and the family moved to a smaller all white community nearby. While this experience was confusing to Jamie at the time, it has subsequently helped to solidify her belief in equal rights and access for all students. Jamie concluded she wants "all students to have an equal opportunity to learn because an education can make a difference for the students."

As for Jamie's gender, she believes it is "just part" of her. She feels it is somewhat "easier for female teachers and administrators because they are seen as moms, and students and parents accept them into these roles." Jamie does worry about the male

students on campus having enough male role models in school. She wants her students to have a balance of male and female teachers in their educational careers.

The teacher leaders agreed with Jamie that her age is "perfect" for the parents at Douglas Middle School. Jamie has the ability to connect with parents and to help support parents with their students. Mary believes Jamie "leads by her story." Jamie was raised by a single mom in a poorer part of Southeast Texas. Additionally, Jamie was a young parent and is perceived as being able to empathize with the parents at Douglas Middle School. The teacher leaders shared Jamie's bottom line is success for all students.

Case Study One Summary

Douglas Middle School is a large suburban middle school located in Central Texas. Jamie, the principal at Douglas Middle School, has been in her position for seven years. This is Jamie's first principal position. The three themes identified from the interviews with Jamie and her teacher leaders are: a) acceptance of change, b) fit and match, and c) learning. Jamie believes it is important to "accept and embrace change." Without change, we will get the same results we achieved last year. Jamie works to focus change at Douglas Middle School so as to support the vision and mission of the school and to not overwhelm teachers. Lastly, Jamie believes "change is all about learning and learning is the main focus of school." The three themes of Jamie's case study will be analyzed with the themes from the other case studies in this research to develop a theory of how successful mid-career middle school principals make meaning of school improvement and school reform initiatives.

Case Study Two: James Middle School

Demographics

James Middle School is located in a mid-sized rural school district in Central Texas. This district is one of the fastest growing in the state. The campus has been open for eight years. It is located on the eastside of the school district. On the north side of the school, there is a large master planned community where many working families live. Open fields, populated by randomly placed trailer homes, surround the other three sides of the school. Just recently, several businesses, such as Lowe's and an AT&T store, have opened near the school. Additionally, a new hospital has opened about five miles from the school.

According to the TEA (2013), James Middle School serves approximately 668 students in grades six through eight. Of the students attending James Middle School 53% are economically disadvantaged and 12% are considered to have Limited English skills. In 2009-2010, the TEA listed the student population as 70% Hispanic, 23% Anglo, and 5% African American. There are 40 teachers at James Middle School. Of these, 3% are African American, 33% are Hispanic and 64% are Anglo. Further, 39% of the staff is male and 67% of the staff is female.

James Middle School is a Title I campus because of the high number of students considered economically disadvantaged. Since James Middle School is designated a Title I campus, the school receives additional funds from the federal government for school programing. The school uses the additional funds to improve their teacher to student ratio.

The State of Texas rated James Middle School as "Met Standard" on the state's new accountability system, and awarded the school one distinction for student academic achievement in 2013. The distinction is "Achievement in Reading ELA." This award is given to schools whose students achieved more than the minimum expected progress on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) of 17%. James Middle School's students exceeded the expected gains on the reading portion of the STAAR Test by 1%, coming in at a total of 18%. The school received no other distinctions. James Middle School's progress measure was 37%, higher than the state's acceptable progress measure of 20%.

Principal Two: Maria

James Middle School has been open for eight years and Maria has been the principal since the school opened. Maria was born and raised in Central Texas. She received her undergraduate and graduate degrees from the university in her hometown, and began her teaching career as a second grade teacher, in a neighboring school district. After teaching for about five years, she was encouraged by her principal to teach in a tested grade level so she could "experience the pressures that teachers of tested areas encountered." Maria moved to a fifth grade bi-lingual classroom for one year. She "loved working in bi-lingual education." It was "hard but rewarding." The students Maria worked with spoke primarily Spanish and had very little English language skills. Maria is "not bi-lingual," but she had her English as a Secondary Language (ESL) certification. Maria knew the State assessment would be how "others would evaluated her effectiveness as a teacher so she worked very hard to get her students to pass the State assessment" because she wanted to be seen a "good teacher."

Maria has a strong family support network and her parents encouraged her to return to school for a graduate degree. Maria was not sure what type of degree she wanted to pursue. She began a master's program in bi-lingual education but stopped because she knew she did not want to continue teaching bi-lingual education forever. She considered going back to school for a counseling degree but her parents told her she would be wasting her time in counseling. Finally, she decided to pursue her principal certification. One of the reasons Maria decided on administration was because her former principal was "ineffective and stifling." Maria knew "she could be more effective" and believed she could "positively influence change as a principal."

Maria's first position in administration was as an assistant principal at a middle school in her current district. The district she was working in was a rapid growth district. The middle school was "so crowded," the district moved the eighth grade students to the high school. Maria moved to the high school to supervise the eighth grade students. When James Middle School opened, Maria was named as principal. This is her first principal position. She has remained at James Middle School because she feels "she has birthed the school. It is her baby." Maria knows she may one day leave but for now she feels there is "still much work to do" at James Middle School.

Teacher Leaders

Maria identified two trusted teacher leaders at James Middle School to help with the data triangulation. The first teacher leader Maria identified was Susan, an Anglo woman in her late twenties. Susan has been teaching for eight years. She was a first year teacher the year James Middle School opened and was part of the founding faculty at James Middle School. Susan is an English Language Arts teacher. In this capacity, she

has facilitated a number of initiatives, including a recent effort to implement writing across the curriculum. Susan's participation in a master's program has confirmed her beliefs about Maria. She believes Maria is a "great principal" because of the structure and support she gives to teachers. Susan knows Maria puts "students first in all decisions and leads with what is best for the students." Susan could not see herself working for a different principal.

The second teacher leader is Elizabeth. Elizabeth is a Hispanic female in her mid-forties who has been in education for twelve years. When Maria first identified Elizabeth for the study, Elizabeth was teaching special education classes and was the special education department chair at James Middle School. Since that time, Elizabeth has become the assistant principal at the school. Elizabeth and Maria met when they were fifth grade bi-lingual teachers together. Elizabeth helped to open James Middle School eight years ago as a teacher, and became the instructional strategist at James Middle School. At one point she was moved to an elementary school when the district shifted the instructional strategist positions, but was able to come back to James Middle School the following year as a special education teacher and department chair. Elizabeth believes in Maria and what Maria does for students. Elizabeth added, "Maria would do just about anything to help the students be successful. She tutors students, takes them home and even buys the student school supplies."

Campus Improvement Plan

The Campus Improvement Plan for James Middle School is developed by the campus leadership team. The leadership team is comprised of teachers from all the core departments (math, science, social studies and language arts), special education,

electives, the school counselor and the school administrators. The mission of James Middle School, "a dedicated family of learners, is to guide students in developing the tools necessary to fulfill their aspirations, meet life's challenges, and enrich their community through supportive relationships and high expectations".

The Campus Improvement Plans (CIPs) for the last three years from James Middle School were reviewed. The main foci of the CIPs are to: a) improve student performance on the state assessment, b) utilize that data to inform instruction, c) implement Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBISs), and d) implement the TEKS Resource System (campus curriculum). Maria confided, "I know I am evaluated on the success of students on the STAAR test. Students have to perform well." To help monitor student performance during the year, "Teachers must use formative assessments in their classrooms to adjust their instruction to help students achieve academically." Likewise, "teachers must implement PBISs to develop a safe classroom for learning." Maria did not elaborate on the CIPs but she did share about initiatives in the CIPs.

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Case Study Two Themes

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Three themes were identified from the interviews with Maria and her teacher leaders. The themes are: a) focus on data, b) relevance, and c) time. Each theme will be discussed in the next section.

Theme: Focus on Data

The first theme identified from Maria's data on how she makes meaning of school reform and school improvement initiatives was her focus on data. Mendels (2012) found that principals must develop systems to manage data in order to foster school improvement. Maria utilizes campus data to provide the rationale for the changes

needing to occur in the classroom or on the campus to improve student performance. Maria has a reputation for being "an expert on using data to provide focus in the classroom and on the campus." She has given many presentations at local, state and national conferences on this topic. Maria shared she constantly asks herself and others on the campus "what does the data tell you that you need to focus on?" She believes it is important for her to spend "time by herself" reviewing the campus data to determine the needs. Once Maria has had a chance to make meaning of her data, she is prepared to share her conclusions with her leadership team and get them to analyze the data too.

Maria said, "It is difficult for her to do long range planning" on her campus because she is continuously monitoring and adjusting her plans based on student data. According to the CIP, James Middle School has continued to focus on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and implementing the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) Resource System (the district's curriculum for the last three years). PBIS is a district-wide initiative to improve the climate and culture on the campus so that all students are successful both behaviorally and academically (Sugai & Horner, 2010). Maria has continued to focus on PBIS because it has improved student learning.

The school improvement initiatives James Middle School will be implementing this year are based on the data Maria has analyzed. She believes it is important to go back to the "basics of lesson planning" this year. She drew this conclusion by "reviewing data from her classroom observations of the teaching staff and because there was high teacher turnover at James Middle School last year." Maria shared, "we are going back to the basics." Teachers will be focusing on how they plan for student success. The planning will include the "overall curriculum plan for the school year and the daily lessons

teachers present students." Maria is very focused first on how teachers will provide instruction in the classroom, and then how teachers will assess their student learning. Additionally, James Middle School will be working on student engagement and assessing students' work and providing feedback to students. Maria is "frustrated because she knows these are basic skills all teachers should know but the teachers at James Middle School are struggling with implementing engaging lessons, assessing student learning and providing feedback to students."

The teacher leaders at James Middle School agree Maria is "extremely focused on data" and she uses data to guide the direction of the campus. Elizabeth shared that teachers are "continuously using student performance data" during professional development days and during Professional Learning Community (PLC) time to try to determine how to make changes in the teachers' instruction to improve student learning. Sonya shared she believes "Maria applies an appropriate amount of pressure on teachers to encourage teachers to reflect on their data and their instruction." If students in a particular classroom are struggling, Maria is a "master" at helping teachers improve their instruction, and student learning. Elizabeth said, "Maria's bottom line is student learning. Maria expects all teachers to have a positive influence on student learning and if a teacher is not being successful based off the data, Maria is fine with the teacher leaving." Maria wants the best teachers teaching the students at James Middle School.

Theme: Relevance

The second theme identified from Maria's data on how she makes meaning of school improvement and school reform initiatives was relevance. Wright (2009) encourages principals to slow down and reflect on school change before moving forward.

Because school improvement and school reform initiatives come from so many different directions, Maria revealed "I decide which initiatives are relevant before I share them with the teachers at James Middle School." She continued, "Initiatives have to make sense to me first. If I do not understand the initiative, how am I going to be able to lead or support the initiative on the campus?" Maria added that it is easy for her to build relevance in regard to school improvement initiatives because she or one of the teachers from James Middle School is bringing the school improvement initiatives to the campus.

For example, James Middle School and Maria are committed to PLCs. As part of the PLC process, teachers meet as departments to discuss their student data and identify which instructional strategies they will use in their classrooms to improve student learning. Maria believes the PLC model helps teachers build relevance for change initiatives because the "model is focused on student learning." Maria made the "decision to enroll James Middle School in The Professional Learning Communities Network about three years ago." The PLC Network is coordinated by the Educational Regional Service Center in Central Texas, and meets three to four times a year. Each meeting has a different educational focus. James Middle School continues to participate in the PLCs because Maria believes "the support given to the campus by the service center has been instrumental in James Middle School's student success."

When it comes to school reform initiatives mandated by central office, Maria "struggles to find relevance in the initiatives because she feels she has no choice in implementing them." For example, Maria said she has difficulties implementing the TEKS Resource System, not because it is bad but because "I feel forced" to implement it. Implementing top-down initiatives is difficult because "you have to find a way to imbed

the initiative into everything else you are doing and sometimes it just does not feel natural." Maria's supervisor has had discussions with Maria about her "responses to district initiatives" because Maria has a "reputation of questioning district initiatives." Maria feels her "reactions are misunderstood by her supervisor." When faced with a district initiative, Maria "first wants to understand it, explore it, and shoot holes in it so-to-speak," so she can understand it. By doing this, Maria equips herself to lead the initiative on the campus more effectively.

Maria stressed the "loneliness" that comes with the position of campus administrator, particularly when it comes to implementing change. Because she wants all initiatives to be "relevant" to James Middle School, Maria spends "a lot of time by herself processing the change and the best way to introduce it to her campus." As shared earlier, Maria's bottom line is student success but she also knows she has to have teacher support to implement any change on the campus. Maria shared, "if I cannot find the relevancy to James Middle School and our students, then how are the teachers going to find the relevancy for our students?"

The teacher leaders at James Middle School did not use the words relevant when describing how they perceive Maria makes meaning of school improvement and school reform initiatives; they used the word "framing." Sonya and Elizabeth agreed that, "Maria frames school improvement and school reform initiatives around what is best for students." Elizabeth believes "Maria utilizes the leadership team to help frame school reform and school improvement initiatives" to better serve the students. Elizabeth shared how Maria "listens to others before making decisions." The teacher leaders agreed with each other that it is a "good thing for her to listen to teachers, students, other

administrators and even parents," but they acknowledge "Maria will make up her mind for what Maria thinks is best for James Middle School." Sonya believes "Maria will give an initiative a chance but if it does not help the students, Maria is comfortable with saying, 'Okay, this is not working, we need to change it." The teacher leaders did not seem aware of how much time Maria puts into thinking about school reform and school improvement initiatives on the campus.

Theme: Time

The third theme identified from Maria's data was time. Fullan (2001) cites a lack of time as a common reason school reform and school improvement initiatives fail to be implemented with fidelity at schools. Maria works hard to make school improvement and school reform initiatives relevant to her before she presents the change to the teachers at James Middle School. Reflecting on how change impacts students, teachers, and even herself, takes time. Often, the "time for reflection is only found after teachers and students leave for the day." When James Middle School was first recognized as a Texas Schools to Watch school, the interviewing committee asked Maria how she was able to get all the work done. "I was single when James Middle School was first recognized and I spent a lot of time planning and then leading school improvement." It has been three years since James Middle School's first recognition as a Texas Schools to Watch school, and Maria is now married and has foster children. Because Maria frequently works late, she sometimes "misses out on time with her husband and family at home."

Long-term systemic change takes three to five years (Portin, 2004). James Middle School has made a long-term commitment to PLCs and the school continues to use the PLC process to improve teaching and learning. This takes time. Teachers must have time

to "review and reflect" on their instruction and the data gathered from the students. "To save time," Maria has set an expectation for teachers to complete pre-planning before coming to PLC meetings. Teachers must bring student work and student data to meetings and must be prepared to discuss their students' results. By pre-planning teachers are able to make the most of the PLC meetings by being ready to engage in reflective conversation.

Additionally, Maria tries to value teachers' time by implementing just a few different school improvement initiatives each year. Maria shares "we continue to implement PLCs and PBIS and then we only implement one or two other things each year." One of Maria's biggest concerns comes from having to "find the time to implement district reform initiatives." In order to implement district level changes effectively, Maria uses time to reflect on how to integrate these changes in conjunction with school initiated changes. "It is very difficult to do everything and avoid overwhelming everyone on the campus."

Maria worries about time limitations. This year, James Middle School is working with a company that provides monthly webinars for the leadership team. These webinars focus on improving student performance on the STAAR test. Nonetheless, it takes time to view the webinar, then debrief and plan how the school will implement the resulting strategies. Maria shares "there is just so much and we have so little time to talk about it." Maria worries about asking her leadership team to come in earlier and stay late but the work must get done.

The teacher leaders have learned from Maria how to manage their time and how to help other teachers manage their time. They talked about not having time to get all

teachers on board with change initiatives. As teacher leaders, they believe they are responsible for helping Maria get teachers to commit to change initiatives. Sonya shared, "I was shocked not all teachers were on board with a writing initiative we started on the campus a few years ago. I told Maria if teachers are not on board, we need to kick them off the boat." Maria helped to focus the teacher leader by asking the teacher leader "would you do that with your students?" The teacher leader realized she would need to do even more to get teachers to commit to the writing process. Sonya and Elizabeth discussed how Maria tries to "delegate jobs so teachers are not overwhelmed." The teacher leaders believed Maria "works hard to utilize everyones' time wisely."

Career Development

Maria is the founding principal at James Middle School, her first principalship. Maria was only an assistant principal for a couple of years before accepting this position. She admits to holding the "reigns of the school very tight" when she first became principal. She was not confident about how to engage teachers in critical conversations. Maria said, "I wrote down everything I wanted to say and do in all meetings." Maria revealed she was "concerned [she] would forget what [she] wanted to do in meetings. [She] wanted to make sure [she] understood the school, and the school developed the way [she] wanted it to develop." Maria says she is sometimes teased by her staff now about how she was in the beginning but Maria will "own it." She says she "did not have trust just yet." The trust Maria wanted to build was in herself as a campus leader, and trust in her teachers, too.

Confident in the systems she has developed on the campus to improve student learning and her own self-confidence, Maria stated, "I have morphed over the last four

years." She has gained "trust in herself" that she is a strong leader. She has also gained "trust in her leadership team." Maria believes her ability to communicate with her teachers, students and parents has improved because she has "fine-tuned her expectations for how she wants students to learn" at James Middle School.

Maria reported, "I still want professional development on how to lead." She wants to make sure when she presents an initiative to her faculty, she is using sound instructional practices that teachers can implement in their own classrooms. Also, Maria wants to ensure that she continues to learn the best ways to lead, support, and grow teacher leaders.

As for the support from central office, Maria would like for central office to look at the staffing ratios on the campuses and provide the middle schools with more administrative staff. Maria would like each middle school in her district to have "an academic dean, or instructional strategist, to help both the principal and the teachers." Additionally, Maria wants central office to have someone who "advocates for middle level education and middle schools." According to Maria, "currently all the secondary schools are lumped into one group and there is no one focusing on, and advocating for middle schools."

When Maria was asked how her age, race and gender affect her leadership on the campus she laughed and asked, "would they have an influence?" After reflecting for a few minutes, Maria maintained, "it is a person's values that determine how a person leads not their race." Maria is Hispanic. She added that she "feels a lot of responsibility in the education of Hispanic students." "There were no teachers who went out of their way to help my parents." As a result, her parents "did not receive a good education." Maria's

parents have been "huge advocates" for Maria and they have pushed Maria to continue her own education. Maria's passion is to "provide for others what no one provided for her parents." Additionally, as a foster parent, Maria sees students "in the system" that need extra support and help. She knows the school has to "provide opportunities for students, not just families."

As for Maria being a female principal, Maria believes, it is more about the way she was raised. She wanted to be a teacher. She believes "teachers are teachers because they grow up wanting to be teachers; they wanted to help the troubled kid, or they were the troubled kid and a teacher helped them." Maria's motivation is to help and to give to others. Maria laughed and shared "sometimes I can be a little Title IX at times." She wants to make sure the girls are given a fair chance to succeed and help develop the girls into strong women.

The teacher leaders at James Middle School shared almost exactly the same information about Maria that she shared about herself. Elizabeth said "we saw a big change in Maria around year three or four." Elizabeth reflected that over time, "Maria has gained trust in herself and trust in the teachers." The teacher leaders plan to model their own leadership style after Maria. Sonya and Elizabeth discussed "you have to gain trust in yourself and in others before real teams can develop, and building trust takes time." Elizabeth believes the "process of building trust will empower the teachers in the organization." The teacher leaders have learned from Maria and when they become principals, they believe they will have "learned from one of the best principal's out there."

Case Study Two Summary

James Middle School is a middle school located in a mid-sized rural school district in Central Texas. Maria, the principal at James Middle School, has been in her position as the principal for eight years, and is the founding principal at the school. This is her first principalship. The three themes developed from the interviews with Maria and her teacher leaders are: a) data, b) relevance, and c) time. Maria is considered an expert on using data to improve student performance at the local, state and national levels. Maria believes before she is able to lead school reform or school improvement initiatives, she must first find a way to make the initiative relevant to herself. Once she finds the relevance, Maria is able to lead the initiative at James Middle School more effectively. Lastly, Maria is very aware of the lack of time to implement change even when both she and her teachers believe in the initiatives. Maria tries to find ways to save time for all. The three themes of Maria's case study will be analyzed with the themes from the other case studies in this research to develop a theory of how successful mid-career middle school principals make meaning of school improvement and school reform initiatives.

Case Study Three: Cedar Middle School

Demographics

Cedar Middle School is located in a large urban school district in Central Texas. It is the fifth largest school district in Texas. It is located in an older affluent neighborhood in the city. According to Tom, the principal, the school has "some of the city's richest families and some of the city's poorest families." Cedar Middle School has been open for more than fifty years and has a very rich history in the city and in the school district. There is a public golf course directly across the street from the school and bungalow style

homes on the other three sides of the school. The neighborhood is a mix of retired people, working professionals and college students. There is a major university located about four miles north of the school.

According to the Texas Education Agency, Cedar Middle School serves approximately 1,077 students in grades six through eight. Of the students attending the school, 40% are economically disadvantaged and 7% are considered to have Limited English skills. Cedar Middle School does not qualify as a Title I campus. In 2011-2012, the Texas Education Agency listed the student population as 45% Hispanic, 44% Anglo, 6% African American, and 3% students that are of Two or More Races. The teaching staff at Cedar Middle School is 5% African American, 9% Hispanic, 81% Anglo, and 4% Two or More Races. Further, 30% of the teachers are male and 70% of the teachers are female.

The State of Texas rated Cedar Middle School as "Met Standard" on the state's new accountability system, and awarded the school one distinction for student academic achievement in 2013. The distinction earned is "Achievement in Reading ELA." This award is given to schools whose students achieved more than the minimum expected progress on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) of 17% Cedar Middle School exceeded these criteria by 5%, rating a total of 22% on the reading portion of the STAAR Test. Additionally, 38% of the eighth grade students scored advanced on their Reading/ELA STAAR Test. This percentage places Cedar Middle School in the first quartile on the Reading/ELA portion of STAAR. Cedar Middle School received no other distinctions. The school's progress measure was 39%, while the state considers an acceptable progress measure to be 20%.

Principal Three: Tom

Tom is an Anglo male in his fifties. He has been the principal at Cedar Middle School for fifteen years. This is Tom's first and only principalship. Tom moved to Central Texas with his wife, a hospital executive. He revealed he does not have to work because his "wife does very well" but he has been taught by his parents that "hard work is important." Tom began his career in education in 1981, serving both as a teacher and as a coach. He taught middle school social studies for about 10 years. In year seven or eight of his career, he decided he wanted to become an administrator and began a master's program at the University of Texas. After completing his master's degree Tom found an assistant principal position at an affluent middle school in a neighboring school district. Tom served as an assistant principal for seven years.

In his last three to four years as an assistant principal, Tom began thinking about becoming a principal. He applied for several different positions and was offered the position at Cedar Middle School. Tom accepted this position because "it was a stretch" for him. He had always worked in suburban or private schools, and was excited about the possibility of working in a large urban district. As an added benefit, the school was very close to home.

Working close to home is important to Tom because he believes strongly in family. Being close allows Tom to spend more time with his family. Tom's mentor was also very focused on family, and Tom adopted this trait. Teachers like working for Tom because he believes if they put their families first they will be able to teach the students more effectively.

Teacher Leaders

Tom identified two trusted teacher leaders at Cedar Middle School to help with data triangulation. These teachers have both worked at Cedar Middle School for many years and they have "pushed" Tom to be a better principal and to "slow down and listen to teachers." The first teacher Tom identified was Susan. Susan was hired by Tom thirteen years ago to teach seventh grade science. Cedar Middle School is the first and only school at which Susan has taught. She is the science department chair and serves on the campus leadership team. She "loves working at Cedar Middle School because Tom makes the school feel like family and because Tom encourages teachers to put their family first." Susan stated, "you can be a good mom and be a good teacher too." Tom expects the teachers to have a "balanced life."

Lisa was the second teacher leader Tom identified to help with data triangulation by providing an alternate data source (Trochim, 2006). Lisa has been teaching for 12 years but she began her teaching career at another middle school in the same school district. She taught for six years before coming to Cedar Middle School. Lisa was hired by Tom to teach seventh grade math but she has moved into another leadership position on the campus. Her new position helps support struggling students. Lisa agrees with Susan about staying at Cedar Middle School because "Tom really encourages the teachers to put their families first." Lisa drives past at least six schools on her way to Cedar Middle School and her commute is about 40 - 45 minutes each day. Lisa is committed to Cedar Middle School because she feels the school is an "extension of her family."

Campus Improvement Plan

The Campus Improvement Plan at Cedar Middle School is developed by the campus leadership team. The campus leadership team is comprised of the department chairs, grade level leaders, counselors, administrators and librarian. The vision and mission of Cedar Middle School is to provide academic success for all students The Campus Improvement Plans (CIPs) for the last three years for Cedar Middle School were reviewed. While the focus of the CIP is to improve student performance on the state assessment, Tom stressed "the test is not my main focus; good instruction is the main focus." He places strong emphasis on implementing strategies found in the book, *Teach Like a Champion.* Cedar Middle School uses this book as a guide to improve classroom instruction and student learning. Tom shared, "Teachers are implementing five strategies at a time and getting good at these strategies before moving to more strategies." Tom did not elaborate further on the CIP.

<p align="center">Case Study Three Themes</p>

Three themes were identified from the interviews with Tom and his teacher leaders. The themes are: a) teacher empowerment, b) pacing, and c) student focus. Each theme will be discussed in the next section.

Theme: Teacher Empowerment

The first theme identified from Tom's data on how he makes meaning of school reform and school improvement initiatives was teacher empowerment. Mendels (2012) supports teacher empowerment and involvement on the campus. Tom believes the "best school improvement initiatives are initiated by teachers." As an effective leader himself, Tom encourages teachers to lead on the campus. He knows "teachers are more apt to

engage in improvement efforts initiated by a fellow teacher then one mandated by him or central office." For example, about three years ago a couple of teachers at Cedar Middle School read the book *Teach Like a Champion* (2010) by Doug Lemov. The teachers thought the book was great and believed the strategies in the book could really improve the teaching and learning at Cedar Middle School. The teachers brought the book to Tom and told Tom "you must read this book." Tom read it and agreed with the teachers the book was not only great but provided strategies that were both simple and effective. Subsequently, Tom "purchased the book for all teachers on campus and the faculty began to study the book together."

Teach Like a Champion provides educators with instructional techniques they can use in the classroom to improve instruction and student learning. Over the past several years, the "teachers have selected five techniques" to implement at a time. Once the school administrators observe teachers consistently utilizing the techniques in the classroom and teachers feel confident with these techniques, the "teachers add five more" techniques. While this has been slow, it has been very deliberate, and Tom knows much of the school's success has been because of the "teachers' deep and steady implementation" of the techniques.

Another example of a school improvement initiated by teachers is the school's advisory program. Cedar Middle School teachers were concerned that too many "students spent their entire day in mandatory academic classes, never having an opportunity to participate in elective or enrichment classes." The teachers approached Tom and asked if the teachers could implement an advisory program that would address the

social/emotional development of all the students. Tom took the "teachers' request to the campus leadership team and gained approval for the initiative."

All the teachers at Cedar Middle School were asked to design a class they wanted to teach, and to design it for 12 to 24 students. The class was to be based on the teacher's own interests or hobby. Tom wanted the "teachers and the students to enjoy" being in these enrichment classes. Teachers developed courses such as "Frisbee, knitting, and a reading club." Now they have a variety of different classes to offer students. All students have an opportunity to enroll in enrichment classes which meet twice a week. These classes have been a huge success for both the students and teachers at Cedar Middle School.

Susan and Lisa talked about "Tom's being willing to try ideas suggested by the teachers." Typically, teacher initiated initiatives are brought to Tom first. If Tom believes the strategy will improve student learning, Tom then takes the initiative to the campus leadership team. The Leadership Team is comprised of campus department chairs, grade level leaders, support teachers, librarian, counselors and administrators. Susan said "if the Leadership Team approves the initiative, the teachers are empowered to move forward with it."

Lisa explained Tom's "strategic approach to getting teachers to buy into change." The faculty discusses an initiative in the faculty meeting, then one of the "teachers leading the initiative may share with the faculty, or Tom may bring a video of a teacher using the strategy in the classroom." The teacher leaders agree with Tom's belief that "teachers buy into teacher initiated change" more enthusiastically than either campus or

district initiative change. Lisa added, "It's almost like we bring things to the table and then he makes it happen."

Theme: Pacing

The second theme identified from Tom's data was pacing. Mendels (2012) warns schools must be cautious about how quickly change is implemented. Tom uses pacing as a means to help teachers develop their teaching skills. Because of Tom's experience as a mid-career principal, he is aware of "how quickly school improvement and school reform initiatives can change," and he is "cautious about jumping into any initiative too fast." As he pointed out, "There are so many things that are expected of the schools and of the teachers, if we did not do go slow, we would be overwhelmed." Therefore, he believes it is important to pace initiatives. Even though the teachers initiated the implementation of the *Teach Like a Champion* strategies, Tom stated, "Cedar Middle School has gone slowly about executing the strategies from the book."

Additionally, he feels the "slow implementation of the *Teach Like a Champion* strategies has enhanced their success." By applying these strategies slowly, teachers have had the opportunity to "practice and perfect" a few techniques before being asked to implement more. Many times, with reform and improvement initiatives, change comes too fast for some teachers. "Teachers need time to develop the skills required to implement change." Tom is very skillful in implementing change. Also, Tom said they did not implement the strategies in consecutive order, but in the order that made sense to the Leadership Team, as they identified a "purposeful process for implementation."

Tom revealed he is also cautious about how he implements district level initiatives. Many times the district will present initiatives and Tom feels the "intensity of

the initiative is at 100%." At times like this, he tries to "pull back the intensity of the initiative to about 75%" when he presents it to the faculty. While Tom strives to avoid overwhelming his teachers, he quickly acknowledged he wants to "support district initiatives too." He is simply concerned about how quickly things change at the district, and wants to make sure district level initiatives support Cedar Middle School's goals. Tom shared he feels he has "some flexibility in implementing district initiatives on campus because his teachers are experienced and know what is best for their students." Tom believes the "district trusts both him and the teachers at Cedar Middle School."

Susan and Lisa stated "Tom is a great filter." He wants to provide teachers with opportunities to lead, but he is the "one to make it happen" on the campus. "Tom implements slowly so as not to overwhelm the teachers." He may also go slowly because he wants to "respect teachers' family time too." If too many initiatives come too close together, teachers may "become overwhelmed and overloaded, leading to teacher burnout." The teacher leaders said even though they brought *Teach Like a Champion* to the school, Tom has been the one to encourage the teachers to go slow and select the techniques they want to implement strategically. The teacher leaders believe Tom keeps a very "good pace for implementing change" on the campus.

As for reform initiatives from central office, the teacher leaders shared they were not sure if central office even mandates any initiatives for them. The teacher leaders believe "Tom is a filter between them and central office," and he makes the decision on how initiatives will be implemented. Additionally, the teacher leaders shared they believe Tom would take initiatives from central office and weaves them into ongoing programs at the school.

Lisa explained a story about a compensation program initiated by central office. After participating in the program for one semester, Cedar Middle School faculty "voted to opt out of the program." The teachers felt the "inherent competition in the program was divisive and threatened their collaboration." Collaboration has been an important part of their success. Once teachers voted not to participate in the program, "Tom met with the superintendent and explained Cedar Middle School's position about opting out of the program." Susan and Lisa assumed the "superintendent was not happy" with their decision but nonetheless, Cedar Middle School was allowed to opt out of the program.

Theme: Student Centered

The third theme identified from Tom's data was his focus on students. Principals must focus on success for all students (Mendels, 2012). Tom is focused on the success of all students, and said, "Cedar Middle School does not play games when it comes to doing what is best for students." About two years ago when the state cut funding to schools, Tom decided to see if he could raise money so the school could avoid cutting teachers and increasing class sizes. In about six weeks, Tom raised roughly $220,000 which is equivalent to four teachers' salaries. Tom had never considered raising money like this before, but because of his success with this fundraising initiative, the school continues to have a list of supporters (parents, community members and businesses) who contribute annually to the school. Tom knows this community support is "concrete evidence the community believes in what Cedar Middle School is doing to teach students."

Tom is willing to stand up for what he believes is best for students. There are over 100 campuses in the school district in which Tom works. Each campus has its own unique student needs. When central office approaches the campuses with new initiatives,

Tom reflects on how it will impact the students at his school. Tom said "I am not just a subservient sheep that just follows the pack." If he believes the initiative will not have a positive impact on student learning, Tom pushes back. He wants to be a good team player, but Tom believes his primary responsibility is to look out for the well-being of students. Tom is passionate about his stance, "we like to follow the law when it makes sense for kids but [not] when it hurts kids, but we will always do what's best for kids first."

Tom expressed concern about whether testing and accountability focuses on what is best for students. He did not elaborate on his comment but he did say "I do not focus on test scores; I focus on good instruction in the classroom." Tom is "adamant about students having great teachers and teachers being free to make good instructional decisions in the classroom that will improve student engagement and learning." Tom knows the "teacher is the most important factor" in student success. He believes his "role is to make teachers great or to get them to move on." Tom wants "only the best teachers for the students at Cedar Middle School."

On the morning I met with Tom, he had been meeting with central office because they were considering cutting the number of personnel units on the campus as a result of a decrease in the number of students enrolled at Cedar Middle School. However, students were already attending classes, and if central office cut teachers, then student schedules would be disrupted. Tom did not think it was good to disrupt student schedules late in the school year. Nonetheless, even though he fought to not cut teachers, they were cut. Tom said he would "work with the other teachers, parents and students to minimize the stress to students."

Lastly, Tom shared he has the confidence to make decisions on campus, no matter how tough it might be. He wants to "encourage teacher input and teacher collaboration" because he knows "teacher involvement is best for the students", but he acknowledges "he is the final decision maker." By openly accepting this responsibility, he avoids the possibility of "teachers blaming each other for initiatives that may or may not work." This frees teachers to continue to collaborate and work closer together to build a better school for the students.

Susan and Lisa know the "buck stops with Tom." They know he will put what is "best for students above all other things" on campus. The teacher leaders believe Tom has "high expectations for himself as a leader and that he constantly strives to be a better leader for the students." They know Tom has high expectations for the teachers too. Tom will support teachers, but at the end of the day, students need to be engaged and learning. If not, something is wrong. Additionally, the teacher leaders shared "parents are an important part of student success." Tom works closely with parents to "cultivate good relationships with parents" so Cedar Middle School knows what parents want students to achieve too.

Career Development

In reflecting back on his career, Tom says "I have changed quite a bit." Tom came to Cedar Middle School from a suburban school where he had worked with the same highly successful principal for about seven years. Tom modeled his leadership style from this principal, but quickly learned he needed to "develop my own leadership style." According to Tom, he learned to be "less brash with people, and to be more patient too." In fact, Tom shared if he could change things he would have been more patient at the

start. He did admit that he "made a lot of mistakes in the beginning and he learned from these mistakes."

Tom believes it is his "responsibility" to pursue his own professional development. He might get feedback from others as to what he needs but ultimately he is the one that must take charge. Tom shared after our first interview he "contacted a nearby university about beginning his doctorate degree." He commented "he would like the challenge of going back to school." Going back to school might also help him "reconnect with some good teaching and learning strategies."

When asked what type of support he needs from central office, Tom reflected he would like for "central office to continue doing what they are doing." He said central office brings in initiatives and then "allows him to tweak the initiative to the meet the needs of his campus." Tom does the same thing with his teachers. He calls it "get out of my way and let me do my thing." Tom does want central office's support when it comes to angry parents. "Please ask me first, and believe the teachers and we are doing the right thing for the students."

When Tom was asked how his age, race and gender affect how he leads on the campus, Tom laughed for a minute. He took a moment to reflect, and then said "I believe it is important to be a male role model at Cedar Middle School." Tom has worked hard to create a gender balanced applicant pool of male and female teachers. He said "there are many students without a male role model in the house, and schools need to evaluate how they can provide strong male role models to students."

Tom shared he is very conscientious of his race when working with students. He knows he could be perceived as racist at any time, or with any family. Tom shared, "I

have to check myself to make sure that I'm not making decisions based on race, but on how important the issue is." Additionally, Tom works closely with a historically African American university in the area to recruit more African American teachers to Cedar Middle School and to the school district.

As for Tom's age, he said he is a "baby boomer and I have a strong work ethic." He believes he has "different values" compared to some of the younger teachers on the campus. He is careful how he relates to younger teachers because they grew-up very different from him. Tom wants to be careful "not to stifle them, but encourage younger teachers" to put the students first.

Being near the end of the mid-career stage, Tom has strong values and knows his role as the campus principal well. He has developed systems to allow others to help lead the campus, and has confidence in his skills as well as in the skills of others around him.

Typically principals remain on a campus for less than five years. It is unusual for a principal to remain at a campus for fifteen years. Because of Tom's success and tenure, he is valued by central office and is allowed to make many decisions about Cedar Middle School that other campus principals may not be allowed to make about their schools. His teachers and families trust him to make decisions about what is best for all students at the school.

Susan and Lisa spoke very positively of the climate and culture Tom has established at Cedar Middle School. Lisa loves how "Tom shares stories of when he was a teacher and the mistakes he made as a teacher." She feels these stories help teachers to know it is "okay when they make mistakes." Tom has experienced so many different initiatives; "he just does not flip out." The teacher leaders trust Tom because his actions

match his words. Tom believes in serving all students and does not believe in leaving any student out. Susan and Lisa agreed, "We never want to leave Cedar Middle School because we know we have it good and there are other teachers out there waiting to take our place if we were to leave."

Case Study Three Summary

Cedar Middle School is located in a large urban school district in Central Texas. Tom, the principal at Cedar Middle School, has been in his position for 15 years. This is Tom's first, and only, principalship. The three themes developed from the interview with Tom and his teacher leaders are: a) teacher empowerment, b) pacing, and c) student centered. Tom is supportive of teacher initiated programs on the campus. He believes a campus is more successful if teachers initiate change instead of central office mandating change. Next, Tom is very aware of how he paces the implementation of initiatives on campus. Tom knows change can overwhelm teachers, and by moving slowly teachers are able to master one thing before moving on to something different. Tom is also very student centered. Any change brought to the campus must support student engagement and learning. Tom makes sure student needs are addressed before any other needs are addressed. Students come first at Cedar Middle School. The three themes of Tom's case study will be analyzed with the themes from the other case studies in this research to develop a theory of how successful mid-career middle school principals make meaning of school improvement and school reform initiatives.

Overall Summary

Chapter IV was a review of the data collected during the interview process. Three principals and two trusted teacher leaders from each campus were interviewed to

determine how the principals make meaning of school improvement and school reform initiatives on their campus. Themes identified for how Jamie makes meaning of school were: a) acceptance of change, b) fit, and c) match and learning. The themes identified from Maria's data on how she makes meaning of school reform and school improvement initiatives were: a) focus on data, b) relevance, and c) time. Tom's themes identified were: a) teacher empowerment, b) pacing, and c) student focus. Additionally, the CIPs from each campus, for the last three school years, were reviewed and key points from the CIPs were shared. Lastly, data regarding career development and the school principal were presented.

V. IMPLICATIONS

In Chapter Four three case studies were developed and themes were identified from the cases on how three successful mid-career middle school principals make meaning of school reform and school improvement initiatives on their campuses and how they negotiate change initiatives with teachers on the campus. The theoretical perspective of the study is career stage development. Career stage theories support that people progress through a series of distinct occupational stages during their careers and each stage is characterized by differences in work, attitudes and behaviors, different types of relationships, employees' needs, and aspects of work valued by the employee (Hall, 2002; Slocum & Cron, 1985; Super, 1992). Additionally, Hargreaves (2005) adds, when educational change occurs or is attempted, not all teachers respond in the same way.

The mid-career principal was defined in Chapter One as a principal age forty to fifty five years old with at least seven years of experience in their current position. Oplakta (2010) considers the mid-career principal to between the ages of forty and fifty five. Additionally, Mendels (2012) stresses principals must stay at least five to seven years for the principal to make an impact on the school. The reasons for focusing this inquiry on mid-career principals are to establish well defined research parameters and to contribute to the limited empirical research on principals in this career stage.

Chapter V now builds a cross-case analysis in order to theorize emergent patterns across the full sample that illuminate the research question (Glesne, 2011; Flyvbjerg, 2006). I organized this cross-case analysis in relation to the two secondary research questions: a) how does the successful mid-career middle school principal negotiate school improvement and school reform initiatives with teachers on the campus and b)

how does career stage development help explain how the principal implements school improvement and school reform initiatives on the campus? I follow this with an integrated discussion of the primary research question: how do successful mid-career middle school principals make meaning of the changing cycle of school improvement and school reform on the campus? Additionally, I discuss the conclusions and recommendations for practice, the limitations of the research, recommendations for additional research, and my final thoughts as I move forward.

Negotiating Change with Teachers

The secondary question regarding how mid-career middle school principals negotiate school improvement and school reform initiatives on their campus is discussed in the following section. The principals in the study utilize reflective practices, relationships and distributed leadership to lead and to negotiate change initiatives with teachers.

Reflective

Each principal shared how they utilized some form of reflective practice as a way to prepare for working with others around them. Being reflective is more than just thinking about an issue (Rodgers, 2002). It is a higher-order thinking skill which can help the principal make decisions about school reform and school improvement.

When new initiatives are presented to Jamie, she reflects on how the initiative will fit with her campus and the teachers, what type of new learning will occur and how she will present the initiative to her teachers. Jamie uses reflection as a means to analyze her preparatory actions to present school reform and school improvement initiatives. In working with teachers she has to be "cognizant of the capacity of her staff to meet

initiatives." As change initiatives are presented to Jamie, she "thinks about her staff and the staff's abilities to implement change." She shared; there are some teachers "really excited about change but there are other teachers who will fight the change." Jamie has to "prepare herself" because she will "approach each group differently." Likewise, Jamie's lead teachers shared, "Jamie prepares for change by making sure she understands, the change and the skills she will have to utilize in helping the teachers" move forward to implement the changes.

When new initiatives are presented to Maria, she is reflective of what type of data support the initiative, how much time will be needed to implement the initiative and how the initiative will be relevant to her and to the campus. Maria reflects on how change initiatives will "impact her" as a leader before presenting a change initiative to her faculty. Maria wants to make sure she "understands the change initiatives and knows how she will support teachers" with the initiative before even considering working with teachers. Maria's teacher leaders are aware of Maria's reflective processes. Additionally, Maria utilizes written reflection to prepare herself in working with others. Maria shared that early in her career, she "had to write everything down she wanted to be prepared in meetings." She laughed about having to "write scripts for every faculty meeting, parent meeting and teacher conference." She "does not script out every detail now" that she has more experience but she "continues to write all questions she wants to ask." Maria shared that her teacher leaders are aware of her use of reflection because they have "reviewed Maria's notes for leadership meetings and helped her script other meetings with teachers."

Tom is reflective when determining how school improvement and school initiatives will impact students and teacher learning, and how will he pace the initiative on his campus. He is very "cautious when central office initiates change," he wants to make sure central office initiatives will "fit in on the campus." He considers how initiatives from central office "will improve student learning and questions whether this improvement is really worth the potential increased stress in teachers' lives." Tom believes he "must help to balance change at the school with the personal lives of teachers." If there are too many changes, then "teachers are overwhelmed and the teachers' effectiveness is compromised." Likewise, Tom utilizes reflection when preparing to lead change; he knows his teachers and knows what type of support individual teachers will need to be successful with change initiatives.

All three principals utilize reflective practices as a way to determine the best way to frame school improvement and school reform initiatives on the campus. Much of the principals' reflections are on how change initiatives will affect the teachers and how the principals will respond and support teachers as they learn and grow. Reflective practices can provide principals the opportune time to slow down and evaluate the aspects of school improvement and school reform on campus (Shannon, 2007). The principals take the time to think and study the change initiative and then decide how best to move forward with change.

It is important to distinguish reflective practices from thinking. Reflective practices are disciplined and constructive processes that allow principals to incorporate prior knowledge and experiences and to evaluate and plan for specific situations (Rodgers

2002). This also refers to using one's beliefs to interpret, to analyze, perform, discuss, or judge" (Kraft 2002).

Relational

The three principals shared that when implementing change initiatives on their campus it is important to have built relationships with the teachers. By having built relationships with teachers and knowing the teachers will respond and cope with change, the principals were able to trouble shoot possible issues with change implementation before issues arise on the campus.

Relationships are important to Jamie, and it was one of the themes identified from Jamie's data. She shared she is "relationship oriented." She knows the teachers and the type of support they need. She said, "When needed I can be direct, I can coach and I can be a listener." Some teachers are "open to change and willing to try" new strategies; other teachers are not as willing to try something new and "hope change will go away." Jamie knows which teachers to approach first when implementing change. Likewise she knows "which teachers have relationships with each other and can help each other with the implementation of change." Jamie utilizes her relationship with teachers and the teachers' relationships with each other to build capacity on the campus. Jamie's teacher leaders shared Jamie "knows" the teachers at Douglas Middle School. She is aware of their "strengths and weakness" and can utilize the teachers' strengths to improve the capacity at the school.

Maria admitted to "struggling with building relationships with teachers" on her campus possibly due to a lack of time, her focus on data and her drive to build relevance for herself, the students and the teachers. She has been accused of having favorite

teachers on the campus. Maria says she "does not see that she has favorites" but she spends more time with certain teachers and departments on the campus. She "spends a significant amount of time with certain groups like the math department and the teachers of English Language Learners." She has developed better relationships with "these teachers." Maria confided she "had to work on building relationships so she can trust teachers." "I have learned to give a lot of trust to the department chairs." The trust has been built with the department chairs because Maria has spent time with them and gotten to know them. She is "more comfortable with how the department chairs lead on the campus." Maria's teacher leaders shared Maria has worked on building relationships with the teachers and the teacher leaders believe Maria's ability to build relationships with teachers has improved with Maria's experience. They shared Maria has "learned to trust herself and she trusts others more."

Tom spoke of "spending time with his teachers getting to know them personally" to build relationships with them. He does this so that he can empower teachers to focus on student learning and keep an appropriate pace when implementing change. He stresses to the "teachers the needs of their families should come first before the needs of the students or the school." He believes by "encouraging teachers to put their own needs and family needs first, he is able to get more buy-in from the teachers." The lead teachers shared, "we love to hear stories about Tom." Tom shares a lot about his own family and about when he was a teacher. The lead teachers laughed about Tom telling them about how "bad a teacher he was." They feel a "significant part of the schools success has come because of the relationships Tom builds with the teachers."

Principals "are viewed as problem solvers, resource providers, instructional leaders, visionaries and change agents who manage people, implement policy, solved problems and provide resources to facilitate the teaching and learning process while guiding teachers and students toward productive learning experiences" (Brown, 2005, p.16). Teachers are people and according to Brown (2005), "people are important and their needs are real" (p. 2). Thus, it is important for principals to focus on the needs of their teachers and get to know the teachers on their campuses by developing relationships with the teachers. All three principals stressed the importance of these relationships. Maria confided that early in her career it was difficult for her develop relationships with teachers. Over time she has improved in building relationships with teachers but she believes she has to learn to trust herself as a leader so she can share more with them. It appeared to be easier for Jamie and Tom to develop relationships with the teachers because they were more easily able to adjust to the different needs of different teachers. Both principals seemed confident in their abilities to build relationships with teachers and get to know the teachers on their campus.

Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008) suggest a positive correlation between the principal's ability to focus on relationships with teachers, their work, and their learning and student outcomes. The principals have built relationships with teachers so student learning is improving. Additionally, by knowing their teachers, the principals know the different needs of the teachers and different types of support and encouragement the teachers need when implementing school reform and school improvement initiatives. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom (2004) argue that principals must not just focus on student performance alone. Principals must also create positive environments,

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build strong relationships, secure resources, and develop teacher leadership. School principals cannot work in isolation; school principals must develop a system of support on campus to help balance their roles and responsibilities.

Distributed Leadership

In an organization that embraces distributed leadership, any person in the organization may be the leader at any given time (Gronn, 2002). According to Harris and Spillane (2006), principals engage in distributed leadership by delegating tasks and responsibilities to others. Teachers take on leadership responsibilities to encourage and support learning for both students and teachers. Collaboration, intuition and relationships are strongly valued and cultivated by the three principals studied. As shared above, each principal in the study specifically discussed how important it was to develop relationships with teachers on the campus. By developing relationships, the principals were able to identify teachers who could help with the implementation of change initiatives on the campus. The principals have learned to share leadership with other teachers on the campus. The principals discussed the campus leadership team's role in school improvement and school reform initiatives on the campus. The make-up of the leadership team on each campus is a little different but the role of the leadership teams is very similar.

The campus leadership team at Douglas Middle School is comprised of department chairs, grade level team leaders, counselors, intervention teachers and campus administrators. The diverse make-up of the team allows all teachers on the campus to have another teacher to go to on the campus. Jamie explained "if we going to change something or if we going to do a school improvement initiative on our campus, the

change initiatives has to be aligned with the vision and mission of Douglas Middle School." Jamie considers herself to be "collaborative person." "I tell my staff all the time this is not my school. This is our school." Jamie believes the teachers must work together to change and improve the school. She knows the job of improving the school has to be the "priority of all teachers not just her and the other administrators." Jamie utilizes the leadership team to lead change.

The campus leadership team at James Middle School is comprised of the campus department chairs and the school administrators. Maria disclosed she has worked hard to develop her leadership team to help build capacity at James Middle School. "I think that I have done much better at inviting my leadership team into that process. I train my leadership team first and then we train the faculty." Maria believes her leadership team is the "first line of defense" in school improvement and school reform. She makes sure "the leadership team can lead and engage the other teachers in the change initiative." Additionally, James Middle School has invested a significant amount of time and money in professional learning communities (PLCs) so teachers can learn and work in a collaborative environment. Maria knows she must continue to push teachers to work together to improve teaching and learning on the campus but she knows teachers must help lead the change process too.

The campus leadership team at Cedar Middle School is comprised by "all the power players;" department chairs, academic team leaders, the librarian, advisory coordinators, and reading specialists. Tom says "the hotbed for our reforms, and improvements come from our leadership team." Tom welcomes and encourages change initiatives to come from the teachers but he will always run new ideas past the leadership

team first. He knows he must have the leadership team's approve on change initiatives before the school will move with initiatives. Tom knows the leadership team has a significant amount of influence at the school but he is comfortable with the team's influence because he feels the team actually makes his job "easier."

Principals have been expected to have all the answers but due to the complexity of the principalship, they must work smart, and work with others to solve campus issues (Lytle, 2012). Each principal stressed the importance of developing a leadership team on the campus to help lead and support not just other teachers on the campus but also the principal. By sharing leadership with teachers, the principal is building a system of distributed leadership making the principal's role more manageable. Principals must encourage, promote and share their leadership with others on campus. By empowering teachers, principals were creating a sense of ownership and responsibility for outcomes of students at the bottom of the organization (Taylor, Martin, Hutchinson & Jinks, 2007).

When working to negotiate school reform and school improvement initiatives with teachers on campus, the three principals in the study explained how they utilized reflective practices, when thinking about change and preparing to lead change on the campus. Wright (2009) encourages principals to implement reflections as a way to engage in personal knowing what is necessary for school improvement. Additionally, the principals discussed the importance of being a relational leaders and building relationships with teachers so that when the principals are attempting to implement change, they know the teachers and what type of support and encouragement the teachers will need. Lastly, the principals revealed they cannot lead on the campus alone. By empowering teachers to lead on the campus, the principals are distributing leadership

make their jobs more manageable and value is added to the whole organization (Taylor, Martin, Hutchinson, & Jinks, 2007).

The Influence of Career Stage Development

The other secondary research question, how does career stage development affect the principal's approach to implementation of school improvement and school reform initiatives, is discussed in the following section. The principals and lead teachers shared that the principal's experience and commitment to the school were major factors in being able to implement change on the campus.

Experience

According to Oplatka (2004), novice principals' may have little experience and skill to manage change while principals' nearing retirement have the experience but may be disenchanted by school reform and school improvement. The three mid-career principals interviewed believed their experience made it easier for them to implement school reform and school improvement initiatives on their campuses. In fact, all three principals shared, their leadership skills and their ability to influence school change have improved with experience.

Jamie said when implementing change initiatives, she has learned through her experiences she sometimes has to be a "situational leader." She is aware teachers need different types of support to implement school change initiative. "Some teachers need very little support when implementing change" and Jamie "stays out of these teachers' way." Other teachers need a more support and Jamie shared "I can be directive when I need to be." Likewise Jamie feels because of her experience, she has the ability to reflect on "prior experiences" to help her negotiate new initiatives being brought to the campus.

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Most importantly, Jamie feels her "experience in working with many different types of students over the years, allows her to have a significant amount of experience to draw on to help lead change."

Maria shared thoughts about how her experience as a campus principal has helped her learn to negotiate change on the campus. Through her experience Maria has "gained confidence in her decision making abilities." The campus has experienced success with students and Maria feels she has "learned to trust others and to trust herself." Additionally, Maria has become more comfortable with having "tough conversations with teachers regarding student learning." Maria said because she has practiced tough conversations and because she has had to engage in tough conversations with teachers, she is confident going into the conversations. She knows the "conversations with teachers will have a direct impact on student learning."

Tom feels experience has helped him learn to be a "little less brash and little bit more thoughtful" of the people around him. Tom shared coming from another school district, he had to learn the ways of his current district and the ways of his campus. Additionally, he had to learn his "own leadership style." Tom feels "confident in his leadership style." His experience has helped him be more confident in having conversations with central office regarding initiatives central office would like see implement on the campus. Tom is able to" articulate the needs of the campus and how they plan to implement change."

Fuller, Young, and Orr (2007) found in Texas, 50% of building leaders leave the principalship within five years and 75% leave within ten years. Each of these three principals has been in their positions' at least seven years and this is their first

principalship. At this time, neither, Jamie or Maria sees themselves leaving their

campuses because as Jamie says "I have more to learn and share with the campus."

Tom's experience is different from the research in that he has remained on his campus for

15 years. Tom expressed he is "still learning too." All three principals demonstrate

enthusiasm for their position and their school. Kremer-Hayon and Fessler's (1992)

studies revealed that at a time of major educational reform, principals did not have to

change positions in order to rejuvenate themselves or acquire new challenges. This

coincides with the principals in this study, plus the schools have the added benefit of

stability in leadership. Additionally, principal longevity supports The Wallace Report,

Mendels (2012) states, "a rule of thumb is that a principal should be in place about five to

seven years in order to have a beneficial impact on a school" (p. 13). All three principals

have been on the campus at least 7 years.

Commitment

According to Oplatka (2010), the *maintenance versus renewal stage* in career

stage theory usually takes place in the midcareer period between ages forty and fifty-five.

At this time, the principal may have very few opportunities for professional growth, and

some principals may experience feelings of stagnation and disenchantment along with a

loss of enthusiasm for the role of principal. Other principals, however, may experience

high levels of enthusiasm and job satisfaction, and feelings of self-fulfillment and self-

renewal, these principals may seek new challenges in their roles and schools. All three

principals have high levels of commitment to the students and teachers at their campus.

Jamie has been the principal at Douglas Middle School for seven years and this

position is her only principalship. She feels a strong commitment to the teachers, students

and community. Jamie focuses on building relationships, keeping the right fit and match between initiatives and continuous learning. Her commitment keeps her at Douglas Middle School and keeps her focused on "improving the quality of teaching and learning" for the students. Jamie believes her commitment is reflected back to her in her teachers' commitment toward the school and students thus trust has been developed between Jamie and the teachers. The teacher leaders at Douglas Middle School shared, they "believe in Jamie and what she is doing at the school." They said Jamie's commitment to improve the teaching and learning at Douglas Middle School is important to the community and makes the other teachers buy in to Jamie's system.

Maria has been the principal at James Middle School for eight years and this is her only principalship. Additionally, Maria is the founding principal at James Middle School. Maria shared James Middle School is her "baby" and there is still "so much to do" at the school. Maria knows she will possibly move on to another school but she has no plans of that now. Maria is committed to the students and the community around her school. Her commitment is seen in her use of data to determine campus needs, how she develops relevance between new initiatives on the campus and the needs of her teachers and students, and by trying to balance time for all. She wants to make the students learning experience the "best she can make it." She has a commitment to the "disadvantaged and struggling students" at the school. Her commitment and strong work ethic are shared by the teachers as well. The teacher leaders at James said "Maria's commitment to the school is contagious." The teacher leaders shared, "to work at James Middle School, you have to be willing to stay late to work with students and the community."

Tom has been the principal at Cedar Middle School for 15 years. This is Tom's first principalship. He shared he "could not believe he had been at the school for so long." He enjoys coming to school every day. Tom's commitment to the school is demonstrated by teacher empowerment, carefully pacing initiatives and keeping a focus on students. He is "committed to providing the students at Cedar Middle School with the best possible education." He wants to make sure the "social emotional aspect of the student is developed along with the academic aspect of the student." School should be about more than just "test scores." Tom is committed to keeping the student to teacher ratio at the school low by "raising funds to pay teachers." The teacher leaders at Cedar Middle School conveyed they "trust in Tom and his commitment" at the school. They believe in his commitment to them and to the students because he is "willing to stand up for the school in the community and with central office."

Successful principals work long hours, are totally committed, have a clear well-articulated sense of purpose and individual identity, are able to build and sustain individual and collective capacity, are respected and trusted by the communities which they serve, and are persistently resilient (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). All three principals have a high level of commitment to improving teaching and learning for the students at their schools. Their commitment to longevity in their positions and to the students and the teachers helps the teachers to buy into the principal's system of leadership and change.

The principals' commitment is demonstrated through their actions and words. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom's research (2004) on successful principals, it is evident successful principals are constantly communicating high expectations in all

they do and say. Successful principals have a strong sense of agency, core sets of deeply held values and moral and ethical purposes and immense amounts of emotional understanding of themselves and others. These traits help teachers to support principals.

Making Meaning of Change

The primary question of the research was how do successful mid-career middle school principals make meaning of the changing cycle of school improvement and school reform initiatives on the campus? In this section the findings of the two secondary questions are pulled together to develop explanations of how the principals studied make meaning of school change.

Historically, schools have been expected to change and adapt to the needs of the local community and society as a whole, and because of these expectations, teaching and learning have changed. Over the last 30 years, there have been multiple school reform initiatives: standards based reform, restructuring reforms, instructional reforms, reforms in collaboration with external partners and school reform across entire large urban school districts (Cosner, 2009). Likewise the role of the principal has had to adjust to change. Principals are expected to know how to develop relationships with teachers and students, be reflective in their practice and share leadership with others on the campus which can be overwhelming. There is abundant research on the role of the principal, and the importance it plays in the implementation of school improvement and school reform (Cosner, 2009; Fink & Brayman, 2006; Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

As a middle school principal, I have felt overwhelmed by the number of change initiatives that have been presented to me and the expectations placed upon me to implement change on my campus. The principals interviewed have been presented with

school improvement initiatives from their campus teachers and reform mandates from the federal, state and local levels and still they have strived to make meaning of these changes by determining if the initiative fits with the campus vision and mission, by implementing change at an appropriate pace so the principals and the teachers learn how to implement the change effectively and the principals utilize their prior experiences with change and their teachers to implement initiatives.

Campus Vision and Mission

Mendels (2012) argues it is important for the school principal to shape the vision of academic success for all students, by establishing high expectations. The principal must demand that all students, advantaged and disadvantaged are challenged to perform at high levels. The goal is to close the achievement gap between both groups of students so that all are prepared for a demanding career. The principals shared that when making meaning of change, it has to fit with the campus vision and mission, and that the principal needs to develop relationships with teachers and empower teachers to lead the campus vision and mission. If the principal or the leadership team determines the change initiative does not fit the campus vision and mission, then the campus will continue to look for other initiatives that support the campus vision and mission.

Jamie described this fit with the mission and vision as having a "tight alignment of initiatives." Initiatives need to "complement each other and improve student learning." Additionally, Jamie shared we have to change because "our students and society are changing." We cannot continue doing what we have been doing. She pointed to the changes in technology and how students use technology to learn. By building relationships with teachers, Jamie is able to "push" them to implementation different

types of technology into the classroom with students. Likewise, Jamie "believes in having all students earn high school credit in middle school." By earning high school credit in middle school, students will have more room in their high school schedule to "explore more opportunities" before graduating and having to choose a career or college.

Jamie works closely with her leadership team and classroom teachers to determine the appropriate initiatives to implement on the campus. She employs distributive leadership to empower teachers to lead initiatives. She wants to be in "the know" with the starting phase of implementation of initiatives so she can support teachers. The leader teachers shared "Jamie attends professional development with the teachers so she knows what is going on and how to support teachers."

Maria is more open to school improvement initiatives brought by the teachers on the campus than she is of reform initiatives presented by central office. She believes the teachers know what is best for the students and they understand the goals of the campus. By sharing leadership with the teachers, she encourages teachers' buy-in for change. For example, the campus has implemented writing across the curriculum because after reviewing the campus data, the English Language Learner students were struggling with writing. One of the teacher leaders leads this initiative on the campus by providing training and support in the classroom as teachers learn to implement more writing.

When implementing initiatives from central office, Maria is "hesitant" to implement because she "needs" to make sure the change fits with the campus vision and mission or is relevant to the campus. She "does not always believe central office knows what is best for her campus." For example, she has felt forced to implement the TEKS Resource System (district curriculum) because "it takes away teacher creativity."

Tom is adamant about change initiatives fitting with the campus vision and mission. For campus school improvement initiatives, he "takes everything" to his leadership team. The leadership team evaluates the initiative and then makes the decision to implement. As shared earlier, several of the teachers from the school brought the *Teach Like a Champion* (2010) book study to the campus. The teachers have been working together to slowly implement five strategies from this text to improve teaching and student learning.

As for reform initiatives being brought to the campus from central office, Tom does "evaluate" which initiatives he will bring to the leadership team. He is comfortable letting central office know that certain initiatives "will not work" on his campus. He expressed that "central office trusted him" to make those decisions and they have allowed him some autonomy in implementing of their initiatives. For example, Cedar Middle School does not adhere to the district's incentive pay program for teachers based on student academic performance.

The principal must develop long-term plans that promote the school's vision, mission and goals (Portin, 2004). Principals need to share leadership with teachers in the development of the campus vision and mission by being relational with teachers. For school improvement and school reform initiatives to be implemented on the campus, the initiatives must fit with the campus vision and mission. This decision can be determined by the principal or by the campus leadership team, but it must fit with each campus. The principals did not discuss their influence on the leadership team in making decisions regarding the fit of initiatives.

Appropriate Speed

Frustration has been expressed by many reformists that school reform and school improvement efforts either take too long to implement or change initiatives happen too fast that teachers do not understand the initiatives (Gronn, 2002). By building relationship with teachers and knowing when the teachers are ready to implement change, and after spending time reflecting on change, principals are better able to implement change at the appropriate speed. Because change is constant, principals have to find the appropriate speed at which to implement change. If change is implemented too fast, teachers and students become overwhelmed; if it takes too long, then teachers and students become frustrated because no results are being seen. By working with teachers and following their lead to slow down the pace of change initiatives, principals are creating positive environments, building strong relationships and developing teachers (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004).

All three principals shared they have a similar belief that the school should only implement a few new initiatives or strategies a year. Because Jamie knows her teachers, she said "anything more than two initiatives will overwhelm the teachers and cause them to shut down." Also, she shared she knows some teachers sit back and say "oh here she goes again; bringing something else in, if we just wait this too will pass."

Maria wants teachers to implement change to help the students but she wants to be careful that it is not too much for the teachers to handle. Maria stated, "We have our on-going initiatives like the implementation and utilization of PLCs and PBIS but we also add one or two other initiatives a year." Additionally, Maria wants teachers to understand the why and how of change initiatives. She expressed concern when "change

is expected so fast that teachers do not really understand why and what they are doing. This causes so much frustration for everyone." She trusts her leadership team to help her determine the appropriate pace in which to implement change.

Early in Tom's case study, he pointed out that he paces out initiatives. He is aware teachers can become overwhelmed with change. Once teachers become overwhelmed it is difficult for them even try to implement the initiative." Cedar Middle School has kept their focus on the slow steady implementation of the strategies in *Teach Like a Champion* (2010). Tom shared, "we only implement five new strategies at a time, when we are really good at those, we add five more." Tom added "we do not do the strategies in order; we look to see which ones will most benefit our students. Tom works closely with his leadership team to determine which strategies to implement and when.

The public needs to remember school improvement will not happen overnight. Principals need time to learn to lead schools (Lytle, 2012) and finding the appropriate speed at which to implement change on the campus can be difficult. By utilizing reflective practices, building relationships and distributing leadership, principals can better gauge the right speed for implementation. There are pressures from the community, central office and from teachers to improve the campus at a faster pace. But, principals need to take time to make sure they understand the initiative and teachers understand how to implement the initiative but not too long as to not implement change on the campus.

Experience

Successful principals work long hours, are totally committed, have a clear, well-articulated sense of purpose and individual identity, are able to build and sustain individual and collective capacity, are respected and trusted by the communities which

they serve, and are persistently resilient (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). The principals expressed their experience as a leader and experience with leading change helped them to make meaning of new change initiatives on the campus. Because they have been on their campuses for seven or more years, they have developed relationships with the teachers to know how the different teachers will respond differently to change and they have learned way to distribute leadership on the campus.

Jamie knows which teachers will be "excited about change" and which teachers will need a "push to get started." She feels through her experience on the campus, she has "developed relationships" with the teachers and she knows what "type of support is needed." Additionally, she knows how to communicate with teachers to get them to buy into the initiative. She utilizes the teachers concern for the students as the "hook" to get the teachers interested in the initiative.

Tom has learned from his own experiences and the experiences of his mentor. He shared if he could go back, "he would be more patient with people and with change." He believes he was "too brash and too quick" with others when he first started as a principal but he has learned to slow down. By slowing he had developed relationships with his teachers and the teachers "trust" Tom. As shared earlier, the teacher leaders like hearing how "Tom made mistakes in his teaching." They feel "safe trying different things because Tom will not get mad at them if they are unsuccessful."

The principals have developed skills and experience to help them develop a leadership style that promotes relationships with teachers and sharing leadership with teachers to lead school improvement and school reform initiatives on their campuses. The principal's leadership style must be tailored to fit each individual leader's personality,

experience and background (Greenleaf, 1996). Additionally, the principals have learned ways to help address the professional development needs of their teachers and how to help teachers to improve and grow.

Summary

The successful mid-career middle school principals make meaning of school reform and school improvement initiatives by checking to see if change initiatives support the campus vision and mission. If the initiative is teacher led and supports the campus vision and mission, the effective principal will likely move forward with the change. If the initiative is a mandate from central office, the principal still checks to see if it supports the campus vision and mission; if it does, then once again the principal moves forward. If either teacher led or central office mandated initiatives do not support the campus vision and mission, the principal will pass on them or the principal will often go slower on the implementation of the initiative.

Additionally, the principals in the study are very aware of the importance of pacing when implementing reform and improvement initiatives. The principals go slower to make sure they and the teachers are not overwhelmed by too many initiatives coming to fast and the initiatives make sense. Principals need time to learn to lead schools (Lytle, 2012).

Lastly, the principals believe their experiences at their campuses and the experiences they have gained from leading other change initiatives gives them more ways to make meaning of change. They have learned to navigate many issues and difficulties, such as building relationships with teachers, parents and the community, they have

learned the organizational culture, and have established ways to overcome the insecurity of inexperience in order to develop a sense of confidence (Oplatka, 2010).

Managing people, data and processes are important skills to foster when implementing school improvement and school reform initiatives and the principals' experiences helps them with these skills. Kremer-Hayon and Fessler (1992) report principals do not have to change their position in order to challenge themselves. Principals can continue to work on reflective practices, building relationships and distributing leadership.

As I reflect back on my personal reflection at the beginning of the research. I think about what I have learned from the participants in the study. Each principal was an advocate for student learning on the campus. It is important to have a campus mission and vision and that all change initiatives must fit with the campus mission and vision. I believe from this I have learned to be more selective to initiatives and advocate for the needs on my campus. We will not just attempt to implement every initiative being pushed our direction.

Additionally, distributing leadership on the campus to teachers will allow me to free up some of my time to better support teachers by being in the classroom or helping with curriculum issues. Also, by sharing leadership, teachers will buy in to our campus mission and vision and we will only grow stronger as a campus.

Conclusions and Recommendations

How can principals be supported and encouraged to continue in their positions longer and derive more meaning from their position? The purpose of this study was to explore how successful mid-career middle school administrators make meaning of

school improvement and school reform initiatives. How do they lead, negotiate and mange school improvement and reform initiatives so student learning, teacher learning and administrator learning improve?

It is my goal that the conclusions and recommendations from this research will be used for administrator development and training programs and to school districts and campuses. Principal preparatory programs may provide aspiring principals additional training on how to manage school change and additional professional development may be provided to current principals regarding management of school change.

Several areas stood out to me in my findings about how principals and teachers work together. First, just having experience and being committed to the school is extremely important to the principals and to the teachers. Second, relationships are vital to working together in schools. The principals and the teachers stressed the importance of developing relationships with teachers to know teachers' strengths and weakness and when teachers are ready for more initiatives. Third, the principals need to be able to share and distribute leadership. Teachers want to help lead the school. Fourth, the campus must have a vision and mission so that all initiatives can be evaluated to determine how they will support the campus vision and mission. Lastly, principals shared learning to reflect meaningfully is very important for effective school leadership

Experience and commitment are important in any profession but they may be more important in education because according to Mendels (2012), schools that have principals who remain in the principalship longer have more student success. But because of the high turnover rate of principals, how can principal preparatory programs give aspiring principals experience in developing relationships teachers, learning to distribute

leadership, developing a campus vision and mission and learning to reflect? These skills are difficult for any new principal to have acquired.

Principal experience and commitment are important to student success but these attributes are gained primarily through experience, just doing it. Likewise, learning to build relationships and being comfortable distributing leadership with teachers take time. But, I recommend principal training programs begin incorporating strategies that teach aspiring principals how to utilize a professional learning community (PLC) model. By nature, PLCs are designed to help teachers build relationships with each other, work together to build strengths, and to share leadership to improve student learning (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). Learning about PLCs and how to implement effective PLCs can help aspiring principals think about and develop systems to build relationships with teachers on campus and to distribute leadership to others on the campus. There are different PLC models out there but all these programs encourage the participation and shared work of all teachers and administrators at the school.

Additionally, because the responsibilities of the campus principal are so great, the utilizations of PLCs will help principals learn to distribute and share leadership on the campus. I recommend school districts require and model the use of PLCs so that principals participate in a PLC at the district level. This will give them the exposure they need to model and participate in PLCs at the campus level. By involving principals in PLCs at the campus level, principals will have the opportunity to develop relationships with teachers and share leadership with them. According DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008), principals must be involved in the implementation of PLCs to support and grow with teachers.

The implementation and utilization of PLCs supports my first three findings, but I want to step away from PLCs for the final two. The principals and teachers in the study emphasized the use of the campus vision and mission when evaluating and implementing change. They asked, does the change initiative support the campus vision and mission? I recommend that aspiring principals reflect on their belief system of school and school improvement and they research and implement best practices in their classrooms or campus so that they have some form of experience to refer to when they are ready to assume the principalship.

For school districts continuing to develop principals, I recommend they look at their utilization and development of campus improvement plans (CIPs). How are CIPs being developed and utilized on the campus? While three principals that I interviewed did not refer to the campus improvement plan directly, they constantly referred to initiatives as having to fit the campus vision and mission.

Lastly, I found that all the principals utilized some form of reflection in their job. The principals believed reflections helped them to prepare for change and to evaluate how change affected them, the teachers and the students. I recommend principal preparatory programs teach a formal unit or topic on the effectiveness of reflection in the aspiring principal's practice. Having gone through a principal preparatory program, I completed reflections as a class requirement but it was never really stressed to me why we were doing reflections. I recommend the programs be explicit in the teaching and use of reflections.

For school districts, I recommend the districts explore professional development for principals regarding the use and implementation of reflection in the principal's

practice. Districts may want to implement a practice to allow principals time to reflect during meetings. Dewey (1933) argued reflective thinking allows people to move away from everyday thinking and actions and guides people to critical considerations. By implementing reflections into practice principals could gain better insight into change initiatives and how initiatives will affect the campus. This could include time during principal meetings to reflect on initiatives or other district requirements/expectations.

Lastly, I want to add one additional recommendation based on a statement Tom made about retaining good principals. Tom shared, "I am compensated just like central office staff. The principals make the same salary as a central office person. Why would I leave this when I get paid just as much as they do?"

Limitations of the Research

No research study is without limitations but the limitations need to be acknowledged (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The typical limitations to qualitative research apply to my study such as selected sample size, sample selections, issues of research bias, and participant reactivity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 78). There are other limitations I would like to acknowledge as well. While generating boundaried knowledge, these limitations do not negate the value or meaningfulness of this study's findings. Rather, all sources are understood to be, as Trochim (2006) notes, errorful and all theorizing out of the data is partial. The usefulness of the study's findings for educational practice are found specifically in the particular, lived, and divergent meaning making of the participants (Glesne, 2011).

When I began my research, I worked with the Texas Middle School Association utilizing the Middle School to Watch recognition criteria to identify

principals in their mid-career who had served as principal on their current campus at least seven years. We were able to identify three principals in Central Texas for the project. Since the beginning of the project, there may be more principals that fit my definition. Exploring their stories for patterns of similarity and difference with these findings would add additional depth and complexity to our understanding.

The participants were asked how race, age and gender influenced their decision making. Since I was using a phenomenological rather than specifically critical framework to guide the study I did not pursue these areas as a primary focus in the analysis, beyond what the participants themselves reported about the relevancy of these constructs to their meaning making. Utilizing a critical theory framework, would have guided me to analyze in a more complex way how constructs such as race, age and/or gender influence the principal's decision making regarding school reform and school improvement initiatives. Additionally, the supervisors of the principals were not included in this research. Further insights could be drawn from investigation of the supervisors' perceptions of how the principal makes meaning and negotiates meaning with teachers on the campus, as well as the relationship to the supervisory process.

Lastly, it is clear that further study would be helpful regarding how the campus improvement plan can be utilized by school principals as a tool when implementing school improvement and school reform on the campus.

With any piece of research, others will ask, have you thought of this or what about that. There are other components I might pursue down the road but at this time, I conclude my current study with rich and complex understandings capable improving my leadership skills and those of other principals as well.

Future Research

I encourage others to utilize my research on the mid-career principal because when I began my research there was limited information on the lives of mid-career principals. As our society continues to grow, we will have more principals to accommodate student growth and more principals will fall into this mid-career stage of development.

There are other lenses with which to interpret this research, which I am interested in pursuing in the future. For instance, using critical race theory would allow the researcher to see more than just the reality of school improvement but look at ways to situate the reality of school change within complex dynamics of race, privilege, and power (Crotty, 2003).

Additionally, I am interested in using a feminist approach to look at the difference between female and male principals' styles in leading school improvement and school reform, with an eye to noting systemic effects of patriarchy as a system of organization within educational administration. Is the female (or feminized?) principal, even as a leader, still restricted by her gender? This study may allow me to possibly recommend more than just a conscious change to the role of the female principal (Crotty, 2003).

Final Thoughts

As I finish Chapter 5, I have to walk away because I cannot believe the end is here. I will have time back with my family. No more questions about "when will the big paper be done?" I am not sure if it is ever done. This work will be constantly held in my soul. I look at what I have learned about the mid-career principal (me) and I will have to take to heart how my recommendations should and will impact my life.

The first concept I have learned from this research is the power reflection can play to help the principal prepare for change on the campus. I will use reflections to think about how the teachers on my campus will respond to change initiatives and how I may need to adjust change initiatives to help the teachers be less stressed when implementing change. Additionally, I will utilize reflection after I have introduced change to evaluate how the change has affected the teachers and students on the campus. By utilizing reflection, I can learn from experience and I can improve as a principal from my experience.

The second concept I have learned from this research is how the implementation and utilizations of PLC's on the campus can help improve relationships between teachers and teachers and teachers and the administration. PLC's are providing teachers and principals the opportunity to learn and grow from each other. Also, PLC's are helping successful principals better focus the campus mission and vision. The campus mission and vision is supported in PLC on a regular basis. Lastly, the implementation of PLC's allows for teachers to develop as leaders. When principals can distribute leadership on the campus to teachers, teachers have more buy in on the campus and in the implementation of change. Even if no one does anything with my recommendations, I can change my practice and make myself a better principal by utilizing reflections and continuing to advocate for PLC's at my campus.

I would like to someday move into central office because I want to support and help principals be better leaders. The position of principal is isolating and sometimes even confusing. There is a lot of responsibility because the role of principal has so much influence on the lives of others. Am I making the best decisions possible? How can I help

others to make decisions that will improve the lives of our students? I move to the next

stage of my life "done" but still as interested in learning, growing and improving as when

I began.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview One - Principal Interview Questions
1) Please tell me a little about your career in education and why you made the decision to become a principal?
2) What led you to your current position?
3) What has influenced you to remain in your position as a principal and at the school?
4) What comes to your mind when you think about school designed improvement and school reform initiatives?
5) Please share your experience with leading school designed improvement and school reform initiatives on the campus?
6) When presented with change, how do you respond to school designed improvement and school reform changes on the campus? Please share some examples?
7) What has been easy about leading change? Please share some examples.
8) What has been difficult about leading change? Please share some examples.
9) How do you feel teachers respond to school designed improvement and school reform changes on the campus? Please share some examples.
10) How do you help teachers implement change on the campus? Please share some examples.
11) How do you believe your age, gender or race has influenced the way you lead or make decision on the campus?
12) What else would you like to share with me about your campus and how you lead?

Interview Two – Principal Interview Questions
1) Reflecting back on your career, how have you changed as a principal?
2) What has caused these changes?
3) What type of professional development do you want right now?
4) What type of support do you want from others right now?

Teacher Interview Questions
1) How long have you been working with your current principal? Were you hired by this principal or were you working on the campus before the principal began working here?
2) How does your principal introduce school designed improvement or school reform to the teachers? Can you please share some examples?
3) How does your principal get buy-in on the implementation of school designed improvement and school reform? Can you please share some examples?
4) What role do you play in implementing school designed improvement or school reform initiatives on the campus? Can you please share some examples?

5) How do you feel your principal's age, years of experience, gender or race influences how he or she leads or make decisions on the campus?
6) What else would you like to share with me about how your campus implements or does not implement change?

IRB CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

TEXAS ★ STATE
UNIVERSITY
SAN MARCOS
The rising STAR of Texas

Institutional Review Board

Request For Exemption

Certificate of Approval

Applicant: Brenda Agnew

Request Number : EXP2013Q6229

Date of Approval: 07/03/13
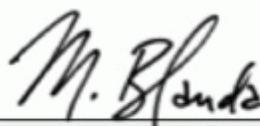
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Assistant Vice President for Research
and Federal Relations
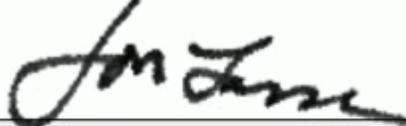
_____
Chair, Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX C

REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATION AND CONSENT FORM

Dear _____:

You are invited to participate in a study conducted by Brenda Agnew, doctoral candidate at Texas State University. The purpose of this study is to examine how school principal negotiate school improvement and school reform initiatives with teachers on their campus.

In particular, this qualitative investigation will explore how career theory effects how successful middle school principals perceived ability to negotiate school improvement or school reform. You were selected as a possible participant for this study because you were identified by the Texas Middle School Association as a successful middle school principal with at least seven years on experience on your current campus. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, confidential and separate from normal work duties.

If you are interested in participating in this study and would like additional information,

Please contact Brenda Agnew via email at bdagnew4@gmail.com or by phone: 512-771-9002.

Thank you,

Brenda Agnew

Texas State University – San Marcos

Doctoral Candidate

CONSENT FORM

Please Keep This Form for Your Records

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the qualitative study. The researcher conducting this research study will also describe the study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to participate. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can stop your participation at any time and your refusal will not impact current or future relationships with Texas State University. To end your participation, simply notify the researcher that you wish to stop participation. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this consent form for your records.

Title of the Study: Mid-Career Middle School Principals' Perceptions of School Improvement and School Reform Initiatives

Principle Investigator/Researcher: Brenda Agnew, doctoral candidate**,** Texas State University – San Marcos, bdagnew4@gmail.com, 512.771-9002

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Michael O'Malley, Ph.D., Associate Professor for Educational Administration, mo20@txstate.edu, 512.245-9923

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this qualitative investigation is to learn how successful middle school principals negotiate school improvement and school reform initiative on their campus. Additionally, this study will investigate how career theory plays a role in the school principal's ability to negotiate change.

If you agree to this study, I will ask you to do the following:

- Provide the researcher with a copy of your Campus Improvement Plan for the last five years.

- Participate in two audio-taped interviews with the researcher. Each interview will last approximately one hour. Interviews will be schedule to fit your schedule time, date and location.

- Provide the researcher with the names of two trusted teachers that would be willing to participate in the study to help with triangulation.

Risks and benefits of participating in this study:

• Participation in the study poses no physical risk; however, there may be some risk of emotional stress when reflecting upon how you have negotiated school improvement and school reform initiatives with teachers.

• Participation in this study is expected to benefit participants by encouraging participants to reflect on their practice as a school principal.

Compensation:

• There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Confidentiality and Privacy Protections:

• The data resulting from your participation will be used for educational purposes and possible publication. The data will contain no identifying information that could associate you with it, or with your participation in this study.

• Data will be stored to ensure that it is secure and remains confidential. The participants'

responses to interview questions will be audio-taped. Audio-recording will be locked in a filing cabinet located at the researcher's home, limiting access to the taped recordings and research data.

Pseudonyms will be assigned after interviews and actual names will be removed from all recordings and data. The researcher will maintain a master key, which maintains the participant's real name and the assigned pseudonym. This key will be securely stored in a separate locked desk drawer located in the researcher's home.

• The records of this study will be stored securely and kept confidential. Authorized persons from Texas State University and members of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) have the legal right to review research records and will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law. Names and locations will be changed. All publications will include pseudonyms for people and places so as to make it difficult to identify you as a subject.

• Throughout this study, the researcher will notify you of new information that may become available and that might affect your decision to remain in the study.

Contacts and Questions:

• If you have any questions about the study, please ask now. If you have questions later, want additional information, or wish to withdraw your participation, contact the researcher conducting this study. My name, phone number, and email address are listed above as is the contact information for the Texas State University sponsor, Dr.Michael O'Malley.

• If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, complaints, concerns, or

question about the research, you may contact Dr. Jon Lasser, Chair, Texas State

University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at 512-245-

3413 or the Office of Institutional Support at 512-245-2348, or email ospirb@txstate.edu.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

As the researcher conducting this study, I have explained the purpose, procedure, risks,

and benefits involved in participation in this study.

Signature of researcher_____

Date_____

Statement of Consent:

• I have read the information above and have sufficient information to make a decision

about participating in this study.

• I consent to participate in this study.

Your signature_____

Date_____

Please print your

name_____

• I grant permission for the researcher to use the data collected as a result of my

participation in this study for future publication and other educational purposes.

Your signature_____

Date_____

Signature of researcher_____

Date_____

Printed name of researcher_____

Date_____

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