EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP GROWTH THROUGH
DEALING WITH A MAJOR CRISIS EVENT:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand the leadership growth and development of principals in the state of Massachusetts who have experienced a major school crisis. Recent research has shown that principals are responsible for much more than curriculum and instruction and that the expectations placed on educational leaders have evolved (Hess, 2002). Research has also shown that principals’ expectations now include a myriad of additional responsibilities. School violence and other unforeseen crises have complicated the role of building administration, and it is critical that principals are prepared to react appropriately in the event of an emergency (Gainey, 2009).

This qualitative study created the opportunity for principals to reflect on their decision making under extreme pressure. Participants articulated their perceived growth as a result of managing a school crisis as they discussed the impact of the event on their own leadership. Four principals from the state of Massachusetts are included in this research. The research questions are: 1) How do principals describe the actions they took when faced with a school crisis? 2) What have principals learned about their own leadership as a result of experiencing a school crisis? Kolb’s cycle of experiential learning guides this investigation.

Whether responding to school violence, the untimely death of a student or staff member,
or other critical situations, principals were afforded the opportunity to explain the decisions they made and discuss how they may have approached the situation differently. Participants responses and information sharing create an opportunity for educational leaders to learn from the personal experiences of their colleagues. This form of learning is useful for improving our collective ability to respond to future school crisis events (Cornell & Sheras, 1994, Coombs, 2004).

Keywords: principals, educational leadership, leadership development, school crisis, school violence.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Problem and Significance

Principals are required to lead their school communities in numerous ways. Hiring and supervising staff, controlling the budget, and evaluating student learning are among the many responsibilities of educational leaders. The accountability placed on school principals has changed significantly since the introduction of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2010). In addition to these federal mandates, statewide assessments such as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) have impacted the expectations of principals and defined the call for accountability in public schools (Leithwood, 2010). These mandates have given principals the additional responsibility of ensuring student achievement, motivating staff and students, and creating professional development opportunities for staff that are tied to school improvement goals (Hess, 2002).

A review of the literature shows that school leadership has been studied from a variety of contexts. Research on the principalship includes: principals as transformational leaders, principals as building based managers, principals as change agents, and the attributes of successful principals (Leithwood, 2010, Hess, 2002, Goldring and Schuermann, 2009). Since principals are under great pressure to respond to the growing demands of education reform, research shows that principal preparation programs are primarily geared toward training principals as instructional leaders (Hess & Kelly, 2005). Educational leadership, however, goes well beyond the curriculum. Principals must be prepared to lead, guide, and support their school in multiple areas. One such area is planning for a crisis situation. Although there is a significant
amount of research dedicated to the principalship and training principals, there is little
information sharing and training that will help prepare principals for a school crisis (Coombs,
2004).

One of the greatest challenges confronting school leaders today is the reality that school
communities are vulnerable to unforeseen crisis events that challenge the leadership abilities of
principals (Schlafer, 2009). Crisis situations threaten to disrupt operations, both short and long
term, and have the potential to leave lasting damage on a school’s reputation if not handled
effectively (Coombs, 2004). Numerous critical incidents have occurred, which have tested the
leadership capacity of school principals. According to the Northeast Homeland Security
Regional Advisory Council (NERAC, 2003), the events at Columbine High School in Littleton,
Colorado changed the way in which we must prepare educators for the demands of public school
administration. For example, in 2010, the high school in Westford, Massachusetts, Westford
Academy, lost a popular female senior in a shocking homicide outside of school (The Lowell
Sun, 2010). Westford Academy’s leadership team was responsible for helping their students and
staff cope with their great loss with only a few hours notice. In another example, on January 19,
2007, a 15 year old student was fatally stabbed by a classmate at Lincoln-Sudbury High School.
This brutal and unpredictable attack occurred in one of the schools’ bathrooms during school
hours (Boston Globe, 2011). Regardless of the nature of a crisis, it is imperative that
administrators are able to implement a comprehensive approach to incident management that will
allow school communities to restore normal working order in an efficient manner.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (2011), the National Youth Risk Behavior
Survey (NYRBS) shows that over seventeen percent (17.5%) of students reported carrying a
weapon (gun, knife, or club), and nearly six percent (6%) of those students were bringing
The problem of practice investigated sought to determine how educational leaders, who have faced crisis situations, analyze and assess their personal experience and explain the effect of the event on their own leadership. While many schools have encountered events of extreme school violence or other crises, there has been little research on educational leaders reflection and examination of the impact to their leadership development (Cornell & Sheras, 1998, Coombs, 2004). Pauchant (2002) explains that promoting the importance of actively learning from previous crisis events is a crucial step in enhancing our ability to respond to emergencies. The ambiguity of crisis situations makes learning more difficult from event to event. Despite this, it is critical that we are able to work to remove barriers for effective learning from crisis situations.

Information sharing about crisis situations will allow educational leaders to learn from the personal experiences of their colleagues. Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2011) highlight the importance of learning from crisis events as an opportunity to prevent similar occurrences in the
future. Through the application of "vicarious learning" (p. 177), the authors explain that organizations do not need to fail in order to learn; they can make gains by studying the experiences of others. According to Ulmer et al. (2011), "Successful organizations engage in vicarious learning in order to recognize risk…and take action to avoid making the same mistakes" (p.177). Learning from principals who have managed crisis situations supported the purpose of this research study, which explored different phenomena from the perspective of those who shared their personal experiences.

**Practical and Intellectual Goals**

The problem of practice, practical, and intellectual goals (Maxwell, 2005) were addressed through a qualitative interpretive phenomenological research study. The research was conducted within schools that have recently experienced a large-scale crisis. Principals in the state of Massachusetts, who have been responsible for leading their school community through a major crisis event, were the subjects of this research. The intellectual goal was to understand a principal’s perceived leadership growth and development as a result of the phenomena experienced. This created an opportunity for other principals to understand what it is like to be in a leadership capacity during a time of extreme adversity. Each participant had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and discuss their own leadership growth as a result of the crisis they confronted.

The practical goal of this study was to learn about the step-by-step actions taken by the principals as they responded to the situation. Through learning from the experiences of others, the collective understanding of leadership skills that may have contributed to the successful response of school administrators was enhanced. Conversely, attributes absent in some leaders
may have had an adverse affect on their subsequent action. By developing a deeper understanding of how leaders who have been through a crisis were able to respond, conclusions are drawn about the educational administrators’ levels of preparedness. Preparation alone does not guarantee that a leader will respond effectively to a crisis situation; however, understanding the actual response to the event may show that training influenced the principal’s decision making ability. Addressing this practical goal may have also highlighted practices and decisions that were not in the best interest of the students, staff, and school community as they worked to recover from the crisis. In addition, recommendations for future training were sought from school leaders who participated in this study. By identifying which strategies were used and which were successful in helping these schools move forward following the traumatic event, school leaders can apply the lessons learned to future crisis situations.

**Research Questions**

The primary questions for this research study are: (1) *How do principal’s describe the actions they took when faced with a school crisis?* (2) *What have principals learned about their own leadership as a result of experiencing a school crisis?*

The questions proposed seek to understand what insight leaders have developed about their own personal leadership growth through experiencing extreme adversity. Learning from first hand descriptions of shared phenomena enables administrators to understand what it is like to be called upon to lead during the most difficult of times.

**Content and Organization of the Thesis**

This doctoral thesis has been organized into four additional chapters. The following portion of this chapter contains an in depth explanation of the theoretical framework that guided
Theoretical Framework

Kolb’s (1984) cycle of experiential learning provided the framework for analyzing the leadership development of the principals participating in this study. In order to understand the leader’s development, it is necessary to understand the experience and the learning process that lead to new insights and growth. Building on the research contributions of Lewin (1951), Dewey (1938), and Piaget (1963), Kolb’s (1984) cyclical theory of learning provides a framework for analyzing the perceived personal growth of the principals who participated in this study. This model depicts learning as a cyclical process including four primary elements: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Kolb (1984) explains that learning through experience is an integrated process which combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior. In addition, Kolb’s perspective on learning
through experience demonstrates clear ties to the intellectual work contributed by Lewin, Dewey, and Piaget (Kolb, 1984).

Lewin (1945) developed his model of action research which is supported by two primary themes. First, Lewin’s (1945) model emphasizes the “here-and-now” (Kolb, 1094, p. 21) concrete experience which serves as the foundation for effective learning. Secondly, processing internal and external feedback helps to solidify the learning process. Lewin’s (1945) model was presented as a four part cycle; concrete experience, observations and reflections, formation of abstract concepts and generalizations, and testing implications of concepts in new situations. Lewin (1945) argues that inadequate progress and a lack of organizational development was a direct result of an imbalance between concrete experience and action. Lewin (1945) explains that integrating experience and action were critical to ensure “an effective, goal-directed learning process” (Kolb, 1984).

Dewey’s (1938) model of experiential learning is similar to the Lewinian model, with a greater emphasis on describing and explaining how concrete experiences are transformed into purposeful action (Kolb, 1984). Dewey’s model is explained in a three part cycle; observation and surrounding conditions, prior knowledge from similar events, and judgment, which blends observation(s) with what is remembered (Dewey, 1938). Dewey stressed the importance of delaying immediate action to avoid acting impulsively. He also emphasizes the integration of reflection and action as crucial for purposeful growth and development (Kolb, 1984).

Piaget’s Model of Learning and Cognitive Development (1963) is presented in four sections; concrete phenomenalism, internalized reflection, abstract constructionalism, and active egocentricism (Kolb, 1984). Each of these sections is supported by four major stages of
cognitive growth: sensory motor stage, representational stage, stage of concrete operations, and stage of formal operations. Piaget’s general idea was that specific experiences are certainly important for learning, but growth and development comes from active problem solving and progression through all stages of cognitive development (Flavell, 1938).

According to Kolb (1984), in order to facilitate effective learning from experience, leaders will engage in all four modes described in his learning model. Concrete experience (CE) is where leaders build the foundation of their learning by living the experience, and they can draw on their immediate response to the event. Reflective Observation (RO) occurs as leaders intentionally transfer their experience into meaningful ideas. Through reflective observation, leaders internally consider their performance and organize their priorities and values. Abstract conceptualization (AC) occurs when leaders organize and understand concepts by analyzing their experience. Leaders operating in an action-oriented mode are involved in active experimentation (AE).

![Four Stages of Kolb’s Learning Cycle](image)

*Figure 1:* Four Stages of Kolb’s Learning Cycle. (Adapted from D. A. Kolb, 1984).

Kolb (1984) found that leaders required all four modes depicted in the cycle in order to be effective. New knowledge is developed by progressing through the four stages of experiential
learning. Leaders enter the cycle beginning with their concrete experience, which provided the foundation for meaningful reflective observation. As the leader progresses through the cycle, they conceptualize their experience and begin to form ideas for applying new knowledge. These concepts and ideas are applied during the active experimentation phase of the cycle. Kolb (1976, 1984) explains that although every individual uses each learning mode in some capacity, each person has a preferred mode of learning, which they would most commonly lean toward in a given situation. Whether out of habit or necessity, it is likely that effective leaders will enhance their performance by matching the appropriate learning mode to the current situation.

Kolb (1984) explains that an experience plays a pivotal role in the learning process by combining “experience, perception, cognition, and behavior” (p. 21). Kolb (1984) offered the following six “propositions” (p. 26)

1. Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes.
2. Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience.
3. The process of learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world.
4. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world.
5. Learning involves transactions between the person and the environment.
6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge.

In his first proposition, Kolb (1984) argues that learning is an ongoing process where, “No two thoughts are ever the same, since experience always intervenes” (p. 26). In describing his second proposition, Kolb explains that “it is the interplay between expectation and experience that learning occurs” (p. 28). Kolb (1984) argues that the role of an educator is to identify prior knowledge and work to either expand upon or modify existing ideas. In explaining the third idea
that “the process of learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world” (p. 29), Kolb (1984) explains that research supports the notion that learning is a conflict filled process. Learning occurs when conflicts between concrete experience, observation, and action are resolved. The fourth and fifth propositions explained by Kolb (1984) are closely tied. They include the idea that “learning is the major process of human adaptation,” (p. 32) and is active in all stages of physical development. Not only does learning occur throughout life, but can be the result of interactions between an individual and the physical environment. In his final proposition, Kolb (1984) maintains that learning is created as part of an ongoing cycle and is “the result of the transaction between social knowledge and personal knowledge” (p. 36).

For the purpose of this study, the concepts and theoretical perspectives that define effective principals and the leadership growth following crises were examined. Kolb’s (1984) cycle of experiential learning provided the framework for analyzing the perceived leadership development of the principals participating in this study. Through the reflection and conceptualization of a concrete experience, principals processed their leadership development as they progressed through Kolb’s (1984) cycle. Participants now understand the impact that the crisis event had on their current practice and explain how they have adjusted their leadership approach as a result of their experience. Managing a school crisis can result in continuous learning which will enhance the understanding of the relationship between educational leadership practice and crisis management.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The review of the literature is broken down into three main categories. Part 1 is an overview of leadership, key scholars and their perspectives. Part 2 examines research dedicated
to educational leadership and identifies specific skills necessary for effective principals. The information is organized around Leithwood et al.’s (2008) taxonomy of core leadership practices. Part 3 begins with an exploration of crisis management, and crisis management in educational settings. Part 3 provides a summary of literature that discusses the importance of learning from the experiences of other leaders and the necessity of adding crisis management training to principal preparation programs. Also included are recommendations that have been made by national and local emergency response agencies based on recent experiences and information gathered through the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, National School Safety Center, and Massachusetts Department of Education.

**Part 1: Leadership Overview**

Various models have been presented through the scholarly literature on leadership. Leadership models frequently discussed from a context of school leadership are transactional leadership, authentic leadership, servant leadership, distributed leadership, and transformational leadership. (Avolio & Shamir, 2002). Bass (1990) describes an effective transactional leadership style as being give-and-take relationships between employees and supervisors. Transactional leadership focuses primarily on creating an environment that is orderly while establishing rules and routines that are suited to guide an organization toward their goals and expectations (Sergiovanni, 2007). Through authentic leadership, the challenge of leadership increases in difficulty during more challenging times. Avolio and Gardner (2005) explain that leaders who are most successful are those who are able to lead with purpose and view integrity as a critical component to their success of authentic leadership development. Servant leadership was introduced by Greenleaf (1977) and is characterized by leaders who are willing to remove obstacles and distractions for their followers in an effort to allow them to focus on their own
primary goals and tasks (Polleys, 2002). Finally, Burns (1978) explains that a transformational leadership approach enables leaders to develop relationships with employees and effectively motivates them by understanding their needs. Research shows that transformational leadership practices must be applied by those in educational leadership positions in order to foster meaningful change (Roberts, 1985, Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999, Leithwood, 2008).

In the mid-1980s, a prominent leadership researcher, Warren Bennis, conducted research in both public and private sectors and identified common links between successful leaders. Bennis (1984) identified four strategies that were common amongst exceptional leaders. In their book *Leadership*, Bennis and Nanus (1985) explain the four strategies as attending to a dynamic vision, emphasizing clear, one-on-one communication, developing trust through consistent action, and fostering individual leadership strength development. Bennis and Nanus (1985) suggest that leaders should behave in a way that fosters a positive organizational culture as opposed to only motivating individuals to perform at high levels (Sashkin, 2004).

Building on the work of such theorists as Burns, Bass, and Bennis and Nanus, in 1987 Kouzes and Posner constructed the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) that was used as a vehicle to measure transformational leadership. The LPI contained five practices aimed at measuring each of the identified leadership behaviors. In *The Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes & Posner (2007) developed a theoretical foundation for leadership, and identified five exemplary practices common to successful leaders. These practices highlight the importance of leading by example, creating a shared vision of the organization, fostering responsible risk taking, and empowering and encouraging staff. These five characteristics are "model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart" (p. 3). The authors report that these practices are applicable to anybody in a leadership position regardless of
the organization. One area of their research has been directed toward leaders in educational settings.

Also supporting the strong link between managerial effectiveness and school leadership is Yukl (1994). He identified managerial behaviors which show similarities to successful school leadership and the core practices detailed by Leithwood et al. (2008). Yukl’s synthesis of what he called “managerial behaviors” (1994, 2002), included many of the responsibilities of today’s educational administrators. Examples include; active problem solving, fostering effective communication, motivating and inspiring staff, delegating, supporting and mentoring employees, conflict resolution, and recognizing and rewarding exceptional effort (Yukl, 2002).

While Bass (1985) and Kouzes and Posner (1987) were developing models to measure transformational leadership, Marshall Sashkin was constructing his Leader Behavior Questionnaire/The Visionary Leader (LBQ, 1984). The LBQ utilized the five behaviors identified by Bennis (1984). Currently, the LBQ is known as The Leadership Profile (TLP) and applies four behavioral aspects listed as communication, trust building, caring, and creating empowering opportunities (Sashkin, 2004). Throughout this historical progression on leadership, it has become clear that a number of themes remain constant. According to Sashkin (2004), in his review of other transformational leadership scholars, “communicating a vision,” “creating empowering opportunities,” and caring about followers needs are “central to transformational leadership” (p. 190).

Part 2: Research on Educational Leadership

In the arena of educational leadership one of the most prolific and well respected scholars is Kenneth Leithwood. Leithwood (1992, 2003, 2006) discussed leadership from a transformational perspective and developed a model of leadership which encompasses the same
characteristics found in other leadership models. The primary difference between Leithwood et al.’s (2008) taxonomy of core leadership practices lies in the attention given to managing the instructional program. This focus distinguishes Leithwood et al.’s model from those outside education while simultaneously maintaining many of the commonly identified characteristics. Leithwood et al.’s (2008) core leadership practices are listed as: setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the teaching and learning (instructional) program. Utilizing Leithwood, et al.’s core leadership practices in the following subsections as an organizing format will allow for an orderly discussion of other key literature on educational leadership.

**Setting Direction.** Principals are responsible for setting the organizational direction, which includes the development of a shared vision and relevant organizational goals. The creation and promotion of effective communication channels is a critical component of establishing direction for an organization. It is incumbent on the building principal to monitor organizational performance to ensure that routine functions are aligned with organizational goals (Leithwood et al., 2006, 2008). Further commenting on the importance of vision as it relates to successful school leadership, Duke (1987) explains how vision allows leaders to base their decisions on what is ultimately right for their entire organization and not just randomly responding to events as they come up. Duke (1987) maintains that cultivating a vision for organizational success allows leaders to operate in a proactive manner rather than solely being reactive. Strong leadership can cultivate a shared vision that will remain after individuals have moved on to face additional challenges (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, Cox, 2005).

Northhouse (2007) explains, “Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 3). An effective school leader is able to
ensure that school and district goals are aligned with their vision (Marzano et al, 2005). This idea is further supported by Leithwood and Riehl (2003) as they explain, “Leadership involves purposes and direction. Leaders know the ends toward which they are striving. They pursue goals with clarity and tenacity, and are accountable for their accomplishments” (p. 7). Fullan (2001) explains that leaders with moral purpose will maintain focus on the individuals within the organization, and on organizational vision. These leaders are able to articulate their vision through effective communication and goal setting (Fullan, 2001).

There are several theorists supporting the importance of leaders being able to share their organizational vision and inspire followers (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). For example, in one of their five practices of exemplary leadership, Kouzes & Posner (2007) explain that inspiring a shared vision requires leaders to genuinely believe they have the ability to make a difference, and are able to create a shared vision among their staff. This idea encourages leaders to recognize that all members of an organization have a responsibility to act as a leader at some level, and recognizes that teachers will develop their collective expertise by working collaboratively. The application of this approach requires a change in school climate, whereby all members of the school community are working to guide and support each other in their roles as leaders. Creating this common culture of expectations within a school community is the responsibility of the principal, but cannot be done alone (Spillane & Halverson, 2001).

**Developing People.** In an ongoing effort to allow teachers to work effectively, principals must be able to offer consistent support and stimulation. It is crucial that educational leaders at all levels are able to evolve and adapt their leadership practice in order to enact meaningful and positive relationships. Modeling expected behaviors is a critical component of developing people
(Leithwood et al., 2008). Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) suggest that once leaders set a clear direction for their organization they must move that way in all that they do. Leaders who are able to build and sustain solid organizational change are able to motivate and connect with their employees and are valued by all organizational stakeholders (George, Sims, McLean & Mayer, 2003).

Together with inspiring vision and modeling what is necessary for effective leadership, Kouzes and Posner identify teamwork and collaboration as key components to this leadership strategy, centered on cultivating mutual trust among people. Kouzes & Posner (2007) explain that it is critical for leaders to empower others and have faith in their abilities. These ideas regarding leadership have been consistent among other theorists. For example, Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond (2001) suggest that leadership tasks should be divided and distributed among leaders and followers. This ensures that all stakeholders have the ability to contribute to the mission of the school. Giving responsibility and listening to the people who do the work results in a sense of ownership and a commitment to both the goals and the people of the organization. Most of the scholars on educational leadership have identified empowerment as a key element. Elmore (2000) explains that empowerment creates an opportunity for all members of the organization to have input into the goals by “enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization…and holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result” (p. 15).

Creating capacity building opportunities can help to develop necessary skills, confidence, and resources for appropriate responses in any context. Fullan (2008) states, “Individuals are high in capacity if they possess and continue to develop knowledge and skills, if they attract and use resources wisely, and if they are committed to putting in the energy to get important things
done collectively and continuously” (p. 57). Spillane and Halverson (2001) make the argument that leadership tasks and responsibilities should be divided among leaders and followers. Further, Spillane et al. (2001) explains that each situation requires the interaction and attention of a group of individuals. In order for this to be successful, it is important for principals to develop and empower each member of their staff. The ability to react to unforeseen circumstances in an appropriate manner is a responsibility that does not rest on the shoulders of one leader. Attention to detail, coupled with the ability to interact and communicate with others is a critical component of management.

Along with giving additional responsibility to followers, another contribution to developing people is building and sustaining meaningful relationships. Michael Fullan (2001), a significant contributor to the field of educational leadership, believes that building and sustaining positive interpersonal relationships is the cornerstone of effective leadership. This idea is further supported by Fleck (2005) who reports that relationship building is the number one priority for successful leadership. Bass (1990) explains that effective leaders are able to capitalize on their ability to build relationships which increases employee productivity and satisfaction through personal and intellectual stimulation. One of the primary elements of successful leadership lies in the ability to cultivate follower development by providing motivation and support through interpersonal relationships (Avolio & Bass, 1993).

**Redesigning the Organization.** The third leadership practice has many of the same elements in terms of building relationships and creating opportunities for followers. Yukl (2001) explains that redesigning the organization also empowers stakeholders to challenge the status quo. Through the development of collaborative opportunities and fostering open communication, principals must work to build productive relationships with all stakeholders in a
school community. Creating opportunities to consider input from internal and external sources will allow principals to develop a deeper understanding of their organization (Leithwood et al. 2008). By monitoring organizational performance and outcomes, they are able to modify systems that are undermining organizational goals (Leithwood et al. 2008). In his book titled, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Edgar Schein (2004) explains that leaders must be able to identify deficiencies within their own organization, and enlist the support of outsiders in order to make improvements.

The changing context of educational leadership highlights the demand for skilled and knowledgeable leaders who are able to shape their school community to meet the complex demands of educational leadership in the 21st century (Leithwood et al., 2006, 2008). Dufour and Eaker (1998, 2008) explain that the process of improving the functioning of a school community requires each member of the school faculty to be constantly searching for better methods of meeting the school’s mission while reflecting on their own responsibilities and contributions. According to Goldring & Schuerman (2009), the changing context of K-12 educational leadership includes, "enhanced accountability demands, a learner-centered leadership focus, the necessity of analytic skills, gathering research evidence and data based decision making, the influence of competition and school choice, and the expectations of system-wide community engagement” (p. 10). Both internal and external accountability pertain to the overarching goals and school district expectations that are associated with the changing context of school leadership.

External accountability is the performance expectation that is a result of working with the local community and constituents who are indirectly impacted by the success or failure of the school system (Goldring & Schuerman, 2009). Today, the public distribution of data has a direct
impact on the level of pressure felt by teachers to improve their students’ performance (Hallinger, 2003). The high stakes demands of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) graduation requirement and potential for student performance being linked with teacher pay raises have also added to the focus on external accountability.

Internal accountability is closely related to the district expectations for individual school buildings as well as the overall school district. An increase in the focus on accountability has several implications for the role of educational leadership, which in turn shows that the training and preparation of the school leaders must evolve in order to meet this growing trend. Leaders must be able to align school system goals in a clear and measurable fashion so that standards are associated with effective student learning (Goldring & Schuerman, 2009). Leaders can establish and articulate standards for learning through relationship building and consistently demonstrating the behaviors that are expected of others (Goldring & Schuerman, 2009).

Access to scientific and evidence-based research, along with data driven decision-making are essential skills and core technologies for today’s educational leaders. One of the results of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) was the assurance that individual states would be responsible for ensuring that each of their school districts had access to detailed information and statistical explanations of student achievement (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2010). Using data to monitor programs is a necessary step in holding educational leaders accountable for student growth. Statistical information can be used to decide necessary programmatic changes and influence the allocation of funds in order to enhance educational programs (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2010).

**Managing the Instructional Program.** Hallinger (2003) explains that managing the curriculum and instruction are critical in educational leadership today. Leithwood (2004, 2008)
explains that managing the instructional program highlights the important role that principals play in understanding and monitoring what is taking place instructionally within their schools. The accountability to increase student achievement and meet the demands of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and NCLB mandates, established in 2001, have drastically increased the pressures facing educational leaders in the 21st century (Hallinger, 2003). Elmore (2004) believes that principals have made a significant shift from being building managers, to managing the delivery of instruction within their buildings. Leithwood et al., (2004, 2008) explains that principals play a significant role in how schools support student learning.

Summarizing principal responsibilities, Murphy (2006) explains that in addition to being visionary leaders, school principals are expected to provide a safe and secure school environment and understand a variety of legal and ethical issues. It is clear that principals are responsible for much more than improving instruction and increasing student achievement. According to The School Leadership Study (2005) conducted at the Stanford Educational leadership Institute:

Principals are expected to be educational visionaries, instructional and curriculum leaders, assessment experts, disciplinarians, community builders, public relations and communication experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special program administrators, as well as guardians of legal, contractual, and policy mandates and initiatives (p. 4).

The demands placed on building principals have changed significantly (Davis, S., Darling-Hammond, L., LaPointe, M., & Meyerson, D., 2005). According to Elmore (2000), successfully preparing principals is made more difficult by additional obligations to stakeholders such as students, teachers, district and central office management, parents, and other community
members. Principals must also be able to set a clear direction for their school community and be able to articulate their vision through effective communication (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006).

As principals are expected to be educational visionaries (Murphy, 2006), they are responsible for fostering meaningful change within their schools. Teachers are unlikely to change their practices without support and guidance from administration along with a deeper understanding of why certain factors may enhance student learning. Marzano (2001) reports that principals, as building leaders, have the ability to have a positive impact on student learning and improve the educational standards of their schools. This idea is supported by Salazar (2008) who also believed that the effectiveness of a principal is second only to teacher effectiveness in regard to enhancing student learning. In addition to supporting student learning through curriculum development, principals are required to remove distractions from teachers. This “buffering” (p. 30) supports teachers and allows them to focus on their primary task, teaching students (Leithwood et al., 2008).

Each of the theorists represented in this educational leadership overview identify effective leadership strategies that have been linked to successful principals. Further, it is clear that principals’ responsibilities continue to evolve which has changed the demands placed on building leaders. While theorists often use different language to describe the strategy, the intent remains constant. Building relationships with constituents, fostering a sense of community through encouraging and modeling collaboration, and maintaining accessibility are among the most important leadership behaviors. Further, maintaining focus on organizational goals and objectives and promoting change are critical components for making effective progress.

The four core leadership practices are also connected to the second focus of this study, which is successfully managing a crisis situation. Setting direction through the development and
implementation of effective communication measures is critical in crisis response (Ulmer et al., 2011, Coombs, 2007). In addition, a leader’s response to a crisis sends a clear message to stakeholders about the organization’s vision and values (Yukl, 2002). The emotional nature of a crisis requires response measures that ensure the safety and well being of all members of a school community. Developing people through effective leadership allows followers to see beyond their personal interests and work for the greater good of the organization (Yukl, 2002). Redesigning the organization to be better than it was prior to the event is also a key aspect of crisis management. According to Ulmer et al. (2011), this can be accomplished when leaders are able to maintain the reality of the crisis event and inspire stakeholders to remain supportive while working to rebuild the organization. Finally, leaders must be able to remain optimistic while encouraging their followers to stay focused on their organizational vision (Yukl, 2002). Good crisis managers are able to remove distractions and allow staff and students to return to normal working order as quickly as possible.

**Part 3: Crisis Management**

Considerable research has been dedicated to the topic of crisis management and several definitions have been offered (Pauchant & Mitroff, 2006, Ulmer et al., 2011, Harvard Business Essentials, 2004, 2007, Boin & Hart, 2003). Crisis management is described as the prevention, preparedness, mitigation, and reconstruction of an organization following an unforeseen event. The management of different crisis events has been made more difficult by public expectations and pressure put on leaders who are expected to put public safety first and be prepared for "worst case scenarios" (Boin & Hart, 2003, p. 546).

According to Coombs (2004), crises are largely sudden and negative. Exploring the factors that contribute to the crisis is a necessary step in determining crisis response strategies.
Initially, the assessment of a threat is considered a two-step process. First, crisis managers are responsible for assigning threat-types to categories based on past events, which will allow them to apply an appropriate response strategy. In the second step, crisis managers are tasked with mitigating the reputational damage while considering crisis history, relationship history, and the severity of the event (Mitroff, 1993). History shows that people tend to blame the cause of an event on an individual or on external factors (Coombs, 2004). Coombs (2004) states, “If stakeholders believe an organization could control a crisis, they will also hold the organization responsible for the crisis” (p. 267). This idea highlights a direct, negative relationship based on the history of past crises and the reputation of an organization.

Coombs (2002) states that crises should be categorized under two different threads. First, he explains that crisis situations have the potential to cause great disruption to daily operations impeding the ability of the organization to function properly. He further explains that effective planning and quick responses may prevent an organization from feeling the full impact of a crisis. Second, he discusses the potential damage to organization's reputation as a result of a mishandled crisis. Lerbinger (1997) reports that a crisis has the potential to threaten organizational survival and reputation if not handled properly. Fearn-Banks (1996) describes a crisis as a major event with tremendous potential for a negative outcome that may affect an organization and all its constituents, along with causing long-term reputational damage. Pauchant and Mitroff (1992) define crisis as “a disruption that physically affects a system as a whole and threatens its basic assumptions, it's subjective sense of self, and its existential core” (p. 15).

The organizational chaos that occurs as a result of an unforeseen crisis event, coupled with the threat of inaccurate information being distributed to media and the potential for long-
term damage increases the importance for leaders to be able to perform under pressure and fulfill their obligations under extreme adversity. People experience crises as episodes of threat and uncertainty, a grave predicament requiring urgent action (Rosenthal, Boin, & Comfort, 2001). Since it is the responsibility of leaders to guide their organizations through these events, crisis and leadership are closely intertwined phenomena. Regardless of the type of crisis that arises, it is incumbent on leaders to be effective crisis managers who are able to respond appropriately to all emergency events.

Crisis planning and prevention measures are critical steps toward avoiding a crisis altogether (Harvard Business Essentials, 2007). If a crisis situation cannot be completely avoided or is unexpected in nature, a detailed contingency plan should be created and tested when possible. Harvard Business Essentials (2004) recommends the following four actions for leaders to follow: use quick decisive action, be physically present, communicate liberally, and put people first. Mitroff and Pauchant (2006) explain that crisis management efforts are deemed most effective when the operations of the organization are quickly sustained or restarted following an unforeseen event, and more importantly, lessons are learned to assist the decision making process in future situations. This is most important as we examine recent acts which have occurred in our K-12 and higher educational institutions.

Close parallels are apparent through Leithwood et al.’s (2008) taxonomy and recommendations generated through crisis research. Crisis researchers explain the importance of crisis leaders managing the uncertainty by facilitating a constant flow of information (Ulmer et al., 2011). Leaders should be reaching out to other stakeholders for help and relying on these relationships for assistance. Effective communication along with fostering solid relationships are two of the key components discussed through Leithwood et al.’s (2008) taxonomy of core
leadership practices. While it may seem natural to withdraw during a crisis, it is critical for leaders to continue to model the behaviors and expectations they have for their followers (Ulmer et al. 2011). Maintaining openness and accessibility are critical components of management, regardless of the situation (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Leaders who are able to manage crisis events successfully can create opportunities for organizational renewal while developing their own skills (Ulmer et al., 2011). Conversely, a poor response from leaders may make the crisis event much worse. Regardless of the crisis outcome, it is incumbent on leaders to learn from the experience (Seeger, 2002).

**Crisis Management in Educational Settings**

Good crisis researchers have applied different crisis management strategies while researching numerous events that have tested the ability of educational leaders to perform under pressure (Coombs, 2004, Coombs & Holladay, 2012, Ulmer et al., 2011). Researchers attempt to understand the precipitating and mitigating factors involved with incidents of school based crises in an effort to improve our collective response. Potential events that would require swift and appropriate action include, but are certainly not limited to, targeted school violence, armed intruders, bus accidents, bomb threats, custody and kidnapping issues, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual issues, the death of a student or employee, suicide, or health pandemic (Schlafer, 2009).

There have been two primary approaches utilized in the investigation of school violence. Some researchers have approached school crises in a broad sense by examining crisis management theory from the perspective of response and recovery (Coombs, 2004) others have taken a more specific approach by focusing directly on a framework of intervention and violence prevention in schools (Addington, 2009, Gainey, 2009). The exploration of intervention and
prevention strategies, response measures, and establishing partnerships with law enforcement and media representatives dominate current literature pertaining to crisis management in schools. Regardless of the crisis type, entire organizations have been renewed when a leader is able to communicate a clear set of shared values and a common purpose for all stakeholders (Ulmer et al., 2011).

**Intervention and Prevention Strategies.** The literature examining the application of crisis management theory to the investigation of intervention and prevention strategies and school crises aides this research study by detailing some of the responsibilities that fall on educational leaders as they develop plans for proactively avoiding a crisis situation. Research has also focused on violence prevention in schools, student and staff attitudes about school violence, threat assessment, identifying potential perpetrators of school violence, and prevention measures through encouraging pro-social behavior and education (Allen et al., 2008, Booren & Handy, 2009). The following studies are examples of the application of crisis management theory to the investigation of intervention and prevention strategies applied to school crises. This literature aids this research study by detailing some of the responsibilities that fall on educational leaders as they develop plans for proactively avoiding a crisis situation.

The researchers who focused specifically on violence prevention in schools paid attention to student and staff attitudes about school violence, threat assessment, identifying potential perpetrators of school violence, and prevention measures through encouraging pro-social behavior and education (Gainey, 2009). Allen, Cornell, Lorek, and Sheras (2008) investigated the importance of professional development in strengthening a school community. Considering that school administrators are largely responsible for the implementation of professional development opportunities for their staff, Allen et al. (2008) conducted a case study aimed at
examining pro-social behavior and its influence on school violence prevention. In this study, pre- and post-training surveys were implemented as part of a one-day professional development training program using the Guidelines for Responding to Student Threats of Violence (Cornell, 2006). These guidelines were developed to help streamline a threat assessment process for administration, teachers, and support staff because they often consulted on safety evaluations pertaining to at-risk students and student threats of violence. The study reported a positive impact on staff and administrative attitudes toward reacting to potential crises resulting from student threats (Allen et al., 2008). Cornell & Sheras, (2006) states, “Safe and orderly schools are necessary so that teachers can devote their time and energy to instruction and students can engage in learning without being distracted by safety concerns” (p. 319). This can be accomplished when educational leaders are willing to dedicate professional development time to school safety and crisis response.

Booren and Handy (2009) conducted a study focused on exploring student perceptions of school safety and the impact that school climate has on safety measures that are in place as a response to school violence. The results show that the ability of school leaders to enforce rules and policies consistently has a large impact on the perception of school safety. Booren & Handy (2006) explain that “this finding has implications for principals, teachers, and other adult leaders in the school environment because they clearly have the ability to consistently manage and enforce school rules and policies” (p. 244). Also focusing on understanding student perceptions, Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, and Gottfredson (2005) sought to determine school climate and the impact that it has on school disorder. This quantitative analysis yielded similar results in their attempt to identify the relationship between the consistency in which principals handled student discipline and the impact on student victimization and delinquent behavior. Again, it was
determined that administrators who have outlined clear expectations for students and are able to enforce rules consistently and in a fair manner have seen less incidents of school violence.

In a study conducted by Razi and DeChillo (2005), crisis management interventions were investigated that evaluated the efficiency of crisis response plans. This study examined the ability of 11 different schools, which had a crisis plan in place, to follow the prescribed protocols during an emergency. Results of this study explain crisis intervention strategies and offer recommendations for schools to follow in any event of unforeseen emergencies. The authors recommend that crisis response plans be divided into three distinct levels of intervention:

(1) Take steps to prevent a crisis altogether; (2) if a crisis occurs, take immediate steps to minimize the chaos and to maximize safety; and (3) provide longer-term services and support to those individuals identified as high risk or those in close proximity to the trauma (Razi & DeChillo, 2005, p. 117).

Murray and Kishur (2008) conducted a similar study of applied crisis management theory to the decision-making process of leaders in crisis situations. The researchers examined several events with unforeseen challenges, which created the potential for large-scale crisis, and evaluated the factors that guided the decision-making of those in charge at the time of the event.

Fast and Fanelli (2003) applied crisis management and intervention theories that evaluated planning versus actual response. This case study examined why none of the members of the crisis team referred to the school crisis safety manual when a bomb was discovered in their school. The researchers reviewed the district and school level safety plans, interviewed the principal, and reviewed the steps taken by the crisis response team over a five-day period. The results of the study showed that despite the fact that the principal and his crisis response team did not refer to the safety plan, their actions were in accordance with it. Members of the crisis
response team felt as though they "knew what to do" (p. 68) and their actions also adhered to the school safety plan. The building principal, charged with managing the crisis event, explained that he did not choose to refer to the safety plan because he did not believe that this situation had the makings of a "crisis event" (Fast & Fanelli, 2003, p. 67). This decision contradicts the basic idea of developing crisis plans so they may be implemented in response to unforeseen emergencies.

Non-violent issues are also prevalent in our schools that require effective emergency management skills and highlight the importance of teamwork and responsible planning. According to Cornell and Sheras (1998), three popular male high school students were killed in a car accident as a result of the underage driver being heavily intoxicated. The school principal learned about the tragedy and opened up the school on a designated holiday to allow for students to meet with guidance counselors. The principal and staff were unprepared for the large student turnout and became overwhelmed. Further compounding the issue, local law enforcement and media were present conducting their own investigations. As a result, parents in the school community blamed the administration for their lack of preparation and for the manner in which their children were interrogated. Cornell and Sheras (1998) state, “Poor planning in this case exacerbated the anger many students felt over the school’s failure to protect the students during a time of emotional distress and vulnerability” (p. 300).

In order to identify a link between law enforcement and school safety, Addington (2009) applied violence prevention theory from a law enforcement perspective in a study that investigated public school security as a direct response to the events at Columbine High School. The study evaluated the effects of having law enforcement personnel assigned to school campuses, along with the use of video cameras for ongoing student surveillance. While there has
been a marked increase in the use of these measures over the past 10 years, there is little research that supports their effectiveness. “School administrators turned to visible security measures to demonstrate that they were doing something” (Addington, 2009, p. 1442). Addington (2009) suggests that principals should be working to develop programs that enhance their school climate instead of spending money on promoting a false sense of security. Further, it is crucial that school leaders are able to establish productive, working relationships with law enforcement agencies and other public officials in order to be able to react quickly in the event of an unforeseen emergency.

**Practical Recommendations for Schools.** The Department of Homeland Security explains that school districts should intentionally prepare school specific emergency response plans that will enable them to effectively respond to unforeseen situations such as fires, school shootings, bomb threats, natural disasters relating to weather, and terrorist-related events. According to the Northeast Homeland Security Regional Advisory Council (NERAC, 2003), “A crisis is the time to follow the crisis plan, not to make a plan from scratch” (p. 13). The recommended sequence of crisis management planning includes mitigation and prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery (NERAC, 2003). Mitigation and prevention encompasses what schools can do in an effort to reduce or eliminate potential loss of life and destruction of property. Also described by Boin et al. (2003), preparedness speaks to the process of planning for worst case scenarios. Response and recovery focuses on the steps taken during a crisis event and with how to restore teaching and learning as soon as possible. Crisis management is a cyclical process where all aspects of the plans should be constantly reviewed and revised.

Massachusetts state law mandates that each school develop response plans that will ensure their preparedness. It is also critical that crisis management plans are embedded in the
daily functions of a school community (NERAC, 2003). The cycle of planning should be adapted from national recommendations and include measures for informing students, parents, and other stakeholders. Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003) suggest that leaders, during crisis situations, are responsible for “framing the meaning” of the event (p. 241). In doing so, leaders will dictate the response and recovery of the school community and will facilitate open and timely communication. Coombs (2007) suggests that school leaders should be consistently working to understand internal and external circumstances that have the potential to develop into crises. This can be accomplished by scanning failures, as described in the Crisis Learning section of this research proposal. Coombs reinforced the importance of establishing productive, mutually respectful relationships with all constituents and local media. Building trust and a solid reputation during a crisis event are nearly impossible tasks (Coombs, 2007).

School communities are also vulnerable to non-violent events that require effective emergency management skills and highlight the importance of teamwork and responsible planning. Cornell and Sheras (1998) explain that poor planning in some cases exacerbates the anger many students feel over the school’s failure to protect them during a time of emotional distress and vulnerability. It is crucial that school leaders establish productive, working relationships with all stakeholders, including law enforcement agencies and other public officials in order to be able to react quickly in the event of an unforeseen emergency and in order to maintain student safety. Weick (1993) supports this idea as he explained that organizational leaders need to be trained to recognize threats, and prepare for communication demands before a crisis hits.

The recommendations included in this section reinforce crisis management strategies presented throughout this literature review. The school mandates discussed further highlight the
importance of developing leaders who are able to engage community members and enhance effective communication channels. It is incumbent on today’s educational administrators to ensure that school safety and security, along with crisis planning and response, are not overlooked. For this to occur, educational leadership preparation programs must evolve and include critical incident management in order to equip principals with essential skills to manage school crises.

**Literature Review Conclusion**

This review of the literature provides an overview of leadership, and highlights different models of effective leadership in education. Leithwood et al.’s taxonomy of core leadership practices provides a structure to consider educational leadership literature examined for this study. Educational leaders in the 21st century are faced with a variety of extremely challenging circumstances. There has been a marked increase in federal, state, and local pressure resulting from a call for greater accountability in our schools (Davis, S., Darling-Hammond, L., LaPointe, M., & Meyerson, D., 2005). In addition to these added pressures, the role of the building principal has continued to evolve from building manager to instructional leader (Goldring & Schuerman, 2009). Along with the responsibility of instructional leadership in their buildings, principals must be prepared to respond to unforeseen emergencies. Schools are vulnerable to targeted violence and other unintentional emergencies, significantly increasing the pressure placed on today’s educational leaders.

In addition to a deep exploration of educational leadership literature, this review shapes the research study by highlighting important components of leadership related to crisis management. The application of crisis management strategies to educational institutions is a
primary focus of this review and guides this study, creating an opportunity for participants to articulate their leadership growth and development as a result of experiencing a major school crisis. Sharing experiences with critical incident management may also improve our ability to respond to future school based emergencies. The review includes several examples of research conducted in schools that have encountered events of extreme school violence or other crises. However, there has been little research conducted that allows educational leaders to learn from the personal experiences of their colleagues. This study addressed that void by considering different school crises from the direct perspective of leaders who experienced the phenomena.

Chapter III: Research Design

Research Questions

This research study employed a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews as the primary source of data collection. This phenomenological research study consists of conducting and analyzing interviews with principals in Massachusetts who have shared a similar experience (Moustakas, 1994). In order to generate a detailed description of the different phenomena being explored, the following questions guided the research.

The primary research question is: *How do principal’s describe the actions they took when faced with a school crisis?* This question is designed to allow leaders to examine the actions they took as they were faced with an unexpected high-pressure situation. Creating this opportunity helped to enhance our understanding of the impact that facing a school crisis has on a principal’s ability to make important decisions under pressure. In addition, participants had the
opportunity to explain the choices they made and identify areas that may be improved in the future. This includes their thoughts on improving crisis response as well as how their experience enhanced their leadership ability. This opportunity for reflection may have enhanced each participants’ ability to respond to future crisis situations.

The second research question is: What have principals learned about their own leadership as a result of experiencing a school crisis? The purpose of this second research question is to create an opportunity for educational leaders to articulate their own personal growth through reflecting on a past crisis event. This allowed leaders to consider their own leadership strengths and weaknesses, and understand how they have been impacted through extreme adversity. Data collected from this question served to enhance our understanding of the effect that managing a large scale school crisis has on individual leadership development.

Methodology

The selection of a research paradigm is one of the most crucial aspects of a research proposal (Patton, 1990). Ensuring that the paradigm is closely matched to the problem being investigated is one of the researcher’s primary objectives. The application of a qualitative design allowed for participants to share their experiences through interviews and dialogue without being bound to a more structured format found in quantitative methods (Creswell, 2009).

**Phenomenological Research.** A phenomenological strategy was most applicable to this study since the goal was to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the individual leadership development and crisis management strategies used by principals as they guided their school communities through a major crisis. Yukl (2002) explains that descriptive studies seek common attributes between leaders who are selected because of a shared experience. Further,
general meanings and themes were derived through the use of open-ended questions and dialogue with those who have lived the experience (Moustakas, 1994, Smith & Osborn, 2007). According to Creswell (2009), phenomenological research enables the researcher to identify the fundamental nature of shared human experiences as they are described by those who lived them. Moustakas (1994) illustrates the importance of setting aside or “bracketing out” (p. 181) one’s own personal experiences and working to examine the phenomenon as though it is occurring for the first time. The process begins by identifying phenomena to be explored; in this case, the shared event will be a major school crisis.

According to Husserl (1913), as translated by Gibson (1962), true phenomenological research seeks to describe common events rather than derive an explanation of why they occurred. Gibson further explains Husserl’s process of “bracketing” (p. 163) as the most crucial step in the phenomenological process. In order to receive the experience in its truest form, without preconceived ideas and bias, researchers must be able to suspend all judgment of the natural world and “effectively erase the world of speculation” (p. 163). In describing Husserl’s ideas of transcendental phenomenology, Moustakas (1994) explains that eliminating prejudgment or presupposition is critical if researchers are to understand the experiences being studied. The premise of transcendental phenomenology is that the focus is placed on the participant’s description of the events as opposed to the interpretations of the researcher. It is the role of the researcher to gather information from those who have experienced the events being studied and to develop a description of what exactly was experienced, and how the subjects experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The aim of the interview is to have meaningful detail regarding a shared experience. These detailed accounts will be significantly more meaningful for the participants versus the general population (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009).
Site and Participants. This study examined four (4) school administrators and their experiences with a major school crisis event. Using critical incidents in order to describe and understand behaviors can be useful in descriptive research (Yukl, 2002). Selecting four principals provided the opportunity of “studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning” (Moustakas, 1994). This idea is further supported by Smith and Osborn (2007) as they explain that recent trends in phenomenological analysis use a “very small number of participants” (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p. 56). Smith et al., (2009) encourage small sample sizes that will allow for the identification of a closely defined group. It is important to note that the small sample size sacrifices breadth for depth and tends to produce richer data (Smith & Osborn, 2007). A smaller, purposive sample size allows for better rapport building with respondents and decreases the importance of the question order. In addition, the interviewer is free to pursue areas of interest that arise and can follow the respondent’s interests and concerns (Smith et al., 2009).

Principals in the state of Massachusetts were interviewed for this study. Each of the participants was assigned a letter for identification purposes and to help ensure confidentiality (for example, principal A, principal B etc.). Participants were purposefully selected (Creswell, 2009) because only those administrators who have been directly involved with crisis management were included. Principals were from middle school or high school and represented different years of experience and demographics. Participants were identified initially through my personal knowledge of school crisis events that were reported through local media outlets. In addition, input and suggestions were gathered from one of the Northeast Massachusetts Law Enforcement Council’s (NEMLEC) mobile response units. The NEMLEC School Threat Assessment Response System (STARS) unit is comprised of police officers, fire fighters, and
educators, who are responsible for responding to various school based crises throughout Massachusetts. This researcher’s personal affiliation with this STARS unit helped me to learn about additional incidents from the personal experiences of these colleagues.

**Data Collection.** Prior to beginning data collection it was important to “bracket out” (p. 103) previous experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Given this researcher’s extensive training in crisis management and responding to school based crises, it was crucial to identify personal expectations and assumptions before beginning the process of learning about the experiences of others (Creswell, 2007). Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted in person. Interviews were conducted at one participants’ school, one was conducted at the central office where a principal was working, and two interviews were conducted at the researcher’s school. The interviews conducted were based on Kvale’s (1996, 2007), “seven stages of an interview inquiry” (p. 34-35) and were phenomenological in nature (Moustakas, 1994). Kvale (1996, 2007) explains that interviews are an exchange of ideas and information between people regarding a common subject. Considering the recommendations outlined by Kvale allowed for the flexibility to match the interview procedures to the needs of the study being conducted.

Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and was audio recorded. General field notes were also taken as the conversations progressed. These notes served as an interview guide as additional questions and salient points were generated through the discussion. In preparation for the actual interviews, one pilot interview was conducted prior to beginning the actual data collection. This was conducted with a colleague who experienced a situation that had the potential to develop into a major crisis event. The purpose of the pilot interview was to identify and address any number of unforeseen problems that may arise during data collection and helped to create familiarity and comfort with the craft of interviewing (Kvale, 2007). The pilot
interview also served to determine if the questions would accomplish the intended goal or if they needed to be revised in any way (Maxwell, 2005). The results from the pilot study were not included in the reporting of the results of the study. Initially, scripted interview questions were used in each of the interviews and additional questions were developed in some cases based on the responses of each participant. Participants dictated the flow of the interview and had the ability to answer questions freely as they described their experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

**Interview Process.** The interview questions provided in Appendix A guided each of the interviews. The interviews began with a briefing that reinforced the purpose of the study and allowed the participants to ask some general questions prior to beginning. Throughout the interview, Kvale (2007) stresses the importance of the interviewer remaining sensitive to the nature of the phenomena being discussed. Two of the most relevant interviewer qualifications described by Kvale (2007), are the ability to be “gentle” and “sensitive” (p. 82). For instance, by presenting a gentle demeanor, the researcher demonstrates patience and allows participants to reflect and explain their experience at their own thinking and speaking pace (Kvale, 2007). Similarly, sensitivity to body language can provide cues into the interviewees’ emotional state throughout the interview. Maintaining an awareness of the participants’ emotions will help to identify which subjects may be “too emotional to pursue” (p. 82).

At the conclusion of each interview, a debriefing was conducted. The debriefing allowed the researcher to summarize main ideas gathered through the interview and enabled the interviewee the opportunity to comment on the feedback given (Kvale, 2007). Participants were also able to ask any additional questions.

As previously explained, the primary source of data collection was through interviews. Along with the interviews additional methods of data collection were generated through the use
of memos and field notes. Miles and Huberman (1994) explain that “memoing” (p. 69) and field notes enable the researcher to record what they see, think, and feel throughout the research process. Notes were taken during interviews when information was shared that was particularly interesting or warranted a follow up question(s). It was also important to spend time, immediately following each interview, recording personal feelings and ideas that were generated as a result of the interview (Corbin & Strauss, 2007).

**Data Analysis.** After gaining approval from the IRB, participants were identified and interviews were conducted. The data collected through the semi-structured interviews was interpreted using the step-by-step analysis provided by Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009). Acting as a facilitator of the discussion, the interviewer can guide the direction versus dictating the direction of the conversation (Smith et al., 2009). Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to be spontaneous in their answers and to create a sense of freedom from judgment and interpretation (Kvale, 2007). This helped the participants discover new meaning about what they experienced. Throughout the course of the interview, it is important that answers can be summarized verbally and discussed with the participants in an effort to clarify intended meaning (Kvale, 2007). These verbal exchanges during an interview enable participants to clarify or confirm their intended meaning thereby producing a “self-correcting interview” (Kvale, 2007, p. 102).

The following six-step process was followed: 1) reading and re-reading; 2) Initial noting; 3) developing emerging themes; 4) Searching for connections across emergent themes; 5) Moving to the next case; 6) Looking for patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009). In the initial phase of data analysis the interviews were transcribed verbatim and field notes and memos were also reviewed and typed (Creswell, 2009). Extensive review of the transcribed interviews
enabled this researcher to become oriented to the information and reflect on the data collection process. Reading the transcripts several times ensured that this researcher became as familiar as possible with the information. During each reading, annotating significant and interesting statements helped to uncover meaning and themes of each interview (Smith, 2007). Maxwell (2005) also explains that engaging in writing memos throughout the data analysis portion of the research study is a crucial step in the facilitation of reflective thinking. Throughout the review of all memos and transcriptions, no attempts to omit words, phrases, or pauses that help to capture the essence of the interview was made (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The specific themes emerged through studying each of the responses and transcriptions as opposed to only fitting the data into predetermined codes (Creswell, 2007). Moustakas (1994) refers to the grouping of these emergent themes as “clustering” (p. 121). It is important to note that certain portions of each transcription may be richer than others, and there are no rigid rules requiring that each section generate an equal number of themes (Smith, 2007).

Emerging themes and super-ordinate themes were labeled according to their relevance to the subject matter, what types of categories readers will expect to find, and unusual or unanticipated aspects that were not identified at the onset of the study (Creswell, 2007). Once these themes were determined, a concise description of the themes that emerged through the data analysis was developed (Creswell, 2007, Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al., (2009) explain that it is critical that the researcher continues to ensure that themes and descriptions are derived from the participants own words and free from individual interpretation. As recommended by Creswell (2007), the description includes “multiple perspectives from individuals and be supported by diverse quotations and specific evidence” (p. 189). Engaging in this construction of a thick description enabled this researcher to further reflect on personal experiences through
the interviews and organize thoughts regarding the data collection while arriving at the essence of the phenomena being explored (Moustakas, 1994).

**Reporting the Findings**

Using the descriptions generated through the data analysis phase of the study, a composite description is presented in narrative form, which is deemed one of the most popular according to Creswell (2007). The narrative paragraphs include a comprehensive discussion of the “essence” (p. 62) of the phenomenon. Polkinghorne (1989) explains the purpose of the composite paragraphs as enabling the reader to feel, “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” (p. 46). Visual tools such as tables are used in order to create a more solid description of the events discussed (Creswell, 2007).

According to Denzin (1989), “In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard” (p. 83). The development of the report findings using as much detail as possible created a thick description and served to recreate the scenes and situations being discussed for the reader (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The report was developed from the onset of the study and includes a “well- substantiated” (Kvale, 2009, p. 130) and interesting account of the findings. The inclusion of an explanation of the methodology and interview design, along with an account of the rationale for conducting the study, enables the reader to develop a deeper understanding of the intent of the investigation and validity of the results (Kvale, 2009). This report also serves to help readers understand the role of the educational leader in dealing with crises in middle schools and high schools.

**Validity and Credibility**
Validity refers to the accuracy and strength of the statements being provided (Kvale, 2009). Potential validity threats lie in the willingness of the participant to share major details regarding their experience with a school crisis. Maxwell (2005) explains the importance of identifying threats to the validity of the study and creating a true plan for addressing these potential threats. Participants in this study may have had difficulty admitting that they made a poor decision(s) during their response to the event. Maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality of participants helped to reduce this validity threat. Inaccurate recall of information depending on length of time that has passed between the event and the interviews could have also threatened the validity of the study. In an effort to address this potential threat, every attempt was made to include relevant crisis events that have occurred most recently.

The consistent use of member checking helps to ensure credibility throughout the interview process. Engaging in member checking enables the participant to respond to the overall sufficiency of the information being recorded (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Member checking also allows participants the opportunity to confirm statements and correct discrepancies where appropriate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further, allowing the participants to review field notes and transcriptions can help ensure their accuracy immediately following the interview (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

**Researcher Bias.** Maxwell (2005) cautions against selecting data that seem to “stand out” (p. 108) to the researcher. Data and information should not simply be selected to fit current preconceptions or “existing theory” (p. 108) about the subject being explored. This idea speaks to the importance of identifying potential biases and discussing how they will be addressed. As discussed in the Data Collection section of this research proposal, Moustakas (1994) stresses the importance of identifying, or “bracketing out” (p. 103) any preconceived ideas of how the
researcher wants the information to be delivered. Despite a lack of direct experience with managing my own school through a major crisis event, it was important to consider my collaboration with several school administrators as they have guided their schools through different crisis events. As previously mentioned, my extensive training with the Northeast Massachusetts Law Enforcement Council (NEMLEC) as a member of the School Threat Assessment Response System (STARS), should be acknowledged. This type of experience could have potentially threatened the validity of the responses received.

Some of the educational administrators who participated in this study may have felt as though they did not act in accordance with local or national recommendations or made decisions that added to the negative impact on their school community. In order to address this potential issue, focus consistently remained on the goal of this study and no judgment was made regarding the participants decisions. Throughout the study, it was important to reinforce the goal of understanding leadership growth and development as a result of crisis management, and exploring how educational administrators should be trained in crisis response. Further, it was important to ensure that the principals interviewed understood that the detailed sharing of their experiences can help other educational leaders respond to future unforeseen crises.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

In order to protect the rights of the human participants in this study, approval was obtained from Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the study was conducted within the established guidelines. All data records were maintained by the researcher and kept securely in the researcher’s personal computer and private home office. All audiotapes were destroyed upon conclusion of this study and participant generated data returned to the participant or destroyed upon their request. In accordance with IRB regulations, the goals and
procedures of the study were clearly communicated to the participants (Kvale, 2009). The participants reserved the right to end their participation at any point during the study. In addition, participants had the opportunity to read and sign the Informed Consent Form (Appendix C) acknowledging their voluntary participation in the research study (Seidman, 1991).

Israel and Hay (2006) explain that researchers must take steps to ensure the protection of their research participants, and promote research integrity through forging strong relationships with participants. Phenomenological studies collect data based on a shared experience or phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). Since the nature of this study is to examine a shared experience, in this case a school crisis, it was critical that the sensitive issue of personal disclosure, and maintaining the privacy of the participants was monitored closely (Creswell, 2009). The possibility of harmful or personal information being disclosed is present and the ability to remain “sensitive” (Kvale, 2009, p. 82) throughout the course of the interview(s) is crucial. Possible consequences must be considered for the participants and their school communities (Kvale, 2009).

It was important that steps were taken to ensure that the research process also created value for the participants. Potential ethical issues can arise when there is not “reciprocity between the researcher and participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 90). Kvale (2009) further discusses the ethical principle of “beneficence” (p. 28) which reinforces the idea that the knowledge gained through the interview should outweigh the potential risks. This issue was addressed as participants were afforded an opportunity to reflect on their leadership skills and decision making abilities under extreme pressure situations. Further, participants have added to the collective efficacy of current and future educational administrators by sharing their experience.
Conclusion

The challenges of educational leadership in the 21st century have grown and extended beyond curriculum and instruction. Through an initial review of the literature pertaining to administrative preparation programs, it is clear that the expectations placed on educational administrators are evolving. Accountability and effective instruction remain as the critical focus of most educational administrative preparation programs despite the fact that the responsibilities faced by a principal are far greater (Schmoker, 2003).

Past events have shown that principals require a unique set of skills to ensure that they are equipped to handle a variety of critical incidents. Murphy (2006) explains that school leaders are also responsible for ensuring a safe and secure school environment. Additionally, crisis management theorists agree that it is imperative that we are able to learn from past events in order to respond appropriately. A lack of principal preparation has been shown to increase the long-term negative impact that is felt in a school community as a result of a major crisis (Schlafer, 2009). As incidents of school related violence and other unforeseen emergencies increase, the need for effective leadership is more important than ever.

Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, leadership decisions made by principals who were charged with leading their school communities through a major crisis event was carefully examined. This study includes four (4) principals in the state of Massachusetts, and information was gathered in an effort to extract patterns of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). One-on-one interviews were conducted and transcripts were reviewed and analyzed to determine common themes in areas including professional learning and growth as a result of the
experience, crisis response, and leadership training prior to the event that impacted their decision making.

This research study created the opportunity for principals to examine the impact that managing a crisis had on their own leadership development. Principals were also able to reflect on their experience while explaining the decisions they made when faced with extreme adversity. The results from these interviews provide great insight into the reality of managing a school crisis situation. Further, the connection between administrative training and ability to respond to a major crisis was considered. Through the careful examination of past school emergency events, the purpose of this research study is to enhance our understanding of individual leadership growth and to discover how leaders can best prepare for the challenges of 21st century educational administration.
Chapter IV: Findings of the Study

Participants

The purpose of this study is to examine the leadership growth and development of principals who have led their school communities through a major crisis event. Each of the participants provided an extensive explanation of the crisis event that occurred in their school(s), and also discussed their leadership growth and development as a result of their experience.

There were four participants in this research study. Each of the participants was a school principal in the state of Massachusetts. The districts that the four participants serve represent fairly diverse demographics. The interview questions utilized during the semi-structured interviews supported the following research questions: 1) How do principals describe the actions they took when faced with a school crisis? 2) What have principals learned about their own leadership as a result of experiencing a school crisis?

Each participant was asked a series of interview questions. The interview questions, found in Appendix A, were based on Kolb’s (1984) cycle of experiential learning and highlighted the cycle components of Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualization (AC), and Active Experimentation (AE). The interviews ranged from 70 to 90 minutes in length. Each participant was asked background questions pertaining to their school demographics, experience in education, and career path into educational administration. They were also asked to discuss their own leadership styles and which responsibilities they believe are most important for a school principal.

Background Information
At the request of two of the participants, their interviews took place at the researcher’s school. One interview took place at the district’s central office where the principal was working, and one took place at the participant’s school. The first set of questions was primarily for gathering information and to establish rapport with the participants. The following table (Table 1) is used to present information gathered through the first set of questions.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years in Education</th>
<th>Years in Role During Event</th>
<th>School Information</th>
<th>Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal A</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Approximately 350 students, 30 staff.</td>
<td>Suburb, Upper Middle Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal B</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Approximately 550 students, 55 staff.</td>
<td>Urban, Varied Economic status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal C</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Approximately 300 students, 50 staff.</td>
<td>Regional School District. Suburb, Middle Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal D</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Approximately 600 students, 50 staff.</td>
<td>Suburb, Upper Middle Class</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 provides an overview of information collected through the first series of questions. Noting the number of years in education and years in the principal role at the time of the event help the reader understand the level of experience of each participant. Background information pertaining to school demographics and school size was also included. This was...
important to include as it helps the reader understand the number of students and staff each principal was responsible for, while also providing insight into the economic and social status of each school community. Overall, the questions proved to be useful as they allowed for positive rapport building while giving each participant an opportunity to speak freely about their school community and explain their years in educational administration.

Analysis

This study followed the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) protocol for data analysis created by Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009). IPA is an effective method of qualitative research where transcriptions, notes, and recordings are reviewed extensively in order to identify themes that emerge from individual interviews (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) explain that by using this process, the researcher is able to identify the most important aspects of the participant’s account, and draw together themes that emerge through the data analysis. Following the identification of interesting and important aspects of the participants’ experiences, patterns across all cases are identified to produce super-ordinate themes representing commonality between participants.

Following the interviews, conversations were transcribed verbatim and sent to each participant for their review. This was done to help ensure accuracy of the information by allowing participants the opportunity to expand or clarify any of their responses. In addition, field notes taken during each interview were used to support the themes that were extracted from the accounts provided by the participants. Each of the transcripts and audio recordings were reviewed comprehensively in order to generate a detailed account of the events. Interviews were analyzed separately to allow emergent themes to be identified without trying to fit data into
pre-determined categories. Employing this method enabled the researcher to “conduct an examination in a way that, as far as possible, enables an experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems” (Smith et al., 2009).

Initial textual coding provided a broad framework to understand and organize the data collected in this study. Following the transcription of the interviews, textual coding occurred, whereby the text was examined closely in an effort to extract meaningful statements and identify themes across participants (Smith et al., 2009). Throughout the process, great care was taken to recreate the participants’ experiences using their own words and phrases. From there, emerging themes for each participant were identified based on the data collected.

Following the identification of individual themes for each of the participants, superordinate themes were developed from the patterns identified across all interviews. According to Smith et al., (2009), Super –ordinate themes are identified based on commonalities between all participants in a study. Smith et al., (2009) explain that following the development of individual themes for each participant, the researcher determines patterns relevant to all experiences. A comprehensive and exhaustive review of all data collected has generated commonalities among all participants.

In reporting the findings of the study, Smith et al. (2009) explain that it is the researcher’s responsibility to “present a clear and full narrative account of what you have learned about each participant” (p.110). Following a detailed summary of each interview, super-ordinate and emergent themes were identified and presented in a table format. Further, Smith et al. (2009) suggest that it is appropriate to “take the super-ordinate themes one-by-one in a logical sequence and write them up in that order” (p. 109). According to Smith et al. (2009), the researcher should
provide evidence of how each super-ordinate theme applies to each participant. This study follows the recommendation and summarizes each super-ordinate theme as a “powerful” (p. 109) means of organizing the information to show that each theme is present for each of the participants.

**Summary of Interviews**

**Principal A**

*On what was described as “one of the coldest days of the year,”* Principal A was talking with a father in the lobby of the school. This parent was attempting to dismiss his son despite a court order against it. *During that conversation, the fire alarms sounded as the principal noticed smoke coming from the kitchen. Students and staff were forced to evacuate the building immediately leaving the principal with several key decisions to make in a very short amount of time.*

Principal A was the principal of a small “neighborhood” school with approximately 345 students. The student body included a "small" ESL and special education population. There was an average of three (3) teachers per grade level, one guidance counselor, and one school nurse. Throughout our discussion, Principal A smiled often as he spoke about his school indicating that he was proud of his school and fond of his staff. He shared that his school had “approximately thirty percent of the kids walk to school, which is unusual for this town.” He also pointed out that he appreciated the opportunity to be working in a very “close-knit community.” Principal A began working as a classroom teacher before pursuing a career in administration. He explained that he quickly moved from the classroom to an assistant principal role. Having already earned
his master's degree, he began to pursue a doctorate in educational leadership during his first year as a building principal which began three years later.

When asked about his leadership style, Principal A stated that he views himself to be in the area of service leadership. Principal A explained his belief that one of his primary roles as principal is to ensure that teachers are able to successfully support the students and families in his school community. He believes that it is the leader’s job to facilitate and put people in the right positions to meet the needs of the students. In discussing the role of the building principal, Principal A explained that, "Being named principal is an honor." He said that the primary role of the principal is to ensure the educational growth for students and professional growth for the staff members. More importantly, Principal A explained that ensuring the physical and emotional well being of the students in his school is one of his major responsibilities. Despite the number of state and federal mandates that fall under the principal’s purview, Principal A was steadfast in his belief that his most important responsibility was for student and staff safety. "You can't teach kids if you can't keep them safe." He explained that he looks at student safety as being the number one priority, because “once they're safe they will be available for education.”

Our discussion then moved from the role of the principal to focusing on the crisis event that happened in his school. In describing the steps that he took to respond to the crisis situation, Principal A commented that he felt like he wanted to run in several different directions at the same time. Although Principal A believes in the importance of training staff to respond appropriately, his statements indicate that he felt as though he still had to be the person who handled everything because he was primarily responsible. In describing his initial reaction to learning of the crises, he stated, “It seemed like forever, probably took a couple of seconds.” He explained that he ran to check the condition of the building, in terms of the smoke coming into
the hallway from the kitchen area so he would have information to share with the fire department when they arrived. Because he saw thick smoke coming from one of the air exchange units in the cafeteria, Principal A stated, “Evacuating the building was the right course of action.” Because he did not know the source of the smoke, he believed that students would be safer outside despite the freezing conditions. His thoughtful and detailed explanation depicted the chaotic nature of the crisis he faced.

Next, Principal A used the school's overhead public address (P.A.) system to let the staff know that all of the school buses had arrived to take students home for the day. The principal then ran to the rear of the school where several of the classrooms had been evacuated per their current crisis management plan. He explained that he saw many staff and students huddled against the "biting cold." Several teachers immediately evacuated the building upon hearing the alarm sounding and did not hear the principal’s announcement to bring students on to the warm buses waiting outside.

Principal A explained that the school had a very strict sign in/sign out policy, which was going to be quite difficult to enforce given the current conditions. In addition to working to adhere to the school’s policy, Principal A had to communicate with the fire department as they arrived. He went into the school building with the firefighters who were able to determine that the heavy smoke was due to a mechanical malfunction and not a fire. The alarm was shut off and the remaining students were allowed to gather in the gymnasium to keep warm. Once again, this decision supports his focus on meeting students’ primary needs. His priority was getting students on the buses or inside as quickly as possible.
During the course of this crisis event, Principal A had several key decisions to make. In a matter of seconds, he had to determine whether to evacuate the building or not, how to alert all staff of what was occurring, and determine how to deal with the custody issue before him. When asked what he was hoping to achieve through the decisions that he was making during this crisis event, Principal A stated "primary needs, safe and warm." He explained that he made decisions based on getting the kids on the buses quickly so 70% of the student body would be accounted for. He then hoped to be able to turn his attention to the remaining students who either walked home or typically were picked up by their parents. In regards to the father who was attempting to pick up his child despite the court order against it, Principal A was fearful that it was a potential kidnapping situation that would have been extremely challenging to deal with in any case, but that challenge was compounded by the chaotic nature of the crisis that occurred. As he spoke about this student, Principal A’s voice softened. It was apparent that he was sympathetic to this child’s custodial situation. Principal A went on to explain that the father, in this instance, did the “right thing” and came into the school with his son after the chaos was under control. He worked with the principal to contact the child’s mother and obtain appropriate permission to take the boy with him.

When asked how he knew what to do, Principal A responded, "It comes down to primary needs. I tell our teachers in staff meetings to keep the kids alive, and everything else can be fixed." He explained that he wasn't exactly sure what to do, but instinctively worked to be certain that all students were safe. Through our discussion, Principal A was clear that he did not have specific training in crisis management, although it was evident that he feels as though he handled the situation well. Principal A explained that he did not have any specific training through his administrative preparation programs that prepared him for such an event. Although
he has taken several courses on a variety of educational leadership topics, none prepared him for this situation. He went on to explain that he has talked about school crisis in regard to financial crisis, educational reform, and other areas related to education, but never focused on emergency management beyond reading a crisis manual.

Regarding decision-making, Principal A discussed his philosophy on shared leadership and how he has a better understanding that he does not have to be the only person who responds. Once again, his focus continued to return to the idea that training staff to respond is a critical component of building leadership. He went on to explain that he now has a much better appreciation for working with a collaborative team, and understands the value of teamwork. In reflecting on his own leadership, Principal A shared that the confidence he has in his own leadership ability has undoubtedly grown. Throughout this portion of the conversation, Principal A continued to reinforce the idea that the decisions that a principal makes have an impact on a tremendous amount of people. This is a responsibility that he takes very seriously.

Principal A also explained that this crisis had a direct impact on how he approaches crisis planning. He explained that he has been relatively diligent in practicing response drills such as lockdowns and other routine evacuations. He went on to share that he has a much greater respect for the importance of that process given this experience. He explained that there are many elements you can plan for such as communication, designating responsibilities, and developing a crisis team. However, there are certainly unforeseen events that can't be planned for. Regardless of the nature of the crisis, "When there's trouble, people look to the principal." He now puts a greater focus on the team of people he has in place in the event of a future emergency. He is more deliberate about training personnel to be ready to act in the event of an emergency.

"They're also going to look to the people who the principal has designated to be leaders in those
situations.” Because of this belief, Principal A makes training personnel to respond appropriately during emergencies a top priority. He again reinforced the concept that the principal does not have to do it all alone. He noted, “It’s important to delegate to other people in those situations and have a better collaborative team approach.” He went on to elaborate about the importance of being able to think clearly in the face of adversity. Showing his sense of humor, he also jokingly commented that it's important that they are willing to accept the responsibility that goes along with incident management.

The following table details Super-Ordinate Themes and Emergent Themes identified through the interview with Principal A.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-Ordinate Themes</th>
<th>Emergent Themes</th>
<th>Sample Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roles and responsibilities of being a principal</td>
<td>Meeting students primary needs</td>
<td>I believe, as a principal, my role exists to help support teachers, to meet the needs of the students and families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall well-being</td>
<td>It is our responsibility to maintain their safety, both their physical safety and emotional safety.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student safety</td>
<td>You can’t teach kids if you can’t keep them safe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responsible for staff growth</td>
<td>You (principals) are responsible for everybody’s safety. Until it’s actually tested; you never know how important that is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I am responsible for 25-30 adults. Not only their educational and professional growth, but for their safety as well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative approach to managing crisis events</td>
<td>Staff training</td>
<td>\begin{itemize} \item When there’s trouble, people look to the principal. They’re also going to look to the people who the principal has designated to be leaders in those situations. \item It’s important to delegate to other people in those situations and have a better collaborative team approach. \item Part of my philosophy is a shared leadership piece that I don’t have to be the only one who responds. \end{itemize}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for the position</td>
<td>Being named principal is an honor.</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff training</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delegating</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis experience resulting in leadership growth</td>
<td>Leadership confidence</td>
<td>I have become more confident as a leader.</td>
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<tr>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to learn from crisis</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a doctorate in educational leadership, I feel like I have taken 100 courses. I have never had a course on this.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for administrative training focused on crisis management</td>
<td>Lack of crisis management training</td>
<td>I never addressed it (crisis management), we talked about leadership through financial times, through ed. reform, you pick it. It’s never leadership through…a car just crashed through a third grade classroom.</td>
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<tr>
<td>---</td>
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<td>---</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiple parts of crisis needing</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Here we have 40% of the students outside on buses. I’m</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2 provides an overview of the super-ordinate and emergent themes identified through the interview conducted with Principal A. Sample statements were included from the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>---</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attention</td>
<td>dealing with a possible kidnapping situation, and now I have smoke billowing throughout the building.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty under pressure</td>
<td>I felt like my body wanted to go in two different directions at the same time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting instinctually</td>
<td>My instincts told me to keep the kids safe.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible crisis planning</td>
<td>I’ve personally been somebody who’s been fairly vigilant in terms of our crisis plan, our evacuations, lock down and so forth.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on having a crisis plan</td>
<td>Your best laid plans can be scripted to a “T”, but they are only templates. So in terms of my understanding of the situations, you can’t be too prepared.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear planning and flexibility</td>
<td>I call it the Hit By a Bus Plan. If I get hit by a bus tomorrow, who will step in my role and function? Not only educationally but also keeping people safe.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership backup</td>
<td>I am somebody who’s a good planner. I think coming out of that event, I’ve paid even more attention to procedures we had in place to keep people safe.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
audio recordings and transcriptions that support each emergent theme. The emergent themes identified for Principal A highlight his belief that ensuring student safety is one of the primary roles and responsibilities of a building principal. In addition, his focus on delegating responsibilities and training staff to respond in an emergency situation were focal points. The emergent themes show that Principal A places a high priority on emergency preparation with a strong understanding that things will not always go according to plan.

In addressing the primary research questions for this study, Principal A carefully described his actions in response to the emergency he faced. In addition, he was able to articulate the impact of managing the event on his own leadership development. Principal A was the only participant who managed a facilities crisis while students were in the building. This challenge highlighted his ability to make critical decisions under pressure.

**Principal B**

*One of the most well-known and respected educators in the community was accused of, and later convicted of, sexually assaulting several male students. The principal of the school was charged with leading his school community through this high profile case as parents, staff, and students followed in disbelief searching for answers.*

Principal B works in a diverse school community. In addition to varied socio-economic status, the students represented a broad range of ethnic backgrounds. Nearly 30% of the students received special education services and approximately half of the school was on free or reduced lunch. There were approximately 550 students in the school with 55 staff members to service them. Principal B has been working in the education field for 17 years both as a teacher and as an administrator. He has worked in five different school districts to date. He decided to enter
the field of administration with the "ultimate goal of feeling as though I could have more of an impact in the school community as a principal, which will ultimately be the educational leader of the building as opposed to being a classroom teacher."

When asked about his leadership style he commented that it's important to refer to it as "our" building and not "my" building. He works hard to operate in a shared leadership capacity so that teachers and other staff members are able to help him make decisions that will directly impact the school. Principal B estimates that approximately 90% of the time he's able to give the faculty and staff shared leadership opportunities along with him, and 10% of the time he makes decisions in isolation that he believes are in the best interest of the school.

In describing what he considers to be the most important aspects of the principalship, he explained that one of the most important responsibilities for a building principal is to provide a safe learning environment for students. After pausing briefly, he explained that even the strongest and most capable teachers would be ineffective if students do not feel as though they are in a safe and secure environment. Beyond that, Principal B discussed instructional leadership as a critical component to being a building principal, and that part of his responsibility is to become proficient in as many academic areas as possible. Early in our discussion, it was clear that he feels he is responsible for modeling expectations for his teachers in regards to academic knowledge and sound teaching practices. He explained that his responsibility is “helping teachers determine what’s essential for students to know, what’s important for students to know, and what’s nice for students to know.” Finally, he believes it is also incumbent on the building principal to act as a parent of the students in their building to make sure they are doing everything they can to help students be successful now and in the future. More than any other participant, he placed great emphasis on hiring and maintaining a strong teaching staff.
As our conversation moved to the crisis event he faced, Principal B explained that one of the male teachers in his building was accused of sexually assaulting several male students over a period of approximately two years. Complicating this issue was the fact that this staff member was “revered in the city.” Principal B also commented that he was “without a doubt, the most popular person in the school district. Born and raised in the city, he was looked at as a legend.” Further, Principal B had developed a social relationship with this individual and considered him to be a friend. Through our discussion, it was apparent that Principal B was completely shocked once he learned that the evidence against this teacher was significant and that “it was going to be very difficult for this person to adjudicate himself from these charges.” Principal B commented that he felt he was betrayed by this individual. While he felt as though he shared some of the responsibility for not keeping all his students safe, he took comfort in the fact that thousands of other people in the city were also unaware of the horrible crimes that were being committed by this teacher.

Within a few days of learning the information Principal B began to work closely with the police department in order to allow them access to this person's computer and personal files that were located in his school building. Principal B also explained that he had to work closely with the principal from high school, where the students who were alleging the abuse were going to school. They developed a plan and contacted all of the counselors available in the district and provided necessary support within the school for students, parents, faculty, and staff. In addition, he made sure that he was available to answer any questions and do anything that he could to help. Principal B demonstrated his compassion and empathy for his staff during our discussion. It was evident that he was in disbelief of the actual events and clearly articulated that he knew his staff would feel the same way. Along with setting up counseling, he held several
voluntary faculty meetings, in order to provide support for the staff members who were going to have to deal with the situation "above and beyond the counseling that they themselves were receiving." Due to the high-profile nature of the case, the community was quickly aware of the charges before the principal had the opportunity to “properly address staff and students.” He went on to explain that he would have appreciated an opportunity to “break the news” to the school community.

When asked how he knew what to do in response to learning this information from the superintendent, he replied:

I really did not know what to do because it's not something that I was ever trained in. As a principal, often times, you'll get training on how to handle a lock down or how to handle an off-campus evacuation if there's a threat in the building or a threat outside of the building. But very rarely, do principals or educators get trained on how to deal with the tragedy, or deal with a significant incident that happens in the building with a member of the school community, or a faculty or staff member, whether it is a death or abusive situation.

Principal B went on to explain that he relied heavily on his mentor and gathered advice from him. This was extremely helpful. In addition, working closely with the Superintendent of schools and the School Committee helped him to feel confident that they were doing everything they could to deal with the situation.

When asked about the impact that managing a major crisis event has had on his leadership growth and development, he replied:
As a leader, I think I definitely learned that I was resilient because overall again, even though I did not have necessary training, I do feel that when I look back on it, I believe that we handled it in the best possible way to make sure the entire school community, not just the students but everyone, was able to, on some level, accept what happened and move on and deal with it.

Principal B also believes this event has increased his confidence and ability to handle other crisis events. "Unfortunately, I've had a lot of things happened to me as I've been principal." He realizes that first and foremost, if an incident happens you need to make sure that "you don't hide it." He explained that he now understands the importance of dealing with difficult situations immediately. This can potentially prevent a major crisis event. He stated, "Based on things I've heard, other things have happened at a point sometime through this person's career, and the person was not dealt with.” During this portion of our discussion, his voice grew shaky as he questioned himself for not recognizing warning signs. He stated, “I wish-I wish I was a little bit more suspicious into what he was doing. How did I let this person who ended up being a sick individual continue working in a school?” His eyes welled as he spoke. Again, he discussed the feelings of guilt that he felt after learning that the allegations were likely true. He gained composure and continued to take comfort in the fact that he was not the only person who was unable to see the horrible acts this man was committing.

Principal B explained that it was extremely difficult to help move his school community forward when the media continued to broadcast this high profile case. In order to help him cope with the ongoing challenges, he explained:
One thing that I can say about the school district is that we have a very strong counseling program within the school at the elementary, middle, and high school levels as well as the school adjustment counseling program and crisis counselors that work within the district. Principal B credited this group of professionals with helping him through these challenging times. Considering this situation was ongoing at the time of this study, the counseling department will continue to help support the students and families in this community. For example, he shared that he felt as though this case “just wasn’t going away” due to a few additional circumstances. He explained that the teacher accused was convicted and subsequently incarcerated in a federal prison. Principal B stated, “I recently learned that he passed away in prison. I am not sure what happened though.” He then explained that several of the victim’s families have filed a civil suit against the city and school. He is “fairly confident” that he will be required to testify at some point on behalf of the school district. No additional details can be shared at this time without jeopardizing the confidentiality of the participant.

Throughout our discussion Principal B used the term "opportunity" on several occasions when describing non-routine events within the school. When asked about his choice of the term opportunity, he explained that he views the different events he has been forced to deal with as having improved the level of confidence that he has in his leadership abilities. In reflecting upon the actual event, he explained that there were several actions he would take that would be similar to what he did, and there would also be things that he would do very differently. He stated:

Again, when I first got this phone call, it took me a long time to accept that the person did it. So I’ve learned to make sure that I don't take anything for granted and that I don't [sic] something is not going to catch me off guard.
Principal B explained that this crisis had a direct impact on how he approaches crisis planning. His approach has definitely changed as a result of the experiences he has had while being an administrator. When developing a crisis team, he enlists the support of parents, custodians, teachers, and counselors in order to "basically open every door and explore every possible step to the best of your ability." At this point, it became evident that he no longer looks at crisis planning as building emergencies only. He includes a broader range of possibilities based on the staff misconduct he experienced.

Another area that Principal B discussed is the importance of making sure that principals work hard to control the information that goes to parents and out to the community. It was clear that he understands the power of media and that it is critical to be careful about the messages being received by the public. Considering that students interpret things in different ways, he explained that he believes it is important for us to make sure that we are sharing accurate information with all stakeholders in our schools. Further, Principal B talked about different situations that may come up for the first time and that it is critical that they are added to your plan on an ongoing basis.

The following table details Super-Ordinate Themes and Emergent Themes identified through the interview with Principal B.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-Ordinate Themes</th>
<th>Emergent Themes</th>
<th>Sample Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being comfortable with the quality of faculty and</td>
<td>Ensuring qualified faculty and</td>
<td>The people I am putting in front of them, the faculty and staff, have to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the Principal in ensuring student and teacher feelings of safety</td>
<td>Focus on student safety</td>
<td>Beyond everything else is that you are able to provide a safe learning environment for students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus on teacher safety</td>
<td>So I think, first and foremost as a school leader is to make sure that the students feel safe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative approach to managing the crisis event</td>
<td>Teamwork with staff</td>
<td>We had a very strong counseling program, school adjustment counselors, and crisis counselors to work with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guidance from others</td>
<td>I really had to rely on my mentor and the superintendent and other district leaders to try and point me in the right direction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship with police</strong></td>
<td>I had to deal with the police throughout the summer. The head detective was very forthright and open with me with regards to what types of information he had.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Keeping staff informed</strong></td>
<td>I held several volunteer meetings for staff to make sure they knew what we were doing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Cooperative crisis planning resulting from experience</strong></th>
<th><strong>Collaboration in crisis planning</strong></th>
<th>So making sure you have a group of people when it comes to crisis planning, explore every possible thing that could go wrong in a crisis and how to deal with it.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Diversity of input</strong></td>
<td>I put together a team. I had a parent on it; I had the head of facilities, head of custodians, and the head of maintenance on it. I also included several teachers to make sure I put together a group of people who knew the answers I would not have known as a principal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Flexibility of crisis document</strong></td>
<td>When things do come up for the first time, you have to add them to your plan. That’s essentially a living document.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Information sharing</strong></td>
<td>Through crisis planning, you make sure you maintain open lines of communication to the best of your ability.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| <strong>Difficulty of accepting the reality of the crisis</strong> | <strong>Feelings of denial</strong> | I got a phone call from the Superintendent and at that point in |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feelings of guilt and regret</th>
<th>time, I did not believe it. We were convinced that absolutely could not be the case because he was truly a legend in the school district. There was a tremendous amount of guilt on my end in realizing that I did not provide a safe school environment for the students that were in the building. I think the biggest hurdle that I had throughout the event was in some ways blaming myself for not picking up on some of the clues.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need for administrative training focused on crisis management</td>
<td>Lack of training in crisis management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple areas of leadership growth resulting from crisis experience</td>
<td>Resiliency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking things for granted</td>
<td>Investigative role</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Learning opportunities than waiting.

Oftentimes I feel as though a principal is a cross between a teacher and a detective-I would say the amount of time I spend investigating. It’s amazing!

Each of these events is an opportunity. It’s a chance to get better at your job.

Table 3 provides an overview of the super-ordinate and emergent themes identified through the interview conducted with Principal B. Sample statements were included from the audio recordings and transcriptions that support each emergent theme. The themes that emerged for Principal B show his strong focus on staff supervision and maintaining a safe environment for student learning. Principal B also believes in collaboration regardless of the circumstances. Whether day-to-day functions or an unforeseen emergency, Principal B relies on teamwork to accomplish various tasks. Another theme that emerged related to the feelings of guilt and denial as a result of the situation in his school. In addressing the primary research questions for this study, Principal B was able to describe the steps he took in response to the serious crisis that occurred in his school community. In addition, he was able to explain the impact of managing the event on his own leadership growth and development.

**Principal C**

*As the school community was still healing from a recent student suicide, a popular freshman was hit by a car and killed instantly in the town center. Complicating this tragedy was the fact that this student had just been robbed by several upperclassmen from his school. He was*
struck by the vehicle as he crossed the street in pursuit of the students who stole his money just a few minutes earlier.

Principal C was the only participant who works in a regional school district. This district was recently regionalized with a high school of just over 300 students. There are approximately 50 staff members working in this diverse school setting. Two towns combined to form the school district that is bordered by two large cities and one rural town. Principal C is in his 18th year in education and is currently working in his third district. After teaching for 10 years, he believed he could have a larger impact on education if he moved into administration. He was an assistant principal for three years before assuming his first principalship.

Out of all four participants, Principal C placed the least amount of emphasis on the students’ physical safety. Instead, he focused more on emotional well being and fostering a sense of community within his school. When asked about his leadership style, he explained that he is action oriented. This was not surprising as Principal C spoke with great energy and enthusiasm. He was quite animated and used his hands to emphasize his words. He went on to explain that his approach is collaborative, but at the end of the day, "I don't mind being the guy where the buck stops." He discussed the importance of establishing committees and defining the work that needs to be done in the beginning of the year and getting people on board as decisions are made. In describing what it is like being a building principal, he views the principal as "the face and the name of your school." He believes it’s the principal's primary responsibility to advocate for students and teachers simultaneously in all aspects of their development.

The conversation shifted to a discussion about the incident involving his students. When describing the crisis event, Principal C shared that he received a phone call from one of his
guidance counselors at approximately 10:30 pm “on a school night.” The counselor explained that she had heard one of their students had been in an accident, but she didn't have a lot of details. Given the lack of information and the fact that they had school the next day, he said he immediately decided to call the police department in order to gather accurate information. Once he learned of the severity of the accident, he knew he had to prepare for working with students and staff in the morning. Next, he called the superintendent and explained the situation. Throughout the course of the evening he described a number of conversations between him and guidance, teachers, and the police department in order to determine what the next steps should be. While describing the hectic nature of the night, Principal C seemed less enthusiastic and his tone was much more serious.

In describing the facts of the actual accident, Principal C explained that a well-liked freshman student was walking to a local pizza shop with a friend when a car containing five older students pulled over. The older students “got out of the car and basically jumped the kid [sic] punched him a few times and stole 20-30 bucks from him.” The victim then chased after the car as they pulled away. In a somber and serious tone, Principal C went on to explain, “He gets up and he’s running after them and gets hit by a car going one way, bounced into a car going the other way. He doesn’t recover. He dies from the sustained injuries.” He then stated, “It gets worse, the driver of one of the cars has a daughter in the school, and her husband is a substitute teacher here.” These additional dynamics involved in the situation undoubtedly added to the challenge of helping the school community cope with this loss.

Some of the challenges stemmed from the different portions of the student population who were supporting the perpetrators, the victim, and the student whose mother was driving one of the vehicles. Along with students in the school “choosing sides,” staff members were also
involved in some interpersonal conflicts as a result of their feelings toward the students involved. Principal C explained, “There is still fall out; like a long time after.” He then stated:

Probably the biggest issue was one of the teachers was really good friends with this kid who was the driver. Fine! There is nothing wrong with that. But then there’s all the scuttle, “Why is that teacher defending this particular student when they are responsible for this?”

Principal C commented that he continues to encourage staff to move on from their own conflicting opinions and “focus on supporting the kids and their sadness.” Through a series of student and staff assemblies, and the creation of guidance support groups, Principal C is confident they are doing everything they can to provide appropriate support for their school community.

In explaining the legal ramifications of this crisis, he stated, “Three of the four students are no longer going to this school.” He explained that two of the students involved are being held accountable in the court system as a result of this event, and one student was already “court-involved.” That student is now serving a prison sentence. Interestingly, Principal C also commented, “We even have kids that are out of district placements as a result of PTSD.” While he is confident that his school community will overcome these challenges, he recognizes that it will take time.

Principal C faced an additional challenge in his response. He was the only participant who spoke at length about the impact that social media had on the school crisis. He explained that there were “rest in peace” messages and pages being created before he even understood any accurate details. Based on his explanation, it was evident that Principal C is comfortable with
technology and familiar with the different mediums that students use to communicate outside of school. Working to manage the inaccurate information being shared, and the speed in which the news was traveling undoubtedly compounded this horrible situation. Further, Principal C discussed his idea that high school students are more likely to use FaceBook to post their feelings and discuss different events. He was confident that the fact that he was working with high school students who used social media added to his challenge.

When asked how he knew what to do, Principal C stated that unfortunately, it was because he "was the principal of a middle school two years ago were a junior committed suicide." He demonstrated that he had learned from a previous experience that helped to guide his response. He went on to explain that the guidance counselors he was fortunate to be working with had vast experience in this area. He credited his willingness to listen and learn from those with experience in this area as being critical to successfully working through this tragedy. He also shared that his superintendent was extremely supportive and provided appropriate guidance for him along the way. Because of the sensitive nature of the tragedy, he understood that he could "run into some problems" if he didn't take the lead of those who also had experience. He explained that none of his administrative preparation programs afforded him the opportunity to learn about managing this type of school crisis. He went on to comment that if some relevant administrative program was to be developed, it would be crucial to have “hands on components” in a "roundtable" format with current or future administrators practicing going through these processes. As he spoke, it was clear that Principal C had given some thought to the development of a training program that would help prepare principals for responding to a school crisis.

While discussing what the impact of managing this crisis had his own leadership, Principal C stated:
It definitely gave me the confidence to be able to say, "Okay this is what we're going to go with." I feel that makes me a stronger leader, a stronger principal to be able to say "Okay, that wasn't perfect. It went well. As well as could be expected."

When asked directly, "Has your leadership style changed as a result of that experience?"
Principal C replied, "I think it's been clarified. I think it's a little clearer to me." He went on to explain that that it has reinforced his philosophy that if things don't work well, it is important to accept responsibility. However, when things do work well they should be celebrated by everybody. Throughout our conversation, he continued to credit his willingness to listen and collaborate as being significant contributing factors to his ability to manage through extreme adversity.

When asked which behaviors he would hope to repeat if faced with a similar situation, Principal C explained that he was confident that the discussions between himself, the superintendent, police, and the guidance department were extremely productive. He felt as though they did a good job of limiting the information to only those people who needed to be involved at that time. He then stated:

So those things work really well, having support, school counselors, and here for two days. I would repeat that even though we didn't utilize them for the second day. I'd rather have too much than not enough. I'd always err on the side of caution. So those things work well. We met, we debriefed, we met with staff where we had to. I would do that again.
Principal C also explained that this crisis has had a direct impact on how he approaches crisis planning. He explained that he feels as though one of the major issues with crisis plans in an educational setting is:

"Crisis plans tend to be in a binder, and you don't really look at them until the heat of the moment when you realize you have an active shooter, or you realize you have a student who has been killed off site, or whatever the horrific tragedy is."

He went on to explain that he thinks it is critical that people make a conscious effort to review the crisis plans annually. He works hard to develop a respectful rapport with students and staff so if the time comes when he needs them to act in a particular fashion, they will follow instructions seamlessly. He also stated that it is very important that all drills are done in a serious and productive fashion. "We don't ask them to do it just for the fun of it, or to test them." By approaching crisis planning in this way, Principal C is confident that his school will continue to run "smoothly" in the event of another unforeseen emergency.

The following table details Super-Ordinate Themes and Emergent Themes identified through the interview with Principal C.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-Ordinate Themes</th>
<th>Emergent Themes</th>
<th>Sample Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative approach to managing crisis event</td>
<td>Accepting input</td>
<td>I think that it was good that I was willing to listen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crediting school counselors</td>
<td>I give the school counseling group a ton of credit on this. They really had the experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and got us through this. The counselors were like, “just call and we will be there in force.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role of the principal in ensuring physical and emotional safety</th>
<th>Offering guidance to students</th>
<th>When things are not going well, they look at us; they look to the principal to help guide them. There is a lot of guidance and helping them (students) navigate through these emotional times.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy for students and staff</td>
<td>I see myself as an advocate for students and teachers simultaneously, educationally, socially, emotionally, for both groups in very different roles.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>There will be factors out of the principal’s control</th>
<th>Impact of social media</th>
<th>You know, before I’m off the phone with him, it’s all over FaceBook. You’ve got all these players involved and they want to have a vigil and it’s on FaceBook already! Kids were also starting to take sides and blaming each other on FaceBook. Why is that teacher picking sides? That is not okay!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need for administrative training focused on crisis management</th>
<th>Minimal crisis management training</th>
<th>I mean the closest thing throughout my training was meeting people who had (crisis) experiences and talking to them. There may be some minimal conversation about—make sure you have a chart in your building. So you have an understanding that you need to make a chart, but</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership growth resulting from the crisis experience</td>
<td>Experience attributing to leadership development</td>
<td>not necessarily an understanding of a real life situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leader making decision</td>
<td>I feel that (experience) makes me a stronger leader, a stronger principal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>It definitely gave me the confidence to lead.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Between the counselors and myself, we had some related experiences to refer to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Be collaborative in that approach but at the end of the conversation, be the one who’s going to say, OK, given all the data, given everybody’s take on this, this is what I’m comfortable doing, are we OK with that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t mind being the guy where the buck stops here, and somebody needs to make a decision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for ongoing crisis planning</td>
<td>Reviewing crisis plans</td>
<td>We are reviewing them (crisis plans) this year. I think we need to because I think we tend to bind them and they sit on a shelf.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I make a conscious effort to review them annually.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Routine practice</td>
<td>The drills we do are a part of the day-to-day, and maintaining a certain level of respect makes the whole thing run.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 provided an overview of the super-ordinate and emergent themes identified through the interview conducted with Principal C. Sample statements were included from the audio recordings and transcriptions that support each emergent theme. Through the interview
with Principal C, several emergent themes were identified. Caring for students’ emotional well-being, along with listening and learning from colleagues with relevant experience were high priorities for Principal C. Also, crisis management training and planning for a crisis were themes that emerged through this interview. Principal C discussed social media during our interview. It is interesting to note that Principal C was the only participant who felt the negative impact of social media on his ability to control the accuracy of information surrounding this crisis event. This uncontrollable media outlet compounded Principal C’s challenges. In addressing the primary research questions for this study, he carefully described his actions in response to the emergency he faced. In addition, Principal C was able to explain that he spends time planning for emergencies and believes that crisis plans go beyond a document on the shelf.

**Principal D**

A sixth grade student had recently moved to this district along with her older sister who was in eighth grade at the same school. Both students were quickly embraced by the school community. During the year, the principal learned that the sixth-grader was undergoing treatment for cancer and had recently taken a turn for the worse. Although they initially believed she was moving in a positive direction, she passed away during the winter of her sixth grade year.

Principal D had the most experience in education out of all of the participants. Additionally, he had been at his school for the longest amount of time prior to the crisis that he faced. He was the principal at one of two middle schools in this large suburban town, with over 600 students attending his school. Given the large number of students in the entire school district, they "ran the gamut" in regards to socioeconomic status, and cultural demography.
There were approximately 60 teachers/staff members working at the school, and one assistant principal. After teaching for 14 years, he assumed an assistant principal role while he earned his master's degree in education administration. He was currently serving in his 11th year as building principal. Principal D was deliberate with his answers and tended not to elaborate unless prompted. He was soft-spoken and appeared to be quite confident in his understanding of educational leadership.

Principal D began our discussion of his leadership approach by explaining that he considers himself to be an excellent listener. "I think you've got to be a really good listener to be a good leader. [sic] Listening to the ideas of teachers and the ideas of kids." He went on to explain the importance of collaborative problem solving and having confidence in the decisions that you make. He considered himself to be "pretty straightforward with the teachers, and I think they appreciate that." Principal D believes that the most important thing that a principal can do is to create a safe and positive learning environment for the students. He stated, "Once you create that, everything else falls into place." He continued to reinforce the importance of kids feeling comfortable and safe in school, which would lead them to be able to thrive in that environment. He also felt as though the role of the principal is to "be sure you have the right teachers in place, and the rest will take care of itself." More than any other participant, Principal D spoke extensively about the importance of creating a strong school community. His answers clearly indicated that he is a staunch advocate for his students. He stated:

If they get off the bus in the morning and you call them by name, and being down the café every day, and doing a lot of school wide events. We have a family golf tournament next week. We took the kids to the Red Sox last night. We do a student - faculty
basketball game annually. We've also got a homerun derby. We even take a group of kids to Washington every year. It's all led by me with staff input, and it's huge.

Our conversation moved from a discussion about his leadership to focusing on the death of a student in his school community. Principal D explained that a sixth grade student had recently moved to his district along with her older sister who was in eighth grade at the same school. The students and staff quickly embraced the new students who were “pretty well liked by everyone.” The sixth grader was undergoing treatment for cancer for approximately 4 years prior to joining his district. His understanding was that her health was actually "pretty good" and they thought she was on the "right path" for the beginning of the school year. Principal D explained that he received the phone call over Christmas vacation that the student was not doing well. He explained:

At that point, she never came back to us and died sometime in the middle of January, I would say. It was sad. It was really sad. It was pretty shocking that she went downhill as quickly as she did, and it kind of took everybody by surprise.

In describing the steps he took to respond to the crisis he was faced with, Principal D explained that once he learned that the young girl's death was probably imminent, he contacted the family and offered his full support. He told her family that they (the school) were willing and able to do whatever they could to help. Next, he had several discussions with the guidance staff and school psychologist in order to determine the steps necessary to get the student body ready to cope with the fact that "she probably wasn't going to make it much longer." "She had some close friends that were pretty aware of the situation. Those are the kids that we focused on most. We never let on with the other kids what was going on, how bad it was." Moreover they
didn't want to start to prepare students for the young girl's death just in case she turned around. He went on to explain that although they took those steps to protect other students, he did not feel optimistic that her survival was a likely possibility. This decision further reinforces his steadfast focus on the students’ best interests. Along with his counselors and school psychologist, they interacted with the girl’s family regularly in order to help in any way they could. In addition, they were very forthcoming with the girl’s classroom teachers considering they were the ones who had the most contact with her.

Principal D continued to plan ahead of time so that he would be best prepared for helping all students and staff cope when the girl passed away. He explained his thought process, which included addressing the following questions; "What is our first step?" "What do we want to do?" "How do we let the kids know that this has happened?" He enlisted the support of his colleagues to help address each of these questions. Considering they had some time between returning from their Christmas vacation and the girl passing away, he felt as though they were "pretty well prepared for when it actually did happen." Along with developing a plan that they would follow, some additional considerations that he shared were to determine exactly who is going to be available to help, what services they would have as a school, and also developing a plan for the students who did not know the girl but may still be impacted. His carefully developed plan supports his focus on ensuring that all students are emotionally supported. Overall, he was confident that having the extra time to "plan" for the inevitable was extremely useful in helping him guide his school community through the loss of a student.

When asked how he knew what to do, Principal D stated:
I didn't really to be honest with you, it's one of those things that I have never dealt with before, never dealt with losing a child. Fortunately, I've never dealt with it before. So it was myself and a school psychologist, my guidance counselor, all sitting down and talking, trying to figure out "what are we going to do here?"

He also explained that his superintendent had a similar experience when he was a principal several years prior. The superintendent was able to share some different tips and strategies for how he handled the situation by reaching out to other people and gathering as much support as possible. It was very clear throughout our discussion that the principal was extremely appreciative of the professionalism and knowledge that the school psychologist and guidance counselors showed as they were able to contribute to the process. He felt strongly that it is important to "learn on the go" and out of all of the classes he took in college, none prepared him for this facet of educational leadership.

After the student passed away, Principal D began to focus on remembering the student in an appropriate manner. When asked if there were additional challenges that came up after she passed, he responded:

We talked about how we want to remember this girl. What do we do on our end? Another fact that played into it, that people didn’t know at the time, was the parents were kind of going through a divorce. So it got a little tricky with how are we going to remember this girl? How do we get both mom and dad on board?

Considering her family had great difficulty coping with this loss, the principal was unable to organize an appropriate ceremony before the end of the school year. They later decided they would plant a tree in her memory and invite her parents and a few close friends to come to a
ceremony. Principal D explained that “I didn’t want to have kids there who maybe didn’t know this girl or really had no connection.” In addition, it was challenging to get both parents to agree on an appropriate way to remember their daughter. He then stated, “Ultimately, we got both parents on board. We had a nice ceremony with a lot of her friends who spoke at it. So it was probably about fifty people there and we did a nice ceremony.”

In reflecting upon the actual events, Principal D explained that he felt pretty confident that they had taken all necessary and appropriate steps in order to prepare for and respond to the student situation. While he did not say that he would do anything differently, he was confident that having this experience would, help him deal with a similar event in the future. When asked to explain some of the behaviors that he would hope to repeat should he be faced with another similar tragedy, Principal D stated:

I think getting everybody together, getting the right people together to decide what the right path is in knowing who to get involved in decision-making, and not just having 50 people involved in that process, was important. Once you start gathering from everybody, you will go in all different directions. We need to keep it small, you get a group of 6 to 8 people and really decide, "Okay what do we want to do here?"

Regardless of the nature of the tragedy, "I still think you draw from that experience, and you'll be better prepared to be in the right position to help people."

Principal D explained that because of the collaborative nature of his leadership style, he continues to approach crisis planning in the same manner. He's confident that if everybody has their role in responding to an emergency, and they continue to conduct regular ongoing practice, they will be successful in handling any challenges that they are faced with. "You want to discuss
the importance of letting the students know about and be involved with, incident planning." He feels as though if he has kids involved in the practices and discussions, then they are less likely to be "scared or anything like that," and they would "know exactly what to do." Principal D consistently demonstrated his commitment to the students and found it important to keep them involved in all aspects of the school.

The following table details emergent themes identified through the interview with Principal D.

**Table 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-Ordinate Themes</th>
<th>Emergent Themes</th>
<th>Sample Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Student centered focus on their emotional well-being | Building relationships with students | If they get off the bus in the morning and you call them by name, and being down in the café every day, and doing a lot of school wide events.  
Student safe haven  
The kids feel really comfortable coming down and talking to me and I include them in almost everything.  
The kids see all kinds of stuff going on; they buy into it and are aware of it. For some it’s a safe haven for six hours a day. |
<p>| Promoting positive school culture         | Safe learning environment         | If you have a place where kids would feel comfortable coming to school every day knowing they are going to be safe, they will thrive in that environment. I think the most important thing |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Creating a school community</th>
<th>is creating a safe positive learning environment. Creating that environment and getting everybody together to create a community to me is number one.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaborative approach to managing crisis event</strong></td>
<td>So it was really myself and my school psychologist, my guidance counselor all sitting down and talking. My Superintendent had been the principal of a building where he lost a child and kind of gave us some ideas. It is so important to get input from all different people and see where everyone’s coming from. We had an established relationship with the family. We tripped out to their house and everything. We communicated with the family every step of the way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with staff</td>
<td>Input from all stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Administrative training focused on crisis management</strong></td>
<td>Not really, No. I don’t recall any specific training in college. So much of what we do is learning on the go. As a teacher you come out of college learning so much, and that’s the same thing for administration. I think you have to have your own experiences and pull from them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of relevant crisis training</td>
<td>Learn from personal experiences and experience of others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5 provides an overview of the super-ordinate and emergent themes identified through the interview conducted with Principal D. Sample statements were included from the audio recordings and transcriptions that support each emergent theme. Maintaining a student-centered focus is an emergent theme that highlights how Principal D places a large focus on helping students feel connected to the school. In addition, he emphasized the importance of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need for administrative training</th>
<th>Without training, you can draw from the experiences of other people.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership development resulting from crisis experience</td>
<td>I hope I would never have to deal with it again, but if it does, I would definitely feel pretty comfortable on how we go about things. In everything we do, you gain experience and you feel a little more confident with it. No matter how long I’ve been doing this, you can draw from experiences, and once you pull everything together, you usually come up with a solution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort level enhanced due to experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team approach to crisis management</td>
<td>We have a team at the school, if there is a major crisis, we have a team. Right now, we have a core team. If there is a major crisis, everyone has their roles. We practice the lockdown drills just like the fire drills. We get together and we talk about our roles, and just go over it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ensuring each student’s physical and emotional well-being. Other emergent themes show that Principal D is reflective in his practice and believes strongly in the importance of working with his staff as a collaborative team. In addressing the primary research questions, Principal D carefully described his actions in response to the situation he faced. While he believed that the event had an impact on his own leadership growth, he placed the least amount of emphasis on himself, and touted the skills of his staff in helping him respond successfully.

Each of the tables above detail the super-ordinate themes and emergent themes identified through this research study. Each of the themes was presented using an approach described by Smith et al. (2009) as “theme within case” (p. 109). This representation focuses on the participant and presents all themes together, while providing supporting evidence for each participant separately. This format was utilized in order to show that each theme is distinctly present for each participant.

Summary of Findings

Although there were numerous emergent themes present in the four interviews, five super-ordinate themes have emerged representing commonalities between all participants. In the following paragraphs, super-ordinate themes will be summarized as they related to each of the participants in order to present a “logical sequence” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 109). The summary begins with the first super-ordinate theme, which includes each participant’s philosophy of school safety, followed by an overview of administrative training they have received. From there, examples detailing their collective responses to the incidents are provided. The focus then shifts to what each principal has learned as result of their experience. The manner in which each
principal now approaches crisis management is described, followed by statements supporting the impact that managing a school crisis has had on their own leadership development.

According to Smith et al. (2009), “Different participants may manifest the same super-ordinate theme in different themes” (p. 107). This idea holds true in this study. For example, each participant discussed their view of the role of a building principal. However, the themes produced varied, and included responsibility toward student well being, staff safety, and a focus on student learning. The five super-ordinate themes which were common between all participants related to; the role of the principal in ensuring physical and emotional safety, administrative training received focused on crisis management, collaborative approach to managing crisis event, flexible practice in crisis management planning, and leadership growth resulting from the crisis experience.

Table 6 shows all of the super-ordinate themes identified through this study. This table is used to display each of the super-ordinate themes, and each relevant sub-theme. Table 6 clearly depicts common aspects of each interview along with areas where participants differed. Following Table 6 is a brief summary of each super-ordinate theme.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-Ordinate Themes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Principal A</th>
<th>Principal B</th>
<th>Principal C</th>
<th>Principal D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roles and responsibilities of a building principal</td>
<td>Focus on student safety</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on staff safety</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student learning</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration during crisis event</td>
<td>Staff Training</td>
<td>Delegation</td>
<td>Guidance counselors</td>
<td>Police</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crisis experience resulting in leadership growth</th>
<th>Leadership confidence</th>
<th>Decision making ability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need for administrative training focused on crisis management</th>
<th>Lack of relevant training</th>
<th>Learning from experience and others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flexible Crisis Planning</th>
<th>Emphasis on having a crisis plan</th>
<th>Planning and flexibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Being comfortable with quality of faculty and staff</th>
<th>Qualified faculty and staff</th>
<th>Parent comfort</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cooperative crisis planning resulting from experience</th>
<th>Including staff in crisis planning</th>
<th>Routine practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty accepting the reality of the crisis</th>
<th>Denial</th>
<th>Guilt and regret</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>There will be factors out of the principals’ control</th>
<th>Social media</th>
<th>Staff involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Role of the building principal in ensuring physical and emotional safety. The importance of ensuring a safe and secure learning environment was a primary focus of each of the participants. Each of the principals talked at length about their responsibility for making sure that students are cared for under their charge. Whether referring to crisis management manuals or routine emergency drills, keeping students and staff physically safe was a high priority.

Interestingly, the participants also discussed the emotional well-being of students. Making connections with students and helping them feel connected to the school, and the adults in the school, was also considered by each of the participants as one of the most important aspects of the principalship.

Administrative training received focused on crisis management. K-12 Administrative training varies between building leaders. The institution attended and experience gained through practicum requirements are two of the factors that impact principal preparation. Each of the participants shared that they felt as though their training lacked a focus on critical incident management. Each of the principals was forced to rely on their own instincts and the experience of others in order to navigate through their difficult circumstances. The approach each of these leaders took was extremely collaborative and undoubtedly helped them successfully manage their events. Some of the participants shared their feelings that relevant crisis management training should become a mandatory component of K-12 administrator preparation. In order to
address this important topic, the participants suggested requiring future building administrators to actively problem solve using real-life scenarios.

**Collaborative approach to managing crisis event.** Effective problem solving requires an open-minded and collaborative approach. Given the sensitive nature of a crisis event, it is even more critical that a principal accepts the help and ideas of their colleagues. Each of the participants was clear that they readily sought and accepted the help of others as they managed the incident they were faced with. Two of the participants, Principal A and Principal C, had a sense of urgency attached to their crisis as they had little or no time to plan, whereas Principal B and Principal D were able to take more time to plan an appropriate response. Regardless of the nature of the crisis they encountered, collaborative problem solving was a key factor in handling the event. Further, each participant spoke about his collaborative approach to building leadership. Whether seeking input and feedback from teachers, or delegating responsibilities, the principals were clear that they could not be successful in any aspect of their jobs if they worked in isolation.

**Flexible practice in crisis management planning.** The principals explained that routine drills and reviewing plans with students and staff will always be a regular part of what they do. However, having experienced these major events in their school communities has given each of the participants a new perspective on crisis planning. Three of the four participants commented that they will never take for granted that things could go wrong when you are working with large groups of people, and that they would no longer get caught off-guard when an incident arises. In addition, all participants agreed that crisis management plans must be revisited regularly and updated on an ongoing basis. Approaching crisis management with the understanding that
anything is possible certainly sets these leaders apart from those who view emergency drills as part of an annual routine.

**Leadership growth resulting from the crisis experience.** According to the principals in this study, managing their school community through a major crisis event had a positive impact on their leadership. Collectively, the participants looked at their experience as an opportunity to learn and were sure they will apply that knowledge to future events. Beyond gaining experience in crisis management, these leaders also explained that they have gained confidence and learned that they are able to act thoughtfully under extreme pressure. In addition, each of the participants believed that should they be faced with another unforeseen emergency, they would be well equipped to react appropriately. Further, given the collaborative nature of each of the participants, it is most likely that these leaders would lend their assistance to a colleague in need during an emergency event.

**Divergent Themes**

In addition to the super-ordinate themes listed above, the analysis process also produced one significant divergent theme. Each of the participants described their own leadership style in a different way while highlighting their own approach to building leadership. The divergent theme is presented in Table 7. While each of the principals explained their approach to leadership in a different way, ultimately three of the four participants were collaborative in their work. Principal C was the only participant to clearly articulate that he had no trouble making decisions on his own. When it came to managing the incident he was faced with, he was able to collaborate with his colleagues and relied on their experience. Outside of that isolated event, he explained that he is open to suggestions, but would ultimately make the decisions that he felt
were in the best interest of the students. Through the interview summaries, the emergent themes, super-ordinate themes, and divergent theme were represented in greater detail using the participant’s own words.

**Table 7**

| Principal A | Approach to leadership | I view myself in the area of service leadership. So because you are at the top of the hierarchical chart, your job is to facilitate and to be able to put the right people in the right positions. It is important to delegate to other people in those situations and have a better collaborative team approach. Part of my philosophy is also a shared leadership piece that I don’t have to be the only person. |
| Principal B | Approach to leadership | I put faculty and staff in shared leadership positions so they are able to help me make the decisions that will directly impact them in the school. It’s probably a 90% to 10% split where 90% of the time I am able to give the faculty and staff shared leadership along with me and the rest of my administrative team. |
| Principal C | Approach to leadership | So, how do I describe my style? It’s action oriented. It sounds a little dictatorial but I’m really (paused) I don’t think that I am dictatorial at all. It’s pretty collaborative but at the end of the day, I don’t mind being the guy where the buck stops here and somebody needs to make a decision. |
Principal D

Approach to leadership

You have to be a really good listener to be a good leader.

We form committees and you do a lot of listening and gather ideas and go from there.

I think it is so important to get input from all different people and see where everyone’s coming from.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings of an IPA study conducted with four principals in the state of Massachusetts who were responsible for leading their school community through a significant crisis event. Chapter 4 began with an overview of the IPA research protocol employed for this study. Chapter 4 also included a presentation of the initial data collected from each participant, along with an overview of the study sample. A summary of the interviews was provided along with the emerging themes and super-ordinate themes identified through the interviews. All identified themes were supported using verbatim quotations and a detailed discussion based on the interviews with each participant. Each common super-ordinate theme was summarized to clearly show that it is present for each participant. All super-ordinate themes generated were presented in Table 6. This was done to show additional links and differences between all participants. Finally, one significant divergent theme was identified and presented in the same manner.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of this study using Kolb’s (1984) cycle of Experiential Learning as a lens to understand the cycle of learning from a specific experience, and examine the impact that managing a school crisis has on a building principal. The implications of the
findings on future research relating to crisis management and educational leadership training is discussed. This chapter will also consider the significance of the findings and demonstrate the connection to the problem of practice introduced in chapter 1 of this study.
Chapter V: Summary and Discussion of Research Findings

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis was to examine the leadership growth and development of principals who have led their school communities through a major crisis event. This qualitative study utilized Kolb’s (1984) cycle of experiential learning as a framework for understanding how principals’ perceive their experience and translate that knowledge to their practice. The impact of the experience is discussed in relation to crisis management, as well as the effect on the day-to-day functioning of the principal. The research questions for the study are: 1) How do principals describe the actions they took when faced with a school crisis? 2) What have principals learned about their own leadership as a result of experiencing a school crisis? Each of the participants provided an extensive explanation of the crisis event that occurred in their school(s) and also discussed their leadership growth and development as a result of their experience.

The first section of this final chapter includes a review of the problem of practice, theoretical framework, literature review, and methodology presented earlier in this thesis. The second section presents the findings of the study, as they relate to the theoretical framework. In this section, the findings are presented using Kolb’s (1984) cycle of experiential learning as a framework, and clearly show the impact that managing a school crisis had on each participant. The third section is centered around a discussion of the findings as they relate to the existing literature in educational leadership and crisis management. This chapter will conclude with an overview of the findings as they relate to future training in educational leadership and crisis management in educational settings and to leadership development more generally.

Review of Problem of Practice
This study explored the problem of practice of how educational leaders, who have faced crisis situations, analyze and assess their personal experience and explain the impact of the event on their own leadership. While many school communities have been forced to work through a crisis, there has been little research on the impact that managing a crisis has on a building principal and his/her approach to leadership (Cornell & Sheras, 1998, Coombs, 2004). Actively learning from a previous crisis event is a crucial step in enhancing our ability to respond to future emergencies (Pauchant, 2002). This study created an opportunity for a small group of principals in the state of Massachusetts to explain their experiences and reflect on the impact that managing the event had on their leadership growth and development. By sharing the knowledge and experience of these four principals, we can learn from these narratives and be better prepared to handle future crisis events (Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger, 2011).

Review of Theoretical Framework

Kolb’s (1984) cycle of experiential learning provided the framework for this study. Understanding the personal experience of each participant was a critical step in being able to examine each individual’s leadership growth. As stated in chapter 2, Kolb’s (1984) cycle of experiential learning is built upon previous research of Lewin (1951), Dewey (1938), and Piaget (1963). Kolb’s (1984) model depicts learning as a cyclical process that is comprised of four elements: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Kolb (1984) explains that learning from experience is a fluid process blending experience, perception, cognition, and behavior.

In addition to the four elements that make up Kolb’s (1984) cycle, he offers six “propositions” (p. 26). Essentially, Kolb (1984) used these points to explain that learning is a
process that is part of natural human adaptation. He stated that knowledge is created where new concepts are linked with existing ideas. Kolb (1984) argues that all knowledge is developed as a result of a lived experience and requires individuals to interact with the physical world around them.

Kolb’s (1984) cycle is well suited for this study. By providing principals with an opportunity for thoughtful reflection of how they each managed a school crisis, participants were able to make meaning of their experience. The interview questions were designed to help participants examine the impact that the crisis event had on their current practice and explain how they adjusted their leadership approach as a result of their experience.

**Summary of Literature Review**

The literature review for this study focused on the two primary areas of educational leadership and crisis management. There are several researchers who have contributed to the body of leadership literature. One of the most significant contributors is Kenneth Leithwood and his associates. Leithwood et al. (2008) have developed a model of educational leadership, known as Leithwood et al.’s (2008) taxonomy of core leadership practices. Leithwood et al.’s (2008) core leadership practices are: setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the teaching and learning (instructional) program. For the purpose of this study, setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization were the most relevant portions of this model. The findings of the study did not prove to be closely tied to the fourth practice, managing the instructional program.

The crisis management literature examined for this study focused on emergency events in large organizations, as well as more specifically focusing on crisis management in educational
settings. Whether examining a school based crisis or looking at a private organization, the literature reinforced the fact that these events are typically sudden and unexpected in nature (Coombs, 2004). Coombs (2004) explains that it is critical for an organization to develop and practice response plans in order to respond appropriately in the event of an emergency. An appropriate response will help to mitigate any reputational damage and decrease the negative effects that are felt long after an event is over. Further, research supports the idea that it is critical for an organization to return to normal working order as quickly as possible following an event.

Ulmer (2011) and his associates report that open and accurate communication channels are extremely important in order to enact an effective response. Developing productive relationships with all stakeholders through communication will help the recovery process of an organization following a crisis (Ulmer et al., 2011). Along with proactive communication, it is critical that organizational leaders take steps to prevent emergency incidents from occurring. It is the leader’s responsibility to ensure that all information received is used in the creation of meaningful critical incident plans. The findings of this study support the importance of collaboration and communication in relationship to emergency management.

**Review of Methodology**

Phenomenological research was most applicable to this study because the goal was to understand the perceived leadership growth of each participant as a result of his experience. Utilizing a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis enabled each participant to describe experiences more freely without being bound to the more rigid structure of quantitative research (Creswell, 2009). This Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et. al, 2009)
employed semi-structured interviews as the primary means of data collection. In order to understand and analyze the impact that managing a school crisis has on a building principal, it was critical that participants were allowed to speak freely about their experience. Through the use of well-developed questions, participants were guided through a reflection of their experience and a discussion about the impact of that experience on their current professional practice.

**Summary of Findings Relating to Theoretical Framework**

Through a thorough analysis of the interview transcripts, as well as an extensive review of field notes taken during each of the semi-structured interviews, the following findings were identified. These findings are presented utilizing Kolb’s (1984) cycle in order to identify each step in the learning process. It is important to note that Kolb (1984) believes that experiencing all four stages is critical to learning from an experience, and people will tend to lean toward their preferred method of learning in a given situation.

**Concrete Experience.** The first step in learning from an experience is living the event in order to build the foundation for future knowledge (Kolb, 1984). Each of the principals in this study was able to articulate his experience in explicit detail. The incidents experienced included a broad range of emergencies. Principal A experienced an unforeseen facilities emergency coupled with a child custody issue. Principal B dealt with allegations of sexual abuse directed at a popular teacher. Principals C and D both managed untimely student deaths. More specifically, Principal C had a student who was struck and killed by a vehicle on a school night, and Principal D had a young student who lost her battle with cancer during the school year. Each experience is summarized in greater detail in the previous chapter. In addition to the crisis events discussed
during the interviews, the participants talked about the impact of the experience on how they approach their more routine responsibilities and the confidence they gained as a result.

Although their events were significantly different, Principal A and Principal C shared some commonalities due to the fact that both principals had little or no time to prepare to respond. Given the hectic nature of the emergencies, each principal was tested in his ability to react appropriately under extreme pressure. Principal A initially struggled with his ability to let go of some control and rushed to respond to each of the events that occurred. He now has a better appreciation for the importance of delegating responsibilities, and he now promotes staff emergency management training. This understanding extends beyond incident management alone. He considers himself to be more collaborative as a result of this experience, and he no longer works in isolation as frequently as he had before. He explained that he asks for teacher input more regularly, particularly in regards to student behavior issues and internal communication. By sharing some of the leadership responsibilities with teachers, leaders can help their staff develop the skills and confidence necessary to contribute to the overall functioning of the school.

Unlike Principal A, Principal C was able to collaborate in his response, but he was given only hours in order to do so. Principal C was clear that although he is open to a collaborative management style, he will not hesitate to do what he believes is best for his school. He went on to explain that he has been working to “release some of the decision-making power” to his teachers. However, he stated that if he disagrees with their direction, he will not hesitate to use his position as principal to make the final decision, regardless of the circumstances.
Conversely, Principal B and Principal D were able to have more collaboration and discussion around their responses. Principal B learned of the sexual abuse allegations against his teacher and had an opportunity to collaborate with his superintendent and law enforcement as he responded. Collaborating with the local police department was especially helpful considering their understanding of the legal aspects of his crisis. This allowed Principal B to focus more on his students, staff, and school community without “making a legal mistake.” In regards to Principal D, the student who passed away at his school had been diagnosed several months prior to her death. This also allowed him to work with his psychology and guidance teams to ensure an appropriate response. The school psychologist in Principal D’s school was trained to help people cope with loss and had also dealt with a student death in a different district. Despite the drastic difference between the two crises, both principals B and D were afforded the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues and enlist the support of people with training and/or experience.

Each of the principals in this study discussed the value of collaboration in emergency management. In relation to each crisis, all four participants relied on experts with experience. Beyond these isolated events, each of the participants also explained their strong belief in a collaborative management style. By approaching their daily responsibilities in a collaborative fashion, they understand that it is in their best interest to devote adequate time and resources to staff development. Along with collaborative crisis management planning, soliciting teacher input during the student placement process and working directly with teachers to develop appropriate academic interventions are examples of these principals collaborating with their colleagues on a routine basis. In addition, Principals B and D explained that their teachers are intimately involved in their MCAS scheduling and student test preparations. These principals are able to generate teacher buy-in by creating an opportunity for teachers to have input into
scheduling MCAS for each grade, along with preparing students for the tests. These types of activities can also help teachers understand the complex nature of building administration and also generate greater support where they are a direct part of different processes. Elmore (2000) explains that it is the leaders’ responsibility to enhance the skills of each member of an organization. By focusing on teamwork and collaboration, the principals in this study believe that they are able to manage their schools more effectively.

**Reflective Observation.** The second step in the cycle is reflective observation. According to Kolb (1984), leaders will analyze their response to a particular event as they work to identify meaningful ideas as a result of their experience. The reflections that are gathered following an experience are critical so a person may make sense of the event. In this study, each participant was able to share the step-by-step actions that he took in response to his crisis. Considering the fact that each participant was able to identify both positive and negative aspects of his performance, it is apparent that each principal had at least given some attention to reflecting on his experience. Each of the participants in this study identified aspects of his response that he would hope to repeat if he was faced with a similar event in the future. In addition, all but one participant (Principal D) stated that there were behaviors that they would not want to repeat in the future. By reflecting on these events and developing a better understanding of their own responses, Principals A, B, and C now have the knowledge to make different decisions in the future. Through the abstract conceptualization and active experimentation portions of Kolb’s (1984) cycle, the principals can draw from their reflections as they progress through the learning cycle and apply new knowledge.

All four of the participants commented that the confidence they have in their leadership abilities has increased as a direct result of their crisis experience. Initially, each principal
explained that he would feel more confident and comfortable managing a similar event in the future given this experience. Beyond crisis management, each commented that he learned about his individual personality and leadership strength through this experience. For example, Principal B explained that he learned he is resilient and cannot think of anything he could not handle at this point in his career. Principal C stated that his role has been “clarified,” and he sees himself being able to manage even the most unusual circumstances given the range of opportunities he has had in the few years he has been principal.

When discussing which behaviors they would hope to repeat, all principals believed that their ability to collaborate with colleagues and other agencies involved was critical to a successful outcome. Each of the participants recognized the value of teamwork and came to the realization that collaboration is critical in school leadership. Additionally, all principals believed they were making the decisions that were in the best interest of the students in their care. Whether they had time to prepare their response or if they were faced with short-term decisions, each principal worked with colleagues and local agencies to promote the best outcome possible.

Three of the four principals also spoke at length about their school counselors. It is apparent that the school counselor’s involvement was an immediate and necessary step in ensuring successful management of the school crisis. The exception was Principal A, who was faced with a facilities emergency. Counseling was not a necessary component of his response. Also, all four participants believed that involving the students’ families and providing accurate and timely information was extremely important.

The identified behaviors that the participants would hope to change were context specific and cannot be generalized. For example, Principal A discussed being more deliberate about
determining the source of the smoke in his school building, and he would have “played it safe” in regards to the custody issue he was working through. Through his reflection, Principal A was also clear that he now realized that he did not have to be the only one who responded to the issue. He explained that he has learned it is important for him to continue to work on his ability to delegate responsibilities. If he spends time training and developing staff, they will be at their best in any situation. Focusing on developing his teaching staff is an aspect of leadership that he understands now based on this experience.

Principal B believed that he should have taken the information more seriously and started his investigation instead of doubting the allegations. He went on to explain that he now investigates everything to the best of his ability and gives it “due diligence.” “I think a lot of times people try not to make a seemingly small issue into something bigger. But if you have any suspicion at all . . . deal with it.” He will not run the risk of “down-playing” any situation because “you never know what you may find.” This approach to management allows Principal B to be thorough in all aspects of his work beyond managing a crisis.

Finally, Principal C explained that he made a mistake by depleting other schools of their counselors to the benefit of his own students. Principal C went on to explain that he now takes more time in recognizing the impact that his decisions may have on other principals in the district. In doing so, he also is considering the students and staff members of those buildings. “Instead of being so singularly focused on the high school, I have to pay attention to the middle school now as well.” Regardless of the perceived mistakes they identified, the fact that they engaged in looking at their response critically further reinforces the reflective aspect of the learning cycle.
**Abstract Conceptualization.** Through abstract conceptualization, people engage in the cycle of experiential learning and essentially work to understand concepts as they analyze their experience. Kolb (1984) explains that abstract conceptualization “emphasizes thinking instead of feeling” (p. 69). Each of the principals discussed some level of attention to developing logical response plans as a result of their experience. Beyond developing emergency response plans, this experience with managing a crisis can also be applied to other contexts. Regardless of the task at hand, each principal was clear that he values collaboration and planning as being critical components of good decision-making.

Each of the participants spoke to the importance of collaboration in educational administration. More specifically, Principals B, C, and D each learned that it was critical to work collaboratively and rely on those with experience and expertise different than their own. Whether responding to an emergency or planning staff training and development, the importance of collaboration is evident. Principal A was able to demonstrate that he understands the impact of his experience by explaining that he now has a better understanding of shared leadership. Coming to the understanding that he does not have to be the only person who responds to an emergency is a significant step toward creating a collaborative response. This speaks to his focus on delegation and staff training.

While analyzing the role of the principal, Principal A explained that he was clear about the importance of teaching and learning when he assumed his position and that student and staff safety was always a priority. As a result of this experience, he now knows that emergencies can, and will happen at any time. This idea has intensified his approach to crisis planning. Beyond crisis plans, Principal A works to build individual capacity for the greater good of the school community. He does this by seeking staff input more regularly and encourages his teachers to
get involved in study groups and professional development. Principal B has gained a much more detailed understanding of how many "non-educational decisions and how many non-educational events" principals are required to deal with on a daily basis. His focus on conducting detailed investigations has been enhanced as a result of this experience. More specifically, he now thoroughly investigates all student and staff complaints regarding discipline and conduct.

Principal C explained that this event has made him a stronger leader and that his role “has been clarified.” Without sharing if he felt this way prior to this event, Principal C explained that he believes that it is his role to accept responsibility when things do not go well and give credit when they do. Principal D had always believed that it was critical for building leaders to be collaborative, and he will continue to listen and accept input from all stakeholders. This event reaffirmed his approach to building leadership and gave him more confidence to work toward a successful outcome should he face a similar emergency in the future.

Each of the principals also discussed some level of attention to developing logical response plans as a result of their experience. Again, all of the participants explained their approach to shared leadership, and these experiences have reinforced the importance of preparing staff to contribute in a positive and productive manner. All four participants also explained that their collaborative approach to building leadership extends beyond crisis management planning and includes the day-to-day decisions that they make as building principals.

Active Experimentation. Kolb (1984) explains that the active experimentation phase of the cycle is largely action-oriented. Leaders apply the knowledge gained from an experience as they work to improve future responses and enhance current performance. There is a greater “emphasis on doing as opposed to observing” (p.69). Each of the four principals in this study
reported that he experienced positive leadership growth as a result of his experience, and has
gained confidence in his ability to respond to a future crisis event. The principals’ statements
during the interviews reflect a largely positive impact on their current performance and approach
to building leadership as well as crisis management.

Each of the principals agreed that he now places greater emphasis on crisis management
efforts as a result of his experience. In regards to crisis management planning, the principals
believe that it is critical to add new information to the plans on an ongoing basis. Given this new
insight, each of the participants has expanded the group of people he works with on crisis
management strategies. Additionally, they consider their plans to be dynamic documents that are
constantly evolving out of necessity. For example, Principals C and D explained that they make
a conscious effort to review the school crisis plans annually and make updates as needed.
Principals A and B review their plans more frequently and also make updates routinely.

As a result of their experience, each of the participants has enhanced his preparation for
future crisis events. Participants are much more deliberate about training personnel to be ready
to act in the event of a crisis. By continuing to train personnel in crisis management and
employing a collaborative “team approach,” participants are confident that future critical
incidents can be managed with greater success. It is important to understand that this approach is
also relevant to the daily functioning of a school, as crisis events are not commonplace. For
example, on a regular basis, these principals collaborate with teachers to plan professional
development, enlist feedback on staff meeting topics, and even provide teachers with
opportunities to share teaching strategies with their colleagues. Beyond future emergencies, it is
important for a leader to help members develop the skills needed to perform in a leadership
capacity (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).
Based on the emergency events they were required to manage, Principal A now works to craft a consistent message and articulates that response to all members of his staff. This allows him to manage the information that is going outside of his school. Similarly, Principals B and C also practice the same approach. Principal B explained that he has learned the importance of consistently providing accurate and timely information throughout the school year. He explained that he is particularly mindful of keeping parents informed about the events going on at his school. Principal C relies heavily on his relationship with the Superintendent and collaborates with him on any information that may be considered “big news.” Similarly, Principal D explained that he continues to work closely with his assistant principal and counselors on a daily basis to make sure they “stay on the same page” in everything they do. This enables him to feel confident that they are all giving the same message to their school community.

Presenting the findings of the study within Kolb’s (1984) model creates a useful overview of the learning process for each participant stemming from an initial event. Beginning with an explanation of a concrete experience, in this case a crisis event, the principals then reflected on that experience and contemplated areas of their performance where they were satisfied, and areas they would hope not to repeat if given similar circumstances. From there, the participants developed plans based on their reflections as they made sense of the experience. As emphasized by Kolb (1984), this portion of the cycle lends itself to learners who work to develop plans and take a systematic approach to their work. The active experimentation piece speaks to the impact of the experience on the day-to-day decision-making and actions of the principals.

**Summary of Findings Relating to Literature Review**
Educational leadership and crisis management. Chapter two presented a detailed overview of the literature relating to educational leadership. A primary focus of the leadership literature was an explanation of Leithwood et al.’s (2008) Taxonomy of Core Leadership Practices, which is part of a much larger body of empirical research. These leadership practices are: setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program. The literature relating to crisis management was predominantly centered around communication and planning. The following paragraphs will focus on each of the core leadership practices and crisis management as they relate to the findings of this study.

Setting direction focuses on the development of a shared vision and related organizational goals. Creating effective communication channels for distributing timely and relevant information is a critical component of setting the organizational direction. In relationship to this study, the participants discussed their effort in providing accurate information to all stakeholders while managing their crisis event. According to Coombs (2007) and Ulmer et al. (2011), the ability to share accurate information during and after an event is a crucial step in beginning the recovery process.

Each of the participants explained that managing a crisis event highlighted the importance of working with parents to provide accurate and timely information. Ulmer et al. (2007) explain that it is critical to an organization that leaders are able to establish clear communication channels with all stakeholders. This idea is also linked with Leithwood et al.’s (2008) focus on setting the direction for an organization that includes establishing effective communication. In relationship to these events, the stakeholders include students, staff, parents, emergency response groups, students and staff of other buildings in the district, and community members.
For example, Principal B explained that he held several voluntary staff meetings in order to be sure that they not only had the support they needed, but to help ensure that accurate information was being discussed within the community. He continues this practice as he collaborates with his central office staff regularly in order to ensure appropriate external communication. In addition, Principal D explained that he met with his teachers and guidance staff regularly to develop plans and share information throughout the period where his student was suffering. Beyond that, he maintained open communication with the student’s family in order to ensure that his school was able to move forward following the loss of this young student. Principal D was clear as he explained that he relied heavily on the communication with his guidance and psychology staff. Maintaining focus on the organizational direction and providing a safe and secure environment for all students and staff allowed each of these leaders to respond to his crisis in an appropriate fashion.

The next Core Leadership Practice explained by Leithwood et al. (2008) is developing people. Developing people is dedicated to creating a supportive environment for all staff in order to help them work effectively. All four participants commented that they work hard to model their professional expectations and foster positive relationships with their staff. They understand that these are critical components of building leadership and developing people. Fullan (2008) supports staff development as he explains that the ability to inspire workers to grow beyond their potential is a key leadership quality. According to Fullan (2001), creating and sustaining productive interpersonal relationships is paramount to educational leadership. In addition to having positive relationships with stakeholders within their school communities, each participant discussed the importance of a collaborative approach to crisis management.
In this study, each of the participants explained that he believes collaboration is an important aspect of the daily decision-making process. While discussing their crises, Principals B, C, and D stated that they relied heavily on others in order to respond appropriately. Each of these principals touted their guidance staff as being crucial contributors to their successful responses. More specifically, Principal D enlisted his school psychologist to be the direct link to the student’s family during their time of uncertainty. This responsibility allowed him to show the confidence he had in this staff member, which likely strengthened their existing relationship. Principals B and C were able to promote similar opportunities for their counseling staffs and shared that they will continue to include these key staff members in their crisis planning. In this study, three of the principals now understand that the counselors they collaborated with played an integral role in their responses.

Conversely, Principal A was unable to use the actual crisis event as an opportunity to cultivate staff development due to the immediate nature of his emergency. Instead, he learned that he would be better served by training staff to help respond prior to a crisis event so he could rely on them in the future. In order to accomplish this, he has altered his crisis planning process to include staff input and now puts a much greater emphasis on the team he has in place in the event of a future emergency. Empowering staff to give input into crisis plans and training them to respond appropriately is an important aspect of ensuring a successful response (Spillane et al., 2001, Ulmer et al., 2011). Principal A explained that this practice extends beyond crisis planning as well. He enlists staff support more regularly and releases some of the decision-making control to his teachers. He understands that decision-making does not have to happen in isolation and he feels as though this approach has made his staff stronger. Considering Principals B, C and D relied heavily on their guidance counselors, duplicating the training that
counselors receive would be a useful step for those three leaders toward developing their entire staffs.

The third practice is redesigning the organization. The primary focus of redesigning the organization is to promote improvement within an organization with input from others (Leithwood, 2008). This practice considers the importance of working with both internal and external stakeholders. For the purposes of this study, stakeholders include students, staff, parents, students and staff from other buildings in the district, and emergency response personnel. Applying Leithwood et al.’s (2008) idea of redesigning the organization, Principal’s A, B, and C explained that they are constantly trying to improve their schools. Whether focusing on rebuilding after the crisis or improving the daily functioning of the building, identifying and correcting deficiencies was a priority for these leaders.

The majority of the literature related to redesigning the organization was focused around accountability for curriculum and student learning. Despite this, it is clear that the basic principles hold true in the area of crisis management. Schein (2004) explains that leaders must be able to form relationships with outside constituents who can provide appropriate support toward making organizational improvements. Each of the participants in this study collaborated with different organizations, for example police and fire departments, in order to affect an appropriate response. This idea is mostly applicable through the collaboration and aftermath portions of crisis planning.

Principals A, B, and C each worked closely with police and/or fire departments during their responses. For example, Principal A worked closely with the fire department as they responded to the alarm(s) at his school. Principal C explained that he immediately called police
to get accurate information when he heard that one of his students was in an accident. Further, he worked with the police as they crafted their response plan for school the next day. Principal B spent the most significant amount of time with external agencies. He explained that he worked with police detectives, and ultimately the FBI in order to respond appropriately. Along the way, he shared that he has learned that it is critical for crisis management plans to be updated and enhanced each time there is a different event. Principals A, B, and C continue to foster the relationship they have built with those agencies. For example, Principals A and B explained that they communicate regularly with police and fire departments as they work to maintain the safest environment possible for their students.

Principal D did not have to communicate with any Emergency Medical services (EMS) during his school crisis. Instead, he sought the support of the student’s family as he worked to create an appropriate response for his school community. Gathering input from this critical resource proved to be invaluable as they shared mutual support through the loss of their young student. Moving forward, Principal D was clear that working closely with the student’s family was important and he will continue to work collaboratively should he be faced with a similar event.

Where redesigning the organization had the greatest impact to all principals is in the area of crisis management planning. The participants explained that they have made improvements to the way they approach crisis management as a result of their experience. Based on national recommendations for critical incident management in schools, principals should work to develop and practice plans regularly with input from all stakeholders (NERAC, 2003). This study has shown that each of the participants has enhanced his crisis management procedures by enlisting input from a larger group of people, adding additional scenarios to the current crisis plans, and
practicing responses more regularly. These efforts will likely improve each of these
organizations by enhancing their ability to respond to a future crisis event.

The final core leadership practice presented by Leithwood et al. (2008) is managing the
instructional program. It is evident that this principle is most closely related to curriculum and
instruction and the role that principals play in promoting student learning. While there does not
appear to be a direct link between critical incident management and student learning, the
participants in this study articulated the relationship between a safe school community and
student success. In addition to ensuring a high quality teaching staff, the principals in this study
explained that they believe they are responsible for ensuring a safe and secure school
environment. When unexpected events do occur, it is critical that principals are able to restore
normal working order as soon as possible (Boin et al. 2003). Managing an event swiftly and
effectively allows the teaching staff to focus on curriculum while limiting disruptions within the
classroom setting.

According to Cornell & Sheras (2006), schools must be safe and orderly in order to allow
teachers to focus on student learning without worrying about safety. Along these lines, each of
the participants in this study spoke about his focus on creating a positive school environment in
order to help students and staffs feel safe and connected to the school. Principal D explained that
he works hard to create a collaborative environment where students and teachers are an integral
part of planning processes. In doing so, a principal can improve the students’ response to school
issues, since they are a part of the creation of school rules and expectations (Booren & Handy
(2009). Principals C and D commented on students’ emotional safety and well being in addition
to their physical safety. According to Principal B, effective student learning is not possible if
students and staff do not feel safe. Principal B also discussed the important role that he plays in
helping students feel connected to the school community. This focus is supported by Allen et al. (2008) as they explain that fostering pro-social behavior within a school community is critical to building a safe environment.

**Implications for Educational Leadership Practice**

This study investigated the experiences of four principals who were required to lead their school communities through a crisis event without prior training and preparation. Regardless of the nature of the crisis, it is critical that principals are prepared to respond effectively. Beyond building principals, the implications of this study extend to school superintendents as well. Three of the four participants in this study explained that they immediately called their superintendents for guidance and support when faced with a school crisis. Superintendents are ultimately responsible for each of the building principals; therefore, the findings of this study support the need for superintendents to also be trained in critical incident management.

One key area that must be addressed is the lack of critical incident management training in principal and superintendent licensure programs. This void can be filled through targeted coursework, coupled with a variety of practical “Tabletop Exercises, Drills, and Full-Scale Exercises” (NERAC, 2003, pg. 32). Each of these approaches to training creates an opportunity for participants to practice and discuss emergency responses without real-world consequences. According to NERAC (2003), many schools have implemented tabletop exercises whereby a moderator presents a hypothetical scenario, and participants work to collaboratively solve the issue presented. During these types of discussion-based exercises, participants are encouraged to talk about alternative methods of problem-solving, while practicing the response options detailed in their crisis plans.
Beyond tabletop exercises, emergency drills and full-scale exercises are also a useful approach to practicing emergency management strategies. NERAC (2003) explains that drills are intended to physically practice a specific procedure or function in a school setting. These drills are not intended to challenge participants with a hypothetical scenario, as is the case with tabletop and full-scale exercises. Rather, they are designed to evaluate the participant’s ability to implement an aspect of the school’s crisis plan. Familiar examples include: fire drills, lock-down drills, information delivery procedures during a crisis, and reunification practices. “Full-scale exercises (FSE’s) are the most complex in the series of exercises” (NERAC, 2003, pg. 32). FSE’s typically involve a partnership between the school and community resources, including police, fire, and emergency responders. NERAC (2003) explains that effective FSE’s will also involve students and staff as they must be familiar with emergency response protocols. FSE’s generally require a deep level of support and coordination in order to be implemented effectively.

Facilitating exercises in order to help prepare principals and superintendents is an important step in enhancing our collective response capabilities. Although crisis events in schools are not a common occurrence (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2011), it is clear that school leaders may find themselves in the middle of a critical incident with little or no advance warning. Providing experience in a controlled environment is an important step toward properly preparing educational leaders for the challenges of emergency management.

In response to an increase in targeted school violence, several school districts in Massachusetts and beyond are choosing to train their staff and students to respond to school based emergencies. One such example is aimed directly at providing options for students and staff in the event of an armed intruder. The A.L.I.C.E. program is currently being introduced in
several communities around the country (Response Options, 2013). The A.L.I.C.E, (Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evacuate) program is aimed at providing ongoing information and updates to the school community during an armed intruder event and allowing students and their teachers to decide their best options for survival. Based on the information they receive, students may decide to leave the building (evacuate), stay in lockdown, or even fight back (counter) if faced with a life or death situation. While the “counter” portion of the A.L.I.C.E. program tends to garner the most attention, the basic principle of the program is what is most critical. School communities should provide students and teachers with the skills and autonomy to make decisions that will increase their chances of survival during an event of extreme school violence. Research has shown that staying in lockdown and waiting for police to arrive is not necessarily the best option, and it is important for educators to enhance their ability to react effectively during an armed attack (Response Options, 2013).

Another important consideration for current practice is in the area of school climate and promoting prosocial behavior among students. Two of the principals in this study discussed the importance of helping students feel connected to the school and taking active steps to promote positive relationships. For example, Principal C explained that he believes that many of the issues he encountered after the student death could have been avoided if his students had more positive interpersonal relationships. The students and staff in his school began “choosing sides” which created an unstable learning environment. Conversely, Principal D discussed his strong belief that if you create an environment where kids feel safe and connected, “the rest will take care of itself.”

Researchers in the area of prosocial behavior and enhancing the school climate suggest that schools must develop more opportunities for students to practice prosocial ways of dealing with
conflict and problem solving (Kilian, Fish, and Managio, 2006). Kilian et al., (2006) explain that several studies have shown that school communities that take a proactive approach to creating a positive school climate see fewer instances of interpersonal conflict and also see less aggression between peers. By actively working to create positive relationships with his students ahead of time, Principal D was able to lead his school community through the loss of their young student, while maintaining a safe and supportive environment.

The findings of this study show that principals who take a proactive approach to fostering a positive school climate can have better success when working through a major crisis event. It is critical that learning from prior experiences occurs in order to help support school leaders who will be called upon to lead during extreme adversity. In an effort to improve our collective ability to respond, the findings of this study can be useful for state and district leaders in enhancing principal and superintendent licensure programs. Developing a component of licensure programs that addresses crisis response is a critical step that will help ensure that principals and superintendents are better prepared to respond to future crisis events. Further, current principals and superintendents can use the information contained in this study to increase their own awareness of the different types of emergency events that have occurred, and they can also consider their preparedness for dealing with a similar incident.

**Future Research and Actions That Could Support Principals**

This study sought to create an opportunity for principals to examine their leadership growth and development as a result of managing a major school crisis. The findings of this study show that additional related research would be beneficial. The following are ideas for future studies that would complement the current research, and help to support building principals:
**Crisis management training in principal licensure programs.** None of the participants felt they received crisis management training that adequately prepared them for managing a school crisis. Each of the participants in this study explained that his decisions were made instinctually and by taking the lead from others with experience. While some of the participants stated that they had some discussion about crisis management in their licensure program(s), none of them relied on any previous training as they responded to their crises. Future studies should analyze principal licensure programs and identify those that include a component of critical incident management. From there, recommendations can be made for enhancing principal training to meet the needs of this important facet of educational leadership. Research would support recommendations for which type and level of training would be beneficial in helping principals respond appropriately. This information could enhance current programs and create a guide for those programs that do not yet address critical incident management.

**The psychological impact of managing a school crisis.** Principals are under extraordinary pressure to fulfill a variety of obligations. Meeting state and federal mandates, maintaining productive relationships with all stakeholders, and meeting district expectations to name a few. Losing a student or staff member or managing a high-profile legal case, can have a significant negative emotional impact on a principal. This study created an opportunity for principals to reflect and examine their personal growth as a result of a crisis experience. Building upon these findings, a useful study would examine, in more detail, the emotional toll that is felt by a building leader as a result of an unforeseen crisis event. This information could prove to be useful in establishing support for principals who manage a school crisis.

**Support and after-care for principals who have faced a school crisis.** Following the emergency event at each of their schools, none of the participants in this study received any psychological
support. A useful study would focus on the emotional needs of a building principal who has managed a critical incident. Information collected could serve to enhance any existing programs that may serve this need. Although none of the participants commented that they needed such assistance, it remains unclear if any counseling may have been useful.

**Impact of Social Media on Crisis Management.** Principal C spoke about the impact of social media and the negative effect it had on his ability to control the information being shared within his school community. Through the use of FaceBook, students and staff were sharing information that made it very difficult for Principal C to ensure the accuracy of the information being provided. Moving forward, an important area of study could examine the use of various social media outlets, such as FaceBook and Twitter, during a crisis. It will be helpful to understand if the use of social media has any effect on the overall ability to manage the event. Further, future studies could also explore the use of social media by the responders as they work to provide timely updates regarding the management of a critical incident.

**Conclusion**

The role of the building principal is evolving based on state and federal mandates and a significant focus on accountability (Leithwood, 2010). Principals are expected to be the educational leaders of their buildings while supervising staff, disciplining students, and monitoring the budget. However, the routine responsibilities of a building principal can quickly become a low priority when emergencies occur. It is clear that managing a school crisis is not a common occurrence, yet it is critical that principals are prepared to respond. Despite the primary focus on accountability and standardized testing from the state level, each of the participants in
this study explained that ensuring a learning environment that was both physically and emotionally safe for students and staff was their top priority.

This study created an opportunity for four principals in the state of Massachusetts to examine their leadership growth as a result of managing a school crisis. Findings from this study show that despite a lack of training in critical incident management, each principal was required to navigate through a crisis relying on collaboration and instincts. While each of the principals was confident he made several good decisions, it is clear that responses could have been improved. This study created an opportunity for principals to reflect on their decisions and identify areas that could be enhanced. In addition, this study enabled participants to identify what they learned about their own leadership ability, and explain how that knowledge translates to their leadership style.

A detailed review of the literature relating to educational leadership highlighted models of effective leadership in schools. Leithwood’s (2008) taxonomy of core leadership practices focused on four key behaviors that help to define the role of the building principal. This study allowed participants to articulate their roles and responsibilities while reflecting on their own leadership styles. In addition, principals were able to examine the impact that managing a crisis event had on their own leadership. It is important to note that the impact of the crisis experience extends well beyond managing a future school emergency, and translates to his overall leadership approach.

A comprehensive examination of crisis literature identified several key areas necessary for an effective crisis response. Participants in this study were able to explain their own approach to critical incident management while considering their response to an emergency. In
addition to creating an opportunity for each participant to learn, this study allows other educators to learn from the experiences of the participants. Ulmer et al. (2011) explain that it is critical to take advantage of learning from previous crisis events in order to enhance future emergency responses. Crisis literature also showed that emergency events are largely unpredictable and have the potential to create long lasting disruptions if not handled appropriately (Coombs, 2004). This study provides insight into strategies and approaches to emergency management that may be useful in helping building leaders react more effectively.

Kolb’s (1984) cycle of experiential learning provided the framework for this research study. Through reflective observation and abstract conceptualization, participants identified and explained how elements of their experience have impacted their role as building principal. Most notably, each principal believed that they had gained confidence in their leadership ability, along with a deeper understanding of the importance of collaboration in educational administration. These new understandings allow each principal to actively apply what they have learned from their concrete experiences to their ongoing responsibilities as building principal. Moreover, all four participants also stated that they are confident that their experience managing a school crisis has prepared them to lead in the event of another unforeseen school emergency.

Many principals throughout the United States and beyond have been challenged with an unforeseen emergency in their schools. Both violent and non-violent events have the potential to disrupt a school community without notice. It is critical that building leaders are able to respond effectively in order to mitigate damage and help to move schools forward following a crisis event. Although this study enlisted a small number of participants, the experiences and responses discussed were varied. This study provided an opportunity for useful reflection for
each participant and is well suited to assist future research relating to the principalship and crisis management.
Section Seven: References


Appendix A

Guiding Interview Questions

1. Please describe your school community including number of students, staff, and other related demographic information.

2. Please discuss your years of experience in education, and career opportunities that guided your path toward educational leadership.

3. How would you describe your leadership role as a school principal?
   a. What types of responsibilities do you consider being most important?
   b. Please discuss your leadership style(s).

Concrete Experience:

4. Describe in as much detail as possible the crisis event that occurred.
   a. Describe where you were and what you were doing when you learned of the crisis?
   b. Discuss the steps you took to respond to the event.
   c. Talk about what you were you hoping to achieve through your actions.
   d. What were the major challenges that you faced while working through the event?
   e. Describe additional challenges you faced after the event.
   f. How did you know what to do?
Reflective Observation

5. Considering the unique nature of the phenomena you experienced, please explain what you have learned about your own leadership.

6. Can you describe an occasion when your reflection on this crisis shifted your perception of leadership?

7. How, if at all, has your leadership been changed as a result of leading your school community through this crisis?

Abstract Conceptualization

8. Describe how your response would be different if you were faced with a similar event.

   a. Describe ways in which you would hope to respond similarly.

   b. Describe how your understanding of a similar situation would likely be different given your previous experience.

Active Experimentation

9. How has this experience altered your current practice?

   a. How do you approach crisis planning?

   b. Does your experience change the way you prepare your staff/students for an emergency?
Appendix B

Telephone Recruitment Script

Hello,

My name is Jeff Parks, and I am the Principal of the Parker Middle School in Chelmsford Massachusetts. In addition to my work at Parker, I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University conducting a research project exploring educational leadership in times of crisis. I am contacting you because of your experience with leading your school community through a major crisis event. For your reference, I learned about your experience and received your name and contact information from____________________.

In an effort to understand leadership growth and development as a result of school crises, my research project aims to learn from principals who have lead their schools through a major crisis event. By enhancing our collective understanding of leadership attributes that contributed to the successful response of school administrators, It is my hope that we can create an opportunity to learn from the unique experiences of our colleagues. This study will include interviews with building principals.

If you determine that you are willing to participate in this research project we will select a date for an interview at your convenience. Wherever possible, I will come to you school and conduct the 90 minute interview. In the event that traveling to your school is not possible interviews will be conducted via telephone. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes only and your confidentiality will be ensured throughout the process. I will not share your name, school, or any specific information that will identify you as a participant in this study. If you would like to participate, please contact me at 978-866-8955, or parks.je@husky.neu.edu, by August 30, 2012. I thank you in advance for your consideration and I appreciate your time.

Sincerely,

Jeff Parks

978-866-8955

parks.je@husky.neu.edu
Appendix C: Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Department of Education.

Investigators: Jeffery Parks, Ed.D Candidate; Dr. Sandy Nickel, Principal Investigator.


Informed Consent to Participate in the Research Study:

You are being invited to participate in a research study being conducted with principals in the state of Massachusetts who have experience with managing a school crisis. This form will explain the purpose and goals of the study in an effort to determine if your experiences make you a candidate for participation. Prior to deciding if you would like to participate, you will have an opportunity to ask questions and gather information to help guide your decision. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and your confidentiality will be ensured throughout the course of the study.

Purpose of the research study:

The purpose of the study is to learn from principals in the state of Massachusetts who have lead their schools through a major crisis event, such as; school violence, loss of student/staff member, suicide etc. By enhancing our collective understanding of leadership attributes that contributed to the successful response of school administrators, we can create recommendations as to how school administrator’s should be trained in crisis response.

Participant involvement:

Each interview will be scheduled for your convenience and will last approximately 90 minutes. Interviews will be conducted in your school and will be audio-recorded for the purpose of transcription and analysis. You will have the opportunity to review your transcribed interview in order to ensure accuracy.

Participant risks:

There are no obvious risks to your participation in this research study. The researcher understands that the sensitive nature of the subject being discussed may create an emotional response in some participants. Participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If one should decide to cease participation during their interview, any data collected will not be used.
Participant benefits:

None of the participants will be compensated financially. However, each participant will have the ability to reflect on their experiences and articulate their personal leadership growth as a result of the phenomena they experienced. In addition, participants will be improving our collective ability to respond to unforeseen events by sharing which strategies were used and which were successful in helping different schools move forward.

Participant confidentiality:

Only the researchers conducting this study will have access to your information. Your identity and school affiliation will not be shared, nor will any of your information be distributed in a manner that will identify you or your school. Audio recordings will be destroyed after they are transcribed. Again, participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason.

If questions or issues arise please contact:

Please contact Jeffery Parks at 978-866-8955 or parks.je@husky.neu.edu at any time with questions or concerns regarding the research study. You may also contact Dr. Sandy Nickel at s.nickel@husky.neu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact: Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115, Email: irb@neu.edu, Tel. 617-373-7570. You may call anonymously if you wish.

I agree to participate in this research study and understand that my participation is completely voluntary.

__________________________________________   ________________________
Signature of person agreeing to participate     Date

__________________________________________
Printed Name

__________________________________________   ________________________
Signature of person who explained the study and     Date
Obtained consent