PAYING ATTENTION TO CULTURE:

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF A PRINCIPAL IN TRANSITION

A thesis presented
by
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to
The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
in the field of
Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
December 2012
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2012
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ABSTRACT

Beginning a new principalship is a complex endeavor where novice and seasoned school administrators must follow a cautious and deliberate plan of action. Every school possesses a unique culture and identity that includes its history, traditions, norms, and values. Understanding and respecting this culture is essential as an outsider entering this established environment. New principals desire to make the smoothest and best possible transition into a school community and not adjusting for the culture can put new leaders at risk (Watkins, 2003). The central research question asks: What deliberate plan of action can a new principal follow to successfully transition into a new school culture and environment?

Through the use of an autoethnographic research methodology, the researcher as the subject chronicled an administrator’s transition into a new school. Using the key aspects of a culture study based on the theoretical framework by Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952), the principal researcher sought to decipher the cultural codes of the new school. The principal researcher recorded this observational data through the lens of the five dimensions of a culture study: Historicity, Uniformity, Causality, Significance and Values, and Relativism. The results of this research suggest an effective framework for principals entering a new school setting looking to make a smooth transition while creating or maintaining a positive and high performing school environment. Findings revealed four significant themes for principals going through a transition with culture at the forefront of the process: understanding the history, listening and observing, learning the culture, and building trust.

KEY WORDS: School culture, organizational culture, toxic cultures, job transition, autoethnography, and principal leadership.
DEDICATION

To my parents, Ann and Paul Borges, who have always believed in me. Thank you for raising me to have the confidence to challenge myself and pursue my dreams.

To my husband Eric, who stands behind me and supports me in my every endeavor. Thank you for your loving support and encouragement, you are the reason I have been able to achieve my goals.

To my children, Grace and Jack, always remember that my proudest accomplishment is being your mom. You teach me a new lesson every day, and I am so grateful to have you in my life.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with sincere appreciation that I extend my thanks to those who helped me achieve a lifelong goal of completing my doctoral degree. I want to give special thanks to Dr. Sara Ewell who served as my advisor and guided me through the process of turning my research and ideas into a cohesive finished product. Thank you for sticking with me during a difficult time, I will be forever grateful for your kindness, understanding, and guidance. I would also like to thank Dr. Francis Connor who served as my second reader. Your support and direction throughout this challenging process kept me on track and motivated to continue moving forward. I would like to give special thanks to my colleague, friend, and inspiration, Dr. Amy Berdos. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to work with and learn from you through the years. I watched you balance with grace, your career, your family, and completion of your doctoral degree. I know that I would have never attempted to complete my own degree without you paving the way and showing me that it was indeed possible.

Once again, I would like to thank my family for supporting me throughout this process. We have all made sacrifices in order for me to be able to achieve this goal. I am looking forward to making up for lost time. I am blessed to have a network of wonderful friends, colleagues, family members, and classmates that encouraged me to keep going. Thanks to everyone who played a part in my completion of this degree, I know I could have never done it without you. Individual thanks go to Lynn Wiegel for saving me, to Dr. John Antonucci for all of the helpful advice when I needed it most, to Lisa Gleason for always helping me, to my brother Mark Borges for his skills during my technology related emergencies, and to my sister Maris Snell for always listening when I needed to vent. This has been a true team effort.
Chapter 1: Introduction

“It is the culture of schools that really matters” (Peterson & Deal, 2009, p. 253).

Purpose of the Study

Education reform has resulted in high stakes accountability and principals today no longer have the luxury of time when assessing a new school environment and making school improvement decisions. Schools today face yearly accountability measures and must make adequate yearly progress despite tight budgets and numerous constraints. Creating a positive school culture and maintaining staff morale are both important factors in improving student achievement results. Senge (2000) states, “a school’s culture is its most enduring aspect. An administrator may be able to change the rules of the school, but cannot tell the staff to “change their culture” (p. 324). Principals must pay close attention to the culture of their school and ensure that they have key elements in place to ensure a healthy and positive environment for students and staff alike that will maximize student achievement.

In the past, it was not unusual to observe schools where isolation and limited professional interaction was the norm. In educational settings today, where high stakes and increased accountability are the reality, teaching in isolation is no longer an acceptable practice. Schools must “work smarter, not harder” through collaboration, common vision and goal setting, and a commitment to high expectations for all learners. In the current educational era, it is essential for schools to take an honest look at their own school cultures and work to create a positive and productive school climate where all staff members are working collaboratively and collegially. The adults in the school building need to be united and committed to the learning initiatives of the school district in order to maximize student success.
Alvesson (2002) discusses the relationship between organizational culture and performance. He identifies the “strong-culture thesis” which is based on the assumption that a strong culture breeds positive results in an organization. When employees and managers adhere to the same set of values, beliefs, and norms, the ensuing positive “corporate culture” will result in organizational success. This approach also encourages shared decision-making between employees as well as the development of common goals. Members of the organization are highly motivated due to their increased sense of belonging and the responsibility they feel towards the company’s success.

The focus of this problem of practice is on understanding the culture of schools and how this can assist principals transitioning and being effective leaders. Terrence Deal has written extensively on the subject of culture and changing the culture in organizations. Deal (1990) states, “In order to transform schools successfully, educators need to navigate the difficult space between letting go of old patterns and grabbing on to new ones” (p.11). The process of letting go of these patterns will be the real work of the staff and developing new patterns has the potential to change “the way we do business” in schools today.

**Statement of Problem and Significance**

Transitioning into a new school setting can be a difficult process and can be especially challenging for principals. Principals are the instructional leaders of a school setting and must be able to show leadership and ensure the smooth running of all processes in the school from their first day on the job. First impressions are also important when starting any new position in the workplace. The problem of practice this study investigated is whether a principal can make a smooth transition to a new school by paying attention to the culture. According to Cameron and Quinn (2011):
No organization in the twenty-first century would boast about its constancy, sameness, or status quo compared to ten years ago. Stability is interpreted more often as stagnation than steadiness, and organizations that are not in the business of change and transition are generally viewed as recalcitrant. (p. 1)

Cameron and Quinn (2011) go on to explain that unpredictable and continuous change in the workplace can make it difficult for managers to keep abreast of issues, predict the future, and maintain consistency within the organization. They warn that neglect of culture can result in the failure of the organization. School administrators must have a keen sense of the culture and history of their schools including understanding the needs of the stakeholders in the educational community. According to Fullan (2003), “Leading schools, as in any great organization, requires principals with the courage and capacity to build new cultures based on trusting relationships and a culture of disciplined inquiry and action (p. 44).

Administrative transition and frequent turnover are critical issues in schools due to “baby boomers” reaching retirement age and increased accountability and reform agendas making the job less desirable (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). In the next decade, high stakes accountability will continue to increase, contemporary education will face significant changes as schools work towards preparing twenty-first century learners, and schools will need leaders to be able to quickly acclimate themselves to their new school environments. Principals today must have a multi-faceted skill set that includes flexibility, adaptability, a vision, and the ability to assess the needs of an organization and develop a plan in a short time period. Learning and being accepted as a native into a new culture can be an overwhelming and intimidating task for beginning and seasoned principals alike. Geertz (1973) aptly states:
One human can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even given a mastery of the country’s language. We do not understand the people (and not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves.) We cannot find our feet with them. (p. 13)

Entering a new school environment can feel like entering a foreign country and educational research does not offer principals a roadmap for success when beginning a new principalship. Paying attention to culture is one approach principals may select in order to show that they respect and want to understand the current environment prior to making any slight or substantive change.

According to Martin (2002), looking at organizations such as schools from a cultural viewpoint, allows attention to be drawn to aspects of the culture that are often ignored or understudied. Some of these characteristics may include: the stories people tell to explain ‘how things are done around here’, the ways offices are arranged, jokes people tell, the working atmosphere, and the relations among people. Martin identifies other manifestations of organizational culture that include rituals, jargon, formal structures and policies, and informal norms of practice.

Using the theoretical frameworks of Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952) and Cameron and Quinn (2011), in an unfamiliar school environment, I worked to decipher the cultural codes and the inner workings of the school culture. Through careful analysis of field notes, field journals, artifacts, and observations that served as the main source of my autoethnographic data, I reflected upon how my principal leadership behaviors and actions impacted the overall culture and my transition into the school.
Practical and Intellectual Goals

The goal of this research project was to assist novice or veteran principals with the process of transitioning to a new school environment. When principals are in the position of “getting to know” a new school culture, they can feel very isolated and alone. There is limited literature available to provide a guideline for this process, and a successful transition can set the stage for administrative success within a school building. Research suggests that administrative stability translates to increased school success. In a study by Mascall and Leithwood (2010), evidence showed that frequent principal turnover had a devastating effect on the school, especially in the area of school culture. Administrative stability can have a positive impact on school culture and teacher morale, which can then lead to greater student success. A practical goal of this project is to provide a structure for principals to succeed in their transition to a new school building by “paying attention“ to the culture and easing into the process of identifying areas in need of change. Making change too quickly can have a negative impact (Deal & Peterson, 2009). This project serves to guide principals in the process of analyzing a new school environment, developing relationships, and establishing trust before making substantive change.

One of the most important parts of the transition process for new principals is observation. A critical intellectual goal for this project was to create a rich understanding of the cultural underpinnings of a new school including the heroes and heroines, the rituals of the schools, the ceremonies, the norms, and the everyday practices. Through the use of autoethnographic data to document my observations in the new culture, the principal as the researcher in this project chronicled the journey of the crucial first few months in a new principalship. The conclusions gleaned from this process may be able to be replicated by other principals looking to make a smooth transition into their new schools. The researcher sought to
investigate the impact of a new principal thoroughly familiarizing herself with a new school culture in an effort to establish trust between stakeholders and less resistance to future change initiatives.

**Research Question**

Creswell (1998) suggests that qualitative research designs operate on the understanding that the research question should serve as an interconnected foundation for a research project, including the theoretical framework, the literature review, and the research methodology. The research question of the study was “What deliberate plan of action can a new principal follow to successfully transition into a new school culture and environment?” This question will be investigated using an autoethnographical research approach supplemented with external data from native members of the new school community.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Introduction.** To frame the research question under investigation, which centers on a principal transitioning into a new school culture, a theoretical base for the study must first be identified. Cameron and Quinn’s Completing Values Framework (2011) frames this study from a modern perspective and provides a strong basis for an analysis of an organizational culture. The Competing Values Framework “explains the core dimensions of culture and presents a theoretical framework for understanding culture forms” (Cameron & Quinn, p. 8). The Competing Values Framework served as the basis for the present culture study and assisted in assessing the culture and examining the “indicators of effective organizations” (p. 38). Since this study is autoethnographical in nature, it is also important to understand culture from a sociological and anthropological standpoint. The process of analyzing a new culture through an autoethnographic lens is supported by the analytical culture work of Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and
Meyer (1952). Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer assert that studying culture through situational analysis can reveal important patterns of behavior. The work of Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952) provides the basis for the autoethnographical culture study and supports the later organizational culture work of Cameron and Quinn. The two frameworks provided an interconnected focus for the researcher who intended to conduct a culture study in today’s modern workplace (Figure 1).

**Study of Culture.** When conducting an in-depth culture study, the writing of Kroeber, Kluckhohn and Meyer (1952) provides an important theoretical framework. Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer identified one hundred and sixty four definitions of culture but were hesitant to select one overarching description. Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952) identify the following concept of culture from the input of many social scientists:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of
traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action. (p. 181)

How researchers describe a culture is most relevant to the autoethnographic culture study that was conducted. Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer believed that the study of culture could be broken down into five separate areas: historicity, uniformity, causality, significance and values, and relativism.

Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952) assert that the study of culture is largely anthropological in nature, however, the historical aspects of culture play an important role in a cultural investigation. They also state that “culture is a precipitate of history…and in more than one sense, history is a sieve” (p. 159). Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer believe that “a historical approach to culture study preserves not only the time and place of the occurrence of its phenomena but also their qualitative reality” (p. 160). When examining school culture, familiarizing oneself with the history of the school is an important first step. Every school has its story, thus including a historical account within an autoethnographic study allows the researcher and reader to possess the important background information necessary to understand the current culture. Maintaining the school’s identity and traditions are an essential part of respecting the school’s culture. New administrators should take caution prior to making change in this area.

According to Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952), uniformity can be explained in that culture comes with no guarantees or consistent attributes; however, it is suspected that there are a number of categories of structural principles are found in all cultures. No constant elemental units like atoms, cells, or genes have yet to be satisfactorily established within one culture in general. Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952) state that the only aspect of culture that is
somewhat consistent is language, specifically in the smaller elements of language that include phonemes and morphemes. The attempts to reduce all social phenomena to a simple set of laws applicable to every society and explaining its structure and history is not a realistic or promising undertaking. Culture is more fluid and relies on attempts to understand how the behavior of individuals is influenced by the beliefs and values of the larger community. With regard to school culture, researchers may wonder how the behavior of individuals has been shaped by the norms of behavior within the given culture.

Looking at the causality of culture requires researchers to examine the multitude of facts that may influence culture. According to Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952):

Causality is complex and difficult, culture is variable, culture is plastic and changeable, and possessed of inertia, it is people that produce or establish culture; but they establish it partly in perpetration and partly in modification of a form of existing culture which has made them what they are. (p. 166)

Many factors influence culture including organic and inorganic factors of the natural environment, social factors (size, location, population of the given culture), and other cultural factors. Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952) believe that “ethnography can be pursued as a study of the classification, interrelations, and history of cultural forms and culture” (p. 166). Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer also believe that “culture can be historically and scientifically investigated without introduction of personality factors” (p. 166). When conducting an autoethnographic study of school culture, one must be aware of how the culture of the school has shaped the professional personalities of the people within the culture and not allow single members of the culture with dominant personalities to influence the generalizations made about the culture.
The importance of examining the significance and values of a culture is that “they are social and cultural and of the essence of the organization of culture” and are considered most important variables (Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer, 1952, p. 171). Significance and values are examined together because they are difficult to keep separate. These areas “are intangibles which are subjective in that they can be internally experienced but are also objective in their expressions, embodiments, or results” (p. 171). Values give significance to our understanding of cultures and are important in that they provide “foci for patterns of organization for the material of cultures” (p. 172-173). In school organizations, looking closely at values provides an important glimpse into what the school stands for (Deal, 1999).

Relativism is the last aspect of culture according to Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952) and is important because “cultures are differently weighted in their values, hence are differently structured” (p. 174). When comparing cultures, Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer advise researchers to be cautious since “as cultures are compared, unique and common values may appear but truly objective comparison is not always possible” (p. 174). Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer believe that anthropologists should not hope to remain completely objective. Instead, cultural anthropologists should develop a more active role and “put something into the data” (p. 170). They go on to state the trustworthiness of an anthropologist’s data depends upon their “receptivity, completeness, detachment and the skill with which his or her inductive generalizations are made” (p. 170). In autoethnographic study design, the researcher is present and actively involved with the culture under investigation.

**Competing Values Framework.** When examining organizational culture and change, Cameron and Quinn (2011) provide a theoretical model that has emerged as a strong framework for organizing and interpreting a wide variety of organizational phenomena with development of
the Competing Values Framework. According to Cameron and Quinn (2011), the purpose of the Competing Values Framework is to diagnose and facilitate change in organizational culture. This framework was developed initially from research on effective organizations. Campbell, Brownas, Peterson, and Dunnette (1974) identified thirty-nine dimensions of represented measures of organizational effectiveness. From the list of thirty-nine dimensions, Quinn and Rohrbaugh (1983) conducted an analysis to determine if patterns existed. From their analysis emerged two major dimensions and four main clusters (Figure 2).

According to Cameron and Quinn (2011) the components of the Competing Values Framework include two major dimensions and four main clusters. The first dimension ranges from Flexibility and Discretion across the continuum to Stability and Control. The Flexibility and Discretion end of the range is characterized by the viewpoint that organizations are effective if they are ever changing, adaptable, and organic. The lower range of this continuum is Stability and Control, which emphasizes stability, predictable behaviors, and a mechanistic viewpoint.
This continuum ranges from organizational versatility and pliability to organizational steadiness and durability on the other end.

Cameron and Quinn (2011) explain that the dimensions of the Competing Values Framework range from Internal Focus and Integration to External Focus and Differentiation. This dimension recognizes the range of organizational tendencies from internally focused, integrated, and united, to those organizations that promote external organization, differentiation, and rivalry. This continuum ranges from organizational unity and agreement on one end to organizational separation and independence on the other.

In Cameron and Quinn’s (2011) Competing Values Framework, the two dimensions, Flexibility and Discretion/ Stability and Control, and Internal Focus and Integration/External Focus and Differentiation, together form four quadrants, which represent organizational effectiveness indicators. The four quadrants represent the beliefs about what members see as their organization’s core values. Each quadrant represents an opposite or competing assumption on the diagonal end of the Competing Values square. For example, the Clan or Collaborate quadrant displays opposite values than that of diagonal Market or Compete quadrant. The Adhocracy or Create quadrant is diagonal and opposite of the Hierarchy or Control quadrant.

**Clan Quadrant.** Cameron and Quinn (2011) explain that the Clan or “Collaborate” quadrant is characterized by a belief system where a family-like atmosphere is present. In this type of organization shared goals and values, shared participation, teamwork, and a commitment to employees is present. On the Competing Values chart, the Clan culture is on the internally focused and integrated side of the continuum. Beliefs of this type of organization are that success can be found through teamwork, employee development, and creation of a humane work environment. In a Clan organization, employees believe in participation, commitment, and
loyalty. The Clan culture exemplifies a friendly place to work, leaders are thought of as mentors, commitment is high, tradition is valued, and employees demonstrate high levels of loyalty. Clan cultures typically place high value on positive employee morale and concern for the organizations individual members.

Schools are examples of organizations that may seek to develop a Clan culture with the intent of maximizing student achievement. According to Senge (2000), “in high-performing schools, a nurturing professional community seems to be the ‘container’ that holds the culture” (p. 326). In these high-performing environments, Senge (2000) explains that teachers feel invigorated, challenged, professionally engaged, and empowered because they teach in this type of school. These successful school communities have several characteristics in common: they engage in reflective dialogue, develop a unity of purpose, have a collective focus on student learning, collaborate and develop norms of sharing, have an openness to improvement, teachers ‘de-privatize’ their practice and open their classroom doors to feedback, a culture of trust and respect is present, a professional community is developed, and there is supportive and knowledgeable leadership (Senge, 2000).

**Market Quadrant.** In Cameron and Quinn’s Competing Values Framework (2011), the diagonally opposite side of the Clan quadrant is the “Market” or “Compete” culture, which has also been identified as an important component of many successful organizations. In a Market culture, the organization serves as a market oriented towards the external environment rather than internal affairs. This type of environments is focused on transactions with outside constituents such as suppliers, customers, contractors, licensees, unions, and regulators. Unlike in the hierarchy quadrant, which is regulated by rules, the market culture is driven by economic market mechanisms, monetary factors, and corporate dynamics. The main driving force is profit,
winning, and bottom-line results. Competitiveness and productivity are hallmarks of a Market culture and leaders tend to be hard driving, tough, and demanding.

Contemporary schools are faced with the challenges of some aspects of the Market culture. Private schools and schools with religious affiliations must “market themselves” to keep enrollment numbers at appropriate levels and to ensure that the costs of running the institutions remain funded by tuitions and endowment from alumni and donors. Public institutions face the challenge of creating a strong Clan or collaborative culture for staff, while working to develop strong relationships with their “customers”. Members of the stakeholder groups can be considered the “customers” of schools. These groups include: students, parents, central office administration, the local school board, and community organizations. In some parts of the country, teachers’ and other employee unions such as secretarial and custodial unions influence the educational decisions made by school communities. Education reform, high stakes testing, and yearly accountability measures have also increased the competitive nature of schools. Many schools find it challenging to continue to achieve adequate yearly progress despite the financial and demographic constraints they have.

**Adhocracy Quadrant.** The next quadrant of Cameron and Quinn’s (2011) Competing Values Framework is the Adhocracy or “Create” culture. This quadrant is close to the dimension of external focus and differentiation. In an Adhocracy culture, attention must be paid to the ever-changing needs of the organizational world of the twenty-first century. Characteristics of the Adhocracy culture are adaptability, flexibility, and creativity. Leaders in Adhocracy organizations must foster entrepreneurship, imagination, and activity on the cutting edge. Adhocracies are always working to create new or innovative products and services and to adapt quickly to new advances or inventions. In Adhocracies, centralized power and authority
relationships are limited in the workplace. There is a strong emphasis on individuality, risk-taking, and predicting future trends. A distinct aspect of organizations utilizing an Adhocracy approach is that there is no organizational chart, physical spaces are often temporary, roles are temporary, and reassignments are common depending on current initiatives. Additionally, creativity and innovation are strongly encouraged.

The Adhocracy culture will play a part in school and education initiatives in the twenty-first century. Schools today must prepare students for jobs that do not yet exist and educational leaders must ensure that students leave school with adequate preparation for life and work in the twenty-first century (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). These important twenty-first century skills include critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity and innovation (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2004). Teachers must continue to find new and engaging ways to motivate students and innovation in education will be a hallmark of the twenty-first century. The challenge of the next several decades will be how to best strike a balance between creating collaborative Clan cultures in schools while ensuring that Adhocracy values such as innovation and risk-taking are also present.

**Hierarchy Quadrant.** The final culture type from Cameron and Quinn’s (2011) Competing Values Framework is the Hierarchy or “Control” culture. The Hierarchy culture is characterized by formalized rules and structures in a work environment. In this type of atmosphere, rules and procedures dictate how employees function. Leaders in this type of culture tend to be seen as coordinators and managers who have the task of creating a smooth-operating organization. This type of organizational culture allows for goods and services to be produced in a uniform manner and quality control can be managed due to consistent policies and procedures. The hallmark of Hierarchy environments is control and standardization. This type
of culture is close to the Internal Focus and Integration and Stability and Control dimensions of the Competing Values Framework.

In many ways, individual schools and school systems have Hierarchy cultures. Individual school boards set school policies, and schools are bound by these formalized rules and structures. After education reform in the early 1990s, came state mandates surrounding certification, teacher quality, standardized assessments, and high stakes testing. All of these structures were intended to ensure that quality control and equity were present in all school districts. In order to run an effective and efficient school, set procedures and systems must be present and complied with, or chaos would ensue. This would result in creating disgruntled customers. With the movement toward a national curriculum and the federally mandated “Race to the Top Program”, schools in this decade will continue to work towards increased standardization and accountability for students and teachers. While schools are not factories attempting to produce the same assembly-line product, there must be consistency in the structure of education in order to ensure equity for students across the country.

In contemplating the four quadrants of the Competing Values Framework developed by Cameron and Quinn (2011), it becomes evident that schools must attempt to obtain a balance of the four cultures that have been identified as competing and ranging in their internal or external focus and their levels of flexibility and control. Collaboration and creation of a family atmosphere (Clan), development of risk-taking and innovation (Adhocracy), establishment of structures and policies to ensure safety and effective management (Hierarchy), and competition and marketability (Market) of the school environment in this competitive era of school choice are all important goals for creating a positive school culture.
Theoretical Framework Conclusion. To bridge the gap between the culture theories of Kroeber, Kluckhohn and Meyer back in the nineteen fifties and the present day culture realities of contemporary schools today, the Competing Values Framework by Cameron and Quinn (2011) provides a practical lens to look at school and organizational cultures in the modern workplace. A culture study has its roots in the anthropological approach of Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952) while focusing on the theoretical framework for understanding organizational culture and personal behavior (Cameron & Quinn, 2011).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The primary concept addressed in this literature review is school culture and focuses on how principal leadership behaviors may influence a shift in the culture of a school. There has been considerable research on the factors that influence a school’s culture, including leadership and change theories, and the characteristics of effective schools (Cameron & Quinn, 2011; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Fullan, 2003; Fullan, 2009). Intertwined with school culture and change research is the study of principal leadership, the principal’s role in school culture, the teacher’s role in school culture, and how school culture impacts student achievement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Fullan, 1993; Mohammad, 2009).

School culture has been a topic of study for centuries and educational researchers have found that school culture is an essential part of creating and maintaining effective schools. Schein (1985) states, “there is a possibility underemphasized in leadership research, that the only thing of real importance that leaders do is create and manage culture and that the unique talent of leaders is their ability to work with culture” (p. 2). School culture is a complex entity that is influenced by many variables: the people working within a school, the students attending the school, the parents, the fiscal resources, the community, the administration, the school
committee, as well as state and federal mandates. School cultures are ever changing and complex systems due to their great number of influences. When attempting to assess individual school culture, school leaders face the challenging task of understanding the school’s history while assessing current conditions and values (Deal & Peterson, 1999). For leaders, making change in a school is often a balancing act of respecting the school’s past history, while gently moving the staff forward towards future initiatives. School culture and principal leadership go hand in hand (Deal & Peterson, 1990). In this literature review, the following topics and themes will be explored: School Culture, Organizational Culture, Toxic Cultures, Teacher’s Role in School Culture, Principal’s Role in School Culture, School Culture and Student Achievement, and Job Transitions.

**School Culture Overview**

Schools are similar to snowflakes; there are hundreds of thousands of schools around the world, and each one of them is unique. Educational researchers have described the uniqueness of each individual school as school culture. The study of school culture dates back to the early twentieth century when Waller (1932) shared his ideas:

> Schools have a culture that is definitely their own. There are, in the school, complex rituals of personal relationships, a set of folkways, mores, and irrational sanctions, a moral code based upon them. There are games, which are sublimated wars, teams, and an elaborate set of ceremonies governing them. There are traditions, and traditionalists waging their world-old battle against innovators. (as cited in Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 5; Waller, 1932)

Waller’s words remain true in today’s modern schools, as every school possesses its own distinct personality that can be detected as soon as an individual enters and spends any time in a school
building. The values of the staff, how the teachers interact with their students, the parents, and each other, and the rituals or ceremonies of the school are all variables that can be closely examined when studying the culture of a particular school environment. Although inanimate, school culture is a presence felt in every school (Deal & Peterson, 1990). The unwritten rules of a school organization can often be predictive of future behavior. “Culture is a concept that helps us perceive and understand the complex forces that work below the surface and are in the air of human groups and organizations” (Deal & Peterson, 1990, p. 19).

School culture is one of the most important influences in the success of a school and can be one of the most difficult things for leaders to change. Deal and Peterson (1999) write that every school has its own unique set of unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations that permeate everything including the way people act, how they dress, what they talk about, and how they treat their students (p.2). Deal and Kennedy (1982) explain the culture of an organization simply as “the way we do things around here” (as cited in Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 269). There are many variables that contribute to the formation of a school’s culture, and culture can have a significant impact on the overall achievement and success of the students in the school.

In their 1999 book, Shaping School Culture: The Heart of Leadership, Deal and Peterson identify schools across the United States that overcame substantial odds and became high performing institutions. Some of these schools contained high percentages of at-risk students and had varying amounts of support and resources available to them, but were able to evolve into highly successful schools based on their student achievement. Deal and Peterson (1999) were able to identify the key elements that schools with a positive culture have in common Table 1:
Creating a positive learning environment for both the students and the teachers has been shown to be an essential component of successful schools. Deal and Peterson (2009) cite a 1996 study conducted by Newmann and Associates who found that “success flourished in schools with a primary focus on student learning, a commitment to high expectations, and social support for innovation, dialogue, and a search for new ideas” (p. 10). Some schools have joined the movement to establish themselves as professional learning communities. A professional learning community is defined as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Key Elements of a Positive School Culture (Deal and Peterson, 1999, p.116)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. a mission focused on student and teacher learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. a rich sense of history and purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. core values of collegiality, performance, and improvement that engender quality, achievement, and learning for everyone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. positive beliefs and assumptions about the potential of students and staff to learn and grow</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. a strong professional community that uses knowledge, experience, and research to improve practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. an informal network that fosters positive communication flow</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. shared leadership that balances continuity and improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. rituals and ceremonies that reinforce core cultural values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. stories that celebrate successes and recognize heroines and heroes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. a physical environment that symbolizes joy and pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. a widely shared sense of respect and caring for everyone</td>
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Educators committed to working together collaboratively in an ongoing process of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators. (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 14)

Many schools that define themselves as professional learning communities have a positive culture and an identity as a learning environment for the teachers and students (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). In *Schools that Learn*, Senge (2000) contends that, “in high performing schools, a nurturing professional community seems to be the ‘container’ that holds the culture. Teachers feel invigorated, challenged, professionally engaged, and empowered because they teach there” (p. 326). According to Deal and Peterson (2002), there is not one approach to create a positive culture, however, successful schools embrace common features of professional learning communities. These features include a sense of purpose and values, norms of continuous learning, a commitment to the learning of all students, collaborative relationships, and opportunities for teacher reflection, collective inquiry, and shared practice. Attempting to create a school environment where the focus is on improving student achievement through teacher collaboration is one strategy that many current-day school leaders have committed to. This approach reinforces Deal and Peterson’s advice for leaders to create “a mission focused on student and teacher learning” (p. 111).

Deal and Peterson (2009) state that, “without a well-known historical map, the school loses its way” (p. 45). When investigating school culture, the history of the school is one of the first places to look since past behavior and attitudes can predict present functioning and culture. “Culture takes form as, over time, people cope with problems, stumble onto routines and rituals,
and create traditions and ceremonies to reinforce underlying values and beliefs” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 49). A school’s history includes the many stories repeated by the staff, which convey morals and carry values for the organization. Deal and Peterson (1999) stress that, “stories that have become part of the fabric of the school can reinforce cultural commitments and values and can exemplify what the school stands for, what is valued, and what has been accomplished” (p.53). These stories can have positive or negative connotations and can illustrate the beliefs and morals of an organization.

While much of the school culture research speaks about school culture as a singular entity, Kent (2006) contends that there are multiple cultures within any organization. According to Kent, school culture as a “jigsaw” in which several interlocking pieces fit together to create the whole picture of school culture. The first piece of the jigsaw is the internal culture of the school that represents the shared belief and value system within the school. These values may be espoused by the stories or ceremonies that have lasted through time and show what the culture views as important. The second piece of the jigsaw is the subcultures within the school. The subcultures of an organization emerge as expressions of their own social identities that may or may not reflect the core values of the organization. The third piece of the jigsaw is the influence of leaders upon school cultures. According to Kent’s research, whatever the leader does or does not do is detectable throughout the school and may have the greatest influence on the culture of a school. In this study, older students voiced that one single leader is not responsible for influencing the culture of a school. Instead, they felt that many leaders including teacher leaders and student leaders create a shared leadership influence on school culture. The fourth piece of the culture jigsaw is the impact of society or external culture on the culture of the school. In this piece, the school’s academic culture is influenced by societal developments that take place.
outside of school. Some examples of societal culture shifts are that parents are now more involved with the happenings within the school, our present government has developed mandates that impact the day to day functioning in school, students are more globally connected than ever before through social media networks, and students are now working at part-time jobs while completing their schooling. The final piece of the culture jigsaw is the evidence of a cultural shift. This piece of the jigsaw is impacted by changes to society, changes in the values surrounding education today, and evidence of a shift in the culture of the school. This cultural shift cannot be planned in an all-encompassing manner, and cultures cannot be quickly changed. Overall, Kent’s research indicated that leaders can have an influence on school culture, but they are just one part of a number of influences that create the overall culture of a school.

**Organizational Culture**

Although more than one hundred and fifty definitions of culture have been identified (Kluckhohn, Kroeber, & Meyer, 1952), Cameron and Quinn (2011), identify the two main disciplinary foundations of organizational culture as sociological and anthropological. Organizational culture can be defined as the area of study that examines the most distinguishing features of companies or organizations. Furthermore, organizational culture refers to “the taken-for-granted values, underlying assumptions, expectations, and definitions that characterize organizations and their members” (p. 18). Analysis of organizational culture seeks to identify what gives the most successful organizations their competitive advantage as well as the most powerful factors that they attribute to their success. The company values, the personal beliefs of its members, and the vision of the organization can be what sets the organization apart from its less successful counterparts. “Most organizational scholars now recognize that organizational
culture has a powerful effect on the performance and long term effectiveness of organizations” (Cameron and Quinn, 2011, p. 6).

Alvesson (2002) states that organizational culture “is a significant way of understanding organizational life in all its richness and variations” (p. 2). Organizational culture continues to be a primary area of study in academic research since the cultural dimension is central in all aspects of organizational life. Even in organizations where little attention is paid to cultural issues, how the people in the company think, feel, act, and what is valued is guided by the cultural ideology of the organization. According to Alvesson, “culture is as significant and complex as it is difficult to understand and ‘use’ in a thoughtful way” (2002, p. 1). In a 1985 publication, Frost et al. state:

Talking about organizational culture seems to mean talking about the importance for people of symbolism-of rituals, myths, stories and legends- and about the interpretation of events, ideas, and experiences that are influenced and shaped by the groups within which they live. (as cited in Alvesson, 2002, p. 3; Frost, P., et. al, 1985).

Schein’s model of organizational culture has served as a context for investigation of school culture for the past thirty years. Schein model demonstrates that organizational culture can be broken down into three interconnected levels: artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions (Schein, 1984; Schein, 1992, as cited in Heracleous, 2001). The first layer, or the artifacts, includes everything that one observes upon entering an organization such as a school. The artifacts include the physical layout of the building, how people dress, how people address each other, physical attributes such as smell and feel, and finally the records of the organization such as annual reports or mission statements (Schein, 1990). A flaw of analyzing this layer is
that the interpretation of artifacts can be subjective depending on the reporter. Researchers should be clear about the underlying assumptions of an organization when investigating artifacts.

Schein’s next level of culture is the values of an organization. The values of an organization can be unearthed through qualitative analysis such as interviews or questionnaires. Schein feels that open-ended interview questions are an effective means of getting to how people in an organization feel and think. Finally, through deeper inquiry, the researcher examining the culture of an organization is able to get to the heart of the assumptions, or the third level of Schein’s organizational culture. The assumptions of an organizational culture are only identifiable through targeted questions when members of the organization are interested in going into a deeper self-analysis about the feelings, beliefs, thought processes, and behaviors evident in that organization. In qualitative analysis, interviewing can be an effective means of delving into this deeper analysis. Getting to the assumptions or deep beliefs requires members of the group to analyze the behaviors or phenomena within the culture, see Figure 3:

![Figure 3](https://example.com/figure3.png)
Toxic Cultures

There has been considerable research on the positive cultural components of successful schools, and conversely, researchers have examined the characteristics of negative or “toxic” school climates. Peterson (2002) states that negative or “toxic” cultures hinder growth and learning. These environments “lack a clear sense of purpose, have norms that reinforce inertia, blame students for lack of progress, discourage collaboration, and may have hostile relationships among staff” (p. 11). Environments like these are not healthy for teachers or students. Deal and Peterson (1999) identify several commonalities found in negative school environments that include a focus on negative values, fragmented schools or subcultures where meaning is derived from subculture membership or anti-student sentiments, destructive environments where negativity is a predominant feature, and spiritually fractured schools that lack values or integrity. Arbuckle (2000) explains that some school cultures stimulate and promote learning, while others stifle it. Arbuckle goes on to state that, “creating vibrant, collaborative cultures in schools and school systems is a vital strategy for individual and school development” (as cited in Senge, 2000, p. 325).

A study by Cheng (1993) examined the characteristics of organizational culture and effective schools. The findings identified several qualities of “culturally ineffective schools”. In this study “weak culture schools” lacked organizational culture, had unbalanced principal leadership focusing on task, and weak teacher job-attitude indicated by disengagement, negative morale, and lack of intimacy. Cheng’s findings also demonstrated that the stronger the school’s organizational culture, the more successful the school was in terms of productivity, adaptability, and flexibility. This study concluded that effective principal leadership and teacher attitude could play a significant part in creating a strong organizational culture.
In a 2005 article that appeared in the American School Board Journal, Vail talks about the link between teacher morale and student achievement. Vail maintains that there are certain aspects of teacher morale that principals cannot control, but also believes there are several things that a principal can do to maintain morale or turn around a toxic culture. According to Vail, principals should incorporate the following behaviors into their leadership repertoire, Table 2:

Table 2. Principal Leadership Behaviors for Positive Morale (Vail, 2005, pp. 4-9)

1. Ensure that there is a structured mentor program available to nurture and support new teachers.
2. Investigate the climate by studying and valuing school ceremonies and traditions, look for and nurture the core group of staff members who believe in the school, respectfully confront negativity and rumor mongering.
3. Empower the teachers and staff through practicing shared decision-making.
4. Recognize and reward teachers and staff to make them feel appreciated.
5. Pay attention to administrator morale by maintaining an appropriate workload and expectations.
6. Ensure that student discipline and behavior are under control with consistent rules and enforced consequences.
7. Treat teachers as professionals and provide professional development and collaboration opportunities.
8. Talk to employees to allow them to provide their input and build trust.
9. Maintain facilities and provide a clean and safe work environment.

Principal leadership behaviors can have a direct effect on the cultural deterioration of a school. According to Deal and Peterson (2009), when new leaders enter a school and make change, they can unravel a school culture in several ways. The first mistake made by some new
leaders is to bring in change too quickly. Some new leaders begin large initiatives without teacher buy-in, and end important school rituals or traditions. The second error new principals may make is to neglect core values by allowing negativity to grow and by focusing exclusively on test scores, standards, or rules. It is essential for new school leaders to respect the rituals, symbols, of a school prior to initiating substantive change, or a toxic culture may be inadvertently created. As stated by Muhammad (2009):

Cultural change is a more difficult form of change to accomplish. It cannot be gained through force or coercion. As human beings, we do not have the ability to control the thoughts and beliefs of others, so cultural change requires something more profound. It requires leaders adept at gaining cooperation and skilled in the arts of diplomacy, salesmanship, patience, endurance, and encouragement. It takes knowledge of where a school has been and agreement about where the school should go. (p.16)

Barth (2002) advises principals who have identified their culture as a negative one to start the process of change by becoming aware of the culture:

What do you see, hear, and experience in the school? What don’t you see and hear? What are the clues that reveal the school’s culture? What behaviors get rewards and status? Which ones are greeted with reprimands? Do the adults model the behavior they expect of students? Who makes the decisions? Do parents experience welcome, suspicion, or rejection when they enter the school? (Barth, 2002, p. 8)

Barth goes on to recommend that principals looking to change the culture of their school should begin to “discuss the non-discussables” (p. 8). Non-discussables are the topics that are important
to the school staff, but only discussed behind closed doors, in the parking lot, or at the dinner table at home. These topics are so anxiety-provoking that people are afraid to talk about them in a professional forum such as a faculty meeting. By bringing these issues to the forefront, principals are taking an important step toward cultural change. Barth states that non-discussables “are the third rail of school leadership” (p.8). Overall, school leaders must take steps to change the unhealthy or toxic elements of their school culture by recognizing the issues and involving the staff with making change to a new, more desirable reality.

**Principal’s Role in School Culture**

Principal’s have vital role in shaping and maintaining the culture of a school. Schein (2004) states, “If leaders do not become conscious of the cultures in which they are embedded, those cultures will manage them” (p. 23). The job of the principal can many times feel like a juggling act. The principal must maintain high academic standards, motivate and manage the staff, work effectively with parents and students, develop schedules, coordinate procedures, prioritize school safety and student behavior, remain current with research and best practices, be a presence in the school and community, all while modeling professional and positive behavior every day. Education reform added increased accountability to the already complicated role of principal. Principals today face the intense pressure of achieving state mandated performance targets based with decreased resources year after year. In many public schools across the country, budgets have been drastically reduced, while state and federal mandates and expectations continue to increase. Despite these budget cuts, teachers and school staff members are expected to handle an increased workload. Asking people to do more work with less assistance can have a negative impact over time on teacher morale and school climate. Without
a strong culture, it becomes increasingly difficult to become a high achieving school and positive environment for the staff and students.

In the words of Fullan and Hargreaves (1996), “for better or for worse, culture is a powerful force” (p.85). Leaders today have been given the challenge of making educational decisions that are research-based in order to ensure that students are reaching state mandated progress and achievement levels. With increased pressure for schools to reach these lofty achievement goals, come necessary changes to instruction and curriculum. Changes to the way “things have always been done around here” can be threatening to many teachers. With regard to the traditional culture of a school, Deal and Peterson warn that, “trying to shape it, change it, or fight it, can have serious repercussions” (Deal & Peterson, 1987, as cited in Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996, p. 85).

While much has been written about the importance of a positive school culture, there is limited specific research available for principals who are looking to instigate a substantial shift in the culture of their school in a relatively short period of time (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). Creating a positive culture often requires leaders to begin by observing the existing culture and analyzing the environment. Stolp and Smith (2005) advise principals to start by “doing nothing.” With this simple approach, leaders begin the process of cultural change through observation and talking to teachers, other staff members, students, and parents in order to learn something about the school environment. Once a principal truly understands the environment, they may begin to gently approach change through staff empowerment and establishment of a shared vision for the future.

Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) believe that the principal plays a pivotal role in shaping and developing a school’s culture. They emphasize that it is essential for principals and teachers
to come together to develop a collective vision for the school. Principals must not fall into the trap of manipulating the culture to conform to their own singular vision. “Vision-building is a two-way street where principals learn from as much as they contribute to others” (Bolman & Deal 1990; Louis & Miles 1990, as cited in Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996, p. 90). Principals can begin the process of a change in the culture of a school through providing opportunities for teacher collaboration, shared leadership, and promoting professional development. “If the whole school culture is to change, it will be necessary to spread responsibility for leadership” (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1990, p. 90).

In his 2003 book, *What Works in Schools: Translating Research Into Action*, Marzano recognizes three key principles of leadership for school leaders looking to make substantive change in their school environments. He first identifies that change initiatives are most effective when carried out by a small group of educators with the principal as a strong cohesive unit. He goes on to state that reform efforts led by teachers alone are often met by resistance due to the democratic cultures of schools where all teachers are considered equal regardless of skill or performance. For reform efforts to be most effective, the principal’s support and participation is crucial. The second aspect of effective change leadership is for leadership teams to provide strong guidance and demonstrate respect for those not on the team. This means that reform groups must make an effort to include the opinions and feelings of those in the group as well as the teaching staff as a whole. The third principle of effective leadership for change can be characterized by specific behaviors that enhance interpersonal relationships. According to Marzano (2003), effective leaders display consistent and specific behaviors when interacting with their colleagues, which include optimism, honesty, and consideration. Developing and maintaining relationships is an essential skill of effective leaders in organizations today.
In a 2008 Belgian mixed-methods study, the characteristics of principals who were able to successfully shape the culture of their schools to one that encourages teaching and learning were examined. The results revealed that principals with “Type A” personalities were most successful when attempting to change the culture of their schools. These Type A individuals exhibited high achievement orientation, were actively involved in the happenings of the school, and demonstrated a continuous pursuit of improvement. Results of the study also indicated that effective leaders communicate their vision clearly and provide an environment of shared decision-making while providing support and feedback to teachers. These transformational leaders serve as mentors, motivate, intellectually stimulate, and inspire their teaching staff while giving teachers individual consideration. Also noted in this study was that despite school success, in order for principals to remain satisfied with their jobs and avoid burnout they must also have consistent external support from the superintendent and school board (Engels, Hotten, Devos, Bouckenooghe, & Aelterman, 2008). This study provides several concrete examples of behaviors principals may choose to employ when seeking to instigate cultural change within their school.

Reflective principals may consider how their leadership style influences the culture of their school. In an autoethnographic study conducted in 2000, Pepper, an inexperienced school principal, hypothesized that her authoritarian leadership style was having a negative impact on the teacher morale in her school. Pepper made a conscious effort to change her approach, and incorporated Leithwood’s research surrounding the traits and behaviors of transformational leaders. Pepper set out to create an environment of optimism and camaraderie while focusing on staff development, promoting collaboration, and empowering teachers to problem solve together effectively. After Pepper made the decision to change her leadership style, in the years that
followed, Pepper noted that gradually the school climate changed to a more caring environment for students and teachers. Pepper found that there were fewer discipline referrals, and grade level planning and collaboration had become more productive. Of the eleven new teachers that Pepper hired during her tenure at the school that served as the research site, six of the teachers moved on to administrative positions. This study demonstrates that leadership style can have a direct impact on school climate. Furthermore, school climate can directly affect teacher morale, which in turn affects student achievement and behavior.

Leithwood and Jantzi (1990) conducted an extensive research study that examined the practices of administrators in effective Canadian elementary and secondary schools who had implemented successful school reform initiatives. Specifically, this study examined the extent to which schools had achieved collaborative cultures, the processes by which collaborative cultures were established, and the strategies used by the school administrators. According to Leithwood and Jantzi, transformational leaders believe in the importance of creating a collaborative culture amongst the staff including shared decision-making, staff empowerment, and shared problem solving. For the purposes of this study, transformational leaders “possessed a high level of commitment and prioritized within their school openness to new ideas, a shared understanding of the organization’s purpose, and established norms of collegiality and improvement” (p. 254). Leithwood and Jantzi found that principals were able to create a collaborative school environment by exercising the following behaviors; strengthening the culture, using bureaucratic mechanisms, fostering staff development, having frequent and direct communication with the school staff, sharing power and responsibility, and using rituals and symbols to express cultural values. Overall, there was evidence to support that “collaborative cultures with shared decision-making structures were most conducive to student and staff development efforts necessary for
school reform initiatives” (p. 276). The results of this study support Fullan and Hargreaves’s (1996) research about the importance of shared leadership, shared problem solving, collaboration, and shared values.

**Teacher’s Role in School Culture**

If principal leadership plays a part in school culture, then certainly one could suppose that teacher attitudes, beliefs, and norms would also contribute to the culture of a school. According to Fullan (1993), “teaching will not become a learning profession until the majority of its members become change agents capable of working on their own sense of purpose, through inquiry, competence building, and collaboration” (p. 127). Muhammad (2009) contends that universal achievement will be “a pipe dream until educators look into the beliefs, practices, behaviors, and norms of school organizations”. He goes on to state that, “a school’s culture is the place that holds the biggest keys to unlocking the potential of our schools” (p. 12).

Muhammad (2009) conducted formal and informal observations in schools across the United States. His research focused on how staff functioned within schools and how staff behavior influenced change initiatives within the school. Muhammad’s research revealed “a war of belief systems” while four distinct groups of staff emerged: believers, tweeners, survivors, and fundamentalists. The first group, the believers, is characterized by its flexibility and is the most important positive influence within the school. Believers demonstrated “high levels of intrinsic motivation, personal connections to the school and the community, high levels of flexibility with the students, application of positive student pressure, willingness to confront opposing viewpoints, and varied levels of pedagogical skills” (p. 32). Key to creating a positive learning atmosphere, believers “display the qualities and value the paradigms that unite staff members and make a positive school culture” (p. 41). Believers are the teachers that a principal will go to
first with a new idea or initiative. Because of the believers’ high levels of flexibility, they are usually unafraid of change and are willing to take risks. The believers can be the role model educators of the school and are those that can exert positive peer pressure to the rest of the staff when they have had success with a new idea or innovation (Muhammad, 2009; Fullan, 2008).

Mohammad (2009) identifies the second group, the tweeners, as teachers who are new to the culture of a particular school and can include novice educators, or an educator who has chosen teaching as a second career. Tweeners are important because effective leaders can support these new staff members and shape their views, allowing them to dramatically change the culture of the school. The third group, the survivors, is the smallest group, but considered to be the most dangerous. Survivors are teachers who have lost their effectiveness, may be close to retirement, and are focusing their energy on survival until the end of the school day or school year. Mohammad cites a 1996 study by Sanders and Rivers that found that students exposed to the instruction of ineffective teachers continue to show the consequences of this ineffective instruction even after assigned to an effective teacher. The same study revealed that students who have three effective teachers or three ineffective teachers in consecutive years have vastly different achievement levels. Allowing survivors to remain in the classroom can prove to be detrimental to the academic success of the students.

The fourth group, the fundamentalists, has the most influence on the culture of the school. Fundamentalists are experienced educators and are fierce protectors of the status quo (Muhammad, 2009). Fullan (1993) contends, “today, the teacher who works for or allows the status quo is the traitor” (p. 14). According to Muhammad (2009), fundamentalists believe that the traditional model of schooling is best, and will do anything possible to discourage change from occurring. Leaders attempting to make change in their schools must understand the
fundamentalist group, and how they operate in order to initiate school improvement. When implementing new initiatives principals may first attempt to achieve “buy in” from the believer group, then use positive peer pressure to assist with slowly converting the fundamentalists. Allowing the fundamentalists to be part of the decision-making surrounding change initiatives can yield positive results and limit resistance.

After examining the different types of teacher personalities, principals may wonder what can be done to assist with teacher motivational strategies. In any school or business, managers must find ways to motivate their employees. One may argue that a happy employee is a motivated employee, and in schools, motivated teachers can equal higher student achievement. Hopkins (2005) examined several human motivation theories in order to determine which may best align with motivation in the school setting. According to Hopkins’ interpretation of Maslow’s polynomial theory, belongingness and esteem are two of the hierarchal needs that are most applicable when considering human motivation in the workplace. These basic human needs “hinge on such elusive concepts as the need for self-esteem, the esteem of others, self-confidence, achievement, adequacy, importance, and appreciation” (Hopkins, 2005, p. 5). Hopkins went on to examine Herzberg’s “motivation-hygiene” theory and identified factors that lead to satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Table 3):
Understanding how to maintain high levels of teacher satisfaction is one part of the school improvement puzzle, but principals also face the challenge of teacher development and its impact on school culture. In a 1988 study, Evans and Hopkins investigated school climate, the psychological state of individual teachers, and the implementation of educational innovations. The authors used Maslow’s theories to examine the psychological states of the teachers in their analysis. What Evans and Hopkins found was that the more self-actualizing the teacher, the greater the use of the new educational innovations. The self-actualized teachers were happy in their work, tolerant, looked forward to professional growth, and were supportive of their colleagues. These teachers also demonstrated self-understanding, self-tolerance, and did not feel pressured by external forces. The self-actualized teachers saw new ideas as a challenge rather than an obstacle to overcome. Teachers who saw innovations as a threat, felt isolated, were ambivalent about their work, depressed, and lacked confidence were less likely to implement new innovations into their teaching repertoire. A positive correlation was identified in strong school climates and the successful implementation of new ideas. Two key components of school climate and successful innovation were the role of school leadership and group consensus on goals. Overall, Evans and Hopkins concluded that the following factors influenced the creation

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors Leading to Dissatisfaction</th>
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<td>Company Policy</td>
<td>Achievement</td>
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<td>Supervision</td>
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<td>Relationship with Peers</td>
<td>Growth</td>
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of a positive school climate: the self-determination of the organization, leaders that were perceived as supportive and actively involved with school reform efforts, strong internal communication, time and opportunity for peer observation, and strong staff collaboration.

**School Culture and Student Achievement**

Building a positive school culture is important to successful schools and teacher motivation, and one could argue that the overriding purpose of school reform efforts is to improve student achievement and the overall schooling experience. Getting the most out of student achievement and improving school climate for students has been a focus of part of the previous research on school culture. Stolp and Smith (1995) cite the research of Fyans and Maehr (1990) in relation to examination of changing cultural patterns and the role that school culture plays on student motivation and achievement, particularly examining the effects of culture on different student ethnic groups. Fyans and Maehr administered questionnaires to over sixteen thousand students in fourth, sixth, eighth, and tenth grade students from eight hundred twenty public schools in Illinois\(^1\). The conclusions of the research were that school culture appeared to be differentially important to the motivation of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. School culture was especially important both positively and negatively to non-white ethnic groups. Overall, the findings of this study revealed that particular aspects of school culture influence student motivation in different ways. Significant differences were noted in the importance of accomplishment, power, recognition, affiliation, and saliency between ethnic groups.

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\(^1\) Fyans and Maehr’s (1990) research focused on five dimensions of school culture; accomplishment, power, recognition, affiliation and saliency of psychological environment
In recent years, schools across the United States have been facing increased accountability in the area of student achievement. High stakes state testing and the pressure to reach achievement and performance targets with all students and subgroups have caused some districts to reevaluate their approach and goals. Thacker and McInerney (1992) conducted a case study of a school district in Indiana that made a conscious decision to change the academic culture of their school district. They recognized the need for the cultural change based on decreasing test scores on the Indiana State Test of Educational Progress (ISTEP). Starting with the superintendent and school committee, the district clearly articulated their mission for all of the school administrators; “all students can and will learn the Indiana Proficiencies, all schools will show improvement in language arts and mathematics achievement scores, and parents will be involved and supportive of efforts to have children master these proficiencies” (p. 19). Using a clearly delineated school improvement process, the district underwent a full cultural shift that included revamping the school improvement focus, redefining the role and goals of school administrators, focusing on student outcomes, rethinking staff development, realigning the new teacher mentor program, improving parent communication of district goals, and in soliciting parent involvement. The results of the case study analysis completed by Thacker and McInerney indicated that the school district made tremendous growth in a one-year period due to their concentrated school reform efforts as indicated by the increases seen in their district ISTEP scores. The first through third graders as well as other grade levels in the district made outstanding gains in the reading, language, and math areas. Four of the eight district elementary schools received monetary awards from the state for scoring at the top percentile. Thacker and

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2 Grade 1, 16 point gain in reading, 13 point gain in math, grade 2, 10 point gain in reading, 9 point gain in language, and 16 point gain in math, grade 3, 10 point gain in reading and positive gains in language and math.
McInerney concluded that, “under good leadership and through teacher empowerment, student achievement will improve” (p.22).

Stolp and Smith (1995) also mention the work of Krug and his significant 1992 study. Focusing on instructional leadership and instructional climate, Krug sought to investigate the subsequent effects on student achievement. Using a sample of eighty-one Chicago area schools, Krug utilized a quantitative analysis on a variety of surveys and questionnaires completed by elementary, middle, and high school students as well as principals and teachers. Krug discovered a significant correlation between instructional climate and the achievement scores of students. He also noted a positive correlation between “instructional leadership and the instructional climate of the schools” (Stolp & Smith, 1995, p.30).

**Job Transition**

There are many reasons why employees may change jobs. Strong workers are promoted, people reenter the workforce after a layoff situation, and companies reorganize which can result in movement with the remaining employees. There are also people who look for a new job because they were seeking a change because they are no longer feeling invigorated or challenged in their current position. In the field of education, teachers may move to leadership roles such as department head or administrator, and successful school administrators may rise in the rankings from assistant principal, to principal, to director or assistant superintendent, to superintendent throughout the course of their careers. In education, administrators may transition to new positions either within the same school district where they previously worked or into a new school district. In any case, transitions can be challenging, and as stated by Watkins (2009), “each time you make a change, you have to opportunity to shine or to stumble” (p. 1).
In his 2003 book, *The First 90 Days*, Watkins provides leaders with ten critical success strategies to guide them through the transition process into a new position. Watkins recognizes that there is a lack of research available to leaders seeking to learn about how to transition into a new job situation more effectively. Watkins emphasizes that the actions taken during the first three months at a new job can largely determine success or failure in the new position. He identifies the periods of transition into a new position as an incredibly vulnerable time because the new leader has a “lack of established working relationships and a detailed understanding of their new role” (p. 1). Watkins tells readers that the success of a transition depends on several factors including “whether you are an insider or an outsider, whether you have formal authority, and whether you are taking over a successful or a troubled group” (p. 10). Watkins provides leaders with ten strategies for success when going through the transition process: promote yourself, accelerate your learning, match strategy to situation, secure early wins, negotiate success, achieve alignment, build your team, create coalitions, keep your balance, and expedite everyone (pp. 12-14).

The first recommendation of “promote yourself” speaks to the fact that the transition from one job to another may take place over a very short period of time. In situations where employees change positions within the same organization, people may even be expected to finish up the responsibilities of one position while simultaneously working on tasks for their new position. In ideal situations, the transition between jobs occurs over a few weeks and employees have time to wrap up their work at one job, and then begin the process of starting their new position. Watkins (2003) recommends that people in this transition process “discipline themselves into making the transition mentally” by making a conscious effort to let go of the old job and concentrate on the new one (p. 21). This mental transition may take place over a night or
a weekend, but will assist with “getting into the transition state of mind” (p. 22). It is also essential for those in transition to understand that it is normal to feel incompetent and vulnerable during the first days and week at a new job.

In terms of accelerating the learning process of a new company, Watkins (2003) recommends that transitioning leaders think systematically about learning about the new organization. One aspect of this learning involves understanding the history of the organization and figuring out exactly what needs to be learned in order to focus efforts on these specific areas. Watkins feels that new leaders should create a “learning agenda” using data gathered from asking specific questions about the past, including performance, root causes, and history of change; questions about the present, including vision and strategy, people, processes, land mines, and early wins; and questions about the future including challenges and opportunities, barriers and resources, and culture. Another essential component of the “accelerate your learning” step is creation of a learning, or entry plan. This learning plan should include how you will go about learning the organization with goals and a timeline for completion of the goals. Also essential in this area is for new leaders to learn about the culture of the organization. Watkins states that culture can be deeply rooted and vary across industries, “but to avoid missteps, one must devote significant energy to understanding and adapting to the new culture or cultures” (p. 57).

Watkins’s (2003) next strategy involves “matching the strategy to the situation” (p. 61). This means that new leaders should diagnose their organization or department and determine whether their new leadership role in the calls for them to lead a “start-up, turnaround, realignment, or to maintain a sustaining-success situation” (p. 72). This organizational diagnosis assists with the learning plan that should be developed covering at least the first ninety days of employment at a new position. Another important facet of transitioning into a new position is to
secure early wins while avoiding common traps that may lead to early losses that can be devastating to people in new positions and may result in a failure. The traps to avoid are listed in the table 4:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Avoiding Common Traps (Watkins, 2003, pp. 80-81)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <em>Failing to focus</em>: New leaders should not attempt to take on too much during a transition. Identify promising opportunities and focus relentlessly into translating them into wins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <em>Not taking the business situation into account</em>: All business circumstances are different, and getting people to talk about the organization and its challenges can be an accomplishment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <em>Not adjusting for the culture</em>: Leaders who come into the organization from the outside are most at risk in this area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <em>Failing to get wins that matter to your boss</em>: Addressing problems that your boss cares about will assist with building credibility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <em>Letting your means undermine your ends</em>: Process matters. If you achieve results in a manner that seems manipulative, underhanded, or inconsistent with the culture, you are setting yourself up for trouble.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Overall, in the learning or entry plan, it can be beneficial for new leaders to plan for early wins that will increase credibility in the short-term, and establish the foundation for their long-term goals (Watkins, 2003). Watkins emphasizes that the new leaders’ behaviors when they first begin in their new position can later “be transformed into stories, which can define you as a hero or as a villain” (p. 92). In the first days and weeks on the job, new leaders can either earn a reputation as being “accessible or remote”, based on first interactions with the staff (p. 92).

In a case study conducted by Clayton and Johnson (2011), the connection between administrator transitions and school culture was emphasized. Clayton and Johnson encourage new leaders to gauge carefully the need for short and long-terms improvements until the new
culture is understood. They also emphasize that the transition process of new leaders into an established school culture should not be taken lightly, and “administrators should carefully observe what traditions their new school communities value when considering what change needs to be incorporated” (p. 22). Clayton and Johnson also state that, “much of the initial stages of a principal’s tenure should be focused on the process of gauging the school culture” (p. 27).

Holton and Naquin (2001) have written about the complex process of transitioning into a new job or changing careers. They make the connection of job transitioning and understanding organizational culture. They state that organizational culture is a “powerful force that manifests itself in many forms including norms, beliefs, language, rites, stories, rituals, and symbols” (p. 4). They go on to state that new employees who wish to be high performers must “learn behaviors that fit the new culture and unlearn behaviors that fit previous employers’ cultures” (p. 4).

Another aspect of the administrator job transition process is the impact of principal succession. Principal succession refers to “the departure of one principal and the arrival of another” (Hargreaves, Moore, Fink, Brayman, and White, 2003, p. 1). In their 2003 report, Hargreaves et al. discuss that “whether they are aware of it or not, principals stand on the shoulders of those who went before them and lay the foundations of those who will follow” (p. 3). Hargreaves et al. reports that a successful transition occurs when there is “careful planning, adequate preparation and decent, humane management of all aspects of the succession process but also a shared vision” (p. 81). The case study by Cocklin and Wilkinson (2011) cautions that three factors can play a part in the success of a transition; whether the succession was planned or unplanned, whether the incoming principal is an insider or an outsider, and the experience level and career stage of the entering principal. This study also found that the characteristics and
effectiveness of the previous principal and the levels of development of the school he or she has helped to secure influenced the success of the principal transition.

**Literature Review Conclusion**

In the literature reviewed on the topic of school culture, principal leadership, the teacher’s role in school culture and the impact of school culture on student achievement, considerable research was discovered explaining how leaders may initiate a cultural shift within their school. Overarching themes emerged including the importance of strong principal leadership, establishing environments where collaboration and shared decision making is the norm, and the value of maintaining teacher morale. Understanding school culture is important to school principals lest they fall into the trap best expressed by Schein (2004), “if we don’t understand [cultural] forces, we become victim to them” (p. 3).

**Chapter 3: Research Design**

**Methodology**

The focus of this autoethnographical school culture study investigates a socially based phenomenon and is anthropological in nature. Qualitative research methods “are used to understand some social phenomena as well as how the participants in a social setting construct the world around them” (Glesne, 2006, p. 4). Schools as research sites are prime examples of social interaction in action and can be viewed as mini-societies with unique cultures all their own. Creswell (1998) explains that qualitative research “is a process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem” (p. 15). Qualitative questions may be “open-ended, evolving, and nondirectional” (p. 99). Due to the personal nature of transitioning into a new principal position with culture at the focus, autoethnography was chosen as the methodology for several reasons.
There were two main reasons that autoethnography was selected as the research methodology for this study. First, when completing the readings for the literature review, the studies that held the most meaning and connection for me were those where the researcher’s own voice came through and practical conclusions were drawn from the research. One study in particular by Kaye Pepper (2000) told the story of a principal who attempted to instigate a change in her school culture using specific transformational leadership behaviors identified by Leithwood (1992). I found Pepper’s writing to be easily understood and clear, and as a practicing principal, I was able to relate to the conclusions and imagine how I could apply them to my own practice. It was Pepper’s study that provided my first spark of interest in autoethnography as a research method.

The second reason that autoethnography made the most sense as a research method was that I was going to be in a period of transition as I moved from one school district to another at the same time that I needed to be considering my research questions and the data I was seeking to collect for my study. I did not yet know the staff in my new school district nor did I know how they would react to the idea of being in the middle of a research study. The personal nature of an autoethnography would allow me to control the focus of the research in a self-study, reflective format. The work of Wolcott (2003) also influenced my decision to conduct an autoethnography. Over forty years ago, Wolcott conducted an ethnography concerning the “Man in the Principal’s Office.” This ethnography provided a deeper perspective into the role of the principal through a personal approach with research that took place over several years. Wolcott’s ethnographic research focused on “real human beings and on actual human behavior, with an emphasis on social, rather than on physiological or psychological aspects of behavior” (p. xvii). I found Wolcott’s work intriguing and relevant even today.
The study of culture has its roots in anthropology, thus the researcher chose to study school culture using an autoethnographic approach. According to Fetterman (2010), ethnography is “about telling a credible, rigorous and authentic story” (p. 1). Fetterman goes on to explain that ethnography “is interested in understanding and describing a social and cultural scene from the emic, or insider’s perspective” (p. 2). Goodenough, as quoted in Geertz (1973) states that “a society’s culture, consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members” (p. 11). In many ways, joining an already established school community is similar to moving to a foreign country. The new member must observe the members of the culture, and then slowly assimilate into that culture. Geertz states that in describing culture, “the writing out of the systematic rules, an ethnographical algorithm, which, if followed, would make it so to operate, to pass for a native” (p. 11). The principal as the research subject creates an autoethnographic study that is based on the same tenets as ethnographical research. In this study, I became a native in the new culture. Unlike a typical ethnography, where the researcher becomes part of the culture for a limited period of time while doing the research, the principal/researcher will be transitioning into becoming a permanent part of the new culture. This element will strengthen the ethnographer’s stake in learning about the existing culture (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). The autoethnographical writing will follow the experience of a new member of a culture familiarizing him or her self in this foreign environment. The following overarching research question guided my study, “What deliberate plan of action can a new principal follow to successfully transition into a new school culture and environment?”
Reflection on Autoethnography as Method

My research question seeks to investigate the importance of culture as a principal transitions into a new school environment. The research question posed called for an autoethnographical approach. This approach is justified because a qualitative inquiry examines “a social or human problem...while the researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). To conduct an in-depth study of a particular culture, the researcher will look at behaviors, language, and artifacts when completing field notes and examining particular patterns of daily activities within the school setting. The theoretical basis provided by Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952) support the ideas on the study of culture (Woolcott, 1987; Spradley, 1980; Fetterman, 1989 as cited in Creswell, 1998), in Table 5:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5. (Woolcott, 1987; Spradley, 1980; Fetterman 1989, as cited in Creswell, 1998)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On the Study of Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. What people do or their behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What people say or the language they use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What people really do and what they ought to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What people make and use or their artifacts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To gather evidence in this autoethnographic approach to the study of culture, the researcher “will gather artifacts, find stories, rituals, myths, and uncover cultural themes” (Creswell, 1998, p. 59). In this case, the culture under investigation will be a school
environment. A portion of the observations will focus around the educational environment according to the following key elements of a culture study as identified by Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952); Historicity, Uniformity, Causality, Significance and Values, and Relativism.

According to Chang (2008), the very definition of autoethnography can mean different things to different people. For the purposes of this study, Ellis and Bochner’s (2000) definition of autoethnography will be the one followed, “autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation” (p. 742). According to Reed-Danahay (1997), autoethnography includes a broad scope of writings that include native anthropology, ethnic anthropology, and autobiographical ethnography.

Autoethnography stems from the field of anthropology and shares the storytelling features of the self-narrative while adding an element of cultural analysis and interpretation (p. 43). Autoethnography was selected as the qualitative research method because “culture and individuals are intricately intertwined” (Chang, 2008, p. 44). The ultimate goal of autoethnography is to gain a greater understanding of underlying autobiographical experiences. To achieve this, ethnographers must undergo data collection, data analysis/interpretation, and report writing. According to Chang (2008), data can be collected in field notes, journals, participation, observation, interviews, and in a document review of the culture being studied.

In addition to the autoethnographical data collected during my transition into a new school environment, open-ended, anonymous written responses to the written questions posed to the teaching staff provided an alternative data source and perspective to my school culture research. The questions the teachers answered were based on the Competing Values Framework developed by Cameron and Quinn (2011), specifically examining the characteristics of the Clan,
Market, Adhocracy, and Hierarchy cultures. Because of my dual role of researcher and direct supervisor of some of the members of the sample whom I sought information from, it was important for me to seek anonymous feedback from the teaching and school staff. The staff that chose to participate in these written questions were aware that their identities would remain anonymous, and that their honest responses to the written questions were for research purposes only. The administration of written feedback from the school staff followed all guidelines adhering to the regulations of the Institutional Review Board of Northeastern University. The procedures and precautions followed are further detailed in the “Protection of Human Subjects” section of this project. I also conducted open-ended informal interviews with other school administrators who had been employed by the school district for five years or less. Support from the Northeastern Institutional Review Board guided me through the process of data collection with human research subjects.

According to Ellis and Bochner (1996), Ethnography appeals to people who do not want to remain caught at the data level, instead “transform data into an ethnographic text” (p. 19). Ethnography is for those of us who want to become storytellers, using a narrative approach to transport readers into our own lived experiences. Ethnographers believe it is possible to share our personal experiences in a way that will benefit the readers who may be going through a similar situation in their own lives or may be able to apply our experiences to make generalizations in other unrelated life situations. “Ethnographers inscribe patterns of cultural experience, they give perspective on life. They interact, they take notes, they photograph, moralize, and write” (p.16). Through an ethnographical process of collecting field data, field notes, and in keeping a personal field journal, I have attempted to record my journey into a new principalship as Ellis and Bochner describe.
Site and Participants

The site of this study was a suburban, middle class, public elementary school in the Northeast Region of the United States where I began a new principalship. The student body of the school consisted of approximately 700 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. The student enrollment by race/ethnicity is as follows: White 91.7%, Asian 3.9%, Multi-Race/Non-Hispanic 1.6%, African American 1.4%, Hispanic 1.3%, and Native American .1%. There are approximately eighty full and part-time members of the teaching staff. The school district consists of six elementary schools, a separate early learning center that houses the integrated preschool, a middle school, and a high school.

Data Collection

Internal and external data was collected in a variety of formats in order “to enhance the content and accuracy of my autoethnographical writing” (Chang, 2008, p. 55). The following data sources identified by Chang (2008) provided the main sources of data for the data collection portion of my project:

Data Collection Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Type</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>When Collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researcher Field Notes</td>
<td>Personal Data Source</td>
<td>July 2011-July 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher Field Journal</td>
<td>Personal Data Source</td>
<td>July 2011-July 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifact Review</td>
<td>External Data Source</td>
<td>July 2011-July 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous Staff Interviews</td>
<td>External Data Source</td>
<td>November-December 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator Interviews</td>
<td>External Data Source</td>
<td>November-December 2011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Personal Memory Data.** In traditional ethnography, the informants of the study provide personal memory data to the researcher. According to Chang (2008), in autoethnography, the researcher herself provides the personal memory data. Personal memory data can be a written account of the background experiences that influenced the researcher and provide a context for the written account and perspective for the research. These memories can become “textual data” that can be collected through “chronicling the past” and “inventorying and visualizing the self”. This personal information will later provide a basis for the autoethnographic analysis and interpretation that will take place, see Figure 3:

*Figure 3: Collecting Personal Memory Data* (Chang, 2008, p.88)

**Visualizing**

**Chronicling**

**Inventorying**

*Chronicling* - Recalling personal and social events and experiences and giving a chronological structure to the events

*Inventorying* - Listing and ranking autobiographical bits of information by importance

*Visualizing* - Organizing personal memories by charts and figures

**Self-Observational Data.** My self-observational data served as the main source of information gathered as the researcher describes what is occurring in the present time. Self-observational data is most commonly known as participant observation or immersion in a culture
In a typical ethnographical research design, the researcher would immerse herself in the culture being studied, however, in autoethnographic research, the data collection field is the researcher’s own life. In the case of this research study, the data collection will consist of the process that the researcher goes through beginning a new principalship and becoming a native in a new and unfamiliar school culture.

Participant observation is a crucial component of effective fieldwork (Chang, 2008; Fetterman 2010). Participant observation begins in a somewhat “haphazard” manner as “the ethnographer seeks out experiences or events as they come to his or her attention” (Fetterman, 2010, p. 37).

As the ethnographer becomes more comfortable and immersed in the culture being studied, the fieldwork can begin to address more specific patterns of behavior. There are two main steps to ethnographic research. First, the ethnographer enters a new social setting and begins the process of getting to know the people within the new culture. The ethnographer immerses herself in the new culture and participates in the daily routines of the setting. The second step is the process of the ethnographer systematically writing down what is being observed and learned. Over time, a written record of the observations and experiences is created (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

Field Notes. Writing ethnographic field notes is more than simply jotting down facts about what one observes within her daily routine. Writing field notes involves the process of “interpretation and sense making” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 8). The “immediate task in writing field note descriptions is to create a detailed, accurate, and comprehensive account of what has been experienced” (p.64). It is impossible for the ethnographer to notice everything, thus field notes can become “detailed slices of life rather than comprehensive, literal, or objective renderings” (p. 63). Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw (1995) further explain:
She must initially work in a *writing mode*, putting into words and on paper what has been seen and heard as quickly and efficiently as possible. In this text-producing mode, the ethnographer tries to “get it down” as accurately and completely as possible, avoiding too much self-consciousness about the writing process itself. (p. 64)

Throughout the transition process, the researcher took field notes on observations and interactions with others in this new school environment on a daily basis. The field notes were written as close to the observed interactions as possible to increase accuracy. Over time, the field notes were reviewed, and the researcher looked for themes and patterns within the writings. According to Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw (1995), the goal of fieldnote writing is to recount the action as it unfolded, and to tell the event(s) as they happen.

**Self-Reflective Data.** Self-reflective data is another important component to collecting ethnographic data. This type of data can be gleaned from field journals, which consist of the researcher’s private and personal thoughts, feelings, and ideas. These journals were recorded separately from the objective field notes also written by the researcher. A field journal can assist with “keeping thoughts running” throughout the writing and data collecting process and can allow the writer to move in and out of the self-reflective state (Chang, 2008, p. 96). The researcher has the freedom to write more subjectively in a personal field journal.

**External Data.** The external data that was collected included interviews, artifacts, and document reviews. Due to the nature of my position as being a new principal in the culture that was under investigation, it was essential for me to exercise caution when planning how these interviews would take place. Interviews provided important external data perspectives to the field notes and journal data, which were largely from a personal viewpoint. Any staff members under my direct supervision who consented to participate did so anonymously in an open-ended,
written question format. The researcher conducted in-person interviews with other administrators, using the prescribed interview questions identified in Appendix B. The information from the written interview questions was adapted from the work of Cameron and Quinn (2011), and sought to assess the school’s “current reality” as well as identify indicators of organizational effectiveness. As noted earlier, this data was collected to further inform the researcher’s understanding of the school culture and the researcher includes reflection on the information gleaned from them.

Data Analysis

The nature of this autoethnographic inquiry will yield a significant amount of written data in a variety of forms. In order to manage this written data most effectively, Miles and Huberman (1998) advise qualitative researchers to plan a well-organized system for storage of field notes and journals, recordings, memos, transcripts, etc. prior to beginning the research. Use of the computer software program MaxQDA enabled the researcher to efficiently sort through the data and complete the analytic coding process where I “looked to identify threads that can be woven together to tell a story (or a number of stories) about the observed social world” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 142). This analysis involved both open and focused coding. In open coding, the researcher reviewed the field notes line-by-line to identify topics, themes, or issues that may emerge. In focused coding, the researcher continued the line-by-line analysis looking for specific topics identified as being of particular interest. As the process of coding continued, I elaborated on some of the insights and connections noted through use of initial then integrative memos. Initial memos consisted of trends in the early stages of processing the data from the field notes, while integrative memos created later in the process sought to clarify and link
analytic themes and categories (p.143). According to Richards (2005) the purposes of qualitative coding including:

1. To reflect on what the coded segments tell you about the categories and meanings in the project
2. To generate questions about how the categories relate to other ideas from the data
3. To gather material from various sources in order to apply and compare the information
4. To create further, more detailed categories
5. To search for blends, combinations, or patterns and look at categories from different viewpoints
6. To compare how different researchers interpret data

A portion of the research data came in the form of responses to in-person interviews or responses to anonymous, open-ended, written interview questions. When conducting interviews, the researcher followed the recommendations of Creswell (1998) who suggests that researchers should carefully select individuals who will not be reluctant to speak or share information and ensure that interviews take place in a comfortable and private setting, free from distractions. Researchers conducting interviews should also ensure that recording equipment is available that is sensitive to the acoustics of the room. Interview protocols were developed where the interview questions were listed with ample space between questions for the interviewer to take notes, especially in case the recording equipment malfunctions in some way. Creswell emphasizes that the protocol should begin with a scripted description of the research study being conducted to ensure that participants are informed and clear with the intent of the study and information being sought. Interviewers should memorize the interview questions to allow eye contact to occur, remember that good interviewers are listeners rather than speakers during an interview, and should stick to the questions as developed. Information gleaned from the
interviews conducted was analyzed, coded, and turned into memos in the same manner that the field notes and field journal data were analyzed. Again, the use of MaxQDA computer software program for qualitative data analysis assisted to streamline this process of data analysis. All administrators who agreed to an interview read and signed the informed consent form approved through Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board.

**Positionality Statement**

It is essential to bring to the forefront the issue that the researcher is the subject in this qualitative study and directly involved with the external data being collected and analyzed. Positionality refers to the consideration that is present in certain types of qualitative research where the researcher is part of the social group being studied (Moore, 2011). In ethnographical studies, prolonged observation of a group usually occurs, and through the researcher’s participant observation and immersion in the culture, conclusions are drawn about the group’s behaviors and customs (Creswell, 1998). In autoethnography, it is essential for the researcher to use self-reflective data to tell one’s own story in terms of the phenomenon being examined, which in the case of the present study is school culture and job transition. Muncey (2010) states that autoethnography fits into the category of ‘participant observation strategies’ where the researcher is an individual observer in the social context where their story is taking place. One may argue that this type of research is entirely subjective in nature, however, the connectedness of the researcher in fieldwork research may also be considered a benefit (Coffey, 1999). My autoethnographical account of a principal transitioning into a new school district while attempting to assimilate into the new culture offers a specific insight into this topic of social/educational research.
Positionality was considered in the present research study throughout my autoethnographical account of a principal transitioning into a new school culture. My position of principal and researcher offered an emic perspective on the topic being studied. My own personal life experiences and potential biases have shaped my attitude and opinions to where they are today, but the hope is that my perspective is similar to others in my same position and that my conclusions and insights may someday serve as an information source to other principals who find themselves at a transition point in their careers. Positionality could also have been a factor when external data was sought from the teachers and paraprofessionals at the school where I was serving as principal. To ensure that my position as the participants’ supervisor and ultimately as the person in charge of evaluating and hiring staff did not influence participation, it was made clear that participation was strictly voluntary and that anyone who did participate would remain anonymous. When analyzing and coding the data, I did not know who on the staff had answered the open-ended written interview questions that had been returned to me for research purposes. It is possible that my personal interpretation of the written interview data could have been influenced by my position as principal when reviewing data from the teacher and paraprofessional viewpoint; however, by systematically coding the data and examining quotes and trends in the responses, the intention was to glean data from the teacher written questions without bias. At one point in my career, I was a teacher and I attempted to be as subjective as possible when making conclusions and generalizations based on the teacher or paraprofessional data.

When interviewing the school and district level administrators in person, my position as an equal with my own colleagues could have influenced my interpretation of the responses to the interview questions. It may have been easier for me to relate to the opinions and generalizations
shared by my colleagues at the same professional level. In an attempt to maintain consistency and to avoid bias, I followed all protocols recommended by the Institutional Review Board and was true to the script and interview questions while interviewing each administrator. Again, when analyzing the data provided by the other administrators, I attempted to code the data subjectively and not impart my own opinions into the trends and analysis of their interview responses.

Reflexivity in research refers to the “constant awareness, assessment, and reassessment by the researcher of the researcher’s own contribution/influence/shaping of the intersubjective research and the consequent research findings” (Salzman, 2002, p. 806). Mosselson (2010) states that “recognizing the role of subjectivity and bringing in the researcher’s positionality can enhance the ethical integrity of the data and enhance the research process and interpretation of the data” (p. 479). Mosselson goes on to state that when researchers recognize the role their own experiences play in the research process, the quality of research can be raised. It is my hope that by using reflexivity as an “important ethical tool” (Mosselson, 2010, p. 493), the validity of my highly personalized account was increased.

Validity and Reliability

Validity in qualitative research refers to the “correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 106). In this autoethnographic study examining at a principal in transition assessing the culture of a new school, validity will be measured by whether the analysis of the data collected provides a credible explanation to the research question. Creswell (1998) recommends that the term “verification” be used instead of validity because “verification underscores qualitative research as a distinct approach, a legitimate mode of inquiry in its own right” (p. 201). This research
project will be legitimized if analysis of the field notes, field journals, observations, and
interviews yields trends and connections in the data that the researcher is able to identify when
assessing a new school culture. Most of all, it is desired that this autoethnography told an
important story that will impact other administrators in a similar situation of transition. Cheng
(2008) speaks to the benefits of autoethnography:

1. It is a research method friendly to researchers or readers
2. It enhances cultural understanding of self and others
3. It has the potential to transform self and others to motivate them to work towards
cross-cultural coalition building

Richards (2005) advises qualitative researchers to build quality checks into their research
design. Triangulation and member checking are two examples of quality checks. Triangulation
refers to “research designs where different sorts of data or methods for handling data are brought
to bear on the research question” (Richards, 2005, p. 140). In this autoethnographic study, much
of the data collected will be my own, self-generated writing. In order to provide alternative
perspectives into the research data, the interviews that are conducted, either face-to-face or
through anonymous written interview questions, will provide an essential counterbalance to the
researcher’s personal written account. Member checking typically takes place once a research
study has been completed. The researcher would ask those studied to read and review the
written account, and provide feedback to the researcher about whether they “see the situation, as
you at the conclusion of your project now see it” (Richards, 2005, p. 140). In the study design,
the researcher will find a person familiar with the culture of the school to assist with member
checking.
Due to the autoethnographic nature of this study, there is potential for researcher bias. Autoethnographic researchers are not all in agreement about whether subjective or objective autoethnography is the best position (Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Denzin, 2006). Using a blend of objective field notes and interviews, mixed with the researcher’s subjective personal memory data and field journal, will produce a balance of data that will be replicable and legitimate.

Protection of Human Subjects

The main data viewpoint will be that of the principal/researcher, thus the researcher provides implied consent through being the main developer of this research project. The main content of the research is ethnographic in nature and essentially a study of a principal transitioning into a new school environment; thus, the culture itself is the entity being examined and scrutinized.

Chapter 4: Report of Research Findings

Introduction

For approximately a one-year period, the researcher as the subject collected data through field notes, a field journal, personal observation, as well as other written documents and artifacts. During this period of transition, the primary research focus was of my personal journey as a principal transitioning from one school district to another. This personal account took place from the time I made the decision to apply for principal positions, to the first months on the job in a new school district. The first part of the personal narrative provides my background and experience in the field of education in order to offer a broader perspective. To address the research question, Can paying attention to culture assist a principal in making a smooth transition into a new school district?, an autoethnographic approach chronicling a one-year period of transition was utilized by the researcher. I will discuss the five key components of the
study of culture that I utilized as I completed my cultural investigation. Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952) describe these components as Historicity, Uniformity, Causality, Significance and Values, and Relativism.

The researcher chronicled the process of transitioning from one school district to another through an autoethnographic research design. The researcher immersed herself in the new culture then systematically observed and collected data over a one-year period through field notes, a field journal, and through chronicling personal memory data (Chang, 2008). The research question “What deliberate plan of action can a new principal follow to successfully transition into a new school culture and environment?” was studied on a personal level and presented in the form of an autoethnographic personal narrative. After the personal narrative, I discuss the themes that emerged to answer my research question.

The intention of the data collected for this research study is to provide a personal account of a principal transitioning into a new school supported with external data that is intended to coalesce to form a cohesive school culture study. In the following narrative, I depict my background as an educator and my own lived experience of the yearlong period of time when I left one school district and started a job in a new school district.

**Difficult Decision**

I loved my job of principal of a small, suburban, neighborhood elementary school. In spite of this love, after serving as the principal for four years in my school, I knew it was time for me to consider looking for a principalship in another nearby community, possibly in a larger elementary school. I had been quite happy with my school for the past four years; especially with the dedicated staff and the wonderful students and parents, but deep down, I knew that it was time for me to move on. Our school district had faced years of crippling budget cuts, there
were several administrative situations beyond my control, and my school was on the chopping block for potential closure. The potential closure of my school had blocked me from making improvements to the school building and grounds and limited the initiatives I could implement within the school itself. These situations were causing me more stress than happiness on a daily basis. I knew it would be excruciating for me to leave the comfortable and close-knit school community that I was a part of due to the wonderful people, but I began looking for elementary principal openings in other nearby school districts. Let me go back and start at the beginning in order to better explain who I am and how I ended up at this point in my educational career.

Where it all Began

My first job working with children was right after college graduation when I was hired as a counselor in a residential treatment facility for severely mentally ill adolescents. The job was a difficult one; the residents were the most complicated and volatile in the state. There were frequent extended physical restraints, the teenagers could be verbally abusive, and we had to work weekends, holidays, and awake-overnight shifts on a regular basis. Despite the numerous challenges, there was an intense sense of teamwork with the staff, and we all grew to develop close personal relationships, as well as care deeply for the residents of the program. We were surprised that even the most challenging residents really were “regular kids” in many ways. Some of the residents had been expelled from their local public schools, had been removed from their family homes to be wards of the state, or had been incarcerated during their adolescence. We were also surprised to find that despite the low pay, inconvenient work hours, and intense and aggressive behaviors of the residents, that we were having fun every day at work. We looked forward to being there day in and day out. Many of the staff members of this program remain my close friends to this day, and this is where I met my husband. Being an employee of
this residential program was the first time that I began to recognize the impact of a positive culture in the workplace. It was at this time that I returned to the local university determined to obtain my special education teaching certification with the goal of getting a teaching job in a public school.

After completing a post baccalaureate degree, I was fortunate enough to be hired as a special education inclusion teacher in an affluent, suburban elementary school district for students in preschool through sixth grade where I had just completed my student teaching practicum. These were wonderful years, and the place where I “learned the ropes” of working in a public school. We had a unique situation as special educators in that we were responsible for providing all of the service delivery for the students on our caseloads, completing standardized testing for all newly referred students as well as our current students, supervising our paraprofessionals, and we ran all of our own team meetings. I did not realize it at the time, but all of the skills I was practicing as a special education inclusion teacher would later assist me when I would begin working as a school administrator. We had supportive administrators who fostered a family-like school atmosphere and supported us in every way possible. One of the assistant principals was a young female close to my age, and she inspired me to return to graduate school to obtain my master’s degree in educational leadership. Prior to seeing her become our assistant principal, it had not occurred to me that pursuing an administrative position was even an option for me.

As a young female in my twenties with just a handful of years of teaching experience under my belt, there were several instances where I began to doubt the achievability of my intentions to become an administrator. One of my colleagues, whom I deeply respected, said to me, “you’ll never be considered for a principal job unless you work as a classroom teacher for a
few years.” Her words struck me, as I had always thought my special education background and experience working with multiple grade levels and in different classroom settings would be an asset rather than a limitation. Another educator in one of my courses said, “you will never get hired as a principal or assistant principal, you are too young.” In any case, I moved on and continued to work towards my degree in school administration. Whether this career path happened quickly or further down the road, I was fascinated by my school administrator coursework and the thought of someday being a school principal. It may have been just a farfetched dream at this point, but I pressed along and continued to think, “why not me?”

After completing my degree and having my first child, I thought the time was right to look for assistant principal openings in the area. I applied for an elementary assistant principal position and after two nerve-wracking interviews, I was shocked to be offered the position. I was to be the assistant principal of a large preschool through third grade elementary school that was located about forty-five minutes away from my home. It was difficult to leave the school I worked in as a teacher, but I felt that I needed to take advantage of this opportunity that was available to me. The decision to move to this new school proved to be a good one. The young, female principal whom I worked under for three years was a wonderful mentor to me. She let me hit the ground running, and allowed me to make my way to discovering my administrative style and approach. I truly feel that she taught me everything I know about being a good principal. To this day, she is the first person I call when I need help figuring out the solution to a difficult problem. During my years as an assistant principal, I experienced some very trying situations and worked with some very challenging students. I learned that going through situations with volatile students and parents and the path with which these situations are resolved is a very important way to gain experience as a school administrator.
This brings us back to my current principal position I was thinking about leaving. After serving as an assistant principal for three invigorating years, I saw a job opening in the local newspaper for an elementary principal of a small, preschool through third grade elementary school just fifteen minutes from my home. After I read the job posting, I got an immediate stomachache. I did not want to leave my exciting and comfortable assistant principal position where I was working with a principal that I deeply admired, but I knew I would regret it if I did not apply. I now had two young children at home, and the commute time I was spending each day felt like missed time with my family. With mixed feelings, I sent in my application package and was granted an interview. As I walked into the interview on a bright sunny June morning after school had let out for the year, town residents picketing a tax override vote that was taking place at the school voting precinct that day bombarded me. Perhaps I should have taken it as a negative omen, but I continued walking into the building of my interview and did the best I could to present myself as a strong principal candidate. The interview went well, and the next day I was offered the principalship of this small, neighborhood school.

Announcing that I was leaving my assistant principal position was difficult, but school had ended for the year. I was excited at the thought of leading my own school and wrote a heartfelt letter to the staff of the school saying my goodbyes. I would love to say that I had no doubts that first summer as I prepared the school for the staff and students return, but I did wonder quite frequently if I was ready to be on my own. There was no assistant principal, and my friend and mentor from my previous school would no longer be with me to run things by or solve difficult problems together. Being the school principal of a smaller size school without an assistant principal can be a lonely job. Confidentiality of staff and students puts principals in a position where they are the sole decision makers and there is very little opportunity for
discussion and collaboration when issues arise. I knew I would miss having my former principal to problem solve with and hoped I would be able to figure things out on my own. Looking back to this summer, there were several key people who played an important role in making my transition a successful one. There was a former principal from my new school who had retired less than two years prior after a twenty-five year career. The principal I was replacing had replaced him, but she made the decision to leave after just a year and a half on the job. She was leaving for a family trip to Europe on the last day of June, so I only had two hours for her to give me the rundown on the school, the staff, and what tasks I should focus on over that first summer. This harried transition was one reason my relationship with the former veteran principal became so important. I met Mr. S on my first day on the job and he took me under his wing. He showed me every nook and cranny of the school and told me about the backgrounds of all of the staff members. He drove me through the neighborhoods that my students would be coming from, and to the police and fire departments to introduce me to the chiefs. He helped me unpack all of the school supplies that arrived that summer and helped to distribute them to the classrooms and supply closets. He had a wonderful joking relationship with the secretary and custodial staff and the five of us spent many lunches together that summer laughing as I learned about the history and culture of the school. Every school has its famous tales and customs. By the end of the summer, I had full knowledge of all of the funny stories that the staff loved to tell and retell about things that had happened in the school through the years. The time I spent with the former principal, the secretary and custodial staff was essential and they later reflected about that first summer when we knew I was going to be leaving the school. They told me that they had been anxious about meeting their new principal, but when I looked them in the eye and shook their hand on the first day it meant a lot to them. They said they appreciated that I ate lunch with them.
and liked that we all got to know each other as “real people”. They told me that the time I spent getting to know them showed them that I respected them. Sometimes, when forming new relationships, it is the little things that we do without much thought that end up making the biggest difference.

The staff at the school of my first principalship was friendly, hard working, dedicated, loyal, innovative, and willing to try new approaches. This was why it was so difficult for me to leave. Now that I made the decision to look for a new principal position, I was extremely selective about openings I applied for; I only chose principal openings that were less than a thirty minute commute from my house, and were in middle class suburban districts. There ended up being only two such districts that I would apply for positions in, and I worked up the courage to send in my first application materials to a school district in the month of January. I received the phone call to come in for an interview in early February, and felt that I presented myself as well as I could have during the large group interview. I was relieved and disappointed to find out that there had been an internal candidate whom they appointed to the position, but found myself to also be relieved that I didn’t need to make a decision about whether to accept the position or not. I did not know at this time that this school district would call me back later in the spring offering me a principal position at another school. The next position I applied for in March would be the school I would end up working in. It was the school I had hoped would have an opening, as the school had a great reputation in the local community. I prepared my application package and hoped to hear that I would make it through the paper screening process to be invited in for an interview. Sure enough, the administrative assistant to the acting superintendent emailed me and asked me to call her and set up a time for my interview. I felt a combination of nerves and excitement and the day of my interview could not arrive soon enough. I hoped I could impress
the interview team and show them my best self. Interviews are stressful enough, but when you think the job is “the one” you want and would be perfect for, it makes the interview even scarier.

Preparing for the Interview

I remember the first time I walked into the school. It was the night of my first interview. The interview team was running behind and I had arrived early. Because of this, I had plenty of time to look around as I waited to be called in to the library where the interview would be held. There were a couple of unopened boxes sitting outside of the office in the hallway. Inside the spacious office, there were four desks in the secretarial area. One of them had about fifty snow globes on top, another was covered in Easter candy typically known as “Peeps”, and the other two desks area was neat and tidy. The office walls were covered in sports pictures: there were literally hundreds of pictures all together, mostly of Patriots players including tickets and memorabilia, but also Red Sox, Bruins, and Celtics pictures. While I was nervously waiting in the main office, another candidate who was scheduled for the interview after mine arrived. He was quiet and seemed to be too nervous for small talk while we waited. I struck up a little conversation with him and we remained mostly quiet while I fiddled around with my cell phone and waited. Finally, after an hour of waiting, I was called in for my interview. I found the group that was assembled to be friendly and they put me immediately at ease. They even asked me if I wanted a slice of pizza, which was left over from their dinner break several hours before. I almost giggled at the thought of how inappropriate it would be for me to be munching on a slice of pizza while I was being interviewed. When I entered the library I saw the interview team that consisted of two elementary principals, the assistant special education director, the school nurse, a parent on the school council, a school committee representative, and two teachers. The library tables had been set up in a large rectangle so that the interview team and the candidates could all
face each other. There was an interactive white board in the library, which I thought was a good sign about the technology in the school. The questions the team asked were relatively standard and straightforward and I left feeling as though I had done as well as I could have. I did not get a good look around the school and only really viewed the main office, the conference room, and the library. Little did I know that this would be my last visit to the school for two months, even after I was appointed as the new principal of the school.

Accepting a Position

A few days after my first interview, the superintendent’s office secretary contacted me and told me I had done well in my interview and was being invited back for the next round of interviews. She set up an appointment for me to meet with the acting superintendent the next day. Again, I felt the same sense of nervousness, apprehension, and desire to present myself in the most positive light when answering any interview questions. The interview was set for the late afternoon after I had been at a conference all day in the northern part of the state. After driving for several hours, I arrived at the district’s central office with trepidation, but anxious to get started.

The superintendent immediately put me at ease and we had more of a conversation than an interview. We discussed the most pressing needs of the school district and our beliefs about how to best move forward despite substantial pending budget cuts. In between our conversation about the school district, the superintendent asked me about my leadership style, philosophy of education, work ethic, and background. The superintendent shared with me that it was going to be a difficult decision for her because there was a very strong internal applicant from the school who was also being considered. I expressed that I completely understood her predicament, but knew that I could make a positive impact on the school based on my strong experience as an
elementary principal. I left feeling positive and that I had done the best that I could have despite
the situation.

The following week while I was on a family vacation in Florida, I received a call from
the superintendent. While I was waiting to be seated at a restaurant at Universal Studios, the
superintendent informed me that she really wanted me to come to her school district to lead the
school as their new principal. I told her I was thrilled to accept the position and that I was
flattered to have been chosen. It was a long process, but I finally knew where I was going to be
going. The school that I would be leading was twice the size of my current school, had an
excellent reputation, and was a sought after school for many of the parents in the school district.
I had finally achieved my goal of finding a new job, and despite my ambivalence, knew that I
would officially be moving to a new district for the following school year.

**Making the Announcement**

Now that it was official that I would be moving to a different school after July first, I
began thinking about how I would tell my staff. My excitement quickly turned to panic and
sadness. In the four years that I had been at the school, I had grown to be very closely connected
to many of the staff, students, and parents in the school community. It was widely known that I
was committed to the school and its improvement goals. Nobody knew that I had been
interviewing, and I knew that my imminent departure would be a shock to many people who
thought I would be at the school for a very long time. It was going to be a difficult
announcement and time period to follow as I wrapped up the school year and left for good.

The principal who preceded me had unexpectedly announced that she would be leaving
her position at a staff meeting where the entire staff was present. On another occasion, she had
called a special staff meeting when there had been an unfortunate and unexpected student death.
Now, every time an impromptu staff meeting was called, the teachers had expressed to me that they were anxious about getting more bad news. Being sensitive to their anxiety, and also being uncomfortable sharing my emotional news in the spotlight of the whole staff, I decided to tell everyone on the staff one by one. Since it was a smaller-sized school, this task was reasonable and I was able to inform everyone in about an hour. Some of the staff members cried, all were surprised at my news, and all wished me well and told me they understood why I was leaving. It was an emotional morning, but when I had finished sharing the news, I erroneously told myself that the hardest part was over. As it turned out, the hardest parts of my transition were just beginning.

**Second Thoughts**

After informing the staff members in my building that I had accepted a principalship at another school, I quickly realized that I needed to tell the parents and students at the school as well. There was going to be an announcement in the local newspaper within a day or two, and it was important for me to tell the parents myself before they read about it in the newspaper. I drafted a letter to send home with the students the following day. It read:

> **Dear Families,** I am writing today with some sad news. Last week, I was appointed principal of the [new school]. Whether or not to apply for an administrative position in another community was a difficult decision for me to make, but in the end, it was the best choice for me professionally. The [school] is a special place that I will always hold dear to my heart. In my years at the school, I have had the pleasure of working alongside selfless and hard-working teachers and staff members, as well as an incredible number of dedicated parent volunteers who do so much to make this school the wonderful student and family-centered environment that it is. Most difficult for me will be leaving the
school students. My memories of [blank town] will always center around the wonderful sense of community that is present here. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for the support you have shown me through the years.

Since I had informed the parents that I would be leaving through the letter, I knew that the students would all know that I was leaving the following school day. As the students got off the school bus the next morning, the questions began. “Mrs. Klingaman, why are you leaving?” “Mrs. Klingaman, is today your last day?” The question that I was not expecting that threw me for a loop was when a student asked me, “Mrs. Klingaman, was it your decision to leave us?” After a pause, I replied, “Yes, I guess it was my decision.” The little girl, elbowed her friend and said, “See, I told you it was her decision.” The other little girl then asked me, “Why would you choose to leave us, we thought you loved us.” That comment took my breath away. I gave the girls the only reply I could think of at that moment, such as “It was a hard decision, and someday when you are grownups and have jobs you will understand.” I had a very strong relationship with the students of the school and our connection was one of my proudest accomplishments. Some of the students had never known another principal than me. The thought of leaving was painful, but I reminded myself that had been my decision all along, and that this difficult stretch of time would soon be behind me.

The next two months were the most difficult in my career. I have never been a person to cry at work, and I found myself crying once a day during this time due to some of the unexpectedly kind things that staff, students, or parents had said to me. As a principal, I spent many afternoons in the previous four years driving home from work feeling that I had not done a great job of being a principal that day. Due to the complexities of the position and the constant “on the spot” decision-making, I always replayed situations and sometimes wished I had said or
done something differently during the day. Yet in the months after I announced that I was leaving the school, I realized that I had made a difference in the lives of the students, teachers, and parents in my school. One realization I made throughout this transition process was that the job of the principal can at times be trying and thankless and it is unfortunate that sometimes you need to leave in order to realize you were appreciated and loved.

Some of the words that people shared with me are etched in my memory. One parent who had always been especially kind and supportive to me told me that she was so sad that I was leaving even though her children were also leaving the school to go to the upper elementary school the following year. I gave her a hug and told her that I was so sad to be leaving. She held me by the shoulders and told me that she had worked in a Fortune 500 company for many years, and the CEO of her company had shared his wisdom with her stating, “always leave when you are on top.” She told me I was leaving on top, and that I should remember that when I was feeling sad. Her words were the most comforting thing that anyone could have offered me at that moment in time, and I repeated that mantra to myself many times over the next few months. One other statement made by a teacher had a great impact on me. She told me I was the best principal she ever worked for and that she was a better teacher because of me. Her words stayed with me during the next terrible days and months. This is the highest compliment a principal can receive from one of her teachers. The process of breaking away from the teachers and students who I had established a high level of trust with was extremely difficult. Trust takes time to earn and I knew that it would be some time before the staff at my new school would feel this way about me, if ever. I began to doubt myself and wondered if I would be able to establish the degree of success that I had in the position I was leaving. Somehow, I made it through this difficult time. I survived “Mrs. Klingaman Spirit Week” where the staff and students dressed up
in different themes about me. I survived the pranks a group of staff played on me: my office was toilet-papered, covered in foil, and my stapler was immersed in Jell-o to mention just a few. I also survived my goodbye ceremony that felt like “This is Your Life.” As a surprise, my husband was brought in who had roses for me, they sat me in the middle of the gymnasium with all the students around me, and the classes and students performed many heart wrenching songs and skits saying goodbye to me. I was drained and overwhelmed by the end and knew that even in my retirement I would probably never experience another goodbye quite like this one. I continued to question my decision. Why was I leaving this place? Suddenly I questioned if my original reasons were as important as I once thought. To this day, I have not been able to watch the video of my goodbye ceremony at my former school.

First Introductions

While I was doing the best I could to maintain my composure and finish my tenure at the district I was departing, I knew that it was important that I start developing a relationship with my new school staff. The staff at my new school was going through similar emotions in saying goodbye to their principal who was retiring after having been at the school for about eighteen years both as an assistant principal and principal. The difference between the school I was leaving and the one I was heading to was that the new school staff knew who their new principal was going to be and my old staff did not. The only people I had met from the school were the staff members on the search committee and the assistant principal.

My first introduction to the new community was at a school committee meeting on a Monday evening in May soon after my appointment had been announced. School administrators must attend televised school committee meetings frequently, and we never know just how many town residents will be tuning in. Again, I was nervous, and I wanted to make sure I had a
coherent and professional statement rehearsed that I would say after the superintendent introduced me to the school committee. I did not want to risk saying something that sounded dumb and have it quoted in the newspaper the next day. I was also aware that some of the teachers from my new school might be watching, so I had to be careful not to say anything to cause alarm. For example, suggesting that there are big changes ahead at the school may not have been the best tactic. When it was time to speak, I gave a simple statement to the effect of “I am thrilled and honored to have been selected to be the new principal of the [blank] school. [Blank] is already a successful school and I look forward to getting to know the staff, students, and parents and to continue the wonderful traditions that are already in place.” I wanted my words to show the community that I respected the culture that was already in place and was not going to come in and make major changes right away. The staff was probably already anxious that the principal they knew and were comfortable with was retiring. My message needed to show that I respected the culture and would take my time watching and listening before initiating any major changes. In the weeks after this school committee meeting, I went back to my school and continued the work of finishing out the school year on a positive note.

The retiring principal and I had a couple of conversations about how I would like to officially meet the new staff. I told him that I wanted to be respectful of his last weeks and months on the job. Although, I had a school year to finish myself, but I thought it was important for the new staff to see me and put a face to a name. I suggested that I come to the first few minutes of one of their June staff meetings and just introduce myself and say hello. He told me that they would be too busy at the last staff meetings. He decided to set up a “new principal reception” one afternoon where there would be food and each grade level of staff members would come in to meet me one group at a time for about five to ten minutes. I agreed and the
date was set for mid-June. Between my interview for the position in mid-April and June thirteenth, I did not enter the school building. I was looking forward to a tour and looking around, even after-hours, but needed to be careful because I wanted to be respectful of the retiring principal and the school staff. Despite my understanding all of these factors, I was beginning to feel uneasy about this transition.

When I came in for my “meet and greet” I was a little early (there had been some confusion about the start time), so the principal asked me to leave and come back in about an hour. It was nice to finally meet the school secretaries for a brief moment, and then I left to bring some paperwork to the superintendent’s office. When I returned, I was immediately ushered into the school library where the reception was to be held. There was a nice display of food set up, and the principal explained to me how the “meet and greet” would work. One at a time, the entire staff of a grade level would be coming to the library to meet me for about five to ten minutes at a time. Their classes were going to be covered by paraprofessionals, so I would not be able to meet all of the staff covering classes that day. The reception immediately began!

There were about five or six classroom teachers in each grade level, kindergarten through fifth grade. During the hour of my reception, each grade level group came in one at a time to sit, have a snack, and chat with me. It was a lot of pressure to keep the conversation going, but I was determined to make a positive first impression and the teachers were all very friendly and respectful. The retiring principal stayed in the reception the whole time, and the hour went by very quickly. After it was over, I realized that I probably would not remember a single person’s name from that first meeting, but at least I was able to meet most teachers before school let out for the summer. My intent was for people to meet me and see that I am not a scary person. I felt that the longer the staff waited before meeting me, the more uncomfortable it would be at our
first meeting. I wanted to begin to build a positive relationship with the school staff as quickly as possible and did not want there to be looming anxiety over the whole summer about “the new principal.” The fear of the unknown can be a strong presence in schools.

The next opportunity I had for first introductions was at the June parent board meeting. The parents had invited me to be introduced prior to the start of the meeting and had advertised that I would be there if anyone wanted to meet me. There was coffee and food brought for this introduction, and I walked around introducing myself to as many parents as I could during the thirty-minute timeframe of my reception. The parents were friendly, and I did not get the impression that many additional parents came out to meet me than generally attend the monthly parent board meeting. All in all, there were about forty parents in attendance, the parent board executive members, the assistant principal, and the retiring principal. Right at the start of the official meeting time, the retiring principal came over to me, thanked me for coming, and told me I was free to leave. I was a bit taken aback since I would have liked to have stayed to observe how the meetings are run, but once again, I did not want to cause any uncomfortable feelings for the retiring principal. I made a final announcement that I was thrilled to have been selected as the new principal of the school and looked forward to beginning my duties on July first, which was just a few weeks away. After I left, I reflected that it is important to be respectful of how different people deal with change, and the retiring principal was going through a difficult transition as he finished out his time at the school and allowed a new person to take over the school he had lead for many years. I was grateful to have had the opportunity to meet the parents of the school who do so much to improve the school through events, fundraising, and other supportive initiatives. In the difficult budgetary times that we are in, we find ourselves
relying on the work of our volunteers and fund-raising more and more, thus the relationship with the dedicated school parent volunteers is essential.

My last “first meeting” took place at the last administrative meeting of the school year for the new district I would be working in. The entire group of district administrators has a full meeting once per month and was a much larger administrative group than I was used to. I was so appreciative to have been invited and left my own school for a few hours one morning to attend. Since I had no idea where I was going, I followed a woman into the building, introduced myself, and asked her if I was going to the same place she was. Luckily, she was another principal, so she showed me where to sign in and the way to the meeting. I was so surprised to see the number of district administrators in attendance! There were seven elementary principals, a middle school principal, a high school principal, five assistant principals from the various schools, a nurse leader, a director of technology, a facilities director, a director of human resources, an athletic director, a special education director, an assistant special education director, and the superintendent. The only person missing from the group was the assistant superintendent who would be hired during the summer months. The district I was exiting had only five principals and three district level administrators. The two assistant principals from the middle and high schools had never been invited to our bi-weekly administrative meetings. Walking into the room of my new district and seeing all of these administrators gave me the feeling that a sense of teamwork was present and that there were many more resources for support. As the meeting was conducted, I was impressed to see that they had “successes” on the agenda where people we able to share some of the great things happening at their respective buildings or offices. There was a respectful and organized tone, but people were comfortable to
make a joke here and there and a sense of camaraderie was present. I left with a feeling of excitement and anticipation that I was going to be part of a functional team.

**Feeling Welcome?**

One of the most difficult parts of my transition was slowly unfolding for me. The two finalists for the principal position had been the interim assistant principal and me. The assistant principal had grown up in town, been a teacher at the school, and was deeply beloved by the students, parents, and staff alike. She was an extremely qualified candidate, but had only one year of interim assistant principal experience under her belt. The staff of the school had been hopeful that she would be selected to be their new leader, and had been led to believe that she would step right into the position. When it was announced that I would be filling the principal post, as an unknown entity, a sense of shock and doom filled the school corridors. To say the staff was disappointed would be an understatement. Shock and anger ensued and there were many tears shed about the fact that the assistant principal would not be the next principal. Many of the staff felt as though the family-like atmosphere that had always been present at the school was at stake and they developed fear for the changes that were inevitable. Change is difficult in any profession, and the staff of the school knew that change was coming with the retiring principal’s imminent departure. They had hoped that change would come in the form of a person they already knew and respected, but they were disappointed to find out that more change than they anticipated was on its way. Also occurring simultaneously were significant budget cuts to the school district and many school personnel had just been notified that they were going to be laid off at the end of the school year. It was a terrible time for the morale of the school.

When I had come in for my “meet and greet session” I had no idea that any of this drama was unfolding. I knew that it had been difficult news that the assistant principal was not
appointed principal, but I had no idea how severe the impact had been. My goal at this time was
to support the assistant principal since she and I would be working closely together, to keep a
relatively low profile, and to ease the staff through the upcoming change process. It was a
delicate time. I was grateful that the assistant principal and I were beginning to develop a
relationship, and she could not have been more professional, respectful, and supportive to me
throughout this difficult time when the announcement of my appointment as principal was made
until my first days on the job. This situation had the potential to be an absolute disaster but due
to the classy way that the assistant principal handled herself, the transition went as smoothly as it
could have. I will forever be grateful to her for what she did for me during this time.

Looking back, the way I made it through the difficult months from getting my new job,
saying goodbye to my old school, and easing my way into a new school where some people were
weary of me and less than thrilled that I would be joining the school, was just to focus on the
tasks at hand. There are plenty of things that principals must take care of in the summer months,
and I knew I would be busy. I asked questions as any new person would, and attempted to just
ignore some of the issues surrounding the scandal of my appointment that I knew were present. I
attempted to put aside my own hurt feelings that some of the staff members of my new school
were less than thrilled I would be joining them, and since I did not know who any of these people
might be, it was not difficult. I told myself that they did not know me yet and I should not take
any of this personally. I also told myself that people would eventually get to know me, my
intentions, and that I would be able to earn their trust over time. The most difficult part of
switching jobs for me was leaving a place where I was respected, trusted, and liked, and
immediately moving into a place where I was not trusted and was somewhat resented. The
change was immediate and tangible, over a one-day period, when I walked through one set of
school doors and into another. Part of being a school principal is having thick skin and understanding that there are many instances where you need to make a hard decision that people will not like. Principals are not in their job to be liked 100% of the time, and we are not here to make friends. But the truth of the matter is that we are all human, and making unpopular decisions, having hard conversations, and being in situations where we have to put our own hurt feelings aside is still difficult. Always being professional on the outside, and managing our feelings on the inside is part of the job and I made it through the hard days without showing how much some of this was bothering me.

**First Days on the Job**

Before I knew it, July fourth weekend was coming to a close and my first day at my new job was upon me. I was looking forward to finally having the opportunity to get into the school and really looking around. I had only been into the school twice over the two full months I had known I would be taking over as principal. Only seeing the school from the outside left me curious about what I would encounter when I finally got the chance to explore indoors. I was leaving a school where I felt completely comfortable and knew every inch of the building. I knew where books were stored, where one could find a dustpan, and I knew where to find more staples. It was a strange feeling to be starting at a new school where I would not know where to find anything. “What if the phone rings and I cannot even answer a simple question,” I worried as I got out of my car. As I look back to this time, I did indeed get many phone calls those first weeks where I had no idea how to answer the questions I was being asked.

When I walked through the doors that first morning, the retiring principal was there to greet me. “Here you go boss,” he said as I walked into the office and he handed over his master keys to the school. It seemed that the “handing over of the keys” was a significant symbol to the
retiring principal. When he no longer held the master keys, he was no longer in the position of power in the school. He had passed on the keys to show me that I was now in charge. It was a poignant moment for him and the first step for him in accepting that he really was retiring.

The retiring principal spent the next few hours acclimating me to the school building and he gave me my first official tour. I remember thinking that the school looked pretty much as I had expected on the inside. The computers and technology were older than I had anticipated, but the school was well organized and maintained. It was nice to see that the supply closets were kept locked and inventoried and I was able to cross the time consuming task of “reorganizing supply closets” off my potential to do list. It did not take long for me to notice some parts of the school that needed some extra attention. Some of the hallways were dirty, and there was an unpleasant odor in some of the corridors. I wondered why one of the glass windows on the gym doors was shattered and noticed that there was some clutter in the main office and teachers’ rooms. I wondered if I would ever feel as at home here at this new school as I felt about the school I just left. Principals spend many hours in their schools, and their schools become their “home away from home.” I reassured myself by thinking that I needed to give it some time and that I would eventually feel as comfortable in my new surroundings as I had in my old school.

The retiring principal told me that he would be working through most of the summer, but that I was fully in charge and he would stay out of my way. He had moved out of his office into another out-of-the-way location, and was working abbreviated hours, so I rarely saw him in those first few weeks. His plan was to inventory our school technology and resources, check-in and hand out curriculum and school supplies as the orders arrived, and finish up some other administrative tasks. It took some practice for the custodial staff to come to me first if they had questions or concerns about the school building since they were used to answering to him. He
was consistent when a custodian went to him first with a problem, he told them they would need to come to me, as he was no longer in charge. The head custodian was planning to retire at the end of the summer and it became evident that he would rather just go through the former principal about issues or time off requests, but we held firm. When the fire alarms abruptly went off one morning in my early days on the job, the retiring principal snapped to attention and took charge of the situation with the fire department and ambulances that were on the scene. I felt torn. Do I let him take over even though he is no longer in charge? Do I assert myself and introduce myself to the fire department? I decided to walk right over to the action with the fire department and let them know who I was. At the time, I felt frustrated about my role and felt as though if I was not careful I would end up looking like I was the assistant principal all summer. The fire department situation was sorted out and we went back to our separate offices. Eventually, we settled into a routine and with his limited hours we did not see much of each other on a daily basis.

For my first tasks and days on the job, the retiring principal left me a short list of “things to do” in the summer. I was surprised to find out that the school secretary would not be working my first week as she was scheduled to be there. In my experience, the secretary is the “go to” person for tasks to be completed, where to find supplies, and for assistance with getting started using the telephone, voicemail, and intercom system. The retiring principal was a self-proclaimed techno-phobe and could offer me no help in these areas. I was disappointed that I would not be able to get to know the secretary and had no help with getting started with some of my most important resources. I wondered if she was having a hard time accepting that a change was taking place and did not want to be there on my first days. Whatever the reasons, she was not there and I had to figure things out on my own. I had no computer, no printer, no scanner,
and had not been able to set up my login information for most of the budget and student database that I would soon need to have access to. I made a plan to paint and redecorate the principal’s office at the end of the week after hours, in the hope that I would feel more settled in once my office was set up with my belongings.

The next few days were spent interviewing candidates for two special education positions that needed to be filled. It was wonderful to get to know the special education director and the assistant special education director while we completed our interviews. It is challenging as a brand new principal to be able to talk about the specifics of the special education programs we were interviewing new teachers for, but I had done my best to gain background information prior to the interviews so that I would be clear with the roles and tasks of the positions we would be filling. Interviewing with other people can give you a sense of their personal work style, and I felt that the two days of interviewing brought me closer to some of the other administrators I would be working closely with in the future. I wanted my fellow administrators to get to know my style as much as I was curious to learn more about theirs. These first interactions were positive and important in my transition.

On the Friday of my first week on the job, I stopped at the local home improvement store on my way to school and picked out paint, supplies, and new window treatments. In between doing my regular work tasks that day, I prepared my new office for a makeover by filling in holes in the plaster where the previous principal’s pictures and sports pennants had been hung and I completed the tedious work of taping off the doorways and windows with painter’s tape. The office was ready for its makeover. Later that evening, we arranged for a babysitter, and my husband and I set to work repainting my office. It was a muggy summer evening, we had the radio on for inspiration, and we worked hard and had the office repainted in a few hours. The
paint looked great and I knew this was the first step in me feeling more comfortable in my new surroundings. I looked forward to Monday when I could ask the custodians to help me move my furniture back and put the final additions of pictures, curtains, and decorations up in the office.

When Monday morning came around, I asked the custodial staff to help me arrange the furniture in my office. The paint color I had selected looked great with the morning sun now streaming through the windows. We got the furniture in place, and I worked to put away some of my personal belongings that I had held off bringing into the school until now. Books, pictures, mementos from my last school, and important paperwork were now neatly arranged in my new desk and on the shelves in the office. The following day, one of the custodians put on my window hardware, and the window treatments became the final touch. It looked great, it reflected a more feminine touch than the previous baseball and sports theme the former principal had in place for many years. I felt better. There is something to be said for “being all moved in” and now I felt as though I had a place to call my own in the new school. It didn’t matter that I still had no computer, no ability to print or scan documents, or any idea of where anything was kept in the school; I had my desk and pictures.

As the summer days rolled by, the tasks that needed completed slowly unveiled themselves to me. Getting the gym door glass replaced, ordering new letterhead, and hiring personnel kept me busy every day. During the days, we worked on having the class lists and schedules ready for September, and by night I came back in to paint bulletin boards and make the school more beautiful. I started looking at the special subjects schedules and duty schedules and decided to reformat the way the schedule had been done in the past. The assistant principal assured me that none of the teachers would mind a new schedule format, so we began to set the schedules for the school year. These tasks filled my first days and weeks on the job and the
assistant principal and I settled into a routine. I was pleased to find out that the assistant principal had a strong work ethic, and we approached all tasks as a team. While we were working on the scheduling, she shared with me tales about the school, processes and procedures, and the stories about how things worked at the school in general. These stories about the school were the crucial background in the school culture that I was seeking. Entering a new environment as an outsider, I was actively seeking information about the people, the customs, and the ceremonies that make every school its own unique place. Throughout the summer, I was like a sponge absorbing any information I could obtain about the teachers, traditions, and history of the school.

It surprised me to find out that the teaching staff had been allowed to tutor in the school building during the academic year and throughout the summer. This had been strictly forbidden in my former school districts and I would later find out was not supposed to be allowed in my new district either. Coming in as a new administrator, I realized that I will at times have to be the “bad guy” in order to remedy some of the practices that may have been allowed previously. This situation put me in a difficult position and I decided that it would best be solved at a later time. It is my job to follow through with school district policies and I knew I would need to eventually tell the staff that tutoring will need to take place off school grounds. Although the tutoring situation at the school made me uncomfortable, it did allow me to meet some of the students and teachers who I would have otherwise only met on the first days of school.

But I’m Not Ready!

Before I knew it, we had reached the final weeks of summer vacation. I was nowhere near being ready for school to start. Due to some last minute funding changes, I still had a head custodian and three more teachers to hire. The schedules were not finished and we needed to
post the class lists. When was I going to have time to finish all of the work I wanted to have completed before the staff returned? Stressful thoughts were racing through my head and I was putting in twelve-hour days in an attempt to have everything ready. It was important to me that the school had a different feel when the staff and students entered the building on the first days of school. For the staff, I wanted to portray a sense of calm and positive excitement to demonstrate a sharp contrast to the stressful and negative end of the school year they had faced due to staffing concerns and budget cuts. For the students and parents, I wanted the school to look clean, bright, and inspiring for a fantastic school year ahead with new leadership. Over the summer, I had hired a teacher from my former school to come in and paint some murals. She had lined both main hallways with the words “Reach for the stars” and “create, inspire, dream, smile”. The words of inspiration looked great and stood out as a positive message for the new school year.

I was working round the clock to prepare the agenda for the two professional development days that would precede the first day of school with students. It was essential that I presented myself well to the staff on the first days of school for the teachers. This was my one and only chance to make a strong first impression. It was my responsibility to lead the teachers through some activities focused on the new state curriculum frameworks. I also wanted to set the stage for the professional learning community work they would be completing throughout the school year. I knew the teachers were anxious about meeting me and would be “checking me out” as I stood in the spotlight before them. Not being one who enjoys being the center of attention, I was nervous and hoped that I would be able to have my first interaction with the entire staff be a positive one.
As the last few days of summer passed us by, the assistant principal and I got closer and closer to being ready for the first day. We made it through the days when the class lists with teacher names were posted for parents and students to view outside of the school. The district administrators met to finalize plans for the two professional development days before school started for the students. I was as ready as I was going to be, and the first day for teachers finally came. The staff from across the district came together at the middle school for our opening day gathering and speech from the superintendent. I had those butterflies that we all have on the first day of school and thankfully, the superintendent’s speech provided me with just the inspiration I was seeking to set the stage for the school year. We all went back to our school and gathered in the cafeteria for our opening day meeting. The meeting was a blur, but the spirits of the staff were high, and there was a positive sense of anticipation present. The teachers were polite and friendly during my opening meeting and I was relieved that I had somehow been able to learn the names and roles of all of the ninety staff members over the summer. We had a luncheon sponsored by the parent board and finished the day with grade level teacher meetings. The following day was spent working on changes to the new state curriculum, and went by quickly and productively. I was beginning to get to know the personalities of some of the staff members and was feeling relieved that the first two high-pressure days were over. A few teachers told me that the start of school had gone well and that they were pleased with what they had seen from me so far. I was both proud and embarrassed at the same time and did not like knowing that I had been a topic for discussion. Despite feeling overwhelmed, nervous, and unprepared, I hope that I had portrayed myself as calm, cool, collected and ready for the students to return the day after the long holiday weekend.
Welcome Students

Now it was the teachers’ turn to be nervous. I had made it through my nerve-wracking teacher professional days and now the kindergarten through fifth grade students were coming for their first day of school. After some last minute bulletin board work and flower planting over the Labor Day weekend, I had determined that the school was as ready and beautiful as it was going to be for opening day. I was anxious to see if we had scheduled enough staff members for the arrival, lunch, recess, and dismissal duties, and was looking forward to seeing the school organizational procedures in action. Would we be able to feed two hundred and seventy-five fourth and fifth graders at once during the first lunch block that we had scheduled? Would we be able to have over six hundred students waiting in the hallways prior to the morning bell ringing since we had eliminated the morning arrival recess on the playground? I did not know, but I trusted the assistant principal who told me it would all be fine. Somehow it was. The students walked quietly in the hallways, knew the procedures for clearing their trays and lining up for buses in the afternoons. I was fortunate to find out that I was the principal of a school that had many strong operational procedures in place for order and I was grateful to the former principal had established these structures.

September

The first days of school came and went and soon we were a few weeks into the new school year. The first days were not without their difficulties. We had a large group of students in various special needs classrooms that are housed in our building and the students’ transition into their new classrooms or programs had been a challenging one and continued to be throughout September. There had been many student physical restraints and meetings with parents and staff members so that we could assist the students and allow them to fully access
their learning. In the lunchroom and at bus time, I was feeling frustrated with the fact that I did not know many of the students’ names. I had come from a school with three hundred and seventy five students and I knew all of their names. Now I was in a school of seven hundred and knew just a small handful of names. I have always felt that it means a tremendous amount to the students when you know their name, and it was taking me longer than I anticipated to learn my new students.

There had been more than one occasion of teachers crying in my office or the assistant principal’s office as they struggled to better understand and meet the needs of their new students. I was pleased that some of the new and veteran staff members were beginning to come to me with concerns and for advice. I knew that establishing trust would take time, but I still hoped that I would be able to develop some positive relationships in the near future. There remained a few staff members that felt more comfortable going to the assistant principal with concerns, even if there was a line out of her office door and not mine. On more than one occasion, I had to go over to the assistant principal’s office and say that she was busy, why doesn’t someone come over and give me a try, and that maybe I could help. One especially reluctant teacher was hesitant to come to me with a student situation, but I persevered and we ended up meeting with a parent together about a challenging student situation. After the parent left, the teacher said to me, “thank you, you handled that very nicely, and you have been a big help to me with this student issue.” Small breakthroughs such as this where a teacher feels supported through a tricky situation with a parent is where new principals can build trust and credibility with the staff. With a staff of over ninety people, and over seven hundred students and sets of parents, I hoped that I was not going to have to prove myself to one person at a time, but I suspected that I may have to.
As September wore on, I noticed that there were several teachers that I was beginning to see every morning at the copy machine. There seems to be a group of teachers in every school that are part of the “early bird” crew. As a member of the early morning group myself, I suspect that we all feel that the quiet early morning hours before the majority of the staff arrives is the best time of day to get some work done. There were about five teachers that were part of the early morning group at my new school, and we started to take a few minutes to chat each day before we went our separate ways to begin our work.

One early morning in late September, after exchanging some small talk with one of the teachers, a thought occurred to me. What I realized is that there are the big things a new principal has to do to earn credibility and trust, such as run a full professional development day in front of the whole staff or represent the school on televised school committee meetings. Then there are the many little things. The little things we do seem small and unimportant at the time but add up like pennies building a relationship bank account. The little things are the things you find out about people by being friendly, asking questions, and listening. What can bring a group of people closer together in the workplace are the personal tidbits of information we know about each other. How many children teachers have and what their names are, where someone’s son is thinking about attending college, how a teacher’s husband’s surgery went, the fact that the custodian is a dog lover are those bits of information that bring us all together as a work family.

I had a big job ahead of me and I set a goal of finding out something small about every person on the staff as soon as I could. I started right away.

**Getting to Know the Culture**

As the days of school turned into weeks and the weeks into months, my routine had developed. I would get to work at 7:00 AM and spend about an hour getting some of my
paperwork completed. The next forty-five minutes would be spent in student meetings, or in meetings with individual teachers about ideas or concerns. We had some very challenging students who were new to the school and we had many collaborative meetings to brainstorm ideas to help these students. Having students who were demonstrating significant behavioral concerns can be a stressful situation in a public school where there are limited personnel, resources, and space constraints. Although stressful and difficult, spending time together with the staff assisting with students in crisis and in figuring out solutions to these issues can create a bonding experience. One small benefit of dealing with these difficult situations was the fact that I had quickly come to know some of the staff members, both new and veteran, on a more personal, individual level. Some of us made the conscious decision to laugh and find the humor about the crazy things happening to us rather than cry and become stressed out about it. Having a good sense of humor working in schools with your children is a necessity. Luckily, it seemed as though I had the good fortune of working in a school with others who shared my beliefs about having fun and finding the humor in every situation.

Through the day-to-day routines, I was getting to know and feel comfortable with the staff members, students, and parents that I was interacting with on a regular basis. It seemed that time was the biggest factor in acclimating myself to the school environment and learning about the customs and values of the school culture. One interesting aspect that had become obvious to me was that there was a strong tradition of “hometown pride” in the community. Many of the staff members in all nine of the school buildings were born and raised in town and were now employed in town and raising their own families to attend school in the same community they grew up in. There are many examples of multiple members of the same families working in the school district. On our staff, there is even a mother/daughter team working together as teachers
at the same grade level. I understood very quickly after starting at my position that many staff
members within the school district were related, and that there are many connections between
other town employees such as the police department, fire department, selectman, school
committee, as well as other elected positions. In the early fall, I overheard a staff member
commenting about the superintendent, “Well, she isn’t from town, so a lot of people don’t trust
her.” I followed up later with that person and asked her what she meant by that comment. She
explained to me that all of the previous superintendents except for the predecessor to the current
superintendent had been born and raised in town. She told me that there is sometimes a level of
distrust from some of our more vocal townspeople when dealing with superintendents who are
advocating for the needs of the schools if they are “not from here.” When I heard this, I thought
that it explained a lot about the reaction that some people had when it had been announced that I
would be the new principal. I was not born in town, and I reside in a nearby community. This
lack of trust of outsiders could have played a part in the lukewarm reaction that occurred when
some of the staff found out that I would be the new principal. This variable, although not
insurmountable, was an additional barrier I was working to overcome while attempting to earn
the trust of the staff.

Now that the school year was well underway, I was beginning to feel as though I had
worked in my new school forever. I am not sure where I was, or when it happened, but I was
finally beginning to feel like a native in my new culture. By Thanksgiving week, all of us felt as
though six months had passed since we started the school year in September. I realized that I
now had some background knowledge. From a variety of sources, I had heard many of the tales
of the school. I could tell you the first and last name of every staff member, and a little
something I knew about them personally. There was an ever-growing group of students that I
could now greet by name when passing in the hallway or running into each other in the lunchroom. I understood some of the frustrations of the different grade levels about their curriculum needs through conversations with each team. I knew where to find supplies or curriculum materials if a teacher came to me asking for something. I could answer most questions about times, dates, and resources when I picked up a telephone call from a parent. Most importantly, I was beginning to bring some of my own “flavor” to the school environment by slowly implementing some initiatives that I had been successful with at my previous district and new ideas that had developed over the first few months in the school. The school nurse and I started organizing a holiday gift drive for families in need in our school community. This drive had the potential to assist a number of needy families in the school. There was still a lot I did not know, but I was finally feeling like a native instead of a stranger pretending to fit in.

**Digging Deeper Into the Culture**

Now that the first few months of the school year had passed, I thought it was an appropriate time to investigate some of the underlying issues and ideas about the culture of the school. I wondered how much more there was about the culture that I did not know about and hoped that asking some specific questions of the staff would assist me with obtaining more information. I was also curious about how other administrators in the school district felt about their transition into their school or district culture. To accomplish this, I planned to ask the teachers and paraprofessionals at my school to complete a set of anonymous written questions about the culture of the school. The next step of my data gathering included setting up interviews with the other district principals, assistant principals, or central office administrators who had been employed by the school district for five years or less. I wanted to make sure the administrators I interviewed were not so far past their initial transition period that they would not
be able to recall some of the more noteworthy details about the time when they first started working in the school district.

To introduce the written questions, I explained to the teachers at a staff meeting that I was completing a research project that was investigating the process of a principal transitioning into a new school culture and that I was looking for anonymous volunteers to answer some written questions about culture of the school. None of the staff members asked questions after I read through my scripted information about informed consent and voluntary participation, so we moved right on to the next agenda items at our staff meeting. I did not know if the reason there were no questions was because I had explained my project so thoroughly, or if the staff were not that interested in assisting me in my quest for more information about the school culture. After the meeting, I placed a copy of the written questions in each teacher and paraprofessional mailbox, and followed up with an email about the information I was seeking. I hoped that many of the teachers would complete the written questions but knew that it can be difficult to get busy people like teachers to remember to complete optional information for the purposes of research.

Once the deadline for completing the written questions passed, I counted up the responses that had been returned to me and realized that thirteen people had answered my questions out of a staff of approximately eighty teachers and paraprofessionals. I was not sure at the time, but the teachers’ union may have advised the staff not to participate in my study. I was disappointed that I did not have a better response, but I was determined to gain some meaning and look for trends within the data that I did have before me. After I coded and analyzed the responses to the written questions, I discovered some themes in the data and made some noteworthy conclusions about the culture of the school. I found the information gleaned to be extremely helpful, and it provided me with insights into what the native members of my new school think and believe.
Looking back to my first transition into a new principalship at a previous school district, I realized that I had not initially surveyed or informally interviewed the teaching staff in an attempt to learn about the core issues and values of the school. Due to this, I believe that it took me longer to understand the intricacies of the culture, especially from a teacher’s perspective because I did not seek their specific initial input. The rich data that emerged from the written questions at my new school provided me with information that I would not have been able to obtain from simple conversations with staff members in our daily interactions. Since one piece of my problem of practice was attempting to find ways to “speed up” the transition process, asking teachers targeted questions emerged as one “shortcut” into learning a new culture.

The data collected in the anonymous written teacher questions showed that asking teachers specific questions about their school’s culture can provide new principals with valuable information about the true values and beliefs of the school staff. Some information about the beliefs of a school staff is difficult to extract from simple incidental conversations alone. A significant trend that emerged from the teacher-written questions was that the staff at my new school identified the best part of the school as its family atmosphere. I recognized this identification as a Clan Culture based on the culture framework by Cameron and Quinn (2011), which allowed me the research base for how to best lead a culture of this type. The environment the native members of this culture describe is one where the needs of the individual staff members and students are the top priority. Teaching staff appreciate the fact that their past administrators have understood and made accommodations for them when issues with their children or other family members have arisen. I had heard the school described as a “family” on many occasions by staff members and parents, but it was not until the analysis of the written
teacher questions that I fully understood the depth of this identification as a family felt by native members of this school’s culture.

I found the feedback about what they staff are looking for in an ideal principal or supervisor to be very helpful to me as a new leader in the school. The information provided allowed me to better understand the expectations of the staff and how the behaviors of the previous administrators may have shaped their perceptions about the role of the principal. Teachers come with a variety of their own individual needs; some are very independent in the school setting and have minimal interaction with their principal while others need daily support and encouragement. New administrators may be basing their administrative style on a mentor or administrator they previously worked with, often in cultures that are vastly different from the culture they may presently be working in. The three most important character traits that the staff from my school shared that they were seeking in a principal leader were someone who is a good listener, someone respectful towards students, staff, and parents, and a leader who is understanding of the personal and family obligations of the staff. Also noteworthy, the staff that responded felt that a leader should be approachable and present around the school and at school events. The staff also stated that they had never had the opportunity to provide the principal with feedback about his or her performance, which I found interesting. Because of the specific and valuable feedback I received from the teachers who answered this question, I vowed to seek feedback from the staff about my performance on a yearly basis. The feedback from the written questions from the staff also demonstrated for me that the teachers had had little input in developing the school mission statement, and had not previously discussed their vision of the school or the values that drive the decisions made on a daily basis. This realization provided me with a starting point for the school culture work I would begin in year two of my principalship.
Other smaller details that emerged were that staff members felt that drop-off time in the morning was chaotic in the hallways, and that teachers had been discouraged to provide honest feedback to paraprofessionals on the paraprofessional evaluation tool. I would not have know about these two smaller issues had I not asked the staff these anonymous questions which reinforced for me that I need to continue to provide the staff members with safe ways to provide input in the years to come.

Next, I set up appointments to meet with the seven building or central office administrators who had been employed by the school district for five years or less. I was looking forward to getting to know my colleagues on a more personal and professional level when I met with them to ask them questions about their transition into the school district. What I found as I completed the interviews was that each of the administrators provided me with at least one key insight into the transition process based on our conversations.

The first prevalent theme that emerged from the administrator interviews was that new administrators may decide to plan to spend their first days, weeks, and even months on the job being an active listener, asking not just questions, but the right questions, and carefully observing their new environment. Several administrators spoke about how they initiated meetings with their colleagues and concentrated on actively listening in order to learn more about the culture. Other administrators interviewed discussed how their first priority when they were hired was to sit down and talk to the other administrators in their new building or with the outgoing principal. They mentioned talking with the teachers that came in the school over the summer, as well as parents and students that were in and out of the building during the summer months. One insight related to the listening, questioning, and observing area that emerged from the data analysis was the importance of new administrators forming relationships with people in
the school district. One administrator went about forming these relationships by having an open door, being friendly, and making a point of getting to know people in the community. This administrator also mentioned the importance of learning people’s names as quickly as possible, finding time to get into all of the classrooms, and being open to sharing information about himself. Another building level administrator mentioned that he spent a lot of time his first year attending school events and supporting teachers in every way possible. All of the administrators interviewed mentioned forming personal relationships and earning trust as an essential part of their transition process.

When discussing starting as an administrator in a new position, several administrators mentioned the influence of the predecessor on the success of their transition or as a hurdle to a smooth transition. One administrator discussed the time he was able to spend with the retiring principal during his first weeks on the job. He stated that the former principal was an exceptional help and support in giving him the lay of the land and information about how the school ran. Another administrator mentioned that the person whom she was replacing had been a close friend when they had worked together in another district. This administrator felt that her transition was successful because the person she was replacing had a similar work style and values as her, and he had provided her with a detailed historical background of the school district. The administrators who had a positive experience with their predecessor also mentioned that being invited to the school or district when school was in session with students, prior to starting their new job, was a very helpful part of their successful transition. The administrators who were able to come into the school on a school day with students present were able to see the processes of how the school runs; arrival and dismissal times, bus procedures, classes changing, or how the lunch periods and cafeteria procedures in action were helpful for the new
administrator to observe first hand. All of the administrators who were able to do a site visit on a school day recommend this practice as helpful to the transition process.

In another interview, an administrator mentioned that the predecessor could have a negative influence when starting a new position. “I think that’s the biggest thing when you’re just replacing someone. The personality difference, good or bad, I think that is the biggest thing that you overcome.” Several administrators mentioned that at times they felt that during their first weeks or months on the job, they were making up for past mistakes of the predecessor. Several administrators mentioned that they did not have all of the information they needed from the person that they had replaced. In some cases, documents were unavailable, or information that had been both documented or verbally shared as fact about the school or district, turned out to be different than the current norms or practices of the staff.

Several administrators that were interviewed identified that their positions had been newly created when they started. Since they were the first administrators to be in the newly created positions, there had been no predecessor to make comparisons to with regard to style and performance. The administrators that had transitioned to newly created positions mentioned that this had been a positive part of their transition experience. The administrators in new positions felt that they had a smooth transition into their jobs because they were able to come in and be an immediate asset rather than feeling that they needed to “fill someone else’s shoes”. Overall, coming into a new position allowed the administrators to develop the position based on their style and where they saw the need to step in and assist.

During the interviews, several administrators shared with me that learning a new culture can be the information new administrators begin to uncover about the school or district that is not written anywhere on paper, but is a definite presence in “the way things are done around here”.
Administrators mentioned that understanding the norms of behavior or how people act and behave in the new school or district had been a challenge. One administrator mentioned that during individual conversations with staff members at the new school, he was surprised to find that the teachers considered their “boss” to be their department head rather than the school principal. He identified this as part of the culture of the school in the attitudes of some staff members, and this was not a piece of information that would have been found written in notes from the former principal or on school improvement plans. One administrator talked about the culture of decision-making. He described that it was an adjustment to get accustomed to the way similar situations he had experienced in the past may be handled differently in the new school district due to variables in the culture such as past practice, the teachers’ contract, or norms of behavior.

When discussing the transition into a new administrative position, several administrators mentioned that they had created an entry plan that documented their anticipated tasks during the initial months of the new position. They mentioned that this had not been a mandatory assignment, but one that they felt assisted them in staying on track during their transition process. The entry plans included information about how the new administrators would get to know the staff and community, as well as how the new administrator would go about addressing the school or district improvement plans. One administrator included a timeline for completion of the items on his entry plan, which he felt provided him with additional accountability since his supervisor had reviewed and approved his entry plan.

The final insight that was brought forth during the administrator interviews was when several of the administrators mentioned that transitioning into the same job for the second time was easier than the first. For example, one assistant principal shared that when he moved from
one school district to another in the assistant principal position, the transition was easier the second time. He stated, “I had the experience, good or bad, in my first assistant principal position. I was able to take that, reflect, and move forward.” The administrators explained that the second time they transitioned into a new school district in the same position, they needed to learn about the school or district culture, not the tasks of the position.

Overall, I felt that the time I had taken to collect data from the teachers in my new school through written interview questions and the time spent interviewing other administrators in my school district proved to be a valuable part of my transition into the new school culture. I learned about what the teachers in my school value and take pride in about the school and what aspects of the school they may find frustrating. Through the administrator interviews, I connected with my colleagues on a deeper level than I may have had I not had the opportunity through my school culture investigation. The data I collected allowed me to delve deeper into some of the underlying aspects of the new culture giving me more of an insider perspective. I was slowly becoming a native of my new culture through observation, conversation, and research.

More Change

We had reached December, which is always a busy month in elementary schools. Parent conferences were upon us, there were several special student events planned, and we all had a lot we wanted to accomplish before holiday break. It was time to face a situation I had been dreading since I started in my new position. Another elementary principal in our school district was planning to retire at the end of December and my assistant principal had applied for the position. I had known this would be a possibility, and the assistant principal was ready to step into her own school building as a principal. I was so happy for her, and knew she deserved her
big chance, but I was going to miss her very much and was nervous to face my big school on my own. I was again beginning to doubt myself, would I be able to maintain the smooth flow we were enjoying with our school processes or would everything fall apart when she left for her new position? It was due to her that my transition had been smooth so far. She had given me the “inside scoop” on many situations and had shared with me her opinion about the best way to deal with certain people. I knew who my “go to” people were if I needed help, which parents could be tricky, and which staff members I needed to be careful about sharing delicate information with. In a way, having her to assist me had sped up my transition process significantly because without her perspective I would have had to figure out a lot of this information on my own which can take a great amount of time. It was sink or swim time for me.

One sunny morning in December the assistant principal told me she needed to talk to me privately. She told me that she had officially been appointed principal at the other school in the district. She decided to make an announcement to the entire staff at once prior to school starting that morning to ensure that the staff heard it directly from her rather than through the fast-moving grapevine that is present in most school districts. She did a great job breaking the news to the staff with a short, but moving speech, and many tears were shed. She had grown up in town and had worked in the school for eighteen years. Despite the fact that she would just be moving up the street, her leaving the school would be a big change for her and the staff. The general feeling among the staff is that they were thrilled for her and thought that she was ready to lead her own school; we were all just sad to be losing such an integral part of the school family. I could not help but feel guilty that it was my fault she was leaving. “If I hadn’t applied for the principal job, she might have been appointed principal, and then she wouldn’t have had to leave,” was the thought running through my head. Nobody had said these words aloud to me; it
was just my underlying fears talking. I had to make a conscious decision not to question fate, and hoped that all would work out for the best. Deep down I knew that it had been in the best interest of the school to bring in a new administrator with solid experience to look at the school with fresh eyes. Despite that knowledge, living the daily experience in the school I could fully understand why the staff had been disappointed to learn that their known assistant principal had not been selected for the principal job. I was proud of all of the small changes I had already incorporated into the school building and felt that the tone of the school and day-to-day attitude of the staff was very positive. Once again, I put the worrisome thoughts out of my head and continued to plunge forward with the work at hand.

Another New Face

It had been a month since my assistant principal left to embark on her own journey as a school principal. Her departure made my daily life at work change instantly: there were a lot less laughs and I was now covering every morning arrival duty, lunch duty, bus duty, discipline issue, teacher issue, and everything else that comes the way of a school principal. We continued to talk several times a week on the phone and she came back from time to time to tie up some loose ends with meetings and projects. She had started at her new school and instead of having any settling in time, had immediately needed to take care of several tricky situations involving both staff and students. I hoped that the six months we spent together had helped to prepare her to run her own school. In the end, I had learned as much from her as I had hoped she learned from me.

It was now time for me to make a decision about who our new assistant principal would be. The position had been posted and we had several internal applicants. The assistant superintendent agreed to conduct the interviews with me, which was a relief since it is always good to have the input and perspective of others on important hiring decisions such as this one.
The new assistant principal would have big shoes to fill and I knew that once he or she was in place there would be a long learning curve as they figured out all that goes along with being an elementary school administrator. Through the inevitable school grapevine, I heard that several staff members were hoping that one of the part-time teachers from our school would be granted the position. I found this news upsetting, as I had not even had the chance to interview the candidates before staff found out who had applied and were commenting on who they hoped would get the job. Even though just a small group of staff members had commented on the new assistant principal appointment, this news again reinforced that the school has a strong fear of “outsiders”. There is a comfort level with people who are known and a fear of those who are strangers, even if they are from within the school district. This pattern had now emerged when it was announced that I would be the new principal, when I overheard a staff member saying that the superintendent was not from town, and now with the assistant principal opening. As in all of my hiring decisions, I knew that I would interview all candidates with an open mind and select the person most qualified for the position. Only I knew all that the assistant principal job entails, so I would have to deal with the consequences if the best candidate turned out to be from another school within the district.

As it turned out, the most qualified candidate was a teacher from another elementary school in the district, and she was thrilled to be offered the position of interim assistant principal. Having just gone through a transition into the school myself just months ago, I did everything for her that I would have wanted to have done for me to make me feel welcome. I sent an email out to the staff announcing her appointment and describing some of the strengths she would bring to our school. I sent home a letter to parents announcing her as the interim assistant principal. I provided her with a tour of the building, introduced her to as many people as I could, and
featured a picture of her in our school blog. We had a breakfast for her on her first day, and we made sure there were fresh flowers on her desk. I hope that she felt welcome; I knew I was thrilled to have her join our school and looked forward to helping her “learn the ropes”. I remembered how I felt when I was in my first weeks as an assistant principal. I felt thrilled to be in the position, but wondered when I would feel confident that I knew what I was doing. Someone told me that it takes a full year to feel truly comfortable in a new job, but I remember feeling that it was more like two years for me once I moved from teacher to administrator. I wanted to try to provide her with the same support and encouragement that my first principal and mentor provided for me. She was the same age I was when I started my assistant principal job. I wondered if our careers will parallel each other in the years to come.

After a few weeks, my new assistant principal and I had settled into a routine. I began to notice that the teachers and other staff members were going to see her with questions or concerns, which to me was promising because they seemed to trust and respect her already. At this time, I found it to be interesting that just six months earlier I had been brand new to the school and my first assistant principal was kind enough to introduce me to the school culture. She did this by talking to me about specific school procedures and about how past stories and situations had been handled by the staff. She told me who on the staff worked independently and who needed more guidance and support to work through their challenges. Now it was my turn to be the native of the culture and share my observations with the new assistant principal. To her, I must have seemed like I knew all about the school: the students, staff, and parents. In reality, I still felt new and was personally learning about the school culture on a daily basis. As the instructional leader of a school, principals do not have the luxury of being “new” for very long. From day one on the job, we are responsible for all of the school’s operational procedures and
for following district policies. We must know our students, academically, socially, and medically to ensure their learning, well-being, and safety. We must know the school staff from teachers to custodians, and all of their individual quirks that make the workplace interesting. We must deal with parent or teacher concerns as they arise, often having to quickly research the background of these delicate situations. We need to make sure that challenging and engaging instruction is taking place on a daily basis following the state frameworks and that our students are making adequate progress on their local and state assessments. Teacher evaluations must be conducted, classroom walk-throughs must take place, and district mandates must be followed. “New” is not a state that principals or assistant principals can remain in for very long, and I quickly needed to train my assistant principal to know the most important background information, but give her the trust and guidance to “hit the ground running” and do her work.

It was wonderful to have my new assistant principal learning the ropes with me. Together we discussed solutions to issues and shared confusion at times about why certain procedures had been put in place. Neither of us had a long history with the school so we could look at situations with a fresh set of eyes. Together we navigated a bumpy first round of state assessments, which were to be administered to the third, fourth, and fifth grade students over a two week period. Fortunately, we had a similar style and work ethic, so the days after the initial transition ran smoothly as we supported each other to get our day-to-day work completed. Most of all, my assistant principal made me laugh, which has always been a trait that I appreciate in others, especially at work. There are so many funny, touching, and intense moments that one encounters working in an elementary school; maintaining a sense of humor in an important part of working in a school around many children and adults. I was pleased that the new assistant principal was doing so well in her first administrative opportunity and grateful to have her help
and assistance with running the school. She had the same determination as me in wanting our school to be an amazing place for learning.

**Becoming a Resource**

Looking back at the second six months at my new school, technology stands out to me as a significant topic and turning point. It started in late February when our school district adopted a new website program that was unfamiliar to the staff. Many of the teachers at the school had active classroom websites that they updated regularly to communicate with their students and families. Overall, the staff at the school had a varied technology skill set; some teachers were very comfortable with technology, while others had very limited skills using the computer mainly for email. The principal that I had replaced was a self-proclaimed “techno-phobe” and often joked that he did not even own a cell phone. During this first year, I was appointed our school “webmaster” and it was my responsibility to manage the school website. I was familiar with the new program that the district had purchased due to using it in my previous school district. Because of my comfort level with the program, I volunteered to the technology department to train my teachers to use the new program as a professional development activity. We scheduled substitute teachers to cover classes, and we made a schedule over two days that would allow all of the teaching staff to be trained on this new program.

As the day of the professional development training approached, I realized I was extremely nervous. I was reminded of how nervous I had been at the beginning of the year when I did not know many of the school staff, but needed to lead a full-day professional development training. On that first professional development day, I had wanted to make a strong first impression, and wanted to appear as though I knew what I was talking about. Those jitters reappeared each month during our whole group staff meeting that I lead. Now, I was asking
myself why I had volunteered to do this training since none of the other principals were doing it. I reminded myself that it seemed like the right thing to do and that I need to challenge myself to do things that make me uncomfortable but will allow me to grow professionally.

The day of the training arrived and the teachers began filling into our school computer lab. Our lab was filled with older model computers and monitors that were not known to be very reliable. I hoped for the best. What happened next surprised me. I loved teaching the teachers! My first session of the morning went really well. I paid close attention to the timing to make sure I had enough time to get through all of the topics. The teachers really seemed to enjoy themselves and liked the new website program. I was not as nervous for my second and third sessions with different groups of teachers, and by the end of the day, I was exhausted but exhilarated. For years, I had thought that I might someday like to teach adult learners, which is why I entered into a doctoral program in the first place, but I always held onto that small seed of self-doubt that I would not actually be good at it. Teaching my teachers about this technology program reinforced my long-term goal of actually teaching at the university level someday. I was so excited that I contacted the director of technology and actually volunteered to teach the same course during an upcoming professional development day for the entire district.

After that initial technology training day, I gained confidence in myself that I could serve as a technology resource to the staff. I had always enjoyed using technology and I had made it a point to model innovative technology use in my own practice in hopes of inspiring the teachers to try some of the programs or techniques in their classrooms. After the training, many teachers at my school came to me and confided that they were not confident with their own technology skills but really wanted to get better and asked me if I could help them. Technology was now beginning to bond us. One day after school, a third grade teacher came running down to find me:
“Mrs. Klingaman, you need to see this! Come quick, Sandy is using the new website program.”

Sandy was a veteran teacher who wanted to learn but was always a little bit afraid of using technology in her classroom. She had never attempted to use the district’s previous classroom website program, but was now trying to set up her classroom website using the skills that she learned in the training with me. After I arrived in Sandy’s classroom, the teachers and I joked about Sandy trying the new program, but I was secretly thrilled and hoped that my training had inspired her. After that day, it became a little competition around the school of who had their new website up and running and who had the fanciest website with pictures and other extras. Many teachers asked me to come see them before school or after school to give them some one-on-one training time on the new website program while others began to come to me with questions about other technology related issues. It was really nice to feel needed for something productive that could have a positive impact on student learning.

**Wrapping it Up**

Before I knew it, we were planning our end-of-the-year events and celebrations for the fifth graders who would soon be moving on to the middle school. It seems as though once April vacation is over, the remainder of the school year passes by very quickly. In May, we finished our second round of state testing, and this time the testing administration went much more smoothly than the testing that had taken place in March. Knowing what to expect with the testing in this new school environment helped considerably. I thought it was funny that I had administered state testing for seven previous years as an administrator, but being in a new school environment with a greater number of students being tested had caused some confusion. The rules of administration are the same, but how a school handles testing situations varies from culture to culture.
By this time in the year, I had developed a comfortable working relationship with our parent board, and we began to make plans for the upcoming school year. Day by day we were completing the tasks necessary to finish off the school year, and it felt really good to be planning my second summer on the job. I knew this summer would be focused on important tasks such as scheduling, hiring, facility maintenance, and ordering instructional materials. I would not need to spend any time searching for resources, supplies, or information this summer. I recalled the weeks last summer when I had just started in the school. I had no computer, which I rely on for communication and getting work completed. I was afraid to answer the phone because I knew it would be unlikely that I would know the answer to any question being asked. This summer would be comfortable and productive. It was amazing to think about the growth that occurred over a one-year period of time and I was excited to imagine the possibilities for the future.

Findings

**Understanding the History.** The first theme I identified from my experience in chronicling my personal journey of transitioning into my new school environment was the importance of understanding the history of the school. Prior to starting my new job, while finishing work in my previous district, I asked the school secretary and custodians what factors had made my transition successful when I started at the school I would be leaving. They shared with me that the fact that I ate lunch with them every day during my first summer, and listened to them tell the stories of the school, made them feel important and respected. The information they shared with me proved to be crucial as I began to develop the plan of how I would make my transition into my new school and job. I reflected on the hours I spent with a former long-time principal of the school I had led for four years. During the time the former principal generously spent with me, I listened. He told me the tales of the school: the funny stories, the tragic losses,
the tales of the staff, infamous student stories, and all about the ceremonies, traditions, and long-standing values of the school and town. He took me around the town and introduced me to the chiefs of the police and fire departments, the prominent business owners, and to the town hall. He also told me it was important to know where my students would be coming from and took me on a tour of the streets where the students who attended my school lived. I did not realize it at the time, but this man taught me many important lessons that summer. Through his wisdom, I learned to value the culture of the school including its people, values, traditions, and ceremonies. He taught me that understanding the integration of the entire community was crucial in the success of a principal.

When I started at my new school, I attempted to replicate the valuable experience of my previous district, but found that the circumstances were not exactly the same. At my new school, I found that the secretary did not work in the summer, and the custodians did not take a lunch break together. I asked the retiring principal if he would take a drive with me so I could see the geographic area that made up the school community, but he told me that the neighborhoods were all over the place, so he would not be able to show me. After a few unsuccessful attempts to discover some of the history from the retiring principal, it became obvious that this type of discussion was not his style. I did not let this discourage me; I had the tools to find the answers about the school history on my own, and knew I could find out the important aspects of the history of the school through other historians. I also knew that understanding the broader aspects of the principalship such as my relationship with the police department, the fire department, and learning about the individual neighborhoods were crucial pieces in my transition into my new school.
Listening and Observing. One of the major themes that emerged from my autoethnographic research was that I needed to demonstrate strong listening and observational skills during my first few months at my new job. When I began my new principalship in July, one of my main focuses was to observe and listen in order to find out as much about the history of the school, understand the values of the people within the school community, and examine the patterns of behavior of the people in the organization. Although the retiring principal was still working in the school throughout the summer, his style was to let me jump right in and figure things out on my own. I spent a considerable amount of time talking to the assistant principal, who was a native member of the school community, as a person born and raised in town that was now raising her family in town and working in the school department. Through her, I learned about the staff at the school including insights into their personalities and work styles. During our numerous conversations, we discussed the values and beliefs of the school staff and what aspects of the school culture were important to them: the customs, traditions, and ceremonies. My experience in my previous district had been valuable, and I felt that I understood many of the questions that needed to be asked.

Over the first few months on the job, like an anthropologist observing a new culture in their natural habitat, it was important for me to observe how the staff behaved in their “native” surroundings. I watched and listened to the teachers, paraprofessionals, custodians, office staff, parents, students, other district administrators, and community members. Observing how people react to different situations and how staff members interact with one another can offer insights into the customs and values of a culture. I was impressed with the kind and respectful way that the teachers treated the students. On the first teacher professional development day and first staff meeting, I noticed that the teaching staff was very willing to work together in collaborative teams
and treated each other respectfully even if they had differing views. While I was observing the patterns of the staff behavior and the tone of the school, I am sure the school staff was also observing me. Those first few days of school were my first chance to present myself, and my leadership style, to the teachers and paraprofessionals. As much as I was attempting to learn the culture of the school environment from observing and listening to the natives, as the leader of the new culture, my presence and style was already changing the culture in subtle ways. Learning a culture and leading that same new culture are a complicated interplay of variables.

**Learning the Culture.** The more time I spent immersed in the culture, the more observations I was able to make about the school culture itself and beliefs of some members of the organization. Very soon after I started in my new position, I realized that there had been a major upheaval in the culture at the end of the school year in the months before I began. There had been a considerable budgetary shortfall the previous spring that had resulted in major staffing layoffs. Every school in the district had been impacted; retiring teacher positions were not replaced, many paraprofessionals were laid off, and all stipend positions were eliminated from the budget. The budget cuts had been detrimental to the culture of the school, and negative feelings had been prevalent that spring before I started. Also impacting the culture had been the announcement in early May that I would be taking over as principal as of July first. This news came as a shock and disappointment to many staff members who had hoped the familiar assistant principal would be named principal. This was a difficult situation for me to walk into, and I reminded myself that nobody knew me yet and not to take things personally that were out of my control. I could not control the past, but I could control being sensitive to the situation and conflicting feelings that many members of the staff might be experiencing. The culture of the school was in a delicate state, and my awareness of this allowed me to start my tenure at the
school being supportive and moving slowly in terms of changing any major parts of the school operation or expectations.

At a later time, once school began, I overheard a conversation of a staff member who was saying that members of the town community may not trust the new superintendent because she was from out of town. When I heard this, it made me think of the fact that some of the school staff were hesitant to have a new principal who was unknown to them, and someone who was not “from town.” An initial distrust of outsiders was a recurring theme in my new school culture and this theme may even extend to the town community at large. Later, this cultural theme was reinforced when it came time for me to hire an assistant principal as it leaked out that some teachers were hoping I hired someone from within the school. This suspicion of “outsiders” had proven to be a trend in the culture of the school, but not one that new people from outside the school and town could not overcome. Despite the initial hesitancy for staff members to embrace outsiders, I have personally witnessed many of the staff members to be warm and welcoming to new people, myself included. When I began to meet the staff members, they were friendly, made me feel welcome, and made a point to get to know me personally.

**Building Trust.** Once I had settled in to the first weeks of my new principalship, developing relationships became one of the most important tasks at hand. Running a busy elementary school is a group effort and it is essential that all members of the school staff feel supported and that they can trust their principal. It was a strange feeling for me to leave my comfortable school surroundings where I knew all of the staff, parents, and students as well as details of their life that were important to them. I had known the school community and the school community had known me. I had established trusting relationships with the staff and had supported them through the good and the bad during the four years I worked at the school. Not
all situations were easy, but we had developed a relationship together and I knew that most of the school community understood my intentions and goals for the school. Now I was in new surroundings where nobody knew me, and worst of all, nobody trusted me yet. I remember walking out the doors of my old school on a Friday and through the doors of my new school the following Tuesday and feeling that everything had changed. I was starting over and wondered if I would be able to successfully build relationships once again.

Over the first months at my new job, I knew that it was important to build relationships with the staff, students, and parents, and that these relationships would eventually start to build trust. One of the most important ways to build trust is to do what you say you are going to do by following through on your word. I also wanted to prove to the staff members that I had an open door policy and that they could come to me with issues or concerns. My skills in technology allowed me to bond with a few particular teachers when they came to me for help. Some of the teachers expressed to me that they appreciated being able to talk to me about problems they were having in their classroom. The time I spent talking to the different staff members, students, and parents allowed me to get to know each of them personally, and hopefully made them feel that I cared about them. The little things I did all year, over time, began to build trust with members of my new school community.

Conclusion

As I came to the end of this autoethnographical journey, I realized that my story is ongoing. Before the first day of school meeting on my second year in the school, I took a moment to reflect upon the past year. In one year’s time, so much had happened. I remembered how I felt the first summer on the job as I explored and investigated every inch of my new building and how I went about getting to know the people. I remembered feeling vulnerable the
first time I stood before the staff on the first day of school. That was the first moment I was their principal and I wanted to make a good first impression while inspiring and setting the tone for a new school year. At this moment, I realized that while progress may seem slow when we are going through a school year, the time really had passed very quickly. I had influenced many positive changes my first year as I was familiarizing myself with my new surroundings. Educators can be hard on ourselves and it is not often that we take a moment to look back at past successes. I had hired several new staff members who had successful a first year. In our school, every teacher now had a new and reliable computer and monitor in their classroom. The computer lab had been refurbished with new flat panel monitors and an interactive white board. Additional classrooms now had mounted projectors. All of the outdated resources in the cabinets and closets had been cleared out and spaces had been cleaned and organized. Areas of the building had been repainted and murals were added. Curriculum improvements were also happening as we had spent the year preparing for the changeover to the newly adopted state frameworks. Our professional learning community work had increased and we were now ready to delve deeper into student data. I felt proud as I was reflecting on our accomplishments and inspired to continue to work hard with the goal of making our school the best place it can be. Maybe the progress in year two will be even faster and easier since I am now a native in the culture.

I will continue to learn about the new school community that I am now a part of. The longer I am at the school, the more background information I will have about the people, the customs, the ceremonies, and the traditions. I have begun to be a part of the culture myself. The job of a principal is complex and exhausting and our stories and experiences are always developing. One never knows what may happen in a given day at a school; this excitement and
uncertainty could be what draw some of us into the profession of school administrator. I hope that someday I can look back and see that I have made a difference in the lives of the students, teachers, and administrators that I have had the good fortune of working with. The process of writing my autoethnography and chronicling my transition into a new school has provided me with an important perspective that I may not have otherwise gained. I believe that I now have the tools to share with others about how to provide a smooth transition for a new principal into a school, and I will always remember the factors that made the biggest positive difference for me. I find that I am a much more self-reflective person who pays attention to fine cultural details in my school environment. I hope that sharing my lived experience will allow others to plan for a positive transition as they transition into new positions in schools. Whether you are a new teacher or a new administrator, transitioning into a new school environment presents challenges for novice or veteran educators.

CHAPTER 5 : Discussion of Research Findings

Introduction

To answer the research question, “What deliberate plan of action can a new principal follow to successfully transition into a new school culture and environment?”, “a methodological approach for examining personal experience”, or autoethnography, was utilized by the researcher (Neumann, 1996, p. 192). For approximately a one-year period, the researcher as the subject collected data through field notes, a field journal, personal observation, as well as other written documents and artifacts. During this period of transition, the primary research focus was of my personal journey as a principal transitioning from one school district to another. This personal account took place from the time I made the decision to apply for principal positions, to the first months on the job in a new school district.
Revisiting the Problem of Practice

The first days and weeks on the job at my new school revealed that the problem of practice I identified was indeed a real phenomenon. Looking back to my first days, I recall not knowing any of the staff, the students, and the parents. I did not know the answers to simple questions, and I did not have any idea of where to find the documents or resources that I was looking for. Coming in to serve as principal at a new and unfamiliar school environment can be an intimidating and overwhelming process. The high pressures of the job of principal, increased accountability, and the fact that many veteran principals are now reaching retirement age have resulted in a large number of principal jobs opening every year. Every new principal starting in a new school or district will encounter a transition period as they familiarize themselves with the new school culture.

While no generalizations can be made from this study due to singular perspective documented, it suggests that there may be common factors that can be identified as helping in making the transition into a new culture a smooth one. The research themes identified will be discussed later in the chapter. Overall, new principals and school administrators find themselves in a complicated situation when they are transitioning into a new position. From day one on the job, questions are being asked of the new principal and instructional decisions must be made about the school. New principals do not have the luxury of time, or even a “settling in” period. Principals must quickly assess the culture they are entering and acclimate themselves to their new environment. Every new principal wants to make a strong first impression and work towards a smooth transition in leadership for the school staff, students, and parents. Transitioning is not easy, no two transitions are alike, and all schools have a different set of circumstances, beliefs, and history. These variables are what make the transition process
challenging, but not impossible, to overcome. By paying attention to culture, which is at the forefront of the present study, principals may have one strategy for understanding the school and may more easily learn to fit in to the school environment they are leading.

**Revisiting the Methodology**

The methodology selected for this study was an autoethnographical account of a principal transitioning into a new school district over a one-year period of time. This approach was chosen based on the personal, social, and cultural nature of the research question being posed: “What deliberate plan of action can a new principal follow to successfully transition into a new school culture and environment?” The researcher as the subject kept a field journal and field notes throughout the process of transitioning into a new school environment. To supplement the personal account that the autoethnography provided, external data was sought and collected through anonymous written interviews with the teachers and paraprofessionals at the new school as well as in-person interviews conducted with other administrators in the school district who had transitioned into their positions within the past five years. The personal data and the external data provided a balance of information from the non-native perspective (autoethnography) and the native perspective (written and in-person interviews) from members of the school community. Overall, the process allowed a deeper understanding of the transition process and followed Wolcott’s (2003) belief that ethnography provides “description and analysis of human social behavior” (p. xvii).

**Research Question**

At the heart of the study that was conducted was the research question, “What deliberate plan of action can a new principal follow to successfully transition into a new school culture and
environment?” Through reflection on the process of my transition, I have come to the following conclusions to answer my research question.

As a new principal or school administrator, you should pay attention to the culture of your new environment. Observation of the natives in their natural surroundings is a key element of paying attention to this established culture. When you arrive in your new school, conduct a “cultural assessment”. Take a close look at the school itself. Notice how people act and interact, and pay attention to what is hanging on the walls in the hallways, as well as in the classrooms. Discover what the important ceremonies of the school are, and what the school community values. Remember to respect the established culture and be wary of making any change that disturbs the culture.

New principals or administrators may want to consider interviewing the staff, students, and parents at the new school, specifically about elements of the school culture. Schedule a time to sit down with all members of the new school staff individually. Be sure to include questions about “What is the best thing about the school?” “What could be improved upon?” and “What are your expectations for the principal?” Spending time getting to know every staff member will allow you to understand more about the culture of the school as themes may emerge from the answers to the questions you ask. The staff will appreciate the opportunity to sit down with you and have their opinions and concerns heard. Talk to students and parents about their perspective of the school; find out what is working well and what areas could be improved upon.

After arriving in the new school culture, new principals or administrators should try to find the historians, and ask lots of questions. Listen more than you speak. When you arrive in your new school environment, find out who has a strong background into the “tales” of the school. This person could be a present or retired administrator, a veteran teacher, the school
secretary, or a custodian. Finding out the stories about the school will allow you to have a background perspective about the culture and understand why people act the way that they do. The history provides a lens into how the belief system of the school culture was created.

New principals or administrators should focus on development of personal relationships, work to establish credibility, and begin to earn trust. Earning trust does not happen overnight. You may need to earn trust through small deposits in a trust “bank account” during your first weeks and months on the job. Developing relationships with individuals takes time and ways to do that include getting to know about people’s interests in and out of school, and letting people know that they are valued both as an employee and as a person. Following up with what you say you are going to do, make yourself useful, and practice active listening when staff members come to you with concerns is where you can begin to earn credibility with your staff. Be willing to share some information about yourself without “over-sharing” and crossing professional boundaries.

New principals should consider conducting a thorough artifact review and do everything you can to learn about your predecessor. The school improvement plans, the binders of data, and the memos or notices from previous school years can provide a window into the culture of the school and the tone with which people communicated in the past. Understand that what is written down on paper is not always what has actually been happening in practice. You will need to use a combination of what is written on the documents you find as well as your observations about the norms of the school to assess the environment’s current reality.

After starting a new job as a school administrator, you should move slowly with change initiatives. Use your first months and up to one year in a new principalship to observe the ebb and flow of the school year in action. Remember that you are still building trust and credibility
with the staff, and they are already adjusting to one big change; having you as the leader. There will be comparisons about the leadership styles of you and your predecessor, so learn as much as you can about how the previous principal ran the school including daily operations, staff meetings, teacher observations, school council meetings, placement processes, how he or she dealt with conflict, or other key aspects of operating a school. You may come into a position with beliefs about the way things should be happening, but if it is not hurting students, move slowly when making change. Once you have established trust and developed personal relationships, you will have a better sense of how to move forward with change initiatives. Remember to include others in important decisions, as research has shown that shared leadership is an important aspect of school success.

**Theoretical Framework Findings**

In the following paragraphs, I discuss themes that I discovered relative to the Theoretical Framework of the study. The five key components of the study of culture that I utilized as I completed my cultural investigation were described by Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952) as Historicity, Uniformity, Causality, Significance and Values, and Relativism.

**Historicity.** Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952) explain that understanding the history of a culture is an important first step in understanding the culture. To this end, I set out to familiarize myself with my new school: its history, its background as well as the traditions and ceremonies that are valued by the school community. To go about this, I asked questions about the stories of the school to as many people as I could find. The former principal, the assistant principal, the school secretary, the teachers, the parents, the students, other administrators, and community members were the people that I questioned about the history of the school. What I found was that some sources were richer than others, and that principals of new schools need to
be able to practice strong listening and observational skills in their first months on the job in order to sort through and make sense of all the information that is being presented to them.

Throughout the first month at my new school, I was like an explorer. I examined every hallway, classroom, and closet in the building, and cleaned out the clutter in the main office. I repainted and decorated my new office. The school itself was the newest elementary school in the district, but there were obvious signs of disrepair and there were many places in the building that needed to be reorganized. Unfortunately, during the first two months of my new job, the custodial staff was showing loyalty to the former principal who would still be working alongside me all summer, and I did not get to initiate many building improvements. Any improvements that were made were done on my own, after hours, and other projects would have to wait until I hired a new custodial staff at the end of the summer.

One important aspect of my study of the history of the school was the time I spent with the assistant principal. In many ways, she was like my own personal historian. She had grown up in the same town, had worked as a teacher in the school, and had become the assistant principal. She had her own children that had attended the school, and was an expert on all historical information about the school. Luckily, she had a friendly personality and openness that provided me with many hours of conversation about the school. She told me about the staff, students, and parents, about the traditions, and provided me with the background information about the school that I was seeking. She was able to provide me with an insider’s perspective on the culture, and the information she shared likely sped up my transition significantly.

The rest of the history of a new culture begins to unfold through time. As different events come up during the school year, one begins to hear more of the stories and lore of the school. Holidays, special school wide activities, and seasons of the year evoke traditions and
memories of past school years. Time is the variable that one cannot control when assimilating into a new school and time is likely the most important factor in truly understanding the culture of a new school or other environment. With patience, a new member of a culture will learn its history through time spent living or working in the new culture. In my case, the new culture I was attempting to assimilate into was a school community.

Uniformity. Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952) explain that when studying culture, Uniformity speaks to understanding the patterns of behavior of the individuals in that culture or organization. Cultures are fluid and it can be difficult to make broad generalizations about intangibles. Many times, we rely on observations about the behavior of individuals to draw these conclusions. “How do people act here?,” and “what are the norms of behavior?” are questions that someone attempting to learn about a new or foreign culture may ask. Learning about the Uniformity or social behaviors of my new school was something that took me about six months to truly understand. During the first few summer months at my new job, I was alone or with the assistant principal and the classrooms and hallways were empty but for a custodian here or there. There were students or teachers briefly passing through the school, and I was spending time once a week with the other administrators when we met for lunch at a local restaurant. It was not until school began in September that I really began to see the norms of behavior in action. Once the hustle and bustle of the school year begins, the politeness of first introductions begins to wane and people start to show their true colors. Stress, difficult students, problems with curriculum or materials, a challenging schedule, or a lack of appropriate teaching space are all situations that came up with staff members once school began. Some parents were unhappy with the class their child had been assigned to when lists were posted the week before school started. Parents in one particular neighborhood were outraged that the school buses were not able to pick their children
up since new guidelines about busing had been established. As a new principal, I observed how people reacted to these challenging situations, and I asked for feedback from others about how these types of situations may have been dealt with in the past. In the end, I made decisions about how to best solve these dilemmas based on my own personal beliefs and past experiences. In these circumstances, I learned about the *history* of how conflict may have been handled, and I observed the *norms of social behavior* patterns in the school. I used the history as a guide, but added my own perspective on how the situations in the new culture would be handled. Before long, as a new principal, I found myself influencing new norms of social behavior through my style of dealing with conflict.

One example of patterns of behavior or norms that I noted in my first months at the school was the apparent distrust of outsiders that several members of the school community shared on different occasions. I learned through listening to a staff member’s conversation about the superintendent that people in town might not trust her because “she is not from here.” This accidentally overheard conversation became a poignant moment for me when I made the parallel between the superintendent and myself. We are both from “out of town”, and this cultural causality could have perhaps explained why some of the staff at my new school was less than thrilled when it had been announced that I was appointed principal the previous spring. The new school culture I was a part of had a long-standing tradition of hiring from within the community. For many years, the superintendents had been born and raised in town. It was only recently that several administrators had been hired from “outside” of the district. There are many examples of multiple members of the same family working in different capacities in the school buildings. I would later encounter the same attitudes when I was interviewing for assistant principal candidates. It “leaked” out that some staff members hoped I would select the candidate that they
already knew who worked in the school. Since the applicants were confidential, I was able to ignore the rumors I was hearing and select the most qualified candidate for the position. A genuine lack of trust for any outsiders was beginning to emerge as a cultural norm.

This specific area of cultural analysis will take some time to truly understand and change. During the first year, it is essential for new principals to observe and understand the norms and patterns of behavior within an organization. Patterns of social behavior can be positive or negative, and these opinions vary based on the individual style of the person making the observation. Luckily, in my new surroundings, I observed many positive patterns of social behavior and I immediately sensed that my values fit in nicely with the people I would be working alongside in the months and hopefully years to come. When observing negative social behavior patterns, it is essential for new principals to model the behaviors they would like to see and provide consistency in handling challenging situations. Understanding where people are coming from and making informed decisions based on what is best for the students and organization are the first steps in understanding the Uniformity of a new culture.

**Causality.** According to Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952), the Causality of culture refers to the notion that there are many variables that influence culture. Narrowing down specific influences of culture can be a challenging and imprecise task. In looking at Causality, Kroeber and Kluckhohn identify organic and inorganic natural factors, social factors, and other cultural factors. When entering my new school, I consciously pondered the causal influences of the culture that may have influenced the formation of the current culture of the school. In many ways, establishing Causality is like solving a puzzle.

Entering my new school that first summer, I immediately began to identify the fact that recent issues and concerns had shaped the attitude or culture of the school that previous spring.
By talking to different staff members, both from within the school as well from around the school district during the summer, the extent of the budgetary and staffing issues of the previous spring started to become evident to me. Several prominent members of the school staff had been laid off due to district budget cuts. The staff members lost from my new school had been considered leaders of the school and the negative feelings that surrounded their layoff had caused a significant upheaval in the equilibrium of the school. Similar “culture eruptions” were likely happening in other schools across the district since the budget cuts had been system-wide. Teaching staff members had been defensive, hurt, and worried about the impact that these cuts would have on them. Added to these already difficult budgetary issues was the fact that I had been appointed principal despite the hope of some members of the school staff that their current assistant principal would be appointed. My status as an outsider; an unknown entity, did not help matters. The knowledge of all of these difficult feelings made me aware that the culture of the school was in a delicate state. The upheaval that the school staff had felt the previous spring until school ended in June was significant. Understanding the fragile state of the school’s culture had a significant impact on the strategy I used moving forward. I understood that I needed to work extremely hard to earn the trust of the staff, and that I might have to win them over one by one. I attempted to make the school bright, cheerful, and organized for the start of school in September so that the staff members felt a tangible shift in the air. I made sure that I was friendly and welcoming to everyone and attempted to make people feel at ease. After quickly learning the names of all staff members, I started to try to learn something small about every single individual that worked in the school. It was a slow process, but eventually I noticed that staff members began to let their guard down and feel comfortable at school again.
In writing this and reflecting upon my first months at the school, I wonder what would have happened if I had discounted the impact that the layoffs and my surprise appointment had had on the school’s culture. Would my transition have been as smooth and pleasant? There is no way of knowing, but the lesson I learned was that new administrators should take their time in getting to know and deal with the current “hot button” issues within the school. As Barth (2002) advises, principals must be brave enough to “discuss the undiscussables” (p. 8). New principals must quickly find out what those undiscussables are in their new environment.

**Significance and Values.** Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952) consider the Significance and Values of a culture to be of utmost importance because they are social and cultural in nature and the essence of an organization. These areas are also intangible and can be internally subjective but objective in “their expressions, embodiments, or results” (p. 171).

In my ongoing lived experience as a principal transitioning into a new school culture, I believe that it can take a long time to truly understand the values of a culture. As someone who has been a part of this new culture for just over a year, I am only just beginning to see the values of the organization emerge through the different experiences and challenges we are facing as we work our way through another school year. How an organization handles a tragedy, how the organization bands together to assist a family in need, how they work though coming up with a collaborative plan for a student in crisis are all real issues we face in schools every year. I notice that through the challenges that we have faced in my first year, the values of the individual and the collective group continue to emerge.

In the months of November and December of my first year in the school, I initiated a school wide holiday gift drive that assisted approximately ten families in need from our own school. After obtaining permission from the families, the school nurse and I divided up gifts that
we would be collecting for each child. We wrote out anonymous gift tags, and created a bulletin board with the gift tags in the front hallway where the most teachers and parents passed through. The response from the staff was enormous. Staff members removed many of the tags on the first few days, and the parents of the school were equally as generous and excited to help. By the end of the drive, we had collected every gift that we had asked for as well as many additional gift cards for grocery stores. Delivering the bags of gifts and the gift cards to the families in need was a humbling and important experience for the school nurse and me. We were overwhelmed with the generosity of the school community and pleased that we had been able to assist some families in need. The values of the community became evident during this exercise, and we were impressed with how everyone banded together to help a worthy cause.

Identifying the day-to-day values of an organization is an important task for a new administrator. As a principal new to the school, my first inclination in learning about the culture has been to listen and observe. Identifying our own vision and values is a collaborative exercise that cannot be rushed and one that may be best served once trust has been established and one is fully assimilated into the new culture.

**Relativism.** Relativism in a culture study can be described as the objective observations that can be made as one becomes part of the culture. Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952) mention the close connection between culture research and the study of anthropology. They also emphasize the importance of the researcher being present and actively involved in the culture in order to put something into their own data. In the case of my autoethnographical research, I certainly threw myself into being part of the culture and my observations may be objective at times, but the intent of the external data gathered from the teaching staff and other district
administrators was to ensure that my observations are grounded in reality and from a perspective other than my own.

In doing a culture study, the researcher must become an anthropologist sorting through data to better understand the culture around her. The data can consist of field notes, artifacts, documents, or other visual cues. The culture data may also come in the form of observations the researcher makes about the environment through conversations, questioning, and careful listening. When assimilating into a new culture, no two people’s transition from outsider to native will look exactly the same, but the key generalizations one makes about a culture should be similar if different researchers remain objective and look at the big picture.

During the time that I collected data on my autoethnographical study of a principal in transition, I observed from afar the transition of another new principal into our school district. He started at the same time I did and was also an outsider coming into a principalship of an elementary school in the district. Despite the similarities of our situations, the experience of his transition has been very different than mine. Through my observations, I believe the factors that have influenced his transition included the style of the predecessor he was replacing, the personality and values of the teaching staff in his building, his own developing leadership style, and the differences in the clientele of the students and families he serves in his school. This was his first principalship, and I cannot help but wonder if making a smooth transition into a culture comes from practice as well as cultural awareness. Despite the differences in the details of our transitions, it would seem that we both recognized the same key components of a successful transition: listening and observing, learning the culture, building trust, and understanding past influences. Examining a culture through the lens of Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer’s factors in describing a culture has led me to the identification of these essential themes.
The purpose of this autoethnographic research study was to assist principals entering a new school environment with a deliberate plan of action focusing on school culture allowing them to make a smooth transition into their new position. As autoethnography is “an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, as cited in Muncey, 2010, p. 29), external validity was sought in multiple forms. In order to increase trustworthiness and to counterbalance and supplement the personal, autoethnographical data collected, the researcher sought external data through teaching staff written questions and administrator interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The external data from the teachers and administrators already working in the school district provided the researcher with an insider or emic perspective into the new school culture directly from native members of the culture. In the end, the study proved to be both autoethnographic in terms of chronicling the principal’s transition into the school as well as ethnographic as the researcher set out to better understand the social and cultural scene of the new school environment (Fetterman, 2010). According to Chang (2008), ethnographic research attempts to gain a deeper cultural understanding through analysis and interpretation. The difference between ethnography and autoethnography is that the autoethnographic researcher enters the field with a familiar topic (self) while ethnographic researchers enter the field with an unfamiliar topic (others). Through this research into the investigation of both self and others, the intention is to provide readers with the opportunity to self-reflect in their own practice and to present an established framework for success when transitioning into a new school environment.

Peterson and Deal (1999) also suggest that new school leaders continue to investigate additional elements of a school’s culture including leadership, crisis and controversies, people personalities and relationships, birth, death and renewal, changes, modifications, and
adjustments. Understanding the history of the school may be the best predictor about how situations and change may be dealt with in the future. Peterson and Deal explain that “the past not only shapes the present; it outlines the future” (1999, p. 47). New school leaders seeking to investigate the history of the school may choose to do so with a focus on culture and should intentionally ask questions of the natives in the new culture, observe the physical spaces as well as how the natives behave in their surroundings, and practice active listening during their initial weeks and months on the job.

**Literature Review Findings**

Connections to the Literature Review conducted revealed themselves during the process of chronicling my autoethnographical journey as a principal leaving one school district and entering a new school culture. The one-year period in my life was a whirlwind of activities and emotions and had I not been focusing on this process from a research mindset, I fear that many of my observations and personal realizations may have been missed. As discussed earlier, the life of principals in the twenty-first century age is harried and we often fail to prioritize the importance of and need for self-reflection. It may be more accurate to state that we as principals do not have time to self-reflect in this age of accountability and pressure as we attempt to develop and sustain highly successful schools. Taking the time to collect data on the important process of transitioning from one school district to another allowed me to pay attention to many of the specific personal emotions and professional details that were taking place all around me. With my personal journey as the research topic, I became the lead character in a screenplay that was being written with every passing day. I allowed myself to get lost in the process and as a result came away with a deep understanding of the factors and variables that are involved with moving from one principalship to another. The intention of my research was for other new
principals to learn and reflect on the process of transition that I went through. As stated by Wolcott (2003) in his ethnographic study of a principalship, “some researchers want to look around at what people in some other group are doing, what people in their own group are doing, and sometimes at what researchers themselves are doing and feeling” (p. vii). My study followed in the same vein as Wolcott’s study and intended to provide a window into what is usually a private event in a school administrator’s life as they work through the challenge of entering a new school district.

Looking back at the process of my transition into a new school culture as principal, I believe one factor that played an important part in my success is that I had done it once before. I had the benefit the second time around of reflecting upon the factors that led to a successful transition the first time, and I was able to ensure that my second transition included some of these key insights. My relationship with a former principal from my previous school was significant and he provided me with a deep understanding that the principalship is bigger than just managing a school. He taught me that the job of principal is a role that impacts the entire community and success or failure depends on this understanding. The insight that I discovered is that transitioning is easier the second time around and this proved to me that experience truly is the best teacher. The mistakes I have made in my career have taught me lessons more valuable than those I have learned in my educational leadership training. Research identified in the Literature Review surrounding job transitions proved to be relevant to the present study. As shown in the case study by Cocklin and Wilkinson (2011) three factors were shown to play a part in the success of a principal transition; whether the succession was planned or unplanned, whether the incoming principal is an insider or an outsider to the culture of the school, and the experience level and career stage of the entering principal. This study also revealed that the
characteristics and effectiveness of the previous principal and the levels of development of the
school he or she has helped to secure influenced the success of the principal transition. My
personal transition certainly aligned with these findings in that the style of the outgoing principal
played a part in my transition, as did the fact that I had previously transitioned into a
principalship. A strong factor in my transition was that I was an outside coming in and had to
learn everything about the culture of the school.

An important insight that emerged through from my autoethnographical research was the
importance of studying and learning the history of the new school culture I was attempting to
assimilate into. The role and influence of history on school culture has been emphasized in the
existing research. School culture researchers have identified the study of a school’s culture as
one of its most enduring aspects and one likely to predict future behavior. Deal and Peterson
(1999) stated that “the past not only shapes the present; it outlines the future.” As we look
backward at the past, we see that it remains embedded in existing culture” (p. 47). The study of
history as an essential component of a culture study is also aligned with the theoretical
framework of Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952) who compare history to a sieve. During
the process of transitioning into my new school culture, I actively sought out information about
the school’s history from the school’s historians. I believe that by demonstrating an interest in
the history and tales of the school, I showed the veteran staff members that I respected the
culture and the experiences that shaped the school into the special place that it is today. I also
believe that it will be years until I am accepted as a full member of the culture since many of the
school natives were born and raised in town and have later spent their entire teaching careers in
the same schools they attended as youngsters. Gaining a better understanding of the school’s
history has helped me to better prepare for the reactions of the staff to different situations and to
best plan for any change initiatives. Without the perspective of history, it would seem that new principals may be inadvertently setting off land mines that could have been otherwise avoided.

Another insight gained from my autoethnographic research was the importance of listening and observing, which aligned to research in the area of school leadership emphasizing the concept of principals focusing on their listening skills. Houston, Blankstein, and Cole (2007) shared the following advice for “out of the box” school leaders:

One of the greatest gifts these leaders give others in their organizations is committed listening during which they strive to absorb what others have to say without distraction, judgment, or a desire to fix or ‘save’ the speaker. When they do, they cultivate and deepen their appreciation of the human condition, a wellspring from which their wisdom grows. (p. 24)

Listening is also a key aspect of conducting ethnographical research. When examining an existing culture, observation of natives of the culture as well as participant observation plays a key role in fieldwork. Fetterman (2010) emphasizes the importance of immersion in a culture when gathering data including observation and informal questions and interviews.

The concept of learning the culture is not an exact science. There has been considerable educational research surrounding school culture and key components of successful schools (Peterson & Deal, 2009; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Deal & Peterson, 1999). The work of Deal, Peterson, and Bolman continues to be seminal in the field of school culture and the impact of culture in creating successful schools. The school culture research conducted in my study was supported by the work of Peterson, Deal, and Bolman, and strongly influenced by my theoretical frameworks that focused on Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952) essential aspects of culture studies and Cameron and Quinn’s (2011) guidelines for assessing the culture of an organization.
Looking at my new school through a cultural lens proved to be an effective means of learning the environment by actively studying its history, looking at the social implications within the culture, examining the significance and values of the culture, and studying the culture objectively and subjectively as a participant observer. All of these aspects of culture came together to create a thorough understanding of the new culture that continues to develop as even more time is spent in this new culture. The study of culture is fluid and continually developing for those of us who are non-natives.

The conclusions from my study are supported by the research surrounding principal succession and transition, including:

- How the existing teacher culture responds to succession events
- The cumulative effects of successive successions on the teacher culture
- The rate and/or acceleration of succession events
- The stages of the succession process (Hargreaves, et al., 2003, p. 22)

As stated in the research of Clayton and Johnson (2011), during the first year of transition into a new school, principals should “absorb and observe as much as possible prior to implementing swift changes” (p. 27). Clayton and Johnson also assert that, “consistent and effective school leadership directly affects student achievement and are crucial parts of successful schools” (p. 26). Based on the research as well as data collected during my transition process, it appears that an ideal situation occurs when the outgoing principal is able to work closely with the incoming principal in order to facilitate a smooth transition of school administrators. This is not always possible due to the circumstances that surround some transitions, but in cases when both incoming and outgoing administrators are available to work through the succession process together, it can be beneficial for the success of the school.
Hargreaves (2003) states that successful principals can help their successors “by giving careful thought to ‘outbound knowledge,’ not just by developing a careful exit plan” (p. 81). Although not the only variable needed for a smooth transition, creation of an “exit plan” can also assist with setting the stage for principal succession. Overall, it is important for new leaders to understand that the variation in the leadership styles of the outgoing and incoming principals can be significant for the staff members of the school.

**Implications for Practice**

As a principal looking to make a smooth transition into a new school district, I wanted to maximize my chances for success. I wondered if paying attention to culture would make a positive difference when going through the transition process into a new school. What I discovered was that understanding the organization’s history, how the members of the culture interact with each other, what factors have influenced the culture in the past, and the values of the organization were all important factors in learning about and becoming assimilated into a new culture. I was seeking particular strategies and key insights from the other administrators about what factors influenced their transition in order to provide others in the same situation a roadmap for a successful transition. As I chronicled my personal journey of my own transition into a new school, I discovered that there were definite similarities between my own personal experience and the key information that the other administrators shared with me about their transitions.

It became evident while gathering data and going through the transition process of leading a new school as principal that this journey is a personal one and that no two transitions into a principalship will be exactly the same. With that in mind, there seems to be a gap in the current research about where to begin as a principal in a new school. Every school’s culture and
circumstances are different, every new principal’s personality and experience is varied, however, the goal is always the same; new principals want to make a smooth and positive transition into their new environment. I hope that the tale of my personal journey will be able to assist principals in a similar position who may not have been able to articulate that paying attention to culture is an important first step in making a smooth transition.

As practicing administrators, we often hear the term “school culture” but the specific definition and meaning can vary from one person to another. Completion of this culture study from a variety of perspectives allowed me to understand the many levels of school culture. The Theoretical Framework of Kroeber, Kluckhohn, and Meyer (1952) allowed for a deeper understanding of the cultural underpinnings that should be focused on when investigating culture: historicity, uniformity, causality, significance and values, and relativism. These five aspects of a culture study gained meaning as I began to go through the process of assimilating into a new culture and the insights gained fit into these five categories when I began to analyze the process of studying a new culture.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

Several implications for further research became apparent during the data collection process. First of all, I found a limited amount of research specifically focused on school administrators transitioning into a new position. The research I did identify appeared to be mainly focused upon principal leadership skills and characteristics of successful schools. There seems to be a gap in the research in terms of first steps of a new principalship as well as recommendations for principals aiming to have a smooth transition into a new school environment. Investigating the principal in the transition process with school culture in mind is a specific area that may be further investigated by educational researchers.
When I asked the teaching staff the written question, *What qualities are you looking for in an ideal principal or supervisor?*, I found that the answer varied based on the level of experience of the teaching staff. Further research may be warranted that investigates whether what teachers need from their principals changes as they gain years of experience. “Does what teachers need from their principal change as they grow from novice to veteran?” may be a research question worthy of further investigation. Principals may want more information about how to adjust their leadership approach based on the individual experience and of their teaching staff or the quadrant where their school falls on the Competing Values Framework (2011). The specific qualities teachers are seeking in their principals are questions that could be closely examined and investigated.

Through conducting interviews with several administrators in the school district, the topic of developing personal relationships came up frequently. School leaders understand the importance of relationship building at the classroom level between teachers and students. Not only is developing positive relationships important for teachers, but positive relationships between teachers and administrators can also make a significant difference in the success, or failure, of schools. Developing these relationships does not come easily to everyone, and further research may be useful for educators seeking to improve their interpersonal skills in order to maximize their own success in school, from teachers to administrators.

Finally, there is little research available specifically focusing on the process or effectiveness of an elementary principal’s role in creating a positive school culture and the implications that a positive culture can have on student achievement. The levels of culture are varied and the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders influence the culture: the students, the teaching staff, the parents, and the greater community. Today, school budgetary constraints
impact the culture of school organizations and the threat of layoffs or school closings can quickly undo the hard work that has been done to establish a positive and high-achieving school environment. In this era of accountability and twenty-first century instruction, how does an elementary principal strike the perfect balance when attempting to create a highly successful school?

**Final Reflection**

It can be difficult to separate effective leadership and school culture. Educational research has identified the commonalities of effective schools and positive school culture, and principals today need to be keenly aware of the key elements that must be in place to maximize student achievement. Teacher collaboration, innovation, shared decision-making, and common goals and values are just a few of the elements that can assist with creating a positive school atmosphere with high student achievement. Unfortunately, when dealing with publicly funded educational institutions, various constraints, increased accountability, mandates, maintaining a positive culture, and teacher morale can be challenging despite the awareness of what the research tells us about elements of successful schools.

When entering a new school environment or culture, the new principal can feel like a stranger visiting a foreign culture. Becoming a “native” in the new culture is the ultimate goal; however, the critical question becomes: how does one get there? As the instructional leader in an era of high pressure and accountability, principals want to make the smoothest transition possible into a new school environment, unfortunately they do not have the luxury of time when assessing the needs of the new school and determining the vision of the future. The incoming principal needs to find the right balance of observing, learning, and respecting the existing culture and traditions while quietly determining the areas that need to be addressed to improve in
the future. Conducting a cultural assessment through an ethnographic lens proved to be one
effective strategy for assisting in this difficult transition process.
Appendix A

Teaching Staff Written Interview Questions (Questions based on *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture*, Competing Values Framework, Cameron and Quinn, 2011).

Sample script to be stated by interviewer: “Thank you for agreeing to participate in this ethnographic research study that is examining how a new principal is able to transition and assimilate into an established school culture. As a native member of this culture, your insights and feedback will provide a strong background into this school culture. As you already reviewed on your informed consent form, your participation in this research study is voluntary and your identity and the information you share will be kept completely confidential. You may decide to end the interview at any time, and your participation has no bearing on your employment or evaluation.”

Clan Culture

1. What input have you had in developing the school improvement plan or district strategic plan? What input would you like to have?

2. Have you had the opportunity to give feedback to the principal about his/her leadership performance? What qualities are you looking for in an ideal principal or supervisor? What is the best part about [blank] school?

Adhocracy Culture

3. Does the school have a current vision statement? Does it provide direction in everyday instructional decisions and inspire creative initiative?

4. Do teachers/paraprofessionals feel encouraged to be innovative? Is this an environment where risk-taking is encouraged?

Market Culture

6. Describe the ways in which the staff has developed a collective vision, identified core values, and created school-wide and/or departmental goals?

7. What formative and summative assessments are being administered to students across content areas to evaluate performance?

8. How do you feel about the teacher/paraprofessional evaluation tool currently being utilized by the school district? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the tool?

Hierarchy Culture

9. What aspects of the schools operational procedures are not working or frustrating to different stakeholder groups?

10. What internal and external communications are present? What works well and what communication could be improved upon?
Appendix B

Interview Questions (Collected through in-person interviews with other school administrators who have been in the district for five years or less).

Sample script to be stated by interviewer: “Thank you for agreeing to participate in this ethnographic research study that is examining how a new principal is able to transition and assimilate into an established school culture. As a native member of this culture, your insights and feedback will provide a strong background into this school culture. As you already reviewed on your informed consent form, your participation in this research study is voluntary and your identity and the information you share will be kept completely confidential. You may decide to end the interview at any time.”

1. Looking back to when you started working in [blank] school district, how did you transition from your interview to your first weeks on the job?

2. How did you go about familiarizing yourself with the school culture of the school you would be leading as principal or administrator?

3. What were the biggest hurdles during the initial transition process from new administrator to now?

4. What would you do differently about your transition if you had the chance to do it over again?

5. What factors made your transition successful that you would want to share with other administrators in a similar situation of starting a new administrative position?
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DOI: 10.1080/15700763.2010.493633


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