MAKING SENSE OF THE POLITICAL COMPETENCE OF PUBLIC SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL ALTRUISM AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE “BUY-IN”

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School superintendents are charged with the responsibility of organizing and managing human and material resources within a complex system of interest groups and collective bargaining agreements that is largely funded by taxpayers with competing wants and needs. “The superintendency has long been regarded with three traditional leadership frames: the managerial, instructional, and political” (Burry, 2003, p. 8). Through the growing body of literature on educational leadership, we have come to know that successful managing is the coordination of people and resources to produce goods or services in an organization (Sergiovanni, 1996). Similarly, the concept of instructional leadership is well-documented throughout the literature and is indeed a central function for superintendents – even when a bulk of work related curriculum, instruction, and assessment is delegated to leaders with expertise in this area. The third frame, what Burry (2003) describes as political, is largely rooted in the relationships between school superintendents and their respective boards or committees. There is very little research, however, that examines the ways in which school superintendents understand and manage the relationships beyond those with their appointing boards.

On the most practical level, this research endeavor sought to contribute to the knowledge base of school leader preparation by uncovering those strategic processes by which managers or leaders were able to articulate and ultimately realize their altruistic vision of public education within a complex, open system; a system where communication, selflessness, problem management, and strategic planning emerged as some of the essential skills inherent to the political competence that school superintendents need to be successful in their work.

Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2012) approach to understand the lived experience of school superintendents, this study explored
the experiences of four public school superintendents and how they made sense of their experiences in making connections to the external and highly politicized school community – an open system - in order to garner “buy-in” when aspiring to advance their educational agenda. Among the goals of this research was to make sense of how school superintendents understand the connection between agenda-setting and effective school leadership and how political competence – a construct that emerged out of the interview narrative - can lead to change.

Surprisingly, superintendents participating in this study had no background knowledge in or awareness of agenda-setting as a function of political science. Strategies used by the study participants to mobilize stakeholders, communicate ideas, and garner buy-in were all the result of lessons learned on the job.

Emergent themes around: communication, community, experience, giving away success, mentorship, perception, politics, problem management, selflessness, strategy, and trust emerged as a result of the rich discussions that took place with the study participants, most of whom did not aspire to become a school superintendent.
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The Milford Public School district has afforded me the opportunity to pursue this work not only with financial support, but by allowing me to experience, first-hand, the political landscape that a school superintendent must be able to navigate in order to influence meaningful change. The opportunity to practice, reflect, strategize, and practice again over the last 16 years in the community where I learned to become a school leader is noteworthy.

I appreciate the time that I was able to spend talking with and learning from the study participants through the interview and reflective writing processes. I have gained tremendous insight into the political competencies of school leaders who have been successful in garnering “buy-in” in the communities that they served over the years. Because of their insights, a blueprint for effective school leadership in a dynamic and highly political educational system has begun to evolve.

I would like to thank my long-time friend, colleague, and study partner, Brian Reagan, for his commitment to helping me see this project through from beginning to end. The countless Sunday’s in the library, office, and anywhere we could find quiet space, photocopiers, and printers will not soon be forgotten.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Problem of Practice

School superintendents are non-elected, executive and chief administrative officers who are charged with the responsibility of organizing and managing human and material resources within an extremely complex, multi-power political system (Glasman & Fuller, 2002). As a result, they must be able to influence a variety of stakeholders in order to build shared visions of what effective schools look like while at the same time garner support for the resources that are necessary within the public school system in order to realize that vision. Even more importantly, school superintendents must effectively communicate within their broad community organizational system – including taxpayers, elected and appointed officials, among others - why school resources are more of a priority than other town needs within a finite budget.

In their efforts to advance an educated citizenry, however, it is my experience, as a practicing school superintendent, that public school superintendents struggle with local politics in the workplace (Scribner, et al., 2003). As a result, superintendents who are not strong communicators and who fail to engage the wide array of community stakeholders in their vision are likely to be ineffective school leaders. The notion that school leaders must make the necessary connections to their external and highly politicized school community in order to garner “buy-in” when aiming to advance educational agendas is substantiated by a broad review of the literature on this topic (Bader, 1986; Bjork and Kowalski, 2005; Bjork & Lindle, 2001; Brosky, 2009; Lindle, 1999; Dustman, 1998; Lindle & Mawhinney, 2003; Ly, 2009; Muhammed, 2012; Scribner, et al., 2003; Selby, 2000; Sheaff, 2003).

If we accept that (1) democracy is a competitive political system in which organizations within a community participate in the decision-making process (Lindle, 1999) and (2) public
schools are an organization within an open and dynamic community system that is driven by multi-directional communication, then school leaders are therefore inherently political beings.

In this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis it was my aim to understand the experiences of public school superintendents and how they make sense of political competence – how they determine what can and cannot be controlled in the communities they serve, when to take action to persuade others, and how to anticipate who is going to resist or advance the agenda in order to lead educational change in a complex, multi-power political system (Tooms, et al., 2007; Rochefort & Cobb, 1992; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1995; Majone, 1992; Jones, 1984).

Significance of the Problem

According to a study by Glasman and Fuller (2002) cited in the Promises and Perils Facing Today’s School Superintendent, “politics has embodied the position of superintendent since its inception…and the politics associated with the role of the superintendent have several interrelated dimensions” (Cooper & Fusarelli, 2002). The dimensions identified in this study include: the politics of having a nonelected executive of a local political enterprise, the politics of local decision making, and the politics of personal survival for the superintendent. These dimensions were selected to frame the political element of this study which sought to uncover the intersection between educational leadership and workplace politics through the lived experience of public school superintendents.

Guided by the central research question: “How do public school superintendents in Massachusetts make sense of the political competencies needed to lead change in a complex, multi-power political system?” and the overarching theoretical framework of Open Systems
Theory and the political science construct of Agenda-Setting, I thoroughly reviewed the literature around these frames before gaining perspective from the lived experience of school superintendents through personal interviews. The dimensions outlined in the study by Glasman and Fuller (2002) were key to building the argument that is predicated on the belief that: (1) democracy is a competitive political system in which organizations within a community participate in the decision-making process that impacts the internal worlds of schools (Lindle, 1999); and (2) public schools are organizations within an open and dynamic community system that are driven by multi-directional communication. Given those beliefs, coupled with the notion of dimensions posited by Glasman and Fuller (2002), school leaders, namely public school superintendents, are inherently political leaders who must possess political competence in order to lead educational change.

As a function of the literature review, I identified the gap that exists in the scholarship as it relates to the ability of superintendents to effectively manage politics in the workplace. The Open Systems Theory is applied in this study to uncover the information that exists around politics in school leadership where environmental interchanges and interdependence are critical. Reflecting on the lived experience of school superintendents though personal interviews proved to be the pinnacle of this study. Understanding how school superintendents advanced their districts’ educational agenda in the inherently political arena of town governance served to bridge the gap between educational altruism and local governance “buy-in.”

At the most practical level, this study sought to address the ways in which public school superintendents need to understand the local political landscape (sources of political power in the city/town, interests, and competing agendas, etc.) and how that landscape intersects with and
overlays upon the educational agenda that the leader envisions for his community in order to be successful in his role.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this IPA was to understand the experiences of public school superintendents and how they make sense of those experiences as a function of political competence in their communities in Massachusetts. At the early stages in the research, political competence was generally defined as the ability to use *political discourse*, essentially persuasion tactics, and *agenda-setting*, influencing what the public believes is important, to advance educational agendas. This study sought to understand how public school superintendents themselves understand how to prioritize education within the local political agenda. Given that: (1) the researcher is a practicing school superintendent in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; and (2) all interviewees had a unique opportunity to inform a blueprint for educational leadership that considers the largely underdeveloped construct that school leaders are inherently political beings who define educational policies within a broad system that links the external community with the internal worlds of schools, this study will benefit the researcher, participants, and current and aspiring school leaders.

**Research Questions**

Influenced by the tenets of Open Systems Theory and the politics of agenda-setting, this study is framed by two guiding questions:

1. How do public school superintendents make sense of their experiences related to political competence?
2. How do superintendents use political discourse and agenda setting (political competence) to advance educational agendas within their community?

Underscored by the belief that (1) organizations can be structured to achieve system objectives and (2) schools are organizations which are generally considered to be open systems by the very nature of their regular interaction within and among educational stakeholders in a community, the research questions are driven by the Open Systems theoretical framework that is defined by permeable boundaries and an interactive two-way relationship between organizations (Bush, 2003).

Making a connection between the guiding questions and the theoretical framework served this research endeavor well as the Open Systems frame considers interchanges with the environment, both responding to external influences and, in turn, seeking support for the objectives of the organization.

**Theoretical Framework**

“It is the charismatically qualified leader who is obeyed by virtue of personal trust in him and his revelation, his heroism or his exemplary qualities so far as they fall within the scope of the individual’s belief in his charisma” (Eisenstadt, 1968 p. 47).

Indeed, the charismatic leader, if so blessed with the gift of grace, harnesses the potential to engage discussions, even among the unlikeliest of allies, which would not likely take place in a closed system of communication. Working in isolation, as is often the case in school leadership roles, does not allow for meaningful and necessary dialogue to take place among educational stakeholders within a community.
The Venn diagram below shows how the open systems theory intersects with the worlds of school leadership and political science in this study to understand the roles that key stakeholders and interest groups play in a school community in order to drive the local educational agenda. Most school leaders recognize that the agendas of elected and appointed officials may not include the well-intentioned and envisioned ideas promulgated by a school chief who believes that what he or she is doing is in the best interest of children. This study reveals that many school leaders do not understand how to work within a system of competing priorities or have had no prior administrative training to prepare them for the inherently political role they play as an educational leader in their community.

Open Systems Theory

Model of Political Competence (Tremblay, 2013)

**Open Systems Theory.** Based upon the problem of practice that this study sought to investigate, the Open Systems Theory, in addition to the political science literature on agenda setting, served as the theoretical frame. “The open-systems theory assumes that all organizations are comprised of multiple subsystems, each of which receives inputs from other subsystems and turns them into outputs for use by other subsystems” (Encyclopedia of Business, 2013).

As Bagin, Gallagher, and Moore state in their text *The School and Community Relations* (2008), there are people in every community who “exercise considerable control over decisions
relating to social, economic, and political matters” (p.24). Recognizing what the authors call a “power structure” is an integral part of this theoretical frame which seeks, in part, to understand the system of interrelationships within a community where “individuals with vested interests who have the ability or authority to control other people, to obtain their conformity, or to control their services” (Bagin, et al., 2008, p. 24).

The extensive literature on this model defines an open system as an environment where organizations, comprised of multiple subsystems of organizations, each with their own level of power and influence, interact with one another and influence one another in order to sustain themselves while seeking support for the objectives of the organization (Bolman and Deal, 1991; Bush, 2003; Bastedo, 2004; Lunenburg, 2010). In an open system, environmental interchanges are encouraged. Organizations, like schools, respond to external influences and similarly those same organizations rely on the external forces to provide them with the resources they need in this two-way model (Bush, 2003).

Systems, according to Bush (2003), emphasize the unity and integrity of the organization and stress unity and coherence of the organization. The development of policies and the promulgation of rules, an organizational objective within the systems frame, flow directly from the political science realm where my experiences and interest in public policy lie. Understanding the interaction between politics and school leadership in a way that moves beyond policy rhetoric and encourages environmental interchanges is important to this study.

The Open Systems Theory is framed by five critical elements: (1) Inputs – environmental resources such as: human resources, physical resources, and information resources; (2) a transformation process – how the organization’s operational system is structured and managed; (3) outputs – demonstrated results of the organization driven largely by goals and objectives; (4)
feedback – identified areas for improvement which may directly impact input, transformation process, and output elements; and (5) the environment – the social, political, cultural, legal, and economic forces that directly impact and influence organizational decision-making, management, and outcomes (Scott, 2008; Lunenburg, 2010).

In their book, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) acknowledge that issues treated within interest-group environments emerge on the public agenda relatively often, as a result of the expansion-of-conflict model first proposed by Schattschneider (1960). This study builds upon that construct, looking at agenda-setting from the perspective of the public school superintendent - the altruistic educational leader and an interest-group unto himself - to target those political competencies necessary for superintendents to manage the educational agenda and influence the community environment in an open system model.

**Agenda-Setting.** Having a working knowledge of agenda-setting - what decision-makers are paying attention to at any given time (Kingdon, 1995) - in addition to the literature base surrounding problem recognition, measurement, formation, and the refinement of policy proposals (Schattschneider, 1960) within the “window of opportunity” as school administrators strive to gain control of the educational agenda within a community’s political landscape (Kingdon, 1995) was necessary. Prior work as a student of public policy, coupled with studies and experiences as a school superintendent who regularly monitors changes in the political stream in the community, led me, as a researcher, to bridge the two worlds of educational leadership and political science through this doctoral project.
Agenda-setting is an important concept in the political science realm and served this study well where matters of persuasion are discussed in the environmental element of the open-systems construct. While there are a number of aspects of the vast body of political science literature that could apply to a paper on the political competence of school leaders, agenda-setting was central to this study.

In their book on leadership, *The Wizard and the Warrior: Leading with Passion and Power*, Bolman and Deal (2006) describe key positional strategies for school leaders which served this research endeavor well. The definitions of authority, access, and visibility, as presented below, serve as an excellent link to the political science literature and discourse on agenda-setting. As a matter of “getting things done,” Bolman and Deal (2006) identify these essential elements:

**Authority:** The right to make decisions that are binding on those within the scope of your office.

**Access:** Ability to get the ear of key decision makers and to get a seat at the table when important decisions are made.

**Visibility:** The “bully pulpit” that makes it easier to get people’s attention and make your point. (p.82)

For generations the public school has tried to uphold the idea of keeping politics out of education and education out of politics. It has done this on the assumption that the school as a nonpartisan, classless, and social institution should remain apart from the political life of the community. As meritorious as this may seem on the surface, the truth is that
the school cannot and should not separate itself from the political scene (Bagin, et al., 2008, p.22).

In summary, Open Systems Theory coupled with agenda-setting, provided the necessary framework for this study to better understand the problem of practice in a local context as well as in the larger picture by discovering what the literature provides about the political competence of public school superintendents and the need for environmental interchanges as the support mechanism for the objectives of the public schools they serve in order to be effective school leaders.

As this study will demonstrate, community support for a well-constructed educational vision can be garnered in any school community provided that a politically competent school leader - someone who understands how to effectively persuade and influence others – can prioritize the educational agenda.
Chapter II: Review of the Literature

The superintendents of schools in America have one of the most responsible and complex roles in modern society. The superintendents’ role makes them central to the welfare of their communities, and they are often very visible within their communities, but their job is rarely understood. Superintendents play a political role balancing the desires of parents and taxpayers, staff and community, liberals and conservatives, and religious and secular interests (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

Literature reviewed in this study is broken into two components: Educational Leadership and Political Science. As a student of both educational leadership and political science at the graduate level and as a practicing school superintendent, I am constantly relying on what I have learned in both disciplines to effectively manage the daily responsibilities associated with leading a school district within a community that uses more than half of its budget supporting educational programming.

Garnering support for education in a complex system of competing community and political interests requires skills that transcend what is learned in educational leadership courses. The study of political science readily lends itself to education outside of the public policy realm and arguably can significantly (and positively) impact a school superintendent’s ability to effectively lead a school district.

By linking the critical readings of educational leadership as they relate to organizational management and the agenda-setting literature from the field of political science, this study used the lived experiences of school superintendents to bridge the two fields of study.
Public Education

The purpose of public education in America may be defined and described in many ways. Agreement as to exactly what the purpose of American public education is, or whether there are competing purposes, is infrequently at the core of discussions about how public education should be improved. Instead, politicians, policy makers, and educational leaders often jump to addressing symptoms and particular problems in isolation from an overarching purpose or set of purposes (Damon, 2005).

In order to arrive at an ideal of public schooling, it is important to understand the educational purposes the school should seek to attain, how the learning experiences that are likely to be useful are best selected, how those experiences can be organized, and how we can assess them in an environment that is the rich learning environment that leaders envision and which the myriad of constituencies will embrace – both philosophically and financially.

Part of the problem, however, may be a school leader’s inability to effectively communicate an overarching purpose of their educational vision which could, in effect, help them to manage the politics around the issue – whether perceived or real. For the purpose of this study, communication is the central educational leadership skill that will be explored.

Educational Leadership

In his dissertation on emergent theories and perceptions of successful educational leaders, Owen Sweatt acknowledges that “in an open systems approach to leadership, the focus is on the human-environment and organizational development” (2002, p.5). Consistent with the theoretical frame of this study, Sweatt’s (2002) dissertation recognizes that within an open
system, “leaders make few choices on their own; instead, various influences and voices guide them” (p.5).

The literature is replete with evidence that district-level leadership in education has become less about pedagogy and much more about managing the range of personalities, priorities, and politics in a dynamic system of limited resources and competing wants and needs (Annunziato, 2008; Björk & Lindle, 2001; Lindle, 1999; Ly, 2009; Muhammed, 2012; Sheaff, 2003; Scribner, Aleman & Marcy, 2003; Tooms, Kretovics & Smialek, 2007). In his writing on culture and leadership in educational administration, Richard Bates asserts that “school leadership has shifted from a culture based in the cultural politics of school communities and the pedagogical requirements of teaching, to a culture based in the cultural politics of capital accumulation and the pursuit of efficiency” (2006, p. 157).

Leadership, according to Bagin, et al. (2008), “is a relational concept implying two things: the influencing agent and the persons who are influenced” (p. 21). An effective superintendent may be described as a person who has the ability to build capacity within the organization (Leithwood, 2006) and within the open system more broadly (Sanders, 2002). An effective superintendent is someone who is able to at once inspire, motivate, stimulate respect, and genuinely values those stakeholders who have a role within the open system, but who can do so without creating enemies or distrust (Sanders, 2002).

“To be motivational,” Leithwood (2006) writes, “people must also believe themselves to be capable of accomplishing these goals (whether or not they actually are)” (p. 206). Though this claim touches upon an element of persuasion which is discussed later in this literature review and throughout the study, Leithwood’s assertions around motivation link directly to capacity-building and distributed cognition, a theory which considers each member of a well-functioning
group to have some of the same understandings about the collective work and constraints within
which the group must function (2006), and are enmeshed with how organizations within an open
system must engage in order to be effective.

Building capacity within an open system where schools become engaged partners with
local government and vice-versa is a function of what Leithwood (2006) categorizes as
*Redesigning the Organization*, where collaborative school cultures are developed, where
structures to foster participation in school decisions are created, and where productive
community relationships are nurtured (Leithwood, 2006). “To acknowledge the school as a unit
of change, for example, implies that its capacity is more than the sum of its individual members’
capacities” (Leithwood, 2010, p. 207).

An effective superintendent is further characterized by what Fullan (2010) calls
“Resolute Leadership” (p. 65). Resolute leadership is about purpose and action and building
positive working relationships within the community. Resolute leadership is “an organization or
system phenomenon – literally the organization pursues reform and its results relentlessly”
(Fullan, 2010, p. 65).

In his book *Leadershift*, Gobillot (2009) argues that the commitment a leader shows to
the community that he serves is what creates his reputation. Reputation, rather than position, is
what makes the leader strong and able to inspire and motivate as Sanders (2002) asserts. “What
creates a reputation is the commitment the leader has shown the community rather than the
effectiveness by which they have made it work for their benefit” (Gobillot, 2009, p.83). When a
reputable school superintendent works with community leaders and presents himself as someone
who is trustworthy and who sincerely values stakeholders within the open system, relationships
can be formed and sustained that will allow the school leader, as a representative of his
community, to effectively position the school district for a prominent place on the public agenda.

Relationships and the role the superintendent plays in building relationships within an
open system is characterized well by Ogawa and Bossert (1995):

…leadership is embedded not in particular roles, but in the relationships that exist among
the incumbents of roles. By shifting attention to relationships, this assumption now
suggests that organizational members can draw on resources to which their roles provide
access to influence others who require those resources to enact their roles successfully.
That success, from the institutional perspective, takes on the form of social legitimacy
and, consequently, organizational survival (p. 234).

Having a shared vision for education among stakeholders, including those who value
education but compete for priority on the public agenda to advance other community initiatives,
is critical within the open system. Getting to the point where there is consensus on the
educational needs within a community, however, requires the superintendent to work as a
political strategist among the competing interests while simultaneously acting as a professional
advisor to the school board (Björk & Lindle, 2001). The inert community is, according to Björk
and Lindle, “inherently conservative, but also relatively inactive. The board accedes to the
superintendent’s proposals as long as such proposals do not disturb the status quo” (Björk &
Lindle, 2001, p. 81).

When school superintendents can nurture a shared vision around education within their
communities, without the deliberate manipulation of others (Gobillot, 2009), then community
members will have a voice – a decided value that they have about the importance of education.
How that value translates into community influence and action is largely dependent upon the reputation and communication skills of the superintendent.

**Educational Altruism**

Educational altruism, for the purpose of this study, is the grand vision of the school superintendent. The perspective of what the critical needs are of the school system to effectively prepare students for the rigors of post-secondary learning and to equip them with the essential skills they need to be productive members of society. Educational altruism, in part, is when there is “clear direction and relentless focus on student achievement through instructional improvement in the classroom” and when resources are allocated and sustained in order to “support the teaching and learning core of the district’s work” (Fullan, 2010, p. 36).

In his book *All Systems Go: The Change Imperative for Whole System Reform*, Michael Fullan (2010) discusses four components of sustainability when building collective capacity at the school and district level. “Above all,” he writes “moral purpose [raising the bar, closing the gap, and holding high expectations for all] must be self-consciously and explicitly played out through the four components” (Fullan, 2010, p. 62):

1. Establish a large critical mass of ‘beyond expectations’ work;
2. Grow, select, recruit, and develop talent consistent with the culture;
3. Take risks and pay attention to detail while cultivating innovation; and
4. Secure the district in its own context – work tirelessly to create new capacity to strengthen relations and engagement with parents and the community.
Interpersonal Communication

According to the Mid-Decade Study prepared by the American Association of School Administrators, the superintendency is an increasingly “people” type of position with superintendents saying that lack of interpersonal communication skills is the factor most limiting their effectiveness. At the same time, they say that presence of interpersonal communication is the most important factor helping their effectiveness (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Kowalski, 2005).

Fullan asserts that “the power of collective capacity is that it enables ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things” (2010, p. 72). We have come to know that successful collective capacity building and managing is the coordination of people and resources to produce goods or services in an organization (Patterson, 1993; Fullan, 2010), but we must consider the process by which a manager or leader finds such success. Educational Altruism – a term which I have coined for this study and what I consider to be the charge of school leaders who are entrusted by their communities to provide a rich educational environment to students and which is fully funded by the community – requires vision, resolute leadership, and effective communication.

In his article Characteristics of School Districts that Are Exceptionally Effective in Closing the Achievement Gap, Leithwood (2010) argues for building close ties with groups within the community as access to these stakeholders, particularly when financial support and human capital is sought, is contingent upon the quality of relationships that the superintendent establishes with individuals and groups within the community.

The ways in which a superintendent communicates with his constituencies, whether as employees of the school district or as officials at the local, state, and federal level, constantly
affects the public perception of education in his community (Bagin, et al., 2008). Perceptions, opinions, or held beliefs about the value of public education can profoundly influence the way in which the critical work of educating children is supported in a community.

In their book *The School and Community Relations*, the authors suggest that “as a working rule, we should think of public opinion as a collection of individual viewpoints held more or less in common by members of a group regarding some person, condition, or proposal” (Bagin, et al., 2008, p. 12). But how does a superintendent influence public opinion? What are the key leadership skills needed to effectively persuade others? This is the rich narrative that will surface through hours of dialogue with experienced and highly successful school superintendents.

**Political Science**

“The superintendency has been described as requiring great political savvy and skill (Blumburg, 1985; Johnson, 1996), but the types of political dilemmas and power building strategies are not well understood” (Annunziato, 2008). Indeed there are politics associated with bringing together a wide array of interest groups in an effort to achieve community support for meaningful education reform, yet “little research exists on how superintendents learn political skills as educational leaders of school districts” (Annunziato, 2008). In fact, in their study on *Superintendents and Interest Groups*, Björk & Lindle (2001) state that “practitioner-designed programs offer no more significant approaches to the complex dimensions of political influence and school leadership. Such programs prefer standards and topics that barely address politics as part of a miscellaneous collection of environmental influences” (p. 87).
In her book, *Policy Paradox*, Deborah Stone writes “Ideas about politics shape political alliances, and strategic considerations of building and maintaining alliances in turn shape the ideas people espouse or seek to implement” (Stone, 2002: 34). The problem, as Schattschneider (1960) describes, is “how to organize the political system so as to make the best possible use of the power of the public in view of its limitations. A popular decision bringing into focus the force of public support requires a tremendous effort to define the alternatives, to organize the discussion and mobilize opinion” (p. 136).

Critical to mobilizing opinion is identifying and understanding power structures (Bagin, et al., 2008; Björk & Lindle, 2001) within the open system. A power structure, as Bagin, et al. (2008) assert, is “an interrelationship among individuals with vested interests who have the ability or authority to control other people, to obtain their conformity, or to command their services” (p.24). Being able to identify and understand power structures, however, is insufficient by itself to effectively influence the community’s prioritizations around education.

“Responding to demands from multiple and diverse groups and graciously enduring criticism require more than street-level political savvy. They require understanding the purpose of public education and acuity for achieving balance through democratic processes” (Björk and Gurley, 2005, pp. 163-164).

**Local Governance “Buy-In”**

In public education, a broad range of stakeholders constitute local governance, including legislators, town officials – including school superintendents, elected and appointed positions within the community, and taxpayers – and they all play an important role in the quest to achieve the balance that Björk and Gurley (2005) describe.
The notion of “buy-in,” an idiom with no literal meaning, signifies general agreement or support for an idea or decision. In this collaborative model within an open system, this study suggests a structure which moves beyond cooperation among organizations within the system. “Collaboration implies shared budgets; joint accountability for results; integrated professional development activities; and the development of new relationships across branches of government, among government agencies, and between state and local units of government” (Harvey, et al., 2013, p.236). Moving from a superintendent’s articulation of an education ideal that could translate to improved outcomes for schools to actually getting support from a broad range of community stakeholders to realize that ideal within an open system requires calculated communication. The most effective collaboration, Harvey, et al., write, is grounded in the question of “what can we do together for the people we are supposed to serve?” (Harvey, et al., 2013, p.236). Understanding how school superintendents make sense of their practice as collaborative leaders who innately frame their actions by this question is among the gaps in the literature that this study sought to bridge.

Beverly Parsons and Sharon Brumbaugh (2013) identify critical elements that are required to make collaboration work:

- **Start with numbers.** You need to build data into your plans to monitor the condition of children and families, and you need to tie data to specific benchmarks of achievement.

- **Think systems, not programs.** Build boats, not houses.

- **Adopt collaboration as a way of life.** Collaboration implies shared budgets, joint accountability, integrated professional development
activities, and the creation of new vertical and horizontal relations with other government agencies.

- Engage the public on its own terms. Don’t give the gobbledygook to the public. Develop strong, clear, two-way communications strategies.

- Develop capacity. Horizontal linkages with your agency peers are one thing. Vertical linkages up and down your different agencies are something else again, and much harder.

- Create a critical mass of people who care. You have to find the right people and invest in them. When you move on, you want this new way of thinking to survive.

- Beg, borrow, and steal effective ideas. Everything in public life is in the public domain. You’re free to steal it. Do so shamelessly if you see something working.

- Follow the money. Talk about system reform is cheap and easy. Make sure that real budget resources are put behind the rhetoric.

- Insist on results. This is tough work. If you’re going to get into it, you have to be serious. Insist on results, assess progress, and report to the public.

- Give ownership away. There’s truth to the axiom that, if we don’t care who gets the credit, there’s no limit to what we can accomplish. Give the credit away, and it will all come back to you.
• **Model the behavior you seek.** You can’t expect your people to cooperate with other agencies if you refuse to give the time of day to your peers in local government.

• **Be a practical visionary.** Visionaries have to be practical, too. You have to have your feet on the ground. Develop an effective plan that provides some demonstrable results in a year or two.

The Superintendent’s Fieldbook: A Guide for Leaders of Learning
(Harvey, et al., 2013, p.257)

As it turns out, the sort of communication necessary for school leaders to truly be collaborative and simultaneously effective in their roles is persuasion, an arguably more tactical approach to garnering public support than a function of simple public relations. Persuasion, in this regard, is an approach that demands certain skills and which are beyond those leadership competencies that would otherwise be expected of school leaders.

**The Ultimate Political Competency: Persuasion**


Micropolitics is about power and how people use it to influence and to protect themselves. It is about conflict and how people compete with each other to get what they want. It is about cooperation and how people build support among themselves to achieve their ends (1991, pp. 1-2).
Understanding conflict and how the nature of conflict determines the scope of public involvement is important for school leaders who believe their vision and educational agenda is worth advancing within a community. Without understanding the value of conflict, school leaders may miss an opportunity to advance their vision for fear of creating conflict in their community when by its very nature the conflict may be exactly what is needed to bring about their goal.

The political science literature base around conflict provides terrific insight for educational leaders and emphasizes the importance of paying attention to changes in public interest in order to better understand important public problems. But why is conflict important? Baumgartner and Jones provide this insight:

In the absence of conflict, issues are likely to reach the agenda only through what we have termed a mobilization of enthusiasm. For issues considered within consensual interest-group environments, in other words, we should expect that normally they would be treated far from the glare of public attention, that they would more often be able to maintain a combination of positive tone and low attention – the class subgovernment...This same thinking leads us to expect that issues treated within the interest group environments marked by intense conflict should less often be able to maintain their independence from broader political forces, and that they should emerge on the public agenda relatively often, as a result of the expansion-of-conflict model first proposed by Schattschneider (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993, p. 179).

Simply raising a concern or manipulating a problem (Rochfort and Cobb, 1992; Stone, 2002) or perpetuating conflict (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Schattschneider, 1960) however does not
imply a solution. Applying Schattschneider’s (1960) conception of conflict expansion, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) argue:

Losers in a policy debate have the motive to change the roster of participants by appealing to those not currently involved in the debate. If they can appeal to the right group of potential participants, they may be able to change their losing position into the winning one, as more and more people become involved in the debate on their side (pp. 35-36).

Expanding the conflict around an educational issue in such a way that that demands public attention while at the same time advances the superintendent’s agenda by attracting a group of potential participants who believe in that vision is where charismatic leadership becomes a necessity. As mentioned in chapter one, it is the charismatic leader who harnesses the potential to engage discussions, even among the unlikeliest of allies, which would not likely take place in a closed system of communication.

Taking what we have come to understand about educational leadership, specifically the ways in which an effective superintendent can build capacity within an organization (Bagin, 2008; Leithwood, 2006; Fullan, 2007); Applying what the Schattschneider (1960) and others from the political science realm have written about problem definition (Stone, 2002), the mobilization of conflict (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993) and agenda setting (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1995); and understanding the potential of a what charismatic leader can do as a school leader in an inherently political open system, it stands to reason that an exploration of the literature around persuasion would be time well spent.
The six principles of persuasion, according to Sarah Cliffe, Professor Emeritus at Arizona State University, and consultant Robert Cialdini (2013) are:

1. **Liking** – If people feel warmly about you because you and they have things in common (or they think you like them), they’re more persuadable;

2. **Reciprocity** – People tend to return favors. We are given serious persuasive power immediately after someone thanks us;

3. **Social Proof** – People tend to do what they see others people doing, especially people with whom they have a lot in common. When people see themselves as part of a larger group that has a shared identity, they are willing to take steps they wouldn’t take for their individual interests;

4. **Commitment and Consistency** – People want to be consistent. Keep promises and take time to check on progress;

5. **Authority** – Most people defer to experts and those with power. The trick is to get others to promote your idea or your authority;

6. **Fear of Loss** – People fear what they might lose. Show them what they will lose if things don’t change.

In their book on working with teachers, parents, students, and the community, authors Brandt. W. Pryor and Caroline R. Pryor (2005) state that “once you know what qualities someone believes an object possesses and how the person evaluates each quality, you know what information you need to provide in influence the person’s attitude in the desired direction” (p. 28).
Certainly, the study of persuasion and influencing attitudes – a positive, negative, or neutral affect toward some object - is a comprehensive study unto itself. It is, however, worth highlighting how attitudes are influenced as a function of this study as this element of persuasion is explored in the conclusion of the study in the context of the lived experience of the study participants. Persuasion, in fact, emerged as an unspoken, but regularly practiced art among the study participants.

Understanding how individual or even group attitudes about objects or ideas, like a school improvement proposal for example, can be most effectively influenced toward a desired outcome is a critical skill (Pryor & Pryor, 2005). Applying that knowledge in way that mobilizes people within a community – within an open system where schools and other town agencies compete for a limited cache of resources – to prioritize education on the collective community agenda is an essential political competency for a school superintendent.

Public Education and Community Engagement: A Dynamic System

Schools are organizations within an open and dynamic community system that is driven by multi-directional communication. In her article What can the Study of Micropolitics Contribute to the Practice of Leadership in Reforming Schools? Jane Lindle writes: “school level decision-making integrates the competing demands of external constituencies and internal factions among teachers” (Lindle, 1999, p. 176). For many taxpayers or other educational stakeholders, schools are the most accessible part of local government. “With more personal contact, the school setting is more political due to the increasing and competing demands placed on schooling. The intimate relationship between schools and communities creates micropolitics” (Lindle, 1999, p. 173).
The central idea behind public engagement is not public relations, but getting the public to own its own schools. If local citizens don’t feel that deep in their bones, you will not be able to count on public support when you need it. It’s important, therefore, that you get your local community thoroughly engaged, connected, and deeply committed to its schools (Harvey, et al., 2013, p. 261).

About the only way the school superintendent can avoid political leadership is to take no action on his own to influence educational policy. However, since such as role is improbable and, professionally speaking, unthinkable, one must suspect that public education is by its very nature political and those involved in its management are politicians any time they seek a decision by the political process (Kimbrough, 1964, p. 274).

The four key strategies: (1) building public awareness; (2) involving the communities and constituencies they serve; (3) maximizing existing resources while leveraging new ones; and (4) developing strategic alliances and relationships across sectors (Schattschneider, 1960) are explored through the interview process described later in this study.

The political science literature on agenda-setting, what Kingdon (1995) defines as what decision-makers are paying attention to at any given time and “windows of opportunity” - those calculated moments of punctuated equilibrium when the language and persuasion of politics can influence the public agenda are the second body of literature that this study explores (Kingdon, 1995; Rochfort & Cobb, 1992; Schattschneider, 1960).

Understanding educational leadership within a political system where leaders and organizations engage the public in the decision-making process is a concept beyond what is
taught in school leadership preparatory programs. In their book *The Superintendent’s Fieldbook: A Guide for Leaders of Learning*, the authors discuss the impossibility of the governance structure within which the superintendent must function. They write: “You are simultaneously an educator, manager, budget maker, public servant, politician, community leader, and local preacher. In each of these roles, you are subject to second-guessing by everyone around you…” (Harvey, et al., 2013, p. 22).

Public engagement is really a two-way deal between you and your local community. It’s basically a conversation in which the agreement is this: I will listen respectfully to what you have to say as long as you hear me out (Harvey, et al., 2013, p. 262).

Informed by a collection of authors, I have summarized the key concepts around public engagement:

1. **From Public Relations to Public Engagement**

   Authors Bertha Pendleton and Richard Benjamin maintain that “true public engagement requires developing strategies that involve all sectors of a community in ongoing deliberations that build common ground for effective solutions (Harvey, et al., 2013, p. 262)

2. **Listening to Your Public**

   Author James Harvey states that “the public is anxious, and educators have to pay attention to that anxiety” (Harvey, et al., 2013, p.263).

3. **A Seven-Stage Model of Engagement**

   Author Will Friedman cites Daniel Yankelovich’s seven-stage model as a powerful tool for superintendents to understand how citizens in a community behave around public issues. “Once you understand these seven stages,” Friedman says, “you will
be in a better position to track how raw, unstable opinion evolves toward stable and responsible public judgment” (Harvey, et al., 2013, p. 266).

**Seven Stages of Coming to Public Judgment**

**Consciousness-Raising Stages**

1. **Awareness**
   A dawning awareness that something is at issue, often the result of media coverage or the efforts of advocacy groups.

2. **Urgency**
   What sets this issue apart from the many issues clamoring for attention.

**Working-Through Stages**

3. **Looking for Answers**
   People gravitate to the first attractive solution they encounter.

4. **Resistance**
   Wishful thinking and denying the existence of trade-offs

5. **Choicework**
   Where serious consideration is given to alternative solutions

**Integration Stages**

6. **Initial, Intellectual Acceptance**
   Accepting an idea or direction in theory

7. **Moral Commitment**
   The point in the seven-stage journey at which the community has reached moral acceptance – full support.
In tandem with the literature around conflict and public engagement, it is important to understand persuasion as a communication strategy that considers: the nature of the power structure and the way decisions are made in a community; the expectations of stakeholders regarding education; situations to be avoided based on the history of conflict in the community; identification of individuals and groups who are friendly or unfriendly toward education; the channels through which public opinion is built in the community; and the identification of leaders and those who influence others in the community (Bagin, et al., 2008).

In her dissertation, *Testing the Relationship Between Interpersonal Political Skills, Altruism, Leadership Success and Effectiveness*, Moss defines interpersonal political skills as “one’s ability to accurately assess social situations, communicate in a manner that is believable, network both inside and outside of the organization and use influence effectively” (2006, p.14). Capturing the lived experience of study participants gave credence to Moss’s research and helped to weave the construct of interpersonal political skills into the more broad construct of political competence.

**Democracy: A Competitive Political System**

If we accept that democracy is a competitive political system in which organizations within a community participate in the decision-making process (Lindle, 1999; Schattschneider, 1975), then it stands to reason that school superintendents – the chief executive of a typical community’s largest cost center - need to have a solid grasp on how political systems and conflict function and are managed within that community.

Public school superintendents need to understand how to define issues or problems in the development of conflict (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994) because, as Schattschneider (1975) asserts,
the outside audience does not enter the fray randomly or in equal proportion for the competing sides. “The definition of alternatives is the supreme instrument of power” (Schattschneider, 1960, p.68) and school leader’s ability to characterize and educational issue or problem while at once defining the alternative as one that is proximal (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994) – hitting close to home – gives the public school agenda a sharp political edge.

According to Bagin, et al. (2008), if educational leaders are to successfully garner public support, “they need to acquire a sophisticated understanding of political realities - they should seek this understanding through a somewhat detailed study of the political structure and the political process within the local area” (p. 22).

In his chapter on the uniting of politicians and professionals, Fullan writes:

When it comes to democracies, everybody is on the high ground. There is no more room for superiority. Politicians want to get reelected and do good – in that order. Union leaders want to look after their members and do good – again, in that order. But if we can find a way whereby self-interest is met, people will rise to the bigger purpose. In fact, they will embrace the wider goal because to do something good for others is an intrinsically self-satisfying goal for most of us. After basic needs are met, altruism becomes a personal and collective goal that humans find deeply meaningful. (Fullan, 2010, p. 95).

In their research, Björk & Lindle (2001) reveal that “the tendency of superintendents to assume roles not aligned with community power distribution offers insight into the persistence of superintendent and board conflict and suggests some disturbing prognoses with the increasing insertion of interest group politics at the local level” (p. 86). Making sense of the political
competence of public school superintendents is an important step toward addressing the unanswered question posited by Björk & Lindle (2001): “Why do superintendents, in the face of abundant folklore and scholarship on the politics of the superintendency, repeatedly report adopting strategies ill-suited to addressing political pressures?” (p. 86). As Jane Lindle reminds us:

Today, education is a more overtly contested terrain for communities and governments, teachers, parents, and administrators. Schools have become more overtly political arenas in this contest. The study of micropolitics is absolutely a question of survival for school leaders and other educators. Indeed, most practicing school leaders are already astute, or even unwitting, students of micropolitics. Not only is the study of micropolitics inevitable, advisable and unavoidable, for most school leaders, it is an inherent occupational requirement (p. 176).
Chapter III: Research Design

Position power is important, but it is never enough. Organizations and societies are networks as well as hierarchies, and the power of relationships is a crucial complement to the power of position. In simple terms, network power amounts to the power of your friends minus the power of your enemies (Bolman & Deal, 2006, p. 85).

By understanding how school leaders understand, apply, and capitalize on the construct of network power as posited by Bolman and Deal (2006), this research endeavor was designed to better understand how public school superintendents use educational visioning and persuasion, elements of political competence as defined in this study, in order to advance the educational agenda in their communities.

Purpose of the Study

This study is an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012) aimed at gathering information from the “lived experience” of public school superintendents and making sense of those experiences in the role as it relates to advancing the educational agenda in a community. This IPA model is based on the idea that “human beings are sense-making creatures, and therefore the accounts which participants provide will reflect their attempts to make sense of their experience” (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to understand how school superintendents are able to prioritize education within the local political agenda and how they operate within an open system that must consider the external community with the internal worlds of schools.
Research Questions

The central research question in this study is: “How do public school superintendents in Massachusetts make sense of the political competencies needed to lead change in a complex, multi-power political system.” To understand this central question, the following sub-questions, largely influenced by the tenets of open systems theory and agenda-setting, will be explored from the participants’ perspectives:

1. How do public school superintendents make sense of their experiences related to political competence?

2. How do superintendents use political discourse and agenda setting (political competence) to advance educational agendas within their community?

Underscored by the belief that (1) organizations can be structured to achieve system objectives and (2) schools are organizations which are generally considered to be open systems by the very nature of their regular interaction within and among educational stakeholders in a community, the research questions were driven by the Open Systems Theory that is defined by permeable boundaries and an interactive two-way relationship between organizations (Bush, 2003).

Qualitative Research Design

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012) was selected for this study, specifically focusing on “intentionality,” what Husserl defines as “that which is experienced in the consciousness of the individual” (p. 13). This idiographic approach is best aligned with my research interest given that fundamentally IPA research seeks
to: (1) understand other people’s relationships to the world; and (2) focus on their attempts to make meaning out of their activities (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). “IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experience” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012, p.32) and it is through this approach that sense will be made of how school superintendents who work or have worked in dynamic, multi-power systems have garnered broad community “buy-in” for education ideals, as they envision them, when education is only one of many competing variables that demand public attention and support.

Moving beyond the academic focus of contributing to the literature base around school leadership and politics, this particular research topic can have tremendous value for school leaders when studied through an IPA lens as they will be able to connect the personal perspectives explored in the study to their everyday experiences in the role.

**The Value of the Double Hermeneutic**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis seeks to understand the lived experience of the study participant from the point of view of the participant himself. There was tremendous value in making sense of a study participant who was at the same time making sense of his own experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003) as they related to his individual understanding of political competence.

In addition, reading and re-reading the transcriptions of each interview and actively listening to the audio recordings several times in order to pick up the nuances of each response from each study participant proved to be an extraordinarily challenging, but immensely rewarding activity.
Smith, et al. (2012) point out that “repeated reading also allows a model of the overall interview structure to develop, and permits the analyst to gain an understanding of how narratives can bind certain sections of an interview together” (p.82). Through repeated reading, it was striking how the interviews began to flow as questions were moved out of their original order to facilitate a deeper conversation, allowing the participants to relive their experiences – their stories – in a way that was meaningful to them. By recording the conversations, the researcher was free to engage fully in the interview discourse. Eye contact, body language, and facial expressions might have been missed had the interview not been an active discussion.

Recognizing that multiple levels of self-reflection are taking place during the interview process where the participant is reflecting on his experiences while the researchers is simultaneously thinking about his own reaction to those responses, all the while trying to make sense of how the participant was himself making sense of his own actions in response to the probing questions, makes the double hermeneutic aspect of IPA all the more interesting and the depth of the study that much more meaningful (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2003), what Smith, et al. (2003) describe as “an element of personal reflection to conceptual coding” (p.89).

The interpretations which you develop at this stage will inevitably draw on your own experiential and/or professional knowledge. You might usefully think of this as a Gadamerian dialogue, between your own pre-understandings, and your newly emerging understandings of the participants’ world (Smith, et al., 2003, p.89).

In consideration of this meaning-making quest, there were levels of interpretation that were considered when working through this method of interpretative analysis. For example,
what was the main emerging (substantive) theme and how did the participant recount or construct their experience knowing that this is reflection on the experience after time has elapsed. What was most important in conducting this study was taking what Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2012) call “a centre-ground position” where the analysis served to draw out the meaning of the experience, a combination of the hermeneutics of empathy with a hermeneutics of questioning, resulting in an understanding of what happened over time (p.36).

Site and Participants

“Given the complexity of most human phenomena, IPA studies usually benefit from a concentrated focus on a small number of cases” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012, p.51). Consistent with sample size guidelines on planning an IPA research study and presenting a high-quality, detailed account of an individual’s experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012), I selected four participants who have worked successfully as career superintendents and who have a reputation for advancing the educational agenda in the communities they serve/have served. I sought the support of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS) to explore leadership through the lived experiences of school superintendents who have intentionally and successfully negotiated politicized school communities in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts through personal one-to-one interviews. Trends, attitudes, or opinions were codified and quantified (Light, Singer, & Willett, 1990) among participants, all of whom were or are practicing public school superintendents in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Participants were purposefully selected (Creswell, 2002; Maxwell 2005) for this study based on their varied experiences in the field, long-standing career as district-level leaders, and because they represent a perspective rather than a population of school superintendents (Smith,
Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). Maxwell (2005) identifies four possible goals for purposeful selection:

1. Achieving representativeness or typicality of the settings, individuals, or activities selected;
2. Adequately capturing the heterogeneity in the population;
3. Deliberately examining cases that are critical for the theories that you began the study with, or that you have subsequently developed;
4. Establishing particular comparisons to illuminate the reasons for differences between settings or individuals.

The interviewees selected for this study shared their stories affording this researcher the opportunity to make sense of their perceptions and understandings of their experiences as a public school superintendent as they relate to persuading others to make education a collective priority within the communities they serve.

**Recruitment and Access**

As a practicing public school superintendent in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, I selected participants who were willing to engage in the study and who have the depth and breadth of experience as school superintendents. I looked for recurring themes as they relate to the political competence of school superintendents and how that competency served their community in the course of advancing the school district.
Data Collection

Using Seidman’s (2006) guide for researchers in education and the social sciences, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, as the interview methodology, I conducted interviews with each of the four superintendents in order to understand their perspective of political competence within the context of their reflections on the lived experience as inherently political leaders in public education (Seidman, 2006) and was the only interviewer in this study.

Framed by Maxwell’s *Qualitative Research Design*, I developed an interview protocol (see Interview Questions section) that employed guiding questions about my research interest that generated the data that I needed to understand my identified problem of practice (Maxwell, 2005) and which provided ample opportunity for open-ended responses from participants that helped me to better understand the political competence of public school superintendents, the practical goal of this study. Interviews followed a schedule where questions, probes, and follow-up questions were used. Questions were somewhat general to start and became more specific as the interview progresses.

Interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes in duration and were casual in nature. Each of the interview sessions was recorded digitally and later transcribed, verbatim, by a certified transcriptionist. The findings derived from the interviews were content analyzed and the results drove the follow-up questions. Participants had the opportunity to review the transcription(s) in order to help improve the accuracy, credibility, reliability, validity, and transferability of the study (“member checking”).

Individual responses to the questions presented during the interviews were analyzed and key words and phrases were extracted. These words and phrases ultimately became the codes that emerged from self-reflections and individual stories. Using the three-column matrix
modeled by Saldaña (2003) and Smith, et al. (2012), the verbatim text transcription of the interviews was captured in column one, an initial coding or first impression of the transcription in column two, and a final code analysis in column three which reflected a more refined filtering of and transitional link to the raw data that was captured in column one.

According to Saldaña (2003), “qualitative codes are essence-capturing and essential elements of the research story that, when clustered together according to similarity and regularity – a pattern – they actively facilitate the development of categories and thus analysis of their connections” (p.8).

After analyzing all of the interviews separately and creating a codebook for each, the final code column was alphabetized and extracted to create a summary of final codes in order to cross-reference commonalities among the participant responses (see Appendix: Alphabetical Cross-Section of Final Codes). These commonalities were the major categories that emerged.

Holding each interview and analysis separate until the cross-referencing task was begun was important to ensure that premature associations between participant responses were not made and so that conclusions were not drawn too early in the analysis process.

In the chapter that follows are those emergent themes which reflect the words and thoughts of the participants and the interpretation of those words and thoughts (Smith, et al., 2012) in an effort to make sense of the political competence of public school superintendents.

**Limitations**

Though the structure for in-depth phenomenological interviewing advocates for quality over quantity when reconstructing an interviewee’s experience in an IPA study (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012; Seidman, 2006), the study is limited in that only the views of four public school
superintendents, all of whom are white males and who are currently working or recently retired from the role in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, were reflected. It is important to note, however, that the participants share similar demographics in terms of age, years of experience in the role, and breadth of experience in a variety of public school settings across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Data Analysis

Through reflections and making sense of how the study participants themselves made sense of their professional work (Maxwell, 2005; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012), I was able construct the connections between what has been gleaned through interviews, the Open Systems Theory, and the literature base on agenda-setting in the political science realm to “capture analytical thinking about data, but also facilitate such thinking, stimulating analytic insights” (p. 96).

As mentioned in Research Instruments/Data Collection section above, I conducted interviews with superintendents using an interview protocol with guiding questions and provided ample opportunity for open-ended responses from participants.

Following a thorough review of the transcribed interviews and anecdotal notes taken during the interviews, responses were organized and categorized with the expectation that themes would occur. Using the data analysis steps of IPA, as outlined by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2012), I:

1. Immersed myself in the original data by listening to the audio recordings while reading the transcripts to ensure that the study participants became the focus of the analysis;
2. Produced a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments (e.g., descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual) on the data which had a clear phenomenological focus, staying as close as possible to the participants’ explicit meaning. At the same time, I logged interpretative notes which helped me to understand how and why the study participants felt the way they did about the topic of study;

3. Identified emergent themes through comprehensive exploratory commenting, shifting the analysis away from the original transcript to the notes and comments gathered;

4. Searched for connections and patterns across emergent themes to effectively organize and present the most interesting and important aspects of the participants’ experiences as both a narrative and graphic representation;

The goal of coding in this qualitative research endeavor, what Saldaña (2003) describes as “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3), was to organize the data that was collected “into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category and that aid in the development of theoretical concepts” (Maxwell, 2005, p.96). In tandem with notes and comments that I logged during my analysis, the cycles of the coding process (Saldaña, 2003) were used as a way to capture the primary content of the interview narrative and inform the development of emergent themes (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2012).

The emergence of these themes through the lived experience of school superintendents helped me to make sense of how the study participants themselves made sense of political competence.
Research Sequence

The research sequence for this study was as follows: (1) Identify interviewees; (2) Consider ethical implications of the study; (3) Receive permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Northeastern University to conduct the study; (4) Ask participants/interviewees to sign a disclosure statement; (5) Conduct interviews in a convenient location for the participants and record interviews digitally; (6) Deliver the recordings to a transcriber for the transcription of interview recordings; (7) Make provisions for the recordings and transcribed data to be stored in a secure location and in multiple places; (8) Analyze the data; (10) Discuss and interpret the findings and connect the data to the theoretical framework and literature review; (11) Conclude doctoral project with a statement of implications to suggest further research.

Interview Questions

While there are several guiding questions that helped to keep the interviews focused, this discussion was intended to be an opportunity for the participant to share their stories and experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). Each interview session began with an “icebreaker” question and ended with an open-ended question where the interviewee was able to provide additional reflection about anything that he feel had been left out of the discussion (see Appendix 2).

Guiding Questions:

1. Icebreaker question: If you could have any job in the world, which one would you want?
2. Can you tell me what prompted you to become a public school superintendent?
3. As you envisioned goals for your school community – what I will call the “educational agenda” - what sort of challenges did you encounter as you tried to bring those goals to fruition?

4. When I use words like “political savvy” or “political competence” to describe public school superintendents, what comes to mind?

5. Reflect on a time when you influenced a key education stakeholder (person or group) with power to advance the educational agenda in your community in a way that was satisfying to you and share the details of that experience.

6. When I use the terms “agenda-setting” and “windows of opportunity” – both taken from the field of political science – what comes to mind? Share an experience where you may have used either of these concepts to advance the educational agenda in your community.

7. Researchers have used the term “political strategist” in education to describe someone who views and uses local politics as a proactive opportunity to “reconcile divergent community group differences in seeking a common ground for enacting local policy. How would you describe a superintendent that is a “political strategist”?

8. What sort of political strategies do/did you use to bring the educational agenda to everyone’s attention in your community/communities? In your experience(s), how do/did you engage your community in a way that allows/allowed you to serve both the interest(s) of the schools and the interest(s) of the community?

9. My study is framed by an open systems model which perceives organizations – in this case, schools - as units that interact with their external environment – the community that surrounds them - rather than being closed and independent units. How have you been able to manage this open system as a school superintendent?
10. Can you give an example of a complex political situation related to advancing the educational agenda that you were not able to handle effectively? In reflection, what could you have done differently to prevent it?

11. In what ways did coursework as a part of your advanced degree or licensure practicum experience prepare you to deal with the political competencies needed to be an effective public school superintendent?

12. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me that you think will be useful to this study?

Threats to Validity and Credibility

Because the IPA model “tends to recruit purposive samples of participants who share a particular lived experience, they can be more difficult to access than other kinds of samples and sustained engagement, in terms of establishing access or rapport with key gatekeepers.” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2012, p. 180). I believe that my rapport with the selected interviewees as a colleague administrator, however, afforded me the access that Smith, et al. say is needed in order to collect “a considerable number of verbatim extracts from the participants’ material to support the argument being made, thus giving participants a voice in the project and allowing the reader to check the interpretations being made.” (2012, p. 180).

It could be viewed that because I am a school superintendent and hold the same role as those whom I have selected to interview that the interviewee responses may not have been probed as fully as they would be if an outside researcher without the same level of access, career knowledge, and rapport that a practicing superintendent would have.

The integrity of responses from participants could be challenged by those who may perceive a loss of credibility as a result of their interview responses. To minimize this limitation,
I sought out recently retired school superintendents, superintendents working in interim, post-retirement leadership roles, or superintendents nearing the end of their career and who bring a wealth of experience to the discussion. In all cases, the confidentiality of each interviewee was be protected throughout this study.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Consistent with the ethical standards of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and expectations of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), ethical data collection for this study respected the study participants and the sites for research (Creswell, 2009). The relationship between the researcher and participants was characterized by honesty. Great care was taken as to avoid the abuse of power where participants could be easily coerced into participation (Creswell, 2009).

**Conclusion**

One of my goals in conducting this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of public school superintendents and how they make sense of those experiences as a function of political competence. As a public school superintendent myself, I was eager to know and understand how others in the same role were able to articulate their educational vision for their school districts while at the same time influence others within a system of multiple subsystems and finite fiscal resources to support their altruistic cause of providing the best possible education for children.

Using *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Saldaña, 2003) and *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (Smith, Flowers, and...
Larkin, 2012) as the primary guideposts for the report of research findings that follow, Chapter 4: Report of Research Findings, reflects the “transitional process between data collection and more extensive data analysis” (Saldaña, 2003, p.4) and seeks to capture the essence of the rich discussions that tell wonderful stories about how some superintendents make sense of their craft.
Chapter Four: Report of Research Findings

Introduction

Though this study, we have come to understand that schools are organizations within an open and dynamic community system that is inherently political and driven by multi-directional communication. Despite that understanding however, this IPA study has revealed that public school superintendents struggle with effective communication, particularly as it relates to the political aspect of leading a public educational system. Among the problems that emerge from this disconnect is that superintendents who are not strong communicators and who fail to engage the wide array of community stakeholders in claiming education as a priority among competing community interests are likely to be ineffective school leaders.

The aim of this study was to understand the experiences of public school superintendents and how they make sense of political competence – how they determine what can and cannot be controlled in the communities they serve, when to take action to persuade others, and how to anticipate who is going to resist or advance the agenda in order to lead educational change.

Influenced by the tenets of Open Systems Theory and the politics of agenda-setting, this study was framed by the central research question: “How do public school superintendents in Massachusetts make sense of the political competencies needed to lead change in a complex, multi-power political system?” Two guiding questions: How do public school superintendents make sense of their experiences related to political competence? and How do superintendents use political discourse and agenda setting (political competence) to advance educational agendas within their community? set the stage for the following report of research findings.
Study Participants

Superintendent 1 earned his Doctorate in Curriculum, Instruction, and School Administration. He additionally holds a Master’s Degree in education with a focus on school administration and a Bachelor of Science Degree in elementary education. Although he officially retired from education in 2011, Superintendent 1 has held a number of interim superintendent positions in recent years following a number of consecutive contracts as a public school superintendent and principal in various Massachusetts communities since 1982. Having been named a Massachusetts School Superintendent of the Year, Superintendent 1 has worked as a consultant on strategic planning, conducted superintendent searches, and provided training in teacher evaluation among other professional accomplishments.

Superintendent 2 earned his Doctorate of Education in school administration, holds a Master of Education Degree in administration, and a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English. He has served as a state-level director of superintendents and has extensive experience as a regional school district superintendent and educational collaborative executive director. During his administrative career, Superintendent 2 established an active public policy committee of school superintendents and school committee members charged with developing public policy positions for a 21-member school district. In addition, he has developed and directed leadership programs and provided advocacy on public policy issues to legislators and local officials.

Superintendent 3 began his central office career in 1987 as an Assistant Superintendent and has been a public school superintendent since 1990. He has a Master’s Degree in Education and a Bachelor’s Degree in Education and has a wealth of experience in town government having worked as a Selectman, member of the Finance Committee, School Building Committee, and various other boards in his home community.
Superintendent 4 has spent 40 years as a professional leader working in a variety of educational settings including public, secondary, and higher education and human service administration. In addition, he has worked in the areas of curriculum and pedagogy, budgeting and finance, program development, training, supervision, and evaluation. He has been successful in legislative and lobbying efforts at the state, regional, and local governmental level and has proven strong communication skills. Superintendent 4 holds a Doctorate of Education Administration Degree, a Master of Education Degree in the Supervision and Administration of Occupational Education, and Bachelor of Science Degree in education. He began working in a central administration role in 1974 and has been in his current role as a vocational school superintendent in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for the last twenty years.

Emergent Themes

Communication. Through this study, both in the literature review and in my reflection on the lived experience, I have come to learn that interpersonal communication is among the most important factors associated with effective school leadership. Superintendent 3 captured the importance of communication very well:

You can't anticipate what you think people want you to say. You just say what it is that you need to say. Just don't tell me what you think I want to hear. Tell me what you think. That's the way you have to be. They have to know that when you say, "We need A, B and C," you need A, B and C.

The ways in which a superintendent communicates with his constituencies directly affects the public perception of education in his community. Consider the experience of
Superintendent 1, a suburban school superintendent with decades of experience at the helm of school districts, as he reflected on his work when arriving in a new community:

I walked in there - they had just bought out their superintendent. The realtors told me that they couldn’t sell this community on public education anymore. So, we had some work to do. The agenda-setting there was how do we bring credibility back to what I think was when I was working there as a teacher - a very good, suburban community. It wasn't the best in the world, but very good, and I think people felt good about the public schools. So, some of that, the political side of that, was just me getting out and about and talking to people about all the good things that happen.

Superintendent 4, a vocational school district leader, would look for opportunities to make sure that his constituencies, which included more than a dozen Town Managers, two senators, five State Representatives, sixty Selectpersons, 126 Finance Committee Members, and about 145,000 citizens, were aware of their return on the tax dollar and the value added benefit of investing in that school system.

Well, it's a constant thought process. We have 17 newspapers that serve the district. They're not all dailies. I began by looking at media outlets. There are eight cable televisions, and there are two radio stations. All of that is inventoried. Initially I invited key players from each of those organizations to come in to tour the school. I gave the tour. We would have lunch and interact with colleagues. I asked them to be aware that we existed. There was a mindset before I arrived that this place should run like an efficient submarine; quiet, deep, and out of notice. I do think that you need to be careful
about being boastful. I think that some of my colleagues across the world, I guess, that get involved in that set themselves up for the jealousy and criticism.

While at first it seemed to me that the participants were fairly caught up in a self-promotion effort to boast about their school district successes, it became clear that instead they were extremely calculated in how they could control what was being communicated and how that communication was being handled and received. It was evident that there was a constant awareness of what was being said and to whom and for what reason. Superintendent 1 remarked that when someone had complimented him on his tie in passing, he would follow-up by saying “do you know that [our high school] has been given an award by the Department of Education for student achievement?”

They'd say, "What?" I'd say, "Now that you said that, I want you to tell some other people about that. Do you know that we had both an elementary school principal of the year and a middle school principal of the year, the same year, and no other public school in the state has that?” “No, I didn't know that.” I said, "Did you know that our elementary school got that same award from the Department of Ed, that Compass Award for student achievement?” "No, I didn't know that."

Each of the superintendents with whom I spoke seized every single opportunity to share the successes of their school district with the community stakeholders. They were, in effect, their only public relations professional. One school district among those selected for this study, however, did establish a public relations office for his district.
Though he could never call the person who managed public relations for his district a “public relations person” because it was considered “to be a taboo for school systems” given the perception of “unnecessary layers of services,” Superintendent 4 reflected:

“Oh my God, look at the money being wasted on public relations. Why do they need to market? It's a non-profit entity.” Well, there are lots of reasons why you market. You make people aware of what is happening with the dollars. These dollars are coming. You compete with senior citizens, livery, police, fire, and in our case it was times 13 in every setting. I try to have people recognize that we're not a town department because of our regional entity. We're probably the only system that is doing six to eight hundred projects a year in the communities versus the town departments not inclined to be doing that. I mean, the Highway Department clearly does projects in the town. They're on the payroll to do that. When we fix a cruiser or we build a ramp or we create a beach house that provides summer swimming and do all these projects, it is an expanded laboratory for us. It's a public relations opportunity to showcase. It helps somebody who needed the help, and it's a great return on the investment that the towns have made to us.

Providing their School Committees and their communities with accurate information, current information of what is happening in the system, and not to have them rely upon some rumor was a common theme among these professional and experienced school leaders and communicators. Whether they interacted with citizens at the supermarket or the post office or the laundry, anywhere they went, they would seize the opportunity to convey an accurate message that helped to perpetuate public relations for their school district.
Community. Engaging the community and garnering “buy-in” is an important theme in this study and another important factor associated with effective school leadership. How superintendents in this study were able to garner support from a broad range of community stakeholders to realize their educational ideal proved to be a fascinating discovery.

Superintendent 1, for example, would find the best parent leaders in the school system and work with them closely. He would build a working group “who could really get stuff done.”

He reflected on a time when he had received an email from a parent who wanted to get a flier out about the district’s preschool program. He told the parent that he would approve the flier, but only if he could come to their next meeting.

Communicating with parents and launching grass-roots type campaigns to advance the educational agenda is, without question, an important aspect of the job according to the study participants, but garnering financial support for education within a sub-system of competing interests requires a different level of public relations. Superintendent 2 noted that in the Open System, where education is one of many community priorities, “sometimes it is ‘wait your turn.’”

I think a lot of it happens to be how you work with those people that you need at some point to kind of get you where you want to go. So, if it's a Town Manager or the police department or the Fire Chief or the Police Chief or the Finance Committee, I think sometimes what we do is we sort of have this expectation that we're going to go in there. We're going to make our plea. We're going to bring our case, and it's going to be compelling. They're going to say, "Hey, we'll do that." I think sometimes it goes to sort of the point of saying, "Maybe you can't get it all the first time." Maybe you piece-meal it with them. Maybe you acknowledge that somebody else's issue is more important than
yours, and can I come back to you and present this to you so that you look like you're a player, and it's not always it is me or my way or the highway. I think again it depends on the circumstances and what you are dealing with at the time. I think there is a point where if you're not seen as a reason person and someone who is part of the team, then I think you have a harder time getting people.

Part of the problem with school departments, as any local official will tell you, is that they consume the greatest portion of a town’s annual budget. The perception in most communities, and certainly in those communities represented by the participants in this study, is that schools get whatever they want and everyone else is left with whatever funds remain. If other organizations or sub-systems within the Open System only see the superintendent advocating for their educational vision, wants, and needs, then, as Superintendent 2 points out, “it is kind of like everybody is on their own or it's one against the other.”

Superintendent 2 reflected on his annual meeting with a clergy organization in the community that he served as an example of engaging the community, but not only when you need them to support you.

We had a clergy organization. I would go every year at least one time a year. I'd go into the clergy and talk to them about what's going on at the schools. I mean, you go to these groups not when you need them, but you go to them when you want to communicate with them and you want to share with them and you want them to feel like they have value and that you respect them. That builds so much capital in terms of when you need something. That is one of them. You look at good superintendents, and they do an awful lot of tending to the flock. You're different constituency groups in terms of how you work with
them and how you get them to see who you are and respect you and so forth. If
something happens, they are some of the allies right away that are right there with you.
So, all of that stuff builds on its own.

**Experience.** There can be no mistaking the value of the lived experience. During his
interview, Superintendent 3 remarked: “I don’t think universities can prep you for what's
practical. They can tell you what the greatest and the latest educational ideas are, but they're not
necessarily what you need.” Superintendent 2 offered a similar message:

I think a lot of it is experiential. I think some of it is intuitive. I think some of it is just
what you bring in your life experience and your own persona to a situation. Some people
are more perceptive than others. Some people are quicker to pick things up, read the
body language, read the tea leaves, look at the history, see what the background is to this.
It's a little bit sort of like the adaptive thinking process, you know, kind of like not taking
superficial knowledge, but kind of going deeper on some of the things that you need to
do. It's also bringing in people who know the landscape. It's talking to people who have
some knowledge or depth of understanding what the culture is, what has been the history
of this, what's the research on this.

Each of the study participants reflected on the need for superintendents to understand the
dynamics of a school in order to be effective in their role. They stressed the value in hiring
competent administrators with expertise in areas that balanced the strengths and weaknesses of
the superintendent as a model for success. Gaining experience comes with longevity in the
position, but as Superintendent 3 remarked, “a lot of people don’t want to invest.” He further ruminated:

The day of the 20 years in a position as superintendent is highly unlikely because along the way even doing a good job, you're going to aggravate somebody. Somebody is not going to like you. It's like anything else. We all have a shelf life. I always used to tell my principals, "We're all interim appointments. We're sitting in these seats until the next person comes along. We're just keeping it warm for someone. So, don't think that you are irreplaceable because not one of us is. If we can replace the president of the United States every four years, we can sure as heck replace the superintendent every three and a half years."

There is concern among the superintendents when reflecting on the investment of their colleagues in the communities they serve and a sense that many do not invest in their communities at all. Community investment, however, is not something that is often found in educational leadership courses according to these study participants. In reflecting on my own studies on educational leadership, I would have to agree. In fact, there is so much that can only be gained from experience in the role. Superintendent 3 acknowledged:

“There isn't an educational program in a college that can prepare you for that because this is life. I can tell you what the textbooks say. I can tell you what Professor so and so as a chair at whatever university has written in his things. You know, they're valid certainly, but are they practical? You have to take what the college people tell you and what life has told you and figure out how you marry those two. Then if you can marry them, you're going to be successful. If you can't, it's going to be a lot of sleepless nights.”
A clear emergent theme from this study, and for which there is an extensive literature base across all educational roles, was the need for school administrators to be guided into the position by someone with experience and who could act as a mentor.

**Giving Away Success.** Giving away success or ownership was another important and wonderfully validating finding in this study. Consistent with some of the major underpinnings of collaboration and underscored by the way in which Superintendent 2 made meaning of “windows of opportunity,” both of which are identified in the literature and described in chapter two, giving away credit seems to pay back great dividends.

I think window of opportunities don't always just come from the superintendent. I think windows of opportunities are seeds that are planted. I think one of the problems that we have with too many of us is that we let our ego get in the way of the ultimate goal that we have in mind. I think a strong leader, one of the things about a strong leader, is I want to get somewhere, but I don't care who gets the credit for it. I think a strong leader is somebody who sees that sometimes these windows of opportunity mean simply waiting for an idea to germinate, to evolve into something that looks like somebody else comes up with your idea. You may talk about the idea. You may plant the idea. It depends on who you do that with whether that's the union or whether that's with a principal or it's a group of teachers who are ready to take something on or want to take something on. You sort of help to kind of frame it, envision it and kind of get them pointed in the direction that you think is maybe not everything you want, but getting where you want to go.
Superintendent 3 put the importance of giving away ownership in even simpler terms: “If your ego is not going to allow you to distribute responsibility and to give other people ownership, then you're not going to be successful.” Allowing and encouraging others to have ownership may just be what is necessary in order to reach the objective. Consider the thoughtful reflection from Superintendent 1: 

So, I might make the decision to do something and if I think it is going to go well, I'll give it to the [School Committee] Chair and just say, "this is yours" or I'll give it to the municipal side and say, "I don't need this." I think some of it is not having to be the star all the time, not having to be out there. I think that's part of the politics of it. As long as I'm grounded and this is the best thing for kids, then I am comfortable. At the same time, you don’t get all of it all the time. So, there are times when you're going to have to say, "Okay, I'm not going to get this today. I'm going to make sure the municipal side wins on this and give them some face. Give them an opportunity to be political.

I suspect that giving away ideas and successes is a leadership strategy that comes with experience. For school leaders who are trying to prove their worth or build relationships and trust among stakeholders, it would seem that they would want to be credited with ideas and educational visioning that benefits students in their school district. But, by all accounts, the opposite holds true. As Superintendent 3 advises: 

Don't be all hung up on taking ownership. Get it done, and let somebody else own it if they want to. I mean, really, as long as you get what you want and what you need. If someone comes to you with an idea, don't be afraid to say, "It was so and so's idea. I
think it's a great thing. That's what it is. Give them ownership. If they own it, they're going to work at it.

If the study participants could have shared a single thought in unison, it would be that a superintendent must be comfortable with who he is and give away success at every opportunity.

**Mentorship.** Ultimately, in the business of schools, if you want to be a school administrator, you need a Godfather so to speak; someone who is going to look out for you, someone who is going to give you opportunity, someone who is going to teach you something so that when you move to the next step you don't make a complete fool of yourself. You have some idea of what is happening (Superintendent 3).

Superintendent 1 talked about the value of learning from his colleagues. He, like the others, learned most when his mentor would visit him at the school. “I would sit down with him for an hour, and we'd talk about teacher evaluation and go through different things, and then we'd talk about how his job looks.”

He would come in and he'd say, "I want you to come with me." I said, "Well, where are we going?" He said, "Well, just come with me. Let's see." We'd go to a school. There would be something going on, an issue. He said, "I just want you to sit and listen. Then I want to talk to you about it afterwards." We would chat about it. It was like he was walking me through how to be a superintendent on almost a day-to-day basis.
Superintendent 1 reflected on how he had learned about the politics of the job from his mentor; How to admit when you make a mistake and how to fix it so you don’t make the same mistake again. But, like the other study participants, Superintendent 1 was clear that there is not sufficient training for leaders who are entering the field. Similarly, Superintendent 3 reflected on the value of his mentoring experience:

I had the greatest kind of education you could get. You could give me all the textbooks you wanted, and I can sit through all the lecture halls you want, and you can tell me to do whatever kind of project you want. I sat there and I lived it. I lived it with him day in and day out; his mistakes, his successes. It was on the job training. You learn on the job. The biggest thing you can learn as a superintendent is how schools work.

Superintendent 1 worried that we are in a society where we try to find simple solutions to these complex problems: “I don't think they talk enough about what you need to do to get the community going. We're almost like just community activists, you know, when you get into the work…it's almost like I'm not an educator anymore.”

Around the topic of mentorship, though, I was most inspired by the reflection of Superintendent 4 and the way in which he recalled how the small number of superintendents truly look out for one another. He shared a story about his early days as superintendent and how the people that he worked under always wanted him to not make any mistake they had made.

I couldn't believe that. I thought the old hard knocks thinking. “If I had to do it this way kid, then you're going to go through the same.” They said, ”We don’t want you to make any mistake we made.” They gave me every possible learning opportunity that they could. I like that. I still use that as a process. I check with people who have initiated
something whether it be private or public settings and say, "What would you do differently?" So, they impacted me to such a point that found myself in the kind of role that I'm in now.

**Perception.** Perceptions about superintendents, their leadership teams, and the school district as a whole seem play an important role in how the community collectively views the entire educational system as a value-added commodity. Superintendent 4, for example, likes to perpetuate an opinion by the public that he works 24 hours a day, and that anybody can call him at any time, any day. “I believe we are servants of the public. We're on their tax dollars, and we're dependent upon them.”

Superintendent 1 likens himself to being the “Mayor of Education” with the responsibility of garnering support for public education from community members so that they “feel good about the public education system in the community.” He reflects:

You talk to a realtor about living in a community. No one ever asks them, and this is not on the side or a criticism of any other department in the town, nobody ever asks them how is the police force, how is the fire department.

Superintendent 2 believes that perception can often be gauged by a “gut level check” – that sense when a superintendent instinctively knows that somehow things are not going as they should be. Yet, that superintendent, in his opinion, creates even bigger problems for himself as he tries to convince others to that everything is under control when it is not.

Some people, out of pride or out of their own sort of self-worth, are not willing to let everybody see their weakness. I think that's a big problem that we have particularly in school leadership. People have this façade, and they need to look like they're in control
and able to handle anything. They don’t know when it's time to, in a timely way, get the help that they need and think through where they are. So, they stay in that place and let the problem continue to build.

An innovative idea that Superintendent 4 shared during the interview was his model for managing the perception among the thirteen communities that he serves as a regional vocational superintendent. He uses the model of a prospectus of a stock or a company. He regularly reads different public sector documents to see how they promote their success - whether it is charting, graphs, and scattered diagrams, or growth charts. Being able to promote longevity of change rather than a single success is much more impactful to him as he constructs his annual report to the communities.

When I bought some stock and I was trying to decide what stock to buy back in the days when you were more inclined to manage your own portfolio, I would look at prospectus from a business model. A good thing to do is to change the lens in which you look at your system. You look at it from a curriculum person or as a parent, but also look at it as an economist and to probe to see what kind of information, what kind of data counts are meaningful to different people. There are people who prefer narrative, maybe succinctly in summary versions. Others would say, "I want the quick and dirty. I want to look at your counts here." Percentages are often times misleading because they simply reference the previous benchmark, but I think growth numbers are significant to people and they generate meaningful conversation. Educators have the reputation for creating their own successes or manufacturing successes where the data doesn't confirm that they exist. I like to step outside of that and say, "Okay, why would you invest in this company?"
"Why would you invest your child in it? Why would you invest dollars in it?" It's an unending quest. I'm always looking for new ways to do that.

**Politics.** "You're not the superintendent of schools. You're the superintendent of education in your community." So, that doesn't start when the kids walk through the school. It starts in the community. It’s politics” (Superintendent 1). Building community support and credibility as a superintendent was a major recurring theme throughout the discussions that I had with the study participants. Another significant underpinning of this research endeavor, each superintendent seemed to understand “the political game” that had to be played in order to advance the educational agenda in the communities they served, yet each agreed that without experience and mentorship that the political side of the job is something for which superintendents are generally ill-prepared.

Superintendent 1 remarked that understanding the various constituencies in any community and building credibility is an important step in managing the political aspect of the position.

When I first started as a superintendent and maybe this was the training or maybe just what I thought I heard in the training was you fight with the municipal side all the time for money. Well, I guess as I have evolved in this, you have to work with them, and you have to share. Hopefully if you built enough credibility and trust, then both sides will figure out that we're all going to win if we all feel good. It's like negotiations. When you finish negotiations, if both sides think they got a little something, then it is probably a good negotiation. When both sides feel that they didn't get everything they wanted, it is probably good negotiations. If one side feels that they beat the other side, it is just going
to be a mess until the next time you negotiate. I think that is the political side of the job that I think some people don't look at, at all.

The ability to manage public perception, a emergent theme of political competence that has grown out of this study, means looking at everything through multiple lenses and *anticipating*, a key word used repeatedly by each of the study participants, how people will react to an idea or plan advanced by the superintendent.

I always look at it as also what is political. I mean, I've said to principals and they've probably heard here a few times even in the last couple of months, what does the front page of the Globe look like tomorrow if we make this decision? In some cases, you're going to have to say, "I don't want that on the front page of the Globe." What do I do about it? At the same time you can't run away from that because you're going to get some negative stuff that happens. Any time you are in a people business, which is what this is, people are going to fall. They're going to make mistakes. You're going to have to figure out what to do about it. Every once in a while, the press is going to hit you with one. What did you do about that? They don't train you for that, Bob

Superintendent 2 spoke at length about the importance of nurturing relationships within the community – the Open System in which the school operates – and how those who really tend to this work are much better in those political arenas of “how to get where they want to end up or in particular when something happens that they need these people either to facilitate an issue or to help them when they are in crisis.”
Nurturing relationships and engaging in the “political game” as a couple of superintendents called it, also extends beyond the local community. There was no shortage of advice on getting involved with issues at the state and national level. A major takeaway from this study was the value in understanding how state politics and actions influenced local decision-making. Understanding who the influencers are and how they work – the lobbyists and legislators – is, according to Superintendent 2, imperative to advancing any educational agenda.

We talked a lot earlier about just the local politics, the personality kinds of issues, the way you think about the local political aspects of your work, the politics of just getting the work done, but then there is the politics. It is building relationships, but it is also much bigger in the sense of how you can influence state-wide policy let alone federal policy. One of the things about the superintendent is that it takes a while, I think. I think it is important that superintendents build a relationship with their legislators. That value, a lot of it doesn't come in the way of financial contributions. It comes more in the way of your credibility, your leadership for the community and for the kids. That's different.

In response to a question about whether superintendents generally understand the seemingly inherent political element of the job, all of the respondents were clear: No. Absolutely not. They don’t get it. They have to add it to their repertoire. I don't have a patent on this or it wasn't brand new. I'm sure that some of the people that you've interviewed have all demonstrated the benefit of political savvy and how to use it to advance the school system. It should be promoted. There should be case studies. There are plenty of disasters. One of the biggest faults I've had is I'm so eager to participate or contribute that I have discovered that it's better not to be the first person to speak. It's better to listen and pick up hints and messages and
even the biases in the room or the Committee or whoever it might be that would alter the answer that I would have given. If I do what I have a tendency to do, I'm so eager and lunge out there and make a comment. Then you don’t have the benefit of listening or the additional information (Superintendent 4).

**Problem Management.** Solving the problem seemed to be less of an issue than I had imagined when interviewing the participants. Instead, managing the problem instead emerged as a recurrent theme. Superintendent 3 talked at length about decision-making. Here is a short abstract of that discussion:

> Everything that you're going to try to do is going to require some decisions being made, be they financial, political, or strictly educational. It's a sad thing to say, but probably the greater number of the folks that are involved with education may be less technically involved in the design of programs, but are in positions to make decisions as to whether that program will get implemented. It's you, your job as the superintendent, to educate the people for whom you work. It's your responsibility as superintendent to ensure that they understand what the objective is and that this is how we're going to proceed. Now does that mean that we're not going to have bumps in the road? No. Does that mean we're not going to change some of the directions we're going in? No. That means that this is our ultimate objective.

In reflecting on how the study participants managed problems, I was struck by a comment made by Superintendent 3. By putting the role of the public school superintendent in a different, more realistic, context, I found his reflection on the role to ease some of my own stresses on the role that I have as a public school superintendent.
Some superintendents don't realize that what they are is a person who has a job called superintendent. Some superintendents think it's another form of life as a superintendent of schools. That's not who I was. It was what I did. That's what you need to understand. You're a superintendent of schools. They need to understand this is the job I do in life. This is not who I am.

Knowing the school system that they were serving emerged as a common theme and proved helpful to the study participants as a problem management strategy. Superintendent 3 underscored the need for the superintendent to understand what is happening in the school system. He suggested surrounding oneself with people that know what they need to do, that know what has to happen that can actually make the superintendent’s job a little easier.

Like everything in life, if you are going to manage, you better have some managers around you that understand what your goals are and are able to assist you in meeting your goals by fashioning their goals to supplement and to encourage your goals and your people to success (Superintendent 3).

Not surprisingly, Superintendent 3, and the other participants, though not exactly in the same words, agreed that problem management was always an ongoing task. “You're going to do it Monday through Friday. You're going to think about it Saturday and Sunday. You're going to come back to it Monday through Friday, and you're answerable to everything and everyone that comes your way.”

Among the great pieces of advice that came out of this study was that superintendents need to understand who they are. “You're a former school teacher that is now in a role of
management. It's the ultimate role of management for what we're doing. The fact is that you need to understand that there are always two sides to every issue” (Superintendent 1).

The problem, as Superintendent 3 points out, is that “we're in the business of not being able to see the results of all our hard work for three, four, five, or six years.” He acknowledged the importance of working with other people to problem-solve, yet he also acknowledged that the people who work for you make you or break you.

If you're superintendent of schools and you have a staff that doesn't trust you or if you have a staff that is not as good as they could be - not saying they're bad but not as good as they could be - then you're not going to be successful.

To solve problems “you need to bring people aboard. You need to be comfortable enough to hire people and surround yourself with people that might be better versed in something than you are” (Superintendent 3).

**Selflessness.** A key theme that was readily apparent was that each of these participants was after one thing in their life work – doing what they truly believed would give children the greatest number of opportunities. Very simply, each stood for acting in the best interest of children – the very spirit of educational altruism. Superintendent 1 remarked that superintendents are not just superintendents of schools, they are superintendents of education. Consistent with that claim, consider the commentary by Superintendent 2:

From the superintendent's point of view, you have the high ground because you represent the community. You represent the kids. You have a particular value when it comes to making the decision about what you want.
Superintendent 3 recalled how irritated he would become when people would put emphasis on what they felt were important issues, but not the most important issue. “The most important part of it was that every youngster that came to your door deserves the right to be educated and we as educators have a responsibility to respond to that need.”

**Strategy.** “Don't invite people to dinner before you have any idea what the menu is. You give some forethought into the plan, the blueprint, the resources, the ability to achieve something before you announce it” (Superintendent 4).

Among the strategic ideas that emerged in this study was the notion that educational agendas should not be set by the superintendent alone. Brainstorming, gathering many ideas, and exploring more options, more variations than any individual can generate or play a part in the agenda setting strategy. Superintendent 4 reaches out to people through surveys, readings, and other professional development activities “constantly looking for new methods, new approaches, and gaining from the insight of multiple players to create agendas that are in the best interest of the school community.”

It became clear from my discussions with these industry experts that a politically competent superintendent needs to be willing to modify their agenda so that others will own it and not view it as a top-down directive. The notion of “buy-in” and the role that it plays in advancing an educational agenda could not have been more explicit. Superintendent 2 commented:

The success of advancing anything is a direct relationship to the ability of people to feel how they can influence it. That can't be haphazard. I think in some ways we're military commanders. You need to know. Your scouts need to tell you what is out there so that
you can modify, amend, adjust, and then revisit. Those are critical aspects of advancing anything.

Superintendent 1 was able to strategically advance his agenda by engaging key players within the community, what Superintendent would call “scouts,” and making his ideas theirs. He seemed masterful at giving away success as a leadership strategy.

I got these groups together. I would meet with the PTO presidents and officers every month. I would give them the agenda. I would say, "What do you want to talk about?"

Every once in a while probably more through budget, I used to just work budget with them all along the way because budgets were tight and I needed their support. They self-described themselves: “We're the parent leaders for the superintendent.”

We shared a laugh as Superintendent 1 reflected on what happened as the then parents of elementary students moved through the grades. “After a couple of years, when they typically get off that group because their kids are getting older, I give them emeritus status. I say to them, "I want you to stay with me."

Building the leadership team for the district emerged as a critical strategy for the study participants because that is how they felt the superintendent could advance the educational system. “It's that old Jim Collins 'good to great' stuff. If you get the right people on the bus in the right seats, then you can figure it out” (Superintendent 1).

Equally important was keeping one’s “enemies close” (Superintendent 2) in an effort to “win them over,” another common phrase among participating superintendents. Holding public meetings where the superintendent would present ideas in such a way that people really
understood what he was trying to do was an important step in garnering buy-in. As Superintendent 2 recalled, the meetings were informational in nature to start with.

Then it got to the point where you try to do all the things you know you should do, which is bring the enemy in and keep them close to you and keep talking to them and bring them in and show them the curriculum and bring them in the classrooms and doing all the kinds of things that you hope to win them over.

Doing his very best to make sure that the teachers in the district were supportive of the educational vision and communicating to parents to “get the grassroots stuff done,” Superintendent 2 reflected on how painful that process can actually be:

It was painful. Yes. I learned a lot in that process about there are certain ideologies that people have, and you are not going to change some people. You know? I had this wild eye vision that I was going to get everybody on the same page. That ain't going to happen. At some point you just have to sort of pitch to the middle, get the people that are more reasoned and don't have an extreme position one way or the other, educate them and bring them along so that you have a large enough constituency that this feels okay. You don’t necessarily have to try to get 100 percent. Sometimes 70 percent is not bad.

An important discovery for me was recognizing that there are different elements to how a superintendent needs to think about garnering buy-in in terms of sort of both winning people over as well as understanding how reasonable it is to advance an educational idea, regardless of how well-intentioned it may be, without a strategic plan in place to garner stakeholder support.
As I mentioned earlier, how well a superintendent “anticipates” was another important competency identified by the study participants. Superintendent 3 always tried to figure out what was going to happen four or five weeks down the road about a decision that he made that day. “I think one of the important things you have to do is say, "Well, if we make this move then, this is what happens down the road; A, B and C. If we don’t do this; D, E and F happens.”

Superintendent 2 considered a school leader’s ability to anticipate as an adaptive mode of thinking, realizing that superintendents are generally more technical thinkers.

The job is tough because it is rapid fire. Problems keep coming at you, and in some ways you just want to get it done and push off, get rid of it because now there is another problem there waiting for you or whatever. But there are some problems which have a lot of political underpinnings to them. If you just do a technical fix, it is going to come back at you, and it could come back at you in a way that could be very damaging to your work.

As a practical matter, Superintendent 3 reflected on strategy as a function of goal-setting and continuing with the goals that were already established and working successfully in his district. What that meant to him was that he needed to know who the players were, what appealed to these individuals “in the game of education.” He remarked that education is a game “from the standpoint that gamesmanship gets you to where you want to go. Not everybody understands what is involved in education. You need to be a politician. You need to politically attack your agenda.”

Trust. Building trust with stakeholders within the Open System was a clear priority among the participants. Superintendent 2, for example, reminded me that relationships are “a
massive part of being a successful leader. People need to trust you. They need to see that you have integrity. They need to know when you say something they can count on it.” And he was not alone in that thinking.

Superintendent 1 discussed the notion of trust in a political context as he thought back to a time when he risked losing credibility with the public.

There are times when politically you're going to have to take that hit or you're going to lose credibility. You're really going to lose credibility with the public. Most people like their leaders to admit when things aren't going well but also have a backup plan to fix it. So, I had already had good relations with the Town Manager, and I think I was pretty credible with the Town Meeting members. I mean, I had a few that couldn't stand me, but we always got there.

Trustworthiness and having a reputation as being collaborative, not surprisingly, emerged as a theme among the study participants. Being mindful of one’s own reputation, knowing and understanding what the community can expect from you as an educational leader, and realizing that people are going to evaluate how far they will let you go or how they perceive you were important points that came out of the discussions and play a prominent role the development of a school efficacy formula.

In my own reflections on how superintendents work toward building trust and strengthening relationships within the organization and among the sub-organizations within the Open System, it would seem that there is a fine line between manipulating the stakeholders and genuinely having an interest and wanting to work them knowing there is likely to be some future
time when their support will be needed in order to advance an educational agenda.

Superintendent 2 shared his thoughts on the matter:

People really do think about doing these things to kind of build their constituencies. So, I don't want to sound like it's all altruistic, this is who they are and they would do this anyway. They do it because they see it as an important part of their job and what they have to do. Now some of them, that is who they are. I wouldn't say in most cases that is the case. I think most of them are smart enough to know that this is what I need, this is the base that I need to have to do my work as the leader, as the educational leader of this community. Everything ties into education. They became partners with us when we developed our budgets. They became partners in how our programs were structured.

Similarly, Superintendent 3 had stakeholders in his community that valued education. He remarked: “If you told them what it was that you were doing and if you could explain it to them so that they understand what it was doing for their children and their children's children, they were on board.” He posited that first and foremost, a politically competent superintendent needs to win the confidence of the community – they need to be transparent.

You tell everybody the truth on everything whether it's good, bad, or indifferent. The truth is always the truth. It may not be pleasant, and they may not want to hear it, but they asked you for it. The value there is people look at you as a person of integrity. If you say to them, "I really need another $10,000 for a particular program," they know you're telling them the truth. They know you're not going to try to run a game on them and think of something else to say. That's what you do. You need to win them over.
They need to believe in you. They need to believe that you are going to tell them what they need.

In writing and reflecting upon the individual responses to the probing questions that were asked during the interviews and the common themes that later emerged, I was amazed by the stories that study participants shared during the interview process and how those lived experiences validated what I uncovered in the literature.

The aim of this study was to understand the experiences of public school superintendents and how they make sense of political competence – how they determine what can and cannot be controlled in the communities they serve, when to take action to persuade others, and how to anticipate who is going to resist or advance the agenda in order to lead educational change. The personal stories and reflections on decades of professional practice captured more than I had hoped at the outset of this study.

The research findings not only answered the questions of how public school superintendents made sense of their experiences related to political competence and how they use political discourse and agenda setting to advance educational agendas within their community, the findings caused me to reflect thoughtfully on my own practice as a school leader. As the findings were being summarized in this chapter, I was simultaneously making changes in my own leadership style, informed by the discoveries about effective school leadership, particularly around the idea of giving away success, as revealed by the powerful reflections of outstanding and highly effective leaders.

On the most practical level, trying to demonstrate leadership capacity and prove one’s worth as a public school superintendent by having and executing big ideas is far less important
the real success that comes when the politically competent superintendent watches his ideas come to life, for the benefit of students, with everyone else around him being credited with the vision.
Chapter Five: Discussion of Research Findings

Relationship to the Theoretical Framework

In this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis it was my aim to understand the experiences of public school superintendents and how they made sense of political competence – how they determined what could and could not be controlled in the communities they serve(d), when they took action to persuade others, and how they anticipated who was going to resist or advance the agenda in order to lead educational change in a complex, multi-power political system (Tooms, et al., 2007; Rochefort & Cobb, 1992; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1995; Majone, 1992; Jones, 1984).

Influenced by the tenets of open systems theory and the politics of agenda-setting, my research interest titled: “Making Sense of the Political Competence of Public School Superintendents: Bridging the Gap between Educational Altruism and Local Governance ‘Buy-in’” was framed by two guiding questions:

1. How do public school superintendents make sense of their experiences as those experiences relate to political competence?
2. How do superintendents use political discourse and agenda setting (political competence) to advance educational agendas within their community?

As discussed in chapter one, the open system theory is framed by five critical elements:
(1) Inputs – environmental resources such as: human resources, physical resources, and information resources; (2) a transformation process – how the organization’s operational system is structured and managed; (3) outputs – demonstrated results of the organization driven largely
by goals and objectives; (4) feedback – identified areas for improvement which may directly impact input, transformation process, and output elements; and (5) the environment – the social, political, cultural, legal, and economic forces that directly impact and influence organizational decision-making, management, and outcomes (Scott, 2008; Lunenburg, 2010).

**Inputs**

Informed by this study and by what we have come to understand about the environmental resources inherent to public schooling as it relates to the open systems theory through the lived experiences of four public school superintendents, building relationships is among the most important steps in bridging the gap between educational altruism and local governance buy-in. It is through the relationships that the superintendent builds among stakeholders (e.g., taxpayers, elected and appointed officials, colleagues) that he can leverage the human, physical, and informational resources that he needs to realize his educational vision. It is through relationships that the superintendent has built and nurtured that he can influence how the school community acts upon and prioritizes educational needs.

**Transformation Process**

A public school’s operational system is structured and managed as a sub-system within the larger system of town or municipal departments. The public school superintendent must work collaboratively with department heads (e.g., police chief, fire chief) and elected and appointed officials. Overseen by a school committee, largely an elected body with no teaching or educational leadership experience among its
membership, managing a sub-system that demands the largest percentage of locally-raised monies can be a challenge for a school leader with a vision for improving the educational experience for children. Realizing the educational vision within a system replete with financial restraints and competing local interests and priorities for community investment requires strategic thinking, anticipation, strong interpersonal skills and a willingness to give away success – what I have come to understand as political competence.

Outputs

Outputs, as a function of the open system theory, are the demonstrated results of the organization driven largely by goals and objectives. Indeed every superintendent who wishes to remain in their role for any length of time must be driven – and measured - by goals and objectives to which he is held accountable by the local school committee and the community that he represents.

Feedback

In my own experiences as a public school superintendent and as evinced through discussions with those far more experienced superintendents who were selected for this study, there is never a shortage of identified areas for improvement which may directly impact the input, transformation process, and output elements of the open systems model. As cycles of education reform come and go with state and national policymakers, how students in a community are able to access education and the nature of what is taught and learned at all levels is an ever-changing system that is, at best, difficult to predict.
Among the pitfalls of education reform is that the impact of the change is often not realized for years into the future. Unlike a factory that can change the way in which a widget is manufactured using consumer feedback, the public education system is steeped in long-standing traditions. Changes in education are often rejected wholesale or challenged by collective bargaining agreements or worse, based on trends or whimsical ideas initiated by school committees who lack the educational understanding to realize the impact of the very change they are empowered to make in their role as an elected official.

Environment

Defined within the open system as the social, political, cultural, legal, and economic forces that directly impact and influence organizational decision-making, management, and outcomes, the environmental element of the open system proved to be among the most interesting areas of analysis for me during this study. What I found to be particularly striking was that the study participants, all of whom had extensive experience leading public schools in a variety of educational environments (e.g., vocational school districts, regional school districts, etc.), learned to manage the social, political, cultural, legal and economic forces while working on-the-job. By their own admission, mentorship by their predecessors played a critical role in how the superintendents with whom I spoke made sense of their environments as they did not receive any specific training in these areas.

Educational leadership coursework required to meet the licensure requirements for a school superintendent generally does not consider these environmental areas of the open system as reported at length in chapter four, yet navigating them requires strong
skills each. It would seem that the next iteration of sweeping educational reform needs to happen in higher education where educational leaders can better understand how to “play the game,” as one superintendent remarked during the interview.

**Relationship to the Literature**

The literature around educational leadership and the political aspect of agenda-setting reviewed in this study was extraordinarily consistent with the findings. Among the most profound discoveries, however, was the significant role that persuasion played as a key political competence. Though given only cursory attention earlier in the paper, the art of persuasion emerged as the most common of the behavioral aspects that each of the study participants commanded, yet none of the study participants identified this as a key competency.

What was learned through this study now informs the literature in a way that bridges politics with school leadership, but does so through the lens of persuasion. Consider some of the emergent themes when viewed through this lens:

**Communication**

The first step to influence is communication (Dilenschneider, 1990). In his book *Power and Influence: Mastering the Art of Persuasion*, he writes:

Communication is very broadly defined, but it is, in this case, a study about yourself or your company. When you give a speech, you are communicating. When you perform a favor, you are also communicating. When you visit with rank-and-file workers in your department, you are communicating, sending a signal. When you attack your competitor as a
villain, you are also communicating. If you are communicating effectively, you will get positive recognition for your communication from the audiences you are trying to influence, which means people will think what you are doing is right and that you are doing it in the right way. You are perceived as competent, effective, worthy of respect (p. 8).

In his book *Changing Minds: The Art and Science of Changing Our Own and Other People’s Minds*, Howard Gardner (2004) claims that “to change minds effectively, leaders make particular use of two tools: the stories that they tell and the lives that they lead” (Gardner, 2004, p. 69). Applying this storytelling notion to advancing an educational vision, the persuasive lens would challenge the public school superintendent to frame the resource need in a way that resonates with the audience and, according to Gardner, to communicate that need in a manner that is “simple, easy to identify with, emotionally resonant, and evocative of positive experiences” (Gardner, 2004, p. 82). The superintendent can be an effective communicator when drawing on shared experiences, images, and institutional culture in creating a convincing narrative (Gardner, 2004).

**Politics**

“Politics is the art of control. More difficult and ultimately more rewarding than absolute power, playing politics depends on shaping the wants and needs of others to achieve our own desires” (Crawford, 2007, p. 5). The politics inherent to effective school leadership, the ability to convince others to pay attention to what the needs of education
are at any given time, requires superintendents to consciously craft their words and actions in such a way that they influence the behavior of individuals and the masses.

Dilenschneider (1990) states that “every time you face an important change, are launching a program, or must confront a big problem, you should create an agenda for change” (p. 13). Interestingly, he touches on several of the emergent themes from this study - problem management, agenda-setting, and strategy to name just a few - in leading to his suggestion of identifying the people needed to help “make that change or resolution easier, more effective, and/or less expensive” (Dilenschneider, 1990, p. 13). Similarly, Gardner (2004) acknowledges that “while politics is partly about ideas, it is also about the accumulation and deployment of resources” (Gardner, 2004, p. 77).

**Strategy**

As a matter of strategy, authors on persuasion focus mindfully on the transaction of favors. Whether asking for favors or receiving them, Crawford (2007) acknowledges that “keeping good relations depends on an equitable transaction” (p. 83). Interestingly, the transaction of favors (Dilenschneider, 1990; Crawford, 2007) did not emerge in the political science or educational leadership literature. The notion of trading favors also did not emerge in the stories from the study participants. After delving into the literature on persuasion following the analysis of the interview narratives, however, the role that favors play in potentially garnering buy-in as defined in this study seems particularly relevant.

Clever favor givers do not only seek something of equal value as payback. They require a premium, something of value beyond that of the favor
granted. Why? Because in truth they usually do not have to grant the favor, so they want to be paid a “fee” for agreeing to the transaction in the first place (Crawford, 2007, p. 83).

As a matter of strategy, Crawford’s (2007) advice is important: “Whether asking for favors or receiving them, keeping good relations depends on an equitable transaction” (p. 83). When it comes to influence and persuasion, Pink (2012) demands that two questions be answered:

1. If the person you’re selling agrees to buy, will his or her life improve?
2. When your interaction is over, will the world be a better place than when you began?

If the answer to either of these questions is no, you’re doing something wrong (pp. 232-233).

For public school superintendents to: (1) successfully champion their cause, the educationally altruistic vision that they believe will best serve the needs of children; and (2) gain the “buy-in” they need to realize that vision, those essential human and fiscal resources provided through local governance and appropriations, they must be strategic. To be strategic, superintendents must be honest storytellers who have the interpersonal communication skills to persuade others by the way they shape the story - and the need – in order to sell their educational vision.

Limitations

This study, as described earlier, was limited in that only the views of four public school superintendents were considered. The four superintendents, however, represent a broad range of
experience in leadership roles in public education, have a reputation in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as being extremely competent and effective in their role as a public school superintendent, and have worked actively in the internal worlds of local, state, and national politics as educational advocates.

Another limitation of the study is that all participants are white males, though they all shared similar demographics in terms of age, years of experience in the role, and breadth of experience in a variety of public school settings across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Participants are currently working as public school superintendents, retired from a long career as a public school superintendent, or working in an interim capacity as a public school superintendent having retired from field in the last few years.

**Implications for Educational Practice**

Imagine if school leaders, particularly aspiring school leaders, could have a better understanding of how the worlds of educational leadership and politics intersect before they enter the field and try to advance their educational vision in a school community. It is for this reason – that vision - that I was driven to engage in this study.

Having endured tremendous political challenges during and following my appointment as a school superintendent and wishing that I had been better prepared for those kinds of challenges that were never addressed in my own leadership preparation experiences, this study has profound implications for educational practice. The learning curve can be tragically steep for public school superintendents, especially those entering the field. By better preparing educational leaders for the world beyond the often lofty ideals of best educational practice and grounding them in the
reality of the key political competencies, as evinced in this study, this contribution to the field of education is one that is indeed long overdue.

Whether already working in the field as a public school superintendent, brand new to the role, or aspiring to take on the challenge of leading a school district, providing educational leaders with the key political competencies needed to be effective in the role was what I, as a scholar-practitioner, envisioned as an outcome of this study.

Driven by previous studies, augmented by a broad review of literature around aspects of political science and educational leadership, framed around a theoretical framework of open systems, and revealed through the analysis of discussions with proven school leaders, this study proposes a new leadership formula to advance the educational agenda.

The leadership formula, however, is not a one-size-fits-all approach. It must be underscored that the climate and culture of the school district in which any public school superintendent leads may limit their effectiveness if the dynamic between the sub-systems of the entire town organization – the open system – is fractured in any way. Communication failure across the municipality, rejection of new leaders of the various sub-systems, and a myriad of other variables could impact the short- or long-term effectiveness of the most politically competent leader. It stands to reason that trust, one of the key emergent themes of the study, must be the foundation upon which the proposed formula is built and to develop a mutually trusting relationship within a dynamic and highly politicized community will inevitably take time.

As a scholar-practitioner, I have already begun to put my own formula into practice within a school climate and culture that I have been grooming for nearly two decades. I am excited to share my findings with my colleagues and to share the stories that have informed the
work that has taken years to develop with the ideal that other leaders will benefit from those experiences. A leadership course as part of a matriculated degree and administrative licensure program around this topic would be a significant and long-overdue contribution to the field of educational leadership – one that I would happily teach based on my findings.

Advancing the Educational Agenda: A New Leadership Formula

This Leadership Formula is an adaptation of: (1) what was identified in the literature, (2) what was uncovered through the interpretative phenomenological analysis, and (3) what emerged through further study of persuasion following interviews with study participants, and will serve as a helpful resource for public school superintendents.

1. **Communicate**

   Be impeccable with your word and think carefully about what is to be communicated and to whom and in what order. Not unlike backward design in planning an educational lesson, think about the hopeful outcome and think of communication as a strategy. What you say and to whom you say it can profoundly influence the ultimate outcome of your vision.

2. **Be Honest**

   Reputation and perceptions are important and superintendents live in the public eye. Be honest. “When all is said and done, then, the most important ingredient for a story to embody is truth; and the most important trait for a leader to have is integrity” (Gardner, 2004, p.112). Crawford (2007) asserts that “if you are determined to be a leader, give your potential followers something genuine and uplifting to support. Follow through with results that demonstrate your honesty” (p.77).
3. **Lead with Interpersonal Intelligence**

   Effective leaders have what Gardner (2004) describes as interpersonal intelligence. Leaders, he claims, “need to understand other people, be able to motivate them, listen to them, and respond to their needs and aspirations (Gardner, 2004, p. 108).

4. **Create A Critical Mass Of People Who Care**

   Find the right people and invest in them (Harvey, et al., 2013). People who believe in the educational vision are the ones who can be mobilized to garner buy-in from others and who can help to realize the shared educational vision.

5. **Give Away Success**

   When the superintendent gives away ideas and successes, people within the organization are more motivated to work, feel more valued for the work they are doing, and ultimately improve the organization.

6. **Model Collaboration**

   People within the organization cannot be expected to cooperate with other agencies within the system if cooperation is not modeled by the leader (Harvey, et al., 2013).

7. **Keep Track of Favors**

   Maintain what Dilenschneider (1990) calls “the favor bank.” Figure out whom you need to advance the educational agenda and who may need you to advance their agenda and leverage those resources. But, as Crawford (2007) cautions, “owing a favor to someone diminishes your control…as with promises, keep track of the favors that you owe as much as those that you hand out” (p. 81).
8. **Be a Practical Visionary**

Leaders must take time for daily analysis and reflection (Gardner, 2004) and be practical in their approach. A practical visionary will develop an effective plan that provides some demonstrable results in a year or two (Harvey, et al., 2013).

9. **Rely on Instinct**

Leaders need a well-honed instinct - a feeling for the right move in a particular situation (Gardner, 2004).

10. **Pick Your Battles**

“Avoid conflict with those who are more powerful and pick your fights carefully – preferably just one at a time” (Crawford, 2007, p. 98).

**Conclusion**

The general who wins a battle makes many calculations in his temple before the battle is fought. The general who loses a battle makes but few calculations beforehand. Thus do many calculations lead to victory, and few calculations to defeat; how much more no calculation at all! It is by attention to this point that I can foresee who is likely to win or lose (Tzu, p.11).

Coming full-circle to where the study began, we must once again acknowledge that public school superintendents are non-elected, executive, and chief administrative officers who are charged with the responsibility of organizing and managing human and material resources within an extremely complex, multi-power political system (Glasman & Fuller, 2002). As a result, these leaders must be strong communicators within their communities, know how to
influence a variety of stakeholders, and possess the political competencies necessary to garner support for school resources.

Public school superintendents, however, struggle with local politics in the workplace (Scribner, et al., 2003) and as a result, superintendents who are not strong communicators and who fail to engage the wide array of community stakeholders in their vision are likely to be ineffective school leaders. The job, as this study explains, requires more than having an educational vision or simply being an educational statesman, the job requires political savvy and calculated leadership if a school leader is to be successful in the management of such a complex operation within an even more complex and highly political system.

Despite their almost textbook responses to the political science language around agenda-setting, I found it striking that superintendents participating in this study had no background knowledge in or awareness of agenda-setting as a function of political science. Strategies used by the study participants to mobilize stakeholders, communicate ideas, and garner buy-in were all the result of lessons learned; Trial and error and on-the-job training.

Another interesting and thought-provoking discovery of this research around the political competencies inherent to the superintendency is that most of the study participants did not aspire to become an educational leader, statesman, or visionary. For some, becoming superintendent was “fatalistic.” Superintendent 2 commented:

I never wanted to be superintendent of schools. I was a principal for 15 years, a middle school principal. I really enjoyed it and had a lot of success with it. I mean, the only thing that ever sort of haunted me, I was an administrator at a very early age. So, I was a principal at 29. So what happened basically was I had a conversation during an evaluation with my superintendent who said to me, "You ought to think about being a
superintendent." I said, "I don't think I'm of that quality." He laughed and said, "You don't really understand what's out there, do you?" He said, "You’ve got the skills to do it. You should do it." So, I started thinking about it.

Similarly, Superintendent 3, reflected on his career noting that becoming superintendent was never his objective. He remarked:

My objective was to come back and teach, come back and coach, which is what I did. If you were to look at my high school yearbook under the old so-called ambitions, I wanted to be a teacher/coach. I was influenced by some very quality teachers that I had the benefit of having in my school life. I had some tremendous men, tremendous women that influenced and were dedicated. I just thought it was a good thing. As it would be, I'll toot my own horn. It worked out pretty well for me, and as I went back into the teaching situation, I tended to move up the ladder.

**Considerations for Future Research**

As I reflect on this study and what I have learned through the rich conversations that I had with accomplished superintendents with decades of experience, I cannot help but wonder if it is it significant that these study participants generally arrived at their posts by chance. Despite the fact that the structure and management of an organization, a critical element of the open system theory (Scott, 2008; Lunenbur, 2010), is largely dependent upon the chief educational leader – the superintendent – few educators aspire to position.

The projected attrition of public school superintendents in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts due to retirement coupled with the shortfall of public school superintendents who
are ready and waiting to fill the posts (Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, 2014), suggest that further exploration of this topic would be valuable in future research. It is imperative that future research identifies those barriers that prevent competent educators with leadership potential and with educational vision from ascending to the superintendency.

It is equally imperative that in the identification of those barriers there is a deeper understanding of the challenges that superintendents face as it relates to their entry into an unequal system of competing interests. It stands to reason that the challenges associated with age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other demographic variables can profoundly impact a public school superintendent’s ability to lead effectively. Future research in this area, coupled with district-level leadership aspirations, would indeed be a useful contribution to the field.
REFERENCES


doi: 10.1177/0013161X02239758


Muhammed, A.S. (2012). *Political skills that superintendents need to embrace in order to maintain a positive working relationship with their board members* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Information and Learning Company. (3514269)


Appendix A: Telephone Script

Northeastern University
Application for Approval for Use of Human Participants in Research

Title: Making Sense of the Political Competence of Public School Superintendents: Bridging the Gap between Educational Altruism and Local Governance “Buy-In”

Principal Investigator: Dr. Kelly Conn
Student Researcher: Robert A. Tremblay

Section H. Recruitment Procedures

Sample Telephone Script

“Hi [name]. I am working on my doctoral project at Northeastern University and was hoping I could include you in my study. The title of my study is “Making Sense of the Political Competence of Public School Superintendents: Bridging the Gap between Educational Altruism and Local Governance ‘Buy-In.’”

The Principal Investigator for this study is Dr. Kelly Conn. Dr. Conn is my advisor at the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University. As the student researcher, I have selected you as one of four participants because you have worked successfully as a career superintendent and because you have a reputation for advancing the educational agenda in the communities that you have served. Your participation in this study, however, is completely voluntary. Even if you agree to begin the study, you may quit at any time.

I am interested in hearing your stories and making sense of your perception and understanding of your experiences as a public school superintendent as they relate to persuading others to make education a collective priority within the communities that you have served.”
## Appendix B: Informed Consent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Northeastern University Name of Investigator(s):</th>
<th>Principal Investigator: Dr. Kelly Conn; Student Researcher: Robert A. Tremblay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title of Project:</strong></td>
<td>Making Sense of the Political Competence of Public School Superintendents: Bridging the Gap between Educational Altruism and Local Governance “Buy-In”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

### Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

We have selected you as one of four participants because you have worked successfully as a career superintendent and because you have a reputation for advancing the educational agenda in the communities that you have served.

We are interested in hearing your stories and making sense of your perception and understanding of your experiences as a public school superintendent as they relate to persuading others to make education a collective priority within the communities that you have served.

### Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to fulfill part of the requirements of earning a doctorate degree in educational leadership and, as part of that work, to help current and aspiring school leaders successfully advance educational agendas in the communities they serve, ultimately improving teaching and learning in schools.

### What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in up to three interviews so that we can better understand your perspective of political competence based on your own professional experiences as leader in public education.

While there are several guiding questions that we have developed to help us stay focused, this series of discussions is intended to be an opportunity for you to share your stories and experiences while the student researcher listens.
The first interview will serve to establish the context of your experiences. The second interview will allow us to reconstruct the details of your experience within the context in which those experiences took place.

Each of the interview sessions will be recorded digitally and later transcribed, verbatim, by a certified transcriptionist.

**Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?**

The interview(s) will take place at locations and times that are convenient for you. Each of the interviews will take about 1 to 1.5 hours and will be casual in nature. All interviews will be completed between November 4, 2013 and December 20, 2013.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort with this research study.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help current and aspiring school leaders to successfully advance educational agendas in the communities they serve, ultimately improving teaching and learning in schools.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being part of this project.

The student researcher will begin an ongoing data analysis immediately following the first interview and will continue to analyze and “code” the data that he gathers from each subsequent interview. The goal of coding in this research study is to organize the data that is collected into categories to help the student researcher develop theoretical concepts and identify emergent themes.

All files related to this research study, including but not limited to audio recordings, transcriptions, and anecdotal notes, will be maintained digitally on the student researcher’s laptop computer with a back-up copy of the same on an external hard drive that can only be accessed by the student researcher. Once the research study is complete, all related files will be archived electronically on an external hard drive that can only be accessed by the student researcher. All files maintained on the student researcher’s laptop computer will be deleted.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review to see this information.
Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Robert A. Tremblay, the person mainly responsible for the research. Tel.: 508.400.2320, Email: tremblay.r@husky.neu.edu.

You can also contact Dr. Kelly Conn, the Principal Investigator. Tel: 857.205.9585, Email: k.conn@neu.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?

Participants will not be paid or given a gift for their participation in this research study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

Beyond costs associated with local travel, no additional costs are expected to be incurred by the participant for this study.

Is there anything else I need to know?

As a public school superintendent myself, it is my hope that this research study will be a practical contribution to the knowledge base of school leader preparation so that school superintendents can be successful in their work as inherently political figures. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

I agree to take part in this research.

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study ____________________________ Date ____________________________

Printed name of person above ________________________________

Signature of person who explained the study to the participant ____________________________

Printed name of person above ________________________________
Appendix C: Interview Comments & Questions

Opening Comments:

- This study is a qualitative research approach aimed at gathering information from the “lived experience” of public school superintendents – in this case, how school leaders – like yourself - make sense of their own experiences in the role as it relates to advancing the educational agenda in a community;

- This Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) model is based on the idea “human beings are sense-making creatures, and therefore the accounts which participants provide will reflect their attempts to make sense of their experience” (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2012). Through this interview, it is my hope that we will, together, make sense of your experiences in garnering support (or “buy-in”) for education in the community/communities that you serve/served;

- You have been selected for this study because of your varied experiences in the field, long-standing career as a district-level leader, and because you represent a perspective rather than a population of school superintendents. I’m interested in hearing your stories and making sense of your perceptions and understandings of your experiences as a public school superintendent as they relate to persuading others to make education a collective priority;
• While there are several guiding questions to help us stay focused, this one to one and a half hour discussion really is an opportunity for you to share your stories and experiences while I listen;

**Guiding Questions:**

1. Icebreaker question: If you could have any job in the world, which one would you want?
2. Can you tell me what prompted you to become a public school superintendent?
3. As you envisioned goals for your school community – what I will call the “educational agenda” - what sort of challenges did you encounter as you tried to bring those goals to fruition?
4. When I use words like “political savvy” or “political competence” to describe public school superintendents, what comes to mind?
5. Reflect on a time when you influenced a key education stakeholder (person or group) with power to advance the educational agenda in your community in a way that was satisfying to you and share the details of that experience.
6. When I use the terms “agenda-setting” and “windows of opportunity” – both taken from the field of political science – what comes to mind? Share an experience where you may have used either of these concepts to advance the educational agenda in your community.
7. Researchers have used the term “political strategist” in education to describe someone who views and uses local politics as a proactive opportunity to “reconcile divergent community group differences in seeking a common ground for enacting local policy. How would you describe a superintendent that is a “political strategist”?
8. What sort of political strategies do/did you use to bring the educational agenda to everyone’s attention in your community/communities? In your experience(s), how do/did
you engage your community in a way that allows/allowed you to serve both the
interest(s) of the schools and the interest(s) of the community?

9. My study is framed by an open systems model which perceives organizations – in this
case, schools - as units that interact with their external environment – the community that
surrounds them - rather than being closed and independent units. How have you been
able to manage this open system as a school superintendent?

10. Can you give an example of a complex political situation related to advancing the
educational agenda that you were not able to handle effectively? In reflection, what could
you have done differently to prevent it?

11. In what ways did coursework as a part of your advanced degree or licensure practicum
experience prepare you to deal with the political competencies needed to be an effective
public school superintendent?

12. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me that you think will be useful to this
study?
## Appendix D: Alphabetic Cross-Section of Final Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUPERINTENDENT #1</th>
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<th>SUPERINTENDENT #4</th>
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