THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL: INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN AN ERA OF INCREASED ACCOUNTABILITY

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Abstract

There is an abundance of literature supporting the notion that the principalship, particularly the public secondary school principalship, has become so complex in recent years that it is nearly impossible for one person to successfully address all of the responsibilities associated with the role (Adelman & Taylor, 2001; Fullan, 2014; Kafka, 2009; Ravitch, 2010; Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). Changes to the demographic make-up of student bodies, increased abdication of responsibilities by the parent community, public pressure for better school performance data, and unprecedented levels of federally-dictated accountability have complicated the principalship at a time when strong educational leadership is critical (Brown, 2005; Catano & Stronge, 2006; Conrad & Rosser, 2007; Fullan, 2014; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Styron & Styron, 2011). Many believe that accountability and the standardized testing movement are out of control and that federal legislation including No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top are forcing principals to focus on the wrong drivers (Fullan, 2014; Ravitch, 2010; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Styron & Styron, 2011).

This phenomenological study was designed to understand, through the lived experiences of sitting public high school principals, how school leaders describe the balancing of instructional leadership practices with their other responsibilities in this era of high-stakes accountability.

Keywords: principal, principalship, secondary education, high school, accountability, mandates, instructional leadership
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem of Practice

As the role of the principal has evolved over time, responsibilities have only increased. The modern day principalship is no longer the “lead teacher” who taught and managed one-room schoolhouses two centuries ago (Brown, 2005; Kafka, 2009). The complexity of the public school environment dictates a high level of complexity for the principalship. The role involves work and activities in the areas of building management, community outreach, bureaucratic compliance, and instructional leadership. Instructional leadership, the aspect of the role that most connects principals with teaching and learning, encompasses a large array of responsibilities including supervision and evaluation, professional development, curriculum design, setting goals and objectives, and planning and facilitating school-wide change efforts (Blase & Blase, 2009; Glickman, 1985; Pajak, 1989; Smith & Andrews, 1989). Instructional leadership is a central issue of this study as it attempted to understand how principals think they balance the responsibilities associated with instructional leadership with the bureaucratic and management elements of the role in this high-stakes educational environment.

Leading a school in this high-stakes era is perhaps one of the most difficult challenges facing education today. According to Kelchtermans, Piot, and Ballet (2011), “The principal’s job is not merely a technical matter of managerial skills, technical knowledge and effective strategic action. Inevitably, leading a school also brings with it moral, political, and emotional agendas” (p. 96). Principals face pressures from both outside and inside school worlds. Outside pressures come from the local school committee, state and federal policymakers, parents, and the broader local community. Inside pressures come from staff, including the superintendent, and students (Kelchtermans, Piot, & Ballet, 2011). The principal has to interact with both worlds
simultaneously. This can be challenging given that both worlds represent different ideas and agendas that are often in conflict. Kelchtermans et al. (2011) described the successful principal as a “gatekeeper” with no true allegiance to either the outside or inside world; the principal must work to find a balance between the two, leaning in one direction or another as needed. Principals were once expected to be, above all else, decent managers. Today, they are expected to be instructional leaders who establish a school-wide vision while the school management factor continues to weigh heavily largely because of bureaucratic demands (Adelman & Taylor, 2011; Catano & Stronge, 2006; Kelchtermans et al., 2011; Petzko, 2008; Sahin, 2011; Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011).

According to Goodwin, Cunningham, and Eagle (2005), “Bureaucratic responsibilities have become complicated, resulted in massive paperwork, and stifled creativity at the school level” (p. 7). Further, conflicts exist within the numerous state and local mandates that have increased expectations without increasing resources and created role overload and role ambiguity for principals (Goodwin, Cunningham, & Eagle, 2005; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). How do public high school principals prioritize the demands of their work, balance the role of compliance officer and instructional leader and, perhaps more importantly, what skills do successful principals employ to be effective educational leaders, political figures, human resources directors, and moral compasses all at the same time?

Accountability has increased exponentially in the American public school arena in recent decades, cemented by powerful legislation stemming from a general sense of urgency around student achievement (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Fullan, 2014; Ravitch, 2010; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2009; Styron & Styron, 2011). A perception that American students are no longer competitive with their international peers has led to increased expectations for educators and educational
leaders in all states with new systems to measure student learning and educator effectiveness (Brown, 2005; Fullan, 2014; Ravitch, 2010). Accountability within the public sector is necessary. Without accountability, the public has no way of knowing if the system is effective and those operating the system have no way of knowing if what they are doing is working (Fullan, 2010).

Fullan (2010) discussed “intelligent accountability,” a term he believes was first used by David Miliband, the former secretary of state for education in England. Fullan (2010) provided context to this term when he stated, “Intelligent accountability in essence involves building cumulative capacity and responsibility that is both internally held and externally reinforced” (p. 66). Intelligent accountability, according to Fullan (2010), is best defined with the following six ideas:

1. It relies on incentives more than on punishment
2. It invests in capacity building so that people are able to meet the goals
3. It invests in collective responsibility – what is called internal accountability
4. It intervenes initially in a nonjudgmental manner
5. It embraces transparent data about practices and results
6. It intervenes more decisively along the way when required

If one through five are present, it is unlikely that number six will be needed. Accountability is a significant driver of the modern-day principalship.

Data support that a skilled school leader can have a profound impact on a school. According to Tekleselassie and Villarreal (2011), “Strong and visionary principals build positive school climate, understand and interpret policies to facilitate their effective implementation, and mobilize teachers and school community members in order to realize school improvement.
targets” (p. 251). Heightened levels of federal and local accountability, greater expectations around the principal’s role as an instructional leader, the growing complexity of the student body driven by significant societal issues, and a decrease in the number of qualified applicants raises questions about the current state and future of the principalship. As the role has evolved over the past 150 years, it has never been as complex as it is today (Brown, 2005; Catano & Stronge, 2006; Fullan, 2014; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Styron & Styron, 2011).

This study explored how principals make meaning of the myriad responsibilities associated with the role, the leadership challenges they faced, and the skills they believe are critical for success as they balance the complex responsibilities of instructional leadership and bureaucratic management in an era of high-stakes accountability.

**Significance of the Problem**

Expectations placed on public school administrators relative to student achievement, teacher performance, positive relationships with all stakeholders, and school culture are substantial (Goodwin et al., 2005; Kelchtermans et al., 2011; Lazaridou, 2009; Styron & Styron, 2011). The complexity of the high school principalship requires successful principals to possess a variety of leadership qualities and to have the ability to view their role through multiple frames (Bolman & Deal, 1997). The inability to do so could limit the principal’s capacity to prioritize and maintain a focus on teaching and learning rather than compliance with bureaucratic demands and ultimately could have a negative impact on overall job satisfaction (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Fullan, 2014).

Schools need capable instructional leaders able to adeptly navigate the complexities of public education. While this critical need exists, the high school principalship becomes more and more mired in bureaucratic pressures that seemingly move the focus away from teaching and
learning and impact job satisfaction among principals (Goodwin et al., 2005; Kelchtermans et al., 2011; Lazaridou, 2009). In a study of the job satisfaction of Iowa principals, Sodoma and Else (2009) determined that principals were facing myriad demands daily. They wrote, “The legislature and taxpayers demand more services, industry expects competent workers, parents insist that social issues ought to be addressed, and the public wants achievement scores to improve” (p. 10). Accountability and bureaucracy go hand-in-hand as principals are held increasingly responsible for student achievement while simultaneously being expected to meet an ever-increasing number of federal and state mandates (Sodoma & Else, 2009). Increased expectations for student performance have forced school leaders to focus on improving instruction by developing teacher skills, creating professional learning communities, developing coherent programs, and securing necessary resources (Fullan, 2002) – all in an effort to increase student achievement and create more collaborative and academically focused school cultures. Simply put, principals are expected to be instructional leaders – a role that seems synonymous with educational leadership in the 21st century. However, the modern-day principal is responsible for much more than instructional leadership (Kelchtermans et al., 2011; Lazaridou, 2009; Styron & Styron, 2011). According to Sahin (2011), “The heart of instructional leadership is the ability of leaders to change schools from cultures of internal accountability to institutions that can meet the demands of external accountability” (p. 1921).

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of a small number of public high school principals, giving consideration to areas such as increased accountability, compliance with bureaucratic policy, building management, and instructional leadership. The study investigated how principals make meaning of the challenges they face and the leadership
characteristics and activities that they believe are critical to their success and the success of their schools.

**Positionality Statement**

My connections to this research project were straightforward. As a sitting principal of a public high school in Massachusetts, I must navigate the complex demands that this study sought to understand. During the fifteen years that I have spent as a high school administrator, six as an assistant principal and the last nine as a principal, I have seen the principalship and public education in general change significantly. I regularly find myself searching for the right skills to help me meet the increasingly diversifying demands of the job. The challenge is particularly acute when trying to balance instructional leadership with traditional building management and bureaucratic compliance.

As a sitting high school principal, it was a challenge for me to maintain my neutrality while analyzing and interpreting data. While the interpretative phenomenological analysis process expects the researcher’s experiences to shape the final analysis, I had to remain cognizant of my own influence on the analysis. I needed to identify my own biases and bracket those biases while conducting interviews, identifying emerging themes, and determining how those common themes could possibly impact future research.

**Purpose and Research Question**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of high school principals with a focus on how they make meaning of the myriad responsibilities associated with their role, the leadership challenges they face, and the skills they think are most critical for success in the current high-stakes and bureaucratic environment of public education. Through individual interviews with four to six current public high school
principals in Massachusetts, the researcher sought to gain insight into the complex role of the high school principal and how principals define instructional leadership and balance instructional leadership practices with all of the other responsibilities associated with the role. This study afforded high school principals the opportunity to share their lived experiences and provide insight into the role of the principal in a high-stakes environment.

One central research question was developed for this study: How do public high school principals describe the balancing of instructional leadership practices with their other responsibilities in this era of high-stakes accountability?

**Theoretical Framework**

Two different, but complementary leadership theories were employed as the theoretical framework for this study: Skill Leadership Theory and Situational Leadership Theory. Much of the study focused on the skills of principals including which skills were most important and how those skills helped principals successfully navigate within such a complex role. Skill Leadership Theory relates directly to the central research question, as instructional leadership was considered in context with a general investigation into the kinds of leadership skills principals identified as critical to their success. In addition to skills, however, this study sought to understand the role itself and how principals make meaning of the myriad responsibilities associated with the role, particularly those specific to local, state, and federal mandates, and increasing expectations around instructional leadership. Situational Leadership Theory provided a framework in which to consider how outside forces, including federal mandates, influenced principals. Situational Leadership Theory relates to the central research question, as the study investigated how principals experience the current high-stakes environment and how they make meaning of the different situations encountered within that environment. Figure 1 depicts how
Skills Leadership Theory and Situational Leadership Theory provided the researcher with two lenses to address the research question, discuss the findings, and uncover implications for future research.

**Skill Leadership Theory.** Skill Leadership Theory focuses on the leader with an emphasis placed on skills and abilities that can be learned rather than personality characteristics that are generally fixed and intrinsic (Northouse, 2010). Many researchers think that there has not been enough of a focus in the research placed specifically on leadership skills, particularly when compared to the amount of research that exists focusing on character traits (Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007). Mumford et al. (2007) purported that a focus on leadership skills shows that “leaders can become better leaders, in part because skills represent capabilities that can be developed” (p. 154). They further posited that by focusing on skills, the emphasis of the research shifts away from the person holding the leadership position to the position itself by looking at what skills are required in a leadership role (Mumford et al., 2007). By exploring the
lived experiences of current high school principals, the study focused on the skills that principals believe are critical to their success.

Two models of Skill Leadership Theory were selected for this study. Katz (1955) identified a “three skill approach” that he indicated best supports successful leadership: technical, human, and conceptual. Mumford et al. (2007) identified a leadership strataplex focusing on four broad leadership skill requirements and how these requirements intersect with different levels of leadership. The work of Katz (1955) provided a simple framework focusing on three leadership skills that the study explored in relationship to the participating principals themselves. Because the work of Mumford et al. (2007) focused on different levels of leadership, it provided a framework for the researcher to consider the importance principals place in the leadership of others, specifically the teachers working for them and the superintendents working above them, in the context of instructional leadership.

The Three-Skill Model of Katz. According to Katz (1955), the skill model “is based not on what good executives are, but rather on what they do” (p. 1). Katz (1955) defined a skill as something that is developed, not inborn, and is demonstrated through one’s performance. Specifically, Katz (1955) identified what he referred to as “three basic developable skills”: technical skills, human skills, and conceptual skills. Katz (1955) posited that these skills eliminate the need to focus on traits, and that while they are interrelated, they should be considered separately (p. 2).

Katz (1955) defined technical skill as possessing “an understanding of, and proficiency in, a specific kind of activity, particularly one involving methods, processes, procedures, or techniques” (p. 2). The concept of technical skills is the most common and tangible of the three. Technical skills play a critical role in the development of the product a particular organization is
tasked with creating (Northouse, 2010). Katz (1955) asserted that technical skills are most important in lower levels of management and are perhaps the least important skills for upper management positions (p. 5). Leaders in upper-level positions frequently rely on the technical skills of the people occupying middle and lower level leadership positions (Northouse, 2010). Although Katz’s work does not focus on the field of public education, it is possible that his model applies to principals who may not only need to possess strong technical skills themselves, but who arguably rely on their teachers to possess strong technical skills. This possibility was explored through this study.

According to Katz (1955), human skill is a leader’s “ability to work effectively as a group member and to build cooperative effort within the team he leads” (p. 3). While technical skills focus on working with things, human skills focus on working with people. Human skills help leaders to work well with their subordinates, peers, and supervisors to develop and attain the organization’s goals (Northouse, 2010). Further, Katz (1955) indicated that human skill is about an individual’s ability to understand how their own perspective impacts the perception and perspective of others in the organization. Human skills are primarily exhibited through the behaviors demonstrated by the leader and to the degree in which the leader alters his or her behaviors in an effort to be sensitive to the needs of others in the organization (Katz, 1955; Northouse, 2010). Unlike technical skills, human skills are important at every level of leadership, although the level of importance tends to diminish to some degree as the level of the leadership position increases (Katz, 1955).

Conceptual skills tend to focus on one’s ability to work with ideas and concepts and are critical to the process of developing organizational goals and for strategic planning (Northouse, 2010). Katz (1955) posited that conceptual skills “involve the ability to see the enterprise as a
whole; it includes recognizing how the various functions of the organization depend on one another, and how changes in any one part affect all the others” (p. 4). Leaders with strong conceptual skills are able to understand and consider the impact of organizational change on all members of the organization and how their perception of the change will impact the implementation and sustainability of such a change (Katz, 1955; Northouse, 2010). Katz (1955) recognized that the approach a leader takes can color the entire organization, which has an impact on the organization’s “personality” (p. 4). Conceptual skills are most important in upper-level leadership positions where a large portion of the responsibility for developing a vision, common goals, and a strategic plan rests (Katz, 1955; Northouse, 2010). The importance of conceptual skills for principals is quite obvious as school-based leaders are critical players in developing common goals and long-term plans for improvement.

The three skill areas identified by Katz (1955) provided a strong framework for the investigation of the central research question of this study. The modern-day principalship requires a blend of technical, human and conceptual skills. How principals consider these skill areas was explored through the interviews conducted for this study.

The skills “strataplex.” In recent decades, the number of studies focusing on leadership skills has grown significantly. In one study, Mumford et al. (2007) identified the “leadership skill requirements strataplex,” which illustrates how skills in four broad categories cut across multiple levels of leadership. The broad categories include: (1) cognitive skills – speaking, active listening, writing, reading comprehension, and critical thinking; (2) interpersonal skills – social perceptiveness, coordination, negotiation, and persuasion; (3) business skills – management of material resources, operations analysis, management of personnel resources, and management of financial resources; and (4) strategic skills – visioning, systems perception, identification of
downstream consequences, identification of key causes, objective evaluation skills, and problem identification skills (Mumford et al., 2007).

Figure 2 is an adapted version of the original strataplex reflecting different levels of leadership within a typical school district. It illustrates the importance of cognitive skills at all levels, the importance of strategic skills for superintendents, and the need for a balance of skills in all areas for principals. The Mumford et al. (2007) study analyzed results of surveys completed by over 1,000 professionals working in an international agency of the U.S. government. The participants came from three levels of leadership identified by Mumford et al. (2007) as junior, mid level, and senior. The study found that the degree of importance for each of the four skill requirements (cognitive, interpersonal, business, and strategic) varied from level to level, but that cognitive skills were foundational and critical at all levels, actually increasing in importance with each level of leadership (p. 164). The study also supported the hypothesis that strategic skills and business skills are more important in mid and senior leadership positions than they are in junior leadership positions. Finally, the study aligned with existing literature positing that skills can be learned over time through experience and training (Mumford et al., 2007; Northouse, 2010).

While the Mumford et al. (2007) study focused on government employees, there are strong connections between the four categories of the model and public education leadership as well as some overlap with Katz (1955). When used as a lens to examine the role of the principal, the four categories of this strataplex highlighted the complexity and breadth of the position. Additionally, because the model cuts across multiple levels of leadership, it provided a framework for the researcher to explore how critical principals believe teacher leadership and superintendent leadership are in the context of instructional leadership.
The work of both Katz (1955) and Mumford et al. (2007) helped to frame the investigation into the central research question of this study by providing a structure to organize and discuss data collected from participants on the complexity of the principalship, the skills important to the role, how leadership exhibited by those working with the principal in other roles influences the principal’s own leadership, and how instructional leadership fits into the myriad responsibilities principals face every day.

**Situational Leadership Theory.** Originally developed by Hersey and Blanchard in 1969 as the life cycle theory of leadership, situational leadership theory is one of the most commonly known theories of leadership and has been used extensively in the field of leadership training and development (Johansen, 1990; Northouse, 2010; Vecchio, 1987). Situational
leadership theory is built on the premise that leaders need to adjust their leadership approach based on the situation they are facing and the development or maturity of the individuals working under them (Blanchard & Hersey, 1970, 1996; Northouse, 2010). The theory was relative to this study as it explored the lived experiences of principals and how the emergence of different conditions impacted these experiences.

**Four leadership styles.** Situational Leadership Theory has three main components: directive (task) behaviors, supportive (relationship) behaviors, and the development level of followers. As Figure 3 shows, directive and supportive behaviors range from low to high creating a four-grid matrix including: high directive/low supportive (S1), high directive/high supportive (S2); high supportive/low directive (S3); and low supportive/low directive (S4) (Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Nelson, 1993; Northouse, 2010; Walter, Caldwell, & Marshall, 1980).

Directive or task behaviors are typically one-way communications where a leader tells their subordinates what needs to be accomplished, how the task is to be accomplished, and who is responsible. Supportive or relationship behaviors are usually two-way communications where leaders provide social and emotional support for their subordinates by asking for input, listening, and solving problems (Gates, Blanchard, & Hersey, 1976; Johansen, 1990; Northouse, 2010).

The first style (S1), also known as a directing style, is where the leader provides significant direction and close supervision. The second style (S2), also known as a coaching style, requires the leader to provide specific direction while paying close attention to the subordinate’s emotional needs and seeking input from the subordinate. With the third style (S3), considered a supportive approach, the leader gives subordinates more decision-making responsibility while remaining readily available to support their progress. The final style (S4), also known as the
delegating approach, requires the leader to relinquish most of the control to his or her subordinates and only intervene in extreme situations (Northouse, 2010).

The third component of the model, development level, refers to a follower’s commitment and ability to accomplish a task (Blanchard et al., 1993; Northouse, 2010). Employees at development level 1 (D1) are considered to have a high level of commitment and a low level of competence. These are people who are enthusiastic about a task or role that they have little experience with. Individuals at development level 2 (D2) have low commitment and some competence. These people have just begun to learn a new task, but have lost the initial motivation that typically accompanies the assignment of a new task. Developmental level 3 (D3) refers to individuals with high levels of competence, but a variable level of commitment. These
people have developed the skills necessary to complete the job, but possess a high level of uncertainty as to whether they can complete the tasks associated with the job. Lastly, those in development level 4 (D4) are the most competent and most committed. These employees have the skills and a high level of motivation to complete their work (Blanchard et al., 1993; Northouse, 2010).

Specific to the principalship, Walter et al. (1980), conducted a small study involving 12 principals and 48 teachers. Using the Leader Effectiveness and Adaptability Description (LEAD) as an instrument for the participating principals and the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBQD-XII) for the participating teachers, Walter et al. (1980) tested the validity of Situational Leadership Theory. Results from that study indicated that most principals disliked the S1 (directing) and S4 (delegating) styles. The study also indicated that teachers had unfavorable views of principals who used the S3 (supportive) and S4 (delegating) styles, citing that these principals did not assume their leadership roles, and were unable to tolerate uncertainty (Walter et al., 1980).

Situational Leadership Theory recognizes that the individual circumstances that define an organization and the maturity level and experience of the employees within that organization impact the behaviors of leaders. Situational leadership relates to the central research question of this study in that it provided a framework to explore the complexities of the principalship specific to state and federal expectations relative to student performance regardless of the demographic make-up of the student body and the maturity level and experience of the staff.

Skills Leadership Theory and Situational Leadership Theory worked in concert with one another to provide a framework for this study. Skills leadership theory was used as a lens to help the researcher identify and analyze the kinds of skills principals believed were crucial to their
success as they balanced instructional leadership with bureaucratic compliance efforts. Both the Katz (1955) and Mumford et al. (2007) models provided structures to categorize skills. The Mumford et al. (2007) model extended the focus of skills beyond the principals themselves by providing a context with which to analyze how principals valued the leadership skills of their subordinates and of the superintendents for whom they work. In addition to seeking to better understand the kinds of skills principals believe are critical to their success, this study also explored how the myriad responsibilities associated with the role impacted principals.

Situational Leadership Theory provided a framework for the researcher to explore how principals adjusted their leadership in response to the many outside influences that exist, including federal and state mandates. Together, Skills Leadership Theory and Situational Leadership Theory provided the researcher with a comprehensive theoretical framework that supported the researcher’s efforts to answer the central research question: How do public high school principals describe the balancing of instructional leadership practices with their other responsibilities in this era of high-stakes accountability?
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

The following literature review was organized to support the central research question identified for this study: How do public high school principals describe the balancing of instructional leadership practices with their other responsibilities in this era of high-stakes accountability? The first section of the literature review focuses on the evolution of the principalship and how and when instructional leadership became a key element associated with the role. This section leads to a review of literature focusing on the impact that increased federal and state accountability has had on the role followed by a section on instructional leadership. The idea of bureaucratic compliance is woven throughout the accountability and instructional leadership sections. The final two sections of the review focus on the leadership skills associated with successful principals and issues related to job satisfaction.

The Evolution of the Principalship

Historical perspectives on the principalship are mostly found within larger studies focusing on broader educational topics. More focus has been placed on the principalship in recent decades with increased accountability associated with new legislation, specifically the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Researchers including Kafka (2009), Goodwin, Cunningham, and Eager (2005), Hallinger (1992), and Rousmaniere (2007) have expounded on early work by Pierce (1935), Reller (1936) and others who began writing specifically about the American public school principalship in the early part of the 20th century. According to Kafka (2009), “Most educational histories tend to focus on either the political and institutional history of schooling or the social history of those who went to school and/or taught in them” (p. 320). The principalship has fallen somewhere in the middle of this continuum where it has found itself outside of the circle of interest for social historians or scholars of education (Kafka, 2009). Not
surprisingly, the role follows a pathway synonymous to the one followed by public school education in general, which tends to mirror political, social, and economical shifts of the nation (Tyack, 1991). Brown (2005) stated:

> Immigration, urbanization, the rise of great corporations, the traumas of two world wars, the Great Depression, the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, and the high stakes accountability movement of the 1990s influenced the values of society, reshaped the purpose of schooling, and increased the demands of the principalship. (p. 109)

According to Rousmaniere (2007), the development of the principalship “radically changed” the educational landscape in the United States in the early 20th century. The principal was critical to the success of newly designed school systems in the early 20th century, in much the same way that the middle manager in business reinforced the development of corporate enterprise (Rousmaniere, 2007).

**The professionalization of the principalship.** The early roots of the principalship lies within the realm of the lead or master teachers who at one time taught and managed single room school houses found in small towns in the late 1700’s. These teachers answered to the local community through elected local school boards. The role developed in urban schools largely during the 19th century. Usually male, lead teachers were responsible for teaching as well as clerical tasks associated with a school including student discipline, attendance record keeping, and facilities management (Goodwin, Cunningham, & Eagle, 2005; Kafka, 2009). As urban populations and local school enrollments grew in the mid to late 19th century, many school superintendents in urban areas including Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati and New York began to delegate responsibilities to individuals in school buildings (Pierce, 1935). This need for
delegation of duties helped to further formalize the role of the principal. These early principals were charged with “coordinating the work of the various departments and securing continuity of materials and progress through the various grades” (Pierce, p. 11). As the 19th century waned, the teaching duties slowly disappeared and the modern day principal emerged as an administrative presence charged with managing the school, supervising teachers, and providing the professional development required to ensure that teachers were well-trained to effectively deliver the curriculum (Brown, 2005; Goodwin et al., 2005).

There were multiple reasons behind the increase in authority and prestige of the principal during the first half of the 20th century. First, as bureaucratic demands increased, superintendents and other central office administrators were forced to delegate responsibilities to their building-level colleagues. Second, principals were actively fighting for a greater level of authority on a wide variety of issues including personnel and curriculum. Third, principals worked to professionalize the role by successfully lobbying the National Education Association (NEA) to create the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) in 1916 and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) in 1921. These professional associations added to the prestige of the principalship and in many states pushed for more stringent licensure requirements for principals (Goodwin et al., 2005). Fourth, principals increased their role as instructional leaders being viewed more and more as a “teacher of teachers” with significant authority over teachers working in their buildings. Lastly, principals raised their status as local leaders in their communities. They reached out to parents to create home and school associations and mother clubs and supported social functions in the local community. By the middle of the 20th century, principals were working closely with social agencies and were increasingly seen as very influential figures within the community (Kafka,
By the middle of the 20th century, the principalship had developed a framework that looks very much like the role does today. Principals moved away from the autocratic mindset that had been associated with the role largely since its inception toward a democratic mindset where shared decision making was an expectation and they began playing a significant role in the areas of curriculum and instruction (Beck & Murphy, 1993; Brown, 2005; Kafka, 2009). As the 1950’s waned and the nation was again gripped by fear with the launch of Sputnik by the Soviet Union, the principalship changed again toward a focus on the effectiveness of teachers and the curriculum they were delivering. Sputnik caused many Americans, who felt that the nation was falling significantly behind, to turn a critical eye toward the public schools leading to increased pressure on school principals to improve student achievement (Brown, 2005). Principals were then and are now leaders with “bureaucratic, managerial, instructional, and community responsibilities” (Kafka, 2009, p. 324).

Instructional leadership and bureaucratic compliance. The principal’s role as an instructional leader began to develop in the 1960s as nation-wide curriculum reform efforts took center stage. The demands of these reform efforts pushed principals away from the task of maintaining the status quo and toward a variety of instructional leadership responsibilities (Brown, 2005). In the 1960s and 1970s, principals were expected to act as change agents as they managed an increasingly higher number of federally-funded grants and entitlement programs (Hallinger, 1992). The increase in federal funding during those two decades led to a large amount of curricular innovation and reform efforts, leading to a different set of expectations for school principals. It was during this time period when the complexity of the principalship began to blossom as they were expected to be bureaucratic compliance officers, instructional leaders, and
change agents (Hallinger, 1992). Hallinger (1992) identified two critical points to consider about the principalship in the 1960s and 1970s. First, because the federal government significantly increased its footprint within the public school domain during this time period, principals were forced to spend a substantial amount of time monitoring compliance with “innovations conceived and introduced by policy makers outside the local school” and managing the implementation of “externally devised solution[s] to social or educational problem[s]” (p. 36). Second, while policies and legislation intended to inspire instructional leadership, bureaucratic compliance took priority for most principals as they “demonstrated a greater concern with meeting criteria for compliance than for program outcomes” (p. 36).

**The principalship and education reform.** For the past three decades, education has been rife with change stemming from the 1983 release of *A Nation at Risk*. An unprecedented period of school reform efforts driven by federal legislation and an increase in international competitiveness began in the 1980s followed by restructuring efforts in the 1990s and 2000s (Brown, 2005). The principalship of the 1980s was as always, multifaceted, but a shift occurred moving the focus away from the autonomy of the individual classroom teacher and toward a school-wide focus on instructional practices that were expected to improve learning (Fullan, 2014). The expectation that principals work as instructional leaders increased during that decade along with a new focus on the principal as an agent of change (Beck & Murphy, 1993; Brown, 2005). In the 1980s, principals were considered problem-solvers and visionaries who led their school communities toward school improvement while providing teachers and students with the resources they needed to teach and learn successfully (Beck & Murphy, 1993; Brown, 2005). Prior to that decade, the principal’s influence on the instructional environment of their school
was largely indirect, through the promotion of democracy, by “running schools according to proven principles, by oiling the system’s bureaucratic machinery, and by interacting positively with the larger society” (Beck & Murphy, 1993, p. 149).

Policy makers in the 1980s began to raise standards and increase licensure requirements while introducing levels of accountability for principals that had never been seen before. Pressure for higher levels of student achievement and teacher performance was coming from all directions, including private citizens, parents, and legislators (Beck & Murphy, 1993; Brown, 2005). Local school committees and superintendents were pushed to respond to mandates from federal and local policymakers, meaning that principals were expected to implement changes at the school-level in order to comply with bureaucratic policies and expectations (Brown, 2005).

The 1990s ushered in a new “bottom up” approach to school improvement where teachers and principals were seen as the vehicles to solve the problems of public education rather than the cause of the problems (Brown, 2005). Beck and Murphy (1993) posited that broader societal issues have always shaped the principalship. In the 1990s, they identified three trends that impacted the role significantly: the perceived economic crisis, the changing social fabric of society, and society’s movement from an industrial to a post-industrial world (p. 179). The feeling that the United States is losing or has lost its top position as an economic and innovative power began in the 1980s and carried forward into the 1990s. Central to this issue was the perception that American schools were dysfunctional with poor leadership fostered by a low level of accountability. In many respects, the 1990s represent a “perfect storm” for the principalship. Increased accountability, a demographic shift, an increase in the number of students affected by poverty, unemployment, and drugs, and a loss of authority as federal and
local policymakers exercised increased influence in the educational sphere (Beck & Murphy, 1993; Brown, 2005).

**The 21st century principalship.** Educational leadership in the 21st century has been largely shaped by the arrival of the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (NCLB). This legislation raised accountability to a level never before seen in public schools with much of the burden falling on school principals. With the addition of *Race to the Top* (RTTT) in 2009, federal pressure to perform has increased consistently over the past decade, negatively impacting the pool of qualified principal candidates leading to what some call a “leadership crisis” (Brown, 2005; Howley, Andrianaivo, & Perry, 2005; Pounder & Merrill, 2001). NCLB and RTTT are seen as major contributors to this crisis in school leadership as principals see these pieces of federal legislation as highly punitive with unrealistic targets. Schools not meeting targets are subject to rigid sanctions established by the federal government. The threat of these sanctions has significantly increased stress on principals in the 21st century and has had a negative impact on the number of educators interested in pursuing a career in educational leadership (Daly, 2009). While RTTT is less prescriptive than NCLB, the accountability structure remains, including sanctions for underperforming schools that do not improve within a certain period of time. RTTT is based on four components: (1) new standards and assessments (Common Core and PARCC); (2) improved data and assessment systems; (3) higher quality teachers and principals through recruitment practices, new evaluation systems, rewards, and punishments; and (4) a focus on schools performing in the bottom 5% (Fullan, 2014). While RTTT eliminates many of the fatal flaws associated with NCLB, it continues to use accountability and sanctions as drivers for reform and improvement – a strategy that has proven time and again to be ineffective (Ravitch, 2010).
The present day principalship has shifted from a traditional “power-over” role to a “power-with” role (Brown, 2005). The principal has been firmly established as a change agent, community leader, visionary, instructional leader, compliance officer, moral leader, and manager. This role definition, however, is filled with contradictions and challenges. The next section addresses the intersection of two of these roles, instructional leader and compliance officer, and how these two roles interact with the high levels of accountability associated with the present-day principalship.

**Accountability, Instructional Leadership and Bureaucratic Compliance**

The three topics at the center of this section of the literature review have been closely associated with the principalship for many decades. They have also intersected at different times and in different ways as the role consistently morphed since the common school era. The concept of accountability first rang true for principals with the launch of Sputnik in 1957. At that time, there was a growing sentiment that public schools were failing to prepare young people to be competitive, particularly in the realm of science education (Brown, 2005). In 1965, accountability and high standards were central to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The trend continued in the 1980s following the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* and the first governor’s summit on education in 1989 where national goals for education were developed (Styron & Styron, 2011).

In recent years, unprecedented levels of accountability following the passage of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) in 2001 have challenged principals to effectively balance their responsibilities as compliance officers and instructional leaders more than ever before. With NCLB, the stakes grew higher for everyone. While the latest flavor of national education policy, RTTT, has addressed some of the concerns raised about NCLB, the basic formula has not
changed. Teachers are still subject to requirements to ensure that they are “highly qualified.” Additionally, student data is still examined in sub-groups, and schools are still required to show student achievement progress not only in the aggregate, but also for each sub-group (e.g. low income, special education, etc.). Most importantly, consequences for schools and their principals still exist if students are not making effective progress or showing growth (Fullan, 2014). These consequences include redistricting of students, termination, and even school closure. During the years preceding NCLB and RTTT, the public education focus was on equity of access and funding. NCLB moved this focus to adequacy of our public education programs (Styron & Styron, 2011). According to Lyons and Algozzine (2006) NCLB shifted the emphasis of the principal’s role from “being accountable for money and other resources to being accountable for student outcomes and achievement” (p. 2). Considering the fact that the primary focus of school is teaching and learning, this idea is not outrageous. What is challenging is that expectations associated with increased accountability were simply added to the already arduous role of the principal, raising the concern that the role has become unmanageable. Additionally, there are significant concerns raised in the literature with the practice of punitive forms of accountability and how there is little to no evidence that these punitive sanctions have had any impact on school performance or leadership (Fullan, 2010, 2014; Leithwood & Earl, 2000; Munoz & Barber, 2011; Ravitch, 2010).

**Challenges for principals associated with accountability.** Many aspects of NCLB and RTTT equate to bureaucratic hoops, especially for underperforming schools. Hiring and retaining teachers who are considered “highly qualified” is particularly challenging for principals. This challenge is exceptionally acute for principals of low performing schools, where there are fewer incentives to attract and retain qualified teachers. NCLB promotes an underlying
assumption that if federal law requires principals to hire qualified teachers, then the problem will remedy itself (Roellke & Rice, 2008; Sunderman, Orfield, & Kim, 2006).

NCLB and RTTT are built on a number of other assumptions, most importantly, the assumption that if schools are labeled underperforming by state and federal agencies and are required by law to make improvements without additional resources, they will show significant improvement over a short period of time (Fullan, 2014; Ravitch, 2010). Federal policy makers also assume that improving education is a regulatory issue rather than a problem rooted in inequality and other social conditions found outside of schools (Sunderman et al., 2006). There is a significant amount of debate over the effectiveness of sanctions as a motivating factor in school improvement (Ravitch, 2010). Accountability standards, as defined by NCLB and RTTT, include significant penalties for principals and schools not meeting annual student achievement data targets. Studies have shown that these sanctions effectively push principals to focus more effort on instructional leadership, but the level of effort is directly related to the degree of pressure on the school deriving from local, state, and federal mandates (McGhee & Nelson, 2005; Rutledge, 2010; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Sunderman et al., 2006). There are also arguments, however, that while federal and local accountability may be pushing more principals toward a focus on instructional leadership, the reasons for the shift are more rooted in bureaucratic compliance than they are in building capacity within the teaching ranks to improve instruction and learning (Fullan, 2014). Michael Fullan has written at length about the importance of capacity building over punitive accountability. Calling accountability a rigid priority and attitude, Fullan (2014) stated, “Accountability assumes that the most important thing to do is to make sure that a person down below acts in line with the directions of criteria passed down by someone higher up” (p. 26). Fullan (2014) argues that there is more to accountability
than measuring results – it is more important that principals build capacity among teachers so they have the skills they need to meet the demands they face in the classroom and ultimately increase student learning and raise achievement.

Although NCLB and RTTT have been the driving force of educational reform over the last decade, many have argued that these pieces of legislation are in direct opposition to what schools should be focusing on in the 21st century (Fullan, 2014; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Ravitch, 2010). According to Schoen and Fusarelli (2008), legislation like NCLB and RTTT is driving schools to focus on basic skills rather than promoting innovative thinking and problem solving. The legislation also assumes that educators have been unsuccessful and are therefore in need of heavy monitoring by people outside of the realm of public education when the focus should be on teacher-centered reform efforts based on improving instructional techniques and more flexible and individualized content (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). This creates a struggle for principals who want to focus on instructional leadership, but also must comply with federal mandates by meeting specific performance benchmarks based solely on test results (Fullan, 2014; Ravitch 2010). Critics of NCLB and RTTT claim that they have narrowed the curriculum significantly through standardization at a time when principals and teachers should be encouraged to increase the focus on thinking and problem solving skills over basic content knowledge (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008).

According to McGhee and Nelson (2005), who conducted a study of principals who were removed from their positions based on poor NCLB performance, the intended consequences of sanctions are not usually realized. The principals in this study were accomplished in their careers, but were removed after being given very little opportunity to work with teachers toward change. These principals reported being isolated during the months prior to their removal, as
there was very little shared accountability within their districts. The cases highlighted by McGhee and Nelson (2005) provided “disturbing evidence that high-stakes accountability systems have negative effects on school leaders” (p. 370). Further, McGhee and Nelson (2005) supported the idea that federal accountability sanctions have the biggest negative impact on schools with the most needy populations by making it difficult to retain quality teachers and administrators where they are needed the most. According to McGhee and Nelson (2005):

Given that principals, regardless of where they work, are already overburdened with the many demands of school leadership, it is reasonable to assume that many, if not most, of the best principals will choose to work in white, middle-class schools where they are least vulnerable to the impact of accountability test scores. (p. 371)

A rigid system of accountability also increases the risk that principals will be dishonest. There are multiple examples of principals who have changed scores, excluded scores of certain students, or refused to enroll certain students (Fullan, 2014; Ravitch, 2010). According to Fullan (2014), “If you are a principal ‘leading’ a school in such a system, the best you can do is to get better at a bad game – do what you can to please the higher-ups in order to protect your staff and yourself” (p. 28). The solution for principals is to build capacity with a focus on results not on punishments (Fullan, 2014).

**Instructional leadership.** According to Blase and Blase (1999), “Instructional leadership is often defined as a blend of several tasks, such as supervision of classroom instruction, staff development, and curriculum development” (p. 350). Other researchers have colored this definition to include action research, motivating staff, and planning, organizing, and facilitating change (Glickman, 1985; Pajak, 1989; W. Smith & Andrews, 1989). In the early
years of public schooling, the principal was considered the local educational “expert.” These early predecessors to the modern day principal were responsible for training and supporting a small number of other teachers in all areas related to teaching and learning, in addition to having teaching responsibilities of their own (Hill, 2002). At the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the industrial revolution helped to create a mindset within the confines of public education that principals were managers of teachers and that while they were responsible for ensuring that teachers were appropriately trained, it was broadly accepted that once they were trained, they were considered adequately prepared to meet the expectations of their roles for the remainder of their careers (Hill, 2002). Instructional leadership at that time in history mostly involved principals suggesting that teachers participate in professional development, but leaving the final decision up to individual teachers. As a result of this relationship, principals played an insignificant role in improving the quality of teaching (Hill, 2002). A weak correlation between principals and teaching and learning was established in the early 1900s and endured for almost a century. In the later decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, instructional leadership emerged as an expectation for principals. At first, instructional leadership was directly linked to supervision and evaluation and was approached in a top-down fashion with principals responsible for developing goals and curriculum and supervising how teachers performed relative to goals and curriculum (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). The contemporary model of instructional leadership is a collaborative effort between teachers and principals where principals are working to provide teachers with the resources they need and the time for them to work together to achieve the shared goals established collaboratively (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Fullan, 2014; Robinson et al., 2008). At the heart of the literature on the current definition of instructional leadership is the idea that the principal’s role is to provide support and resources in an effort to
establish the conditions conducive to collaboration – a collaboration that principals themselves should be engaging in alongside their teachers (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Fullan, 2014; Grissom & Loeb, 2009; Robinson et al., 2008). According to Hallinger (2003):

> Principals play managerial, political, instructional, institutional, human resource, and symbolic leadership roles in their schools. Critics assert that efforts to limit or even focus narrowly on this [instructional leadership] single role in an effort to improve student performance will be dysfunctional for the principal. (p. 334)

This assertion highlights the importance of a well-balanced approach by principals. Instructional leadership is a critical piece of the complex puzzle, but without providing attention to the many other responsibilities associated with the role, principals may struggle to impact teaching and learning. Principals tend to place instructional leadership lower on their priority list, partially as a survival instinct, but also because they are not trained as instructional leaders, have limited time, and increasing bureaucratic responsibilities (Jenkins, 2009).

The tension between instructional leadership and traditional management works its way into the literature beginning in the 1970s. The literature of the 1970s and of subsequent decades supports the notion that while principals recognize the importance and value of being seen as the instructional leader of their schools, the management tasks associated with the role consume the majority of their time (Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Jenkins, 2009). During the 1980s, instructional leadership emerged from research conducted on school change, school improvement, and program improvement. Studies in these areas consistently showed a link between successful schools and skillful leadership (Hallinger, 2003). However, while instructional leadership remains at the top of the long list of responsibilities associated with the principalship, it has never truly been considered as a specific model of leadership in the United
States, making empirical studies of the effects of instructional leadership scarce (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006).

Since the advent of NCLB and the subsequent approval of RTTT, literature has emerged discussing the impact punitive federal and state accountability structures continue to have on the principal’s role as an instructional leader. According to Fullan (2014), “Principals are spending more and more time on instruction, but it is not time well spent, in that it does not yield widespread results” (p. 55). Fullan (2014) argued that expecting principals to be “direct” instructional leaders is an ineffective way to bring about school change or improvement in student performance, as it creates too narrow a focus for principals and pushes many of them to micromanage teaching and learning. Fullan (2014) asserted that principals need to become “learning leaders” in their building where they model learning while working to create the necessary conditions for teachers, students, and administrators to continuously learn together. In order for this approach to instructional leadership to be successful, the principal must build “collective teacher efficacy” where teachers accept responsibility for student learning. According to Leithwood, Patten, and Jantzi (2010), principals can create this kind of environment by ensuring that professional development is meaningful, encouraging collaboration, and structuring the school so that collaboration is easily achieved.

Looking at student performance data over the past decade, one could easily argue that traditional models of instructional leadership, where principals spend their time working with individual teachers and facilitating occasional professional development trainings that often have little or no follow-up has not had a significant impact on teaching and learning (Fullan, 2014; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Ravitch, 2010). Instructional leadership today should be more about building capacity within individual schools so that teachers learn from each other and
principals provide the conditions and resources necessary for this kind of collaboration to effectively take place and actively participate in the learning along with the teachers in their buildings (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Fullan, 2014; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2010).

Many principals are not trained to be effective instructional leaders. Principal preparation programs touch upon multiple facets of leadership, curriculum, and instruction, but do not necessarily provide training on instructional leadership and how to use instructional leadership practices to impact school performance (Jenkins, 2009). Whitaker (1997) identified four skills that he called “essential” for instructional leadership: (1) be a resource provider - recognize the strengths of the teachers in the building and make it a priority to support them by providing them with the resources they need to do their work; (2) be an instructional resource – be aware of current instructional trends and share that knowledge with teachers; (3) be a good communicator – clearly communicate beliefs about teaching and learning; and (4) be a visible presence – visit classrooms, provide meaningful feedback on what is observed, and model good instructional practices whenever possible (Jenkins, 2009; Whitaker, 1997).

According to Hallinger (2003), the most frequently used conceptualization of instructional leadership was developed in 1983 by Hallinger and Murphy (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood, 2008). They identified three dimensions of instructional leadership that are subsequently defined by 10 functions. The first dimension of the Hallinger and Murphy (1983) conceptualization of instructional leadership is defining the school’s mission. This dimension is supported by two functions: (1) framing school goals; and (2) communicating school goals. Hallinger and Murphy (1983) asserted that instructionally effective schools generally have clearly defined data-driven and measurable goals that are consistently communicated with
parents, teachers, and students formally and informally. The second dimension of the Hallinger and Murphy (1983) conceptualization, managing the instructional program is supported by three functions: (1) supervising and evaluating instruction; (2) coordinating curriculum; and (3) monitoring student progress. Hallinger and Murphy (1983) argued that coordinating what teachers do in the classroom with the goals of the school is critical. They also called for a high level of correlation between a school’s defined curriculum and instructional practice as well as a high level of curricular articulation across and between grade levels. Lastly, they asserted that principals and teachers should regularly use student achievement data, whether from local or standardized assessments, to inform professional practice. To define their final dimension of instructional leadership, promoting a positive learning environment, Hallinger and Murphy (1983) identified six functions: (1) protecting instructional time; (2) promoting professional development; (3) maintaining high visibility; (4) providing incentives for teachers; (5) enforcing academic standards; and (6) providing incentives for students (p. 221). According to Hallinger and Murphy (1983), “School learning climate refers to the norms and attitudes of the staff and students that influence learning in the school. This dimension consists of primarily indirect, though important, activities” (p. 223).

According to Hallinger (2003) between 1980 and 2000, over 125 empirical studies employed the above construct leading to a number of conclusions. First, principals regularly contribute to school effectiveness and student achievement indirectly through actions they take to improve and protect the learning and teaching environment. Second, the alignment of school structures (academic standards, curriculum, time allocation) is heavily influenced by strong instructional leadership. Lastly, the school context (size, level, socio-economic status) significantly impacts the type of instructional leadership employed by principals (Hallinger,
Using the Hallinger and Murphy construct as a framework, both ideas were explored in this study through specific interview questions designed to bring this issue to the surface.

**The Skills and Practices Associated with Effective Principals**

The literature focusing on the skills and practices of successful principals is broad. Within the literature, the work of Kenneth Leithwood is referenced consistently. Both working alone and in concert with dozens of other researchers, Leithwood has conducted several studies focusing on the elements critical to the success of principals. Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) identified seven assertions about school leadership that will be used as the framework for this section of the literature review. These assertions are: (1) school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning; (2) almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices; (3) the ways in which leaders apply these basic leadership practices – not the practices themselves – demonstrate responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the contexts in which they work; (4) school leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions; (5) school leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed; (6) some patterns of distribution are more effective than others; and (7) a small handful of personal traits explains a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness (p. 28).

**The impact of leadership on student outcomes.** Strong school leadership, specifically strong principal leadership, has a positive impact on student learning (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2010; Robinson, 2010; Robinson et al., 2008). The assertion by Leithwood et al. (2008) that school leadership is “second only to classroom teaching” as an influence on student learning is strongly supported by empirical
evidence gathered from many qualitative studies. What is interesting is that the qualitative data are in stark contrast to data gathered from quantitative studies that tend to show a statistically insignificant connection between principal leadership and student learning (Robinson et al., 2008).

According to Leithwood et al. (2010), the evidence is so clear that strong principal leadership has a positive impact on student learning, that “The focus of attention for many leadership researchers has moved on to include questions about how those effects occur” (p. 672). While leadership effects on learning can be both direct and indirect, the vast majority of literature supports the idea that effects are largely due to practices, skills and behaviors that are indirect in nature (Leithwood et al., 2010). In a general sense, these indirect behaviors and practices involve the principal creating the optimal conditions for teaching and learning including a collaborative culture of instructional leadership and the development of a shared vision (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Fullan, 2014; Protheroe, 2011; Roe, 2013). According to Leithwood et al. (2008), “There is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning around...in the absence of talented leadership” (p. 29). This statement is related to the idea that strong leaders possess the skills necessary to motivate their colleagues to work in ways that bring out the best in themselves and others within the organization (Leithwood et al., 2008).

**Common practices of successful principals and the application of these practices.**

This section combines the second and third assertions by Leithwood et al. (2008), as there are strong connections between the two. According to Leithwood et al. (2008) almost all leaders draw from the same collection of leadership practices and the way they apply these practices demonstrates responsiveness to the contexts in which they work. The also asserted that “The central task for leadership is to help improve employee performance and such performance is a
function of employees’ beliefs, values, motivations, skills, and knowledge and the conditions in which they work” (p. 29). Leithwood et al. (2008) identified four core leadership practices that are central to these basic assumptions: (1) building vision and setting directions; (2) understanding and developing people; (3) redesigning the organization; and (4) managing the teaching and learning program (p. 29).

Successful school principals are able to motivate and inspire their staff members through the process of developing a shared vision with common goals and a clearly-delineated plan to realize that vision and achieve the goals (Fullan, 2014; Leithwood & Beatty, 2009; Prothroe, 2011; Roe, 2013; Senge, 2013). Yukl (2006) underscored the importance of a shared vision when he suggested that leaders need to involve key stakeholders in the development process and identify strategic objectives with a wide appeal. According to Yukl (2006), “A single leader is unlikely to have the knowledge needed to develop a vision that will appeal to all stakeholders” (p. 298). With so many outside pressures, it is important that principals are able to successfully connect the shared vision with local, state, and federal expectations. According to Day (2005), the principal’s “ability to combine external demands with their own broader vision of the purpose and practices of education” is seen as a leadership strength by other stakeholders (p. 276).

For principals, it is critical that they invest time and resources into increasing the capacity of their teachers so they are able to work together to establish a shared vision with associated goals (Fullan, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2008; Robinson, 2010). This investment should include providing teachers with training opportunities, adequate supplies and materials, and time to collaborate with colleagues and the leadership of the school toward meeting the school’s goals. According to Leithwood et al. (2008), this category of leadership skills and practices includes
“fostering intellectual stimulation and modeling appropriate values and behaviors” (p. 30). Successful principals also foster positive relationships with parents, students and community members. Interactions with these members of the school community occur in a variety of contexts. In a study designed to examine knowledge and skills new principals believed were most critical to success, Petzko (2008) identified human relations and personnel function as the two most important skill domains. Skills associated with managing, motivating, and working with people are closely connected with a principal’s responsibilities. Petzko (2008) listed communication, collaboration, conflict resolution, faculty selection, induction, evaluation, supervision, and development as the skill areas within the human relations domain.

Leithwood et al. (2008) identified “redesigning the organization” as the third of their four core leadership practices. According to Leithwood and Riehl (2005), “Successful educational leaders develop their schools as effective organizations that support and sustain the performance of teachers as well as students” (p. 22). This core leadership practice relies upon a principal’s ability to act as an agent of change with a focus on three specific sets of practices: (1) strengthening school culture through the development of shared norms, beliefs, and values; (2) modifying organizational structures to ensure the establishment of positive conditions for teaching and learning; and (3) building collaborative processes by providing staff with opportunities to participate in the decision-making process within the school (Leithwood et al., 2005). Success in this arena is tightly connected to a principal’s ability to build meaningful relationships with staff, students, parents and the community. Principals who are successful change agents understand the delicate connection between having strong relationships with people and structural change (Fullan, 2001). According to Fullan (2001), “Leading in a culture of change does not mean placing changed individuals into unchanged environments” (p. 79). It
is critical that principals focus on improving the culture and climate of their schools while simultaneously strengthening relationships with all connected parties (Fullan, 2001; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). According to DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003), “Serving all students while helping them meet high standards requires most schools to change the way they think and work” (p. 45). This type of change begins at the core of a school’s culture and requires principals to create an environment where teachers collaborate, learn in context, and build capacity (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Fullan, 2001; Leithwood et al., 2008; Marzano et al., 2005).

Leithwood et al. (2008) identified “managing the teaching and learning program” as the fourth core leadership practice that almost all successful leaders draw from. This category focuses on the creation of a positive and productive working environment through effective personnel management, ensuring stability within the school, and strengthening the infrastructure of the school. Connections can be made between this core leadership practice and two of the four leadership paths identified by Leithwood et al. (2010), the rational path and emotions path. According to Lethwood et al. (2010), the rational path is built upon the “knowledge and skills of school staff members about curriculum, teaching and learning” (p. 673), while the emotions path includes “feelings, dispositions, or affective states of staff members, both individually and collectively, about school related matters” (p. 675). In essence, managing the teaching and learning program requires successful leadership of people in concert with components of instructional leadership.

A principal’s ability to apply leadership practices and skills in context is more important than the mere mastery of these practices and skills. According to Leithwood et al. (2008), successful principals are able to “apply contextually sensitive combinations” of the leadership
practices described in this section. There are connections here to practices associated with Situational Leadership Theory, which is grounded in the premise that leaders adjust their behaviors in response to the specific conditions they are facing at a given moment in time. How the four basic leadership practices described above are applied and whether or not they are applied differently at different times and in a variety of combinations depending on the context was explored through this study.

**Leadership’s indirect impact on school performance.** The fourth assertion by Leithwood et al. (2008) is that “School leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions” (p. 32). This leadership claim focuses on building capacity in addition to motivation, commitment and working conditions as mentioned above. Through a review of the relevant literature, Leithwood et al. (2008) discovered that school leaders have a modest impact on capacity, but a strong influence on motivation, commitment, and working conditions. Conversely, the literature shows that building capacity has the strongest influence on teaching practices and student learning with motivation and commitment second and working conditions as having the weakest impact (Leithwood et al., 2008). Fullan (2014) wrote at length about the importance of building capacity in relation to positive school change and improved results. He argued that by giving people the skills they need to do their jobs effectively, you increase performance and people become more accountable. According to Fullan (2014), “There is more to accountability than measuring results; you need also to develop people’s capacity to achieve the results” (p. 27).

Two related concepts highlighted by Leithwood et al. (2010), collective teacher efficacy (CTE) and professional learning communities, have close ties to capacity building, motivation,
commitment, and working conditions. Leithwood et al. (2010) defined CTE as the level of confidence that a group of teachers have about their capacity to ensure that students achieve at high levels. Teachers with high levels of CTE accept responsibility for student achievement and hold themselves to high performance standards. Leaders can impact CTE indirectly by demonstrating strong instructional leadership practices, fostering collaborative working environments, and working together with teachers to develop a shared purpose, vision, and common goals (Leithwood et al., 2010). The literature supports a strong correlation between professional learning communities and student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2010; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Leadership behaviors and practices that support PLCs are more often supportive rather than directive. In an effort to foster a true PLC, principals need to ensure that the proper conditions exist including scheduling and protecting time for teachers to meet and work collaboratively to establish common goals (Leithwood et al., 2010). Both CTE and PLCs require indirect principal support, but can have a significant impact on school performance (Leithwood et al., 2010).

**Distributing leadership.** Increased accountability and pressures associated with the 21st century principalship have popularized distributed leadership as a method of improving student achievement and teacher performance (Brown, 2005; Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, & Hopkins, 2007). According to Leithwood et al. (2008) evidence showing a direct connection between distributed leadership practices and student performance is limited, but compelling evidence exists showing that the practice has an indirect impact. While definitions of distributed leadership vary across the literature, there is some agreement that the basic premise of distributed leadership is to spread the work over a number of people within the organization. In schools, the model has been described as teachers and principals working in “collegial networks” on a variety
of tasks directly connected to teaching, learning and school performance (Pristine & Scott-Nelson, 2005). While distributed leadership is not a new leadership phenomenon, it has seen a resurgence since the early years of the 21st century (Harris et al., 2007). According to Harris (2006), the rise of distributed leadership has three dimensions which align with the challenges of the 21st century principalship: (1) representational – reflects the changing leadership structures of schools; (2) illustrative – reflects a new leadership style to accommodate an increased workload for principals; and (3) descriptive – aligns with schools organized as professional learning communities.

Leithwood et al. (2008) asserted that certain patterns of distributed leadership yield better results than others. While they admitted that the evidence is limited, they noted that data does show a stronger correlation between distributed patterns that are well coordinated and school performance that exists between poorly coordinated efforts and performance. Further, the more levels of leadership involved in the distribution pattern used in a particular school or district (e.g. assistant principals, principals, superintendents) the higher attribution to student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2008).

**Personal traits as a factor.** There are many studies identifying lists of traits associated with successful leadership. None of these lists are comprehensive, forcing scholars to approach them thematically in an effort to make sense of the hundreds of traits identified across many studies (Dubrin, 2010; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Northouse, 2010). While there is some overlap, these lists continue to highlight the broadness of the research and the lack of agreement among researchers as to which traits are most essential to leadership success. According to Leithwood et al. (2008), evidence shows that the most successful school leaders are “open minded, ready to learn from others. . .flexible, persistent, resilient and optimistic” (p. 36).
Agreement can be found within the literature that while traits matter, they are not the sole context of successful leadership. Certain personality traits make individuals more likely to excel at certain behaviors that are critical to successful leadership (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). There is compelling evidence supporting the idea that successful leaders possess certain characteristics that non-leaders do not (Dubrin, 2010; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). A major weakness with focusing on traits as a component of successful leadership is that it is difficult to determine which traits are most effective for which leadership situations. When considering personality traits alone, there is no way to tie specific traits to specific circumstances (Dubrin, 2010; Northouse, 2010). Dubrin (2010) asserts that focusing too narrowly on traits can foster an elitist view of leadership where individuals who do not possess certain traits are not considered for leadership or discouraged from pursuing leadership opportunities (p. 59).

The assertions about successful leadership identified by Leithwood et al. (2008) provided a strong framework in which to organize a review of characteristics of successful principals. An analysis of the work of Leithwood et al. (2008) showed that successful principals (1) create the working conditions necessary to support teaching and learning; (2) act as an agent of change; (3) possess strong interpersonal skills; (4) work collaboratively to develop a common vision; (5) understand that their impact is largely indirect; (6) distribute leadership across multiple constituencies; (7) understand the role of the instructional leader; and (8) possess certain personality traits that make the above possible. These eight constructs were used when framing interview questions for this study.

**Job Satisfaction of Principals**

As accountability-driven legislation has increasingly overshadowed the field of public education over the past decade, the principalship has grown more and more complex (Brown,
2005; Fullan, 2014; Styron & Styron, 2011). Not surprisingly, the role has become less attractive creating a dearth in quality candidates seeking career advancement from the classroom to administration and higher rates of turnover among those that reach the principal’s office (Battle & Gruber, 2010; Conrad & Rosser, 2007; Fullan, 2014; Howley et al., 2005; Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). Both the perspectives of sitting principals and the perceptions of those who would normally aspire to become principals are having an impact on the role. Studies conducted as early as the mid to late 1990s showed that more than 80% of teachers holding administrative licenses had no interest in the principalship (Howley et al., 2005). According to some teachers, the role was becoming increasingly complex, was a source of considerable stress, lacked support, did not pay enough, required long hours, and had a significant negative effect on an individuals family life (Howley et al., 2005). While these particular perceptions were captured prior to the advent of NCLB, they are closely aligned with the disincentives that sitting principals discuss in association with job satisfaction today (Gates et al., 2006).

Research has warned that measuring job satisfaction is a subjective process that highly depends on the “perceptions, attitudes, needs, and values” of individuals (Conrad & Rosser, 2007). However, if considered through a more comprehensive lens, data can be useful. Rather than considering job satisfaction as a single attitude, Conrad and Rosser (2007) contextualize it as a set of perceptions, attitudes and feelings individuals have about their work.

**Mobility, turnover, and burnout.** Increased demands on the principalship related to higher degrees of accountability has not only made it difficult for districts to attract quality principal candidates, but it has also increased the likelihood that sitting principals will change schools or leave the profession all together (Gates et al., 2006). High levels of turnover has
limited the effects of the kinds of school improvement efforts that are necessary in order for schools to meet federal and state accountability benchmarks because it has significantly diminished leadership stability (Gates et al., 2006). Only 15% of principals held their positions for 10 years or more, 31% left the principalship during their first year, and in one state 66% of principals left their schools within six years (Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011).

Higher rates of mobility and turnover among principals are attributed to multiple factors. According to Federici and Skaalvik (2012), there is a strong correlation between mobility and self-efficacy. Research has indicated that self-efficacy may actually reduce an individual’s desire to leave their job and that an individual with an external locus of control is less likely to quit (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012). According to Friedman (2002):

School principals may experience professional accomplishment whenever they successfully demonstrate leadership in the school which inspires all concerned to collaborate actively in attaining the school’s mission; group processes involving others in establishing short and long term goals; instruction; setting high standards for students, staff, parents, and self; organizational processes, and political processes. (p. 229)

When these things are not in play, principals begin to doubt their leadership skills, feelings of professional accomplishment diminish, stress increases, and burnout becomes more likely (Friedman, 2002).

**Factors related to job satisfaction.** A school’s demographic make-up is strongly linked to student performance, the quality of school personnel, and staff turnover (Gates et al., 2006; Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). Given this, it is no surprise that the job satisfaction of principals in underperforming urban schools tends to be lower than it is for those in high-
performing suburban schools. Urban schools tend to have higher enrollments of students with special needs and low social economic status and tend to struggle more with resources and parental support. As a result, principal candidates in these schools tend to be less qualified than those in more affluent communities leading to higher turnover and lower levels of satisfaction (Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). Ethnicity of the student body has an impact on job satisfaction and turnover. Gates et al. (2006) conducted a study of principals in North Carolina and Illinois and found that in schools with zero percent minority students, the turnover rate for principals was 14 percent while in schools with 100 percent minority enrollment the turnover rate for principals was 24 percent.

Qualifications of principals, specifically, level of degree attainment and years of experience, are generally a factor in mobility (Gates et al., 2006). Principals with master’s degrees and with several years of experience are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs and less likely to change schools or professions; however, it is challenging for urban districts to recruit and retain experienced candidates with advanced degrees (Gates et al., 2006). Educators are often attracted to the principalship because of a desire to have a positive impact on a school’s quality (Pounder & Merrill, 2001). Given the inherent challenges associated with urban school settings, it can be more difficult for principals to have the impact they desire to have during their tenure, lowering rates of satisfaction (Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011).

Working conditions is a very broad category, but an important factor in the satisfaction of principals (Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). Working conditions include such factors as workload, stress, salary, hours, and perceived support from the community and upper administration. Work overload and the complicated nature of the modern day principalship cause a high level of role confusion that reduces overall job satisfaction for principals (Kafka,
2009; Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). Additionally, several of the factors mentioned above are closely correlated with federal and state expectations and mandates. With the potential for serious consequences for principals leading schools that consistently miss student performance targets, stress increases, hours increase, and principals can feel isolated (Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). According to Tekleselassie and Villareal (2011), an “imbalance between decision authority and decision accountability leaves principals confused and frustrated – breeding conditions that that may negatively influence their career longevity” (p. 256). Salary is another key factor impacting job satisfaction and longevity. In many cases, the differential between the salary of experienced teachers and principals is insignificant given the longer hours and work year and higher level of responsibility accompanying the principalship. Salaries are generally not competitive enough to attract and retain quality professionals (Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011).

The affective or emotional dimension of the principalship is a key job satisfaction factor. This dimension is even more important than salary and other workplace factors when considering job satisfaction and mobility (Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). Principals who feel that their work is having an impact and who feel like their skills and talents are being utilized and appreciated by the school or district have higher levels of satisfaction (Sutter, 1996; Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). The affective domain is often satisfied when a principal receives direct and personal feedback from superiors; works closely with students, teachers, and parents; has ample opportunity for professional development; has the ability to control and schedule work; and has a general sense of autonomy (Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). The affective domain is also tightly linked with the quality of the personal relationships a principal has forged in his or her school community. Principals with positive working relationships with
staff, students, parents, community members, and superiors are generally more satisfied and tend to remain with their school or district for longer periods of time (Friedman, Friedman, & Markow, 2008; Friedman, 1995; Johnson & Holdaway, 1994; Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011).

**Literature Review Conclusion**

The foregoing review of the literature was designed to capture the evolution of the principalship from its beginnings to the complex position it is today. Woven throughout the review are topics relevant to the research question that drove this study. What is clear from the literature is that the principalship is highly complex, presenting a challenge that can be overwhelming to many who occupy the role. These challenges come from a variety of sources including the federal government, local communities, students and families, and faculties. It is evident that the principalship has evolved significantly over time with a striking number of changes coming since the approval of the No Child Left Behind Legislation in 2001. As accountability has increased, so have expectations for instructional leadership. Unfortunately, job satisfaction has decreased at the same time, making it difficult to find high quality candidates. To add to the complexity of the role, what is necessary to meet accountability mandates often juxtapose instructional leadership strategies. Also, principals are often ill equipped to serve as instructional leaders. The literature identified what is expected of principals, but was less clear about how principals make meaning of the responsibilities associated with the role, or the specific skills or strategies they believe are critical to their success.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Methodology and Research Design

Using a qualitative research design, this study explored the lived experiences of a small number of public secondary school principals focusing on how they make meaning of the myriad responsibilities associated with the role, the leadership challenges they face, and the skills they think are most critical for success. The study was guided by the following research question: How do public high school principals describe the balancing of instructional leadership practices with their other responsibilities in this era of high-stakes accountability?

Creswell (2009) identified nine characteristics of qualitative research which aligned with the goals and research question of this study: (1) natural setting: data were collected in the field at the participants’ schools where they occupied the role of the principal; (2) researcher as key instrument – the researcher collected data by interviewing participants directly; (3) multiple sources of data – while interviews were the primary source of data, the researcher also considered demographic data associated with each participant’s school as provided by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; (4) inductive data analysis – themes were identified from a detailed analysis of interview data; (5) participants’ meanings – there was a consistent focus throughout the study on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem of practice; (6) emergent design – parts of the process shifted during the data collection phase to accommodate themes that surfaced during interviews; (7) theoretical lens – data were analyzed through the lens of two specific approaches within leadership theory; (8) interpretive – as qualitative research is an interpretive inquiry design, the study naturally fused interpretations of the researcher and the participants based on their backgrounds, history,
contexts and prior understandings; and (9) holistic account – the study attempted to identify and analyze the full complexity of the problem of practice.

Using an interpretative qualitative design, the researcher built a large body of highly detailed narratives from a series of interviews conducted with each participant. According to Locke, Silverman, and Spirduso (2010), the researcher constructs an “extensive collection of thick description as the basis for inductive generation of an understanding of what is going on or how things work” (p. 184). For this study, the researcher engaged in two interviews with each participant in an effort to understand their lived experiences relative to the identified problem of practice of how principals make meaning of the myriad responsibilities associated with the role, particularly those specific to local, state and federal mandates and increasing expectations around instructional leadership.

**Research Tradition**

Given that the research investigated the lived experience of public high school principals, a qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis was selected for the study. According to Maxwell, “A qualitative study can include virtually anything that you see, hear, or that is otherwise communicated to you while conducting the study” (p. 79). Maxwell also referred to the researcher as the research instrument in qualitative work. These concepts are closely aligned with phenomenology and with interviews as a vehicle for data collection.

Phenomenology has a long history as an approach to the study of the human experience. According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) phenomenologists “share a particular interest in thinking about what the experience of being human is like, in all of its various aspects, but especially in terms of the things which matter to us, and which constitute our lived world” (p. 11). The literature most often recognizes the German philosopher Edmund Husserl as the central
figure in the development of the methodology as it is most commonly known today (Ehrich, 2005; Groenewald, 2004; Hutton, 2009; LeVasseur, 2003; Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009; Tufford & Newman, 2010). Husserl’s belief that all philosophy, science and knowledge should seek to uncover the meaning of different experiences became the foundation of his transcendental phenomenological methodology (Smith, 2007). Husserl possessed a desire to find a way for individuals to understand their own experiences with a particular phenomenon to the point where they could identify the “essential qualities” of these experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl’s transcendental phenomenological theory is closely connected to the idea of intentionality – the “orientation of the mind to its object” (Moustakas, 1994). To further illustrate Husserl’s perspective on intentionality, Smith et al. (2009) asserted, “Experience of consciousness is always consciousness of something, seeing is seeing of something, remembering is remembering of something, judging is judging of something” (p. 13). Meaning is at the center of phenomenology and Husserl believed that only through meaning does “consciousness present us with a world, an organized structure of things around us, including ourselves” (Smith, 2007, p. 190).

Husserl’s transcendental phenomenological design has led to variations developed by other philosophers and academics over time. Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, based his approach to phenomenology on what he learned from his teacher, but with a focus toward hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, rather than transcendentalism (Smith et al., 2009; Tufford & Newman, 2010). The interpretative approach differs from the transcendental philosophy of Husserl in that it does not push the researcher to completely suspend beliefs, biases, and assumptions during the research process, an activity known as bracketing. When using an interpretative approach to phenomenology, the researcher’s personal connections to the
phenomenon being studied are an integral part of the analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger’s approach to phenomenology also included the perspective of ontology, the study or theory of the nature of being or existence (Smith et al., 2009). According to Annells (1996), “Meaning lies in the individual’s transaction with a situation such that the situation constitutes the individual and the individual constitutes the situation” (p. 708). This cyclical relationship between a person and their experiences related to this study as it attempted to identify how principals make meaning of their work. Epistemology, the study of the nature and grounds of knowledge, plays a significant role in phenomenology and was connected to the development of the research question for this study. Research questions for phenomenological studies should be directed toward meaning in an attempt to learn about people’s understandings, experiences, and sense-making activities (Hutton, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). Axiology, the study of values also plays a role in phenomenology. Axiological assumptions accept the subjectivity that is characteristic of qualitative research. According to Hutton (2009):

The value associated in the research process encompasses the individualistic perspective of relativism, holding that realities subsist in relation to various mental concepts and they are originated from individualistic perceptions and experiences and influenced by one’s social, cultural, specific, and local aspects of life and experience. (p. 1)

Although phenomenological researchers attempt, through bracketing and other reduction strategies, to set aside or minimize their own perspectives on the phenomenon being studied, it is unreasonable to think that the final interpretation of the data will be void of any influence from these perspectives (Hutton, 2009; Smith et al., 2009).
Because this study focused on the principalship and the researcher is employed as a principal, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected as the specific research methodology. Smith et al. (2009) described IPA as a “research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences. IPA is phenomenological in that it is concerned with exploring experience in its own terms” (p. 1). IPA focuses on the moment when an ordinary everyday experience becomes important to a person and that person begins to reflect on that experience as something significant as well as begins to make meaning of the experience (Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith et al. (2009), “When people are having major experiences and facing big issues, the multidimensional aspect of their response to that experience comes to the fore and so a holistic phenomenological analysis is particularly apposite” (p. 34). This study examined the lived experiences of high school principals, with a specific focus on how the participants made meaning of the myriad responsibilities associated with state and federal mandates and local expectations as they served as instructional leaders in their buildings. This research tradition fit this study, as IPA research calls for a relatively small sample size with data collected through a series of semi-structured interviews. Perhaps most importantly, because the principalship is so complex and can be interpreted in a multitude of ways depending on the person and the school, the holistic approach of IPA served this study well.

IPA is built upon three distinct theoretical perspectives: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Each of these perspectives connected to the nature of the study. Phenomenology focuses on how individuals make sense of their lived experiences, and how the individual’s meaning relates to the environment in which they work and live (Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith et al. (2009), “In IPA research, our attempts to understand other people’s
relationships to the world are necessarily interpretative, and will focus upon their attempts to make meanings out of their activities and to the things happening to them” (p. 21). This study interpreted the relationships principals have with the current accountability-driven environment of public education and examined how participant’s described the balancing of instructional leadership demands with the many other responsibilities associated with the role.

Hermeneutics focuses on interpretation and context. Originally, hermeneutics was used to interpret biblical texts and was later employed as a tool to interpret a wider body of texts including historical documents and literary works (Smith et al., 2009). This research study relates to the hermeneutic circle, which focuses on the “dynamic relationship between the part and the whole” (Smith et al., 2009). The hermeneutic circle asserts that in order to understand a given part of a phenomenon, one must look at and understand the whole. Conversely, in order to understand the whole, one must look at and understand the smaller parts that make up the whole. As a broad example, Smith et al. (2009) stated that “the meaning of [a] word only becomes clear when seen in the context of the whole sentence. At the same time, the meaning of the sentence depends upon the cumulative meanings of the individual words” (p. 28). This study explored the relationship between how individual principals made meaning of their work (part) within the high-stakes nature of the environment of public education (whole). IPA involves a double hermeneutic where the researcher is attempting to make sense of the participant attempting to make sense of the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). In most cases, the researcher and participant share a broad characteristic – they are both human beings with similar mental and personal skills. For this study, awareness of the double hermeneutic was particularly important because the researcher is a principal who was seeking to understand how other principals experience their role in this era of high-stakes accountability and increasing expectations for instructional
leadership. While a double hermeneutic played a role in the study, the researcher remained cognizant of this factor and made every effort, through bracketing, reduction, and the use of field notes, to minimize its effect on the overall analysis of the data collected.

Idiography focuses on the particular at two distinct levels (Smith et al., 2009). First, IPA is committed to detail and an in depth analysis of the data collected. In order to ensure this level of commitment to detail, the researcher must conduct a thorough and systematic analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Secondly, according to Smith et al. (2009), “IPA is committed to understanding how particular experiential phenomena (an event, process or relationship) have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context” (p. 29). IPA calls for a small purposeful sample. This study used semi-structured interviews of five high school principals to gather data for a thorough analysis of the research topic and explored how they perceived the complexity of their roles in the context of the current educational environment.

Participants

As Smith et al. (2009) suggested, the sample should be a small, purposive, and homogeneous group for whom the “research question will be meaningful” (p. 49). By selecting five public high school principals from Massachusetts, data were collected from a homogenous group who provided perspective on the specific phenomena being studied. Smith et al. (2009) stated, “Because IPA is an idiographic approach, concerned with understanding particular phenomena in particular contexts, IPA studies are conducted on small sample sizes” (p. 49). The participants represented a perspective on the high school principalship, not a particular segment of the broader population of high school principals.

The research process for this study began with the identification of five high school principals willing to participate. The selection was purposeful in order to help ensure that the
sample was suited to best help the researcher understand the problem of practice (Creswell, 2009). An attempt was made to identify a relatively diverse group of high school principals based on the socio-economic status of their schools and communities, the size of their schools, and the performance levels of their schools. A profile for each school was created using data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Participants were provided with documentation outlining why they were selected for the study, the sequence of interviews to be conducted, how the results would be reported, and what the researcher hoped to gain from the study (Creswell, 2009).

**Recruitment and Access**

Participants were recruited through telephone conversations with the researcher with follow-up written documentation. Participants were not offered any incentives for participation. They will be provided with copies of the study in its finalized format. Approval from the Institutional Review Board was obtained prior to the recruitment of participants. The researcher successfully completed the “Protecting Human Research Participants” training course through the National Institutes of Health (NIH). All participants signed an informed consent form. Given the nature of the study, there were no issues relative to ethics or the protection of human subjects. Each participant and his or her school were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

**Data Collection**

The method of data collection was a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face with each participant. With the exception of one session, interviews were conducted at the participant’s schools. Principal Smith requested that his first interview be conducted at the researcher’s office. Smith et al. (2009) described a qualitative interview as a
“conversation with a purpose” (p. 57). Questions were developed that encouraged participants to tell their story in a sequence that began with why they entered into the field of education and ended with a description of their present experiences as high school principals. An interview schedule was developed for each of the interviews with open-ended questions that encouraged the interviewees to talk at length (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher followed guidelines identified by Smith et al. (2009) when developing the interview schedules: (1) Develop questions that provide the researcher with an opportunity to answer the research questions; (2) Consider the range of topic areas to be covered for each session; (3) Sequence the topic areas in a logical way; (4) Consider phrasing to avoid abstract structure and foster open-ended questions; and (5) Review the final list of questions with someone else and make revisions as deemed necessary (p. 61). Seidman (2006) asserted that context is critical when using interviews to gather data for a study and that conducting “one-shot” interviews with participants whom the researcher is not that familiar with will not yield the amount of information needed for an in-depth analysis of the topic (p. 17). While Seidman (2006) recommended three separate interviews with each participant, this study combined the first two interviews, as described by Seidman (2006), into one meeting. In this vein, the first interview began with a focus on how each participant entered the field of education, including what influenced them to become educators, and their journey from the classroom to the principal’s office and ended with questions focusing on the participants present experiences as school principals relative to the high-stakes public school environment and federal, state and local expectations for student achievement, teacher performance, and instructional leadership. As Seidman (2006) suggested, the interviews consisted of questions about their work and their experiences as principals in an effort to help them reconstruct the details of their experiences in the area being studied. The second, and final
interview focused on meaning (Seidman, 2006) by taking the data collected in the first interview and asking questions that pushed participants to reflect on their history and experiences and connect what they shared in the first interview with the guiding research question: How do public high school principals describe the balancing of instructional leadership practices with their other responsibilities in this era of high-stakes accountability?

During the interview stage of the study, the researcher made field notes in an effort to retain data as they were being collected. Field notes focused on broad “who, what, where, when, and why” questions and fell in one or more of the following categories: (1) observational notes that made note of what happened; (2) theoretical notes that attempted to derive meaning; (3) methodological notes that served as reminders, instructions, or critiques for the researcher; and (4) analytical memos that were used to summarize the progress at the end of a day or series of interviews (Groenewald, 2004).

**Data Storage**

All data were stored on the researcher’s laptop computer with a back-up copy of all data stored on an external USB storage device. The laptop computer, USB storage device, and all notes, transcripts, and paperwork associated with the study were secured in the home office of the researcher. Interviews were audio recorded using a digital recording device. Digital audio files of each interview were downloaded from the portable recording device to the researcher’s laptop computer in waveform audio file format (WAV files). Once downloaded to the laptop computer, the audio files were deleted from the portable digital recording device. A professional transcriptionist, hired by the researcher, transcribed each interview.

The confidentiality of each participant and that of his or her school was maintained through the use of pseudonyms. All audio files, transcripts, and notes are stored on the
researchers laptop computer and USB storage device and will remain there for a period of three years following the conclusion of the study in accordance with Northeastern University IRB policy.

**Data Analysis**

According to Creswell (2009), the data analysis process “involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (p. 183). As this study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a research method, the researcher drew from the following six-step data analysis process as identified by Smith et al. (2009): (1) Reading and re-reading; (2) Initial noting; (3) Identifying emergent themes; (4) Searching for connections across emergent themes; (5) Moving to the next case; and (6) Looking for patterns across cases (p. 82). Smith et al. (2009) suggested that it is important to “immerse oneself” into the original data. For this study, those data will be recordings of the various interviews conducted. To meet the conditions of step one of the analysis process listed above, the researcher listened to the audio recordings while reading the transcript and making notations. According to Smith et al. (2009), most people are conditioned to read and synthesize information quickly. The IPA analysis process requires the researcher to slow down and listen and read multiple times to ensure that the participant is the focus of the analysis and to ensure an active level of engagement with the data (Smith et al., 2009). Lastly, according to Smith et al. (2009), “This reading also facilitates an appreciation of how rapport and trust may build across an interview and thus highlight the location of richer and more detailed sections, or indeed contradictions and paradoxes” (p. 82).
Smith et al. (2009), described step two, initial noting, as the most detailed and time consuming. This step, which overlaps with some of the activities found under step one, helps the researcher become familiar with the transcripts. As the researcher listened and made notes, things that mattered most to the participants and the meanings that these things have for them emerged. Smith et al. (2009) suggested the use of three distinct processes during step two: (1) make *descriptive* comments focusing on the content of what the participant says; (2) note *linguistic* notes that focus on the specific language used by the participant; and (3) make *conceptual* comments that focus on engaging on an interrogative or conceptual level. Descriptive comments include key words or phrases that a researcher takes at “face value.” Linguistic comments analyze language use including pauses, laughter, repetition, tone, and metaphor. Conceptual comments are interpretative and usually involve a shift toward the overarching understandings that a participant has of the topic. It is common for researchers to draw upon their own personal experiences when completing this phase of the coding process (Smith et al., 2009).

In step 3, developing emergent themes, the researcher built upon the data originally gathered and the detailed notes taken during step two. Through the first two steps, the data set grew significantly. According to Smith et al. (2009), the goal of the third step is to “reduce the volume of detail whilst maintaining complexity, in terms of mapping the interrelationships, connections and patterns between exploratory notes” (p. 91). There is a relationship between this step of the analysis and the hermeneutic circle as the researcher breaks down the whole of the transcript into parts and then creates a newly defined thematically-based whole (Smith et al., 2009). This step required more interpretation, drifting away from the participant and focusing more on the researcher. This process led to a final product that represents a collaborative effort.
between the participants and the researcher. The emergent themes are a conglomeration of the participant’s words and the researcher’s interpretation of those words (Smith et al., 2009).

Step four, searching for connections across emergent themes, involved mapping or charting how the themes fit together (Smith et al., 2009). There are several ways that a researcher can look for patterns. The following strategies, identified by Smith et al. (2009), fit the needs of this study. Abstraction is the process of putting like themes together to create a “superordinate theme.” Subsumption occurs when one of the original emergent themes rises to the top to become a superordinate theme that subsumes a series of other existing emergent themes. Polarization involves the examination of themes from the perspective of how they differ as opposed to their similarities. Numeration is the simple process of keeping track of the number of times a theme is supported and prioritizing those themes that are seen multiple times.

The fifth step sent the researcher back to step one to repeat the process with the next participant. While the researcher was influenced by what was uncovered during the analysis of previous participants, it was important to treat each participant individually so that new themes had the opportunity to emerge (Smith et al., 2009). The sixth and final step was to look for patterns across cases. The researcher considered questions like: What connections exist across cases? How does a theme in one case help illuminate a different case? Which themes are the most potent? This may lead to new themes or the renaming of existing themes (Smith et al., 2009).

Trustworthiness

While Creswell (2009) asserted that “Validity is one of the strengths of qualitative research” (p. 191), the fact that there were only five participants and that all of the participants were drawn from a pool of principals in a small geographic area acted as a limitation. To help
minimize this, the researcher employed the following validity strategies as identified by Creswell (2009): (1) the use of rich, thick description to convey findings; (2) clarifying the bias the researcher brings to the study; and (3) presenting negative or discrepant information that ran counter to the themes (Creswell, 2009).

**Research Design Conclusion**

A qualitative approach, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), was selected to support the research question for this study: How do public high school principals describe the balancing of instructional leadership practices with their other responsibilities in this era of high-stakes accountability?

This research tradition allowed the researcher to explore the lived experiences of the participants through in-depth interviews and a comprehensive analysis of interview narratives. The three theoretical perspectives of IPA: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography all aligned with the study. Phenomenology considers how participants make sense of their lived experiences, hermeneutics has a heavy focus on interpretation of the part and the whole, and idiography focuses on the in-depth analysis of data and how a phenomenon is understood by people within a certain context. In-depth interviews were modeled on the work of Smith et al. (2009) as well as Seidman (2006). Two interviews were conducted with each participant. Finally, the six-step analysis process as described by Smith et al. (2009) was employed when analyzing interview transcriptions. This research tradition provided the researcher with the thick and rich narrative data that is so critical to qualitative research.
Chapter 4: Report of Research Findings

Introduction

This study explored the lived experiences of a small number of public high school principals and how they make meaning of the challenges they face and the leadership skills and activities they think are most critical to success when balancing bureaucratic compliance and instructional leadership responsibilities. To that end, the researcher conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews with five purposefully-selected participants, each currently serving as a public high school principal. Influenced by two theoretical frameworks, skill leadership theory and situational leadership theory, the interview questions were designed to answer the central research question for the study: How do public high school principals describe the balancing of instructional leadership practices with their other responsibilities in this era of high stakes accountability?

The interviews ranged from 40 to 60 minutes in length. Each participant was asked a series of background questions related to their experiences in education, career path to the principalship, and school demographic information. They were also asked questions directly related to instructional leadership practices, leadership skills, the federal accountability system, and their own leadership styles. The questions asked during the two interview sessions can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B. With the exception of one interview session, all interviews took place at the participant’s schools. The first round interview for the first participant was held at the researcher’s school at the request of the participant. Each participant and his or her school were assigned a random pseudonym to protect confidentiality. Table 1 lists each participant by pseudonym and provides relevant background information and demographic data obtained during the first interview session with each participant.
Table 1

Pseudonyms and Demographic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>School Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years in Education</th>
<th>Years as Principal</th>
<th>School Enrollment</th>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Accountability Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal Smith</td>
<td>Clear River HS</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>800 (9-12)</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Level 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Williams</td>
<td>Green Hill HS</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>475 (9-12)</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Level 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Miller</td>
<td>Gray Stone HS</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1,175 (9-12)</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Level 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Davis</td>
<td>Blue Lake HS</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>730 (9-12)</td>
<td>Rural Regional</td>
<td>Level 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Jones</td>
<td>Gold Meadow HS</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2,125 (9-12)</td>
<td>Suburban Regional</td>
<td>Level 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indicating the number of years each participant has worked in education and the number of years that each participant has served as principal will provide context for the reader relative to the level of experience for each participant. The type of school, student enrollment and the federal accountability status for each of the participant’s schools are all important pieces of information for the reader to consider when reading the analysis and discussion of the research findings. The five schools included in this study are classified as Level 1, Level 2, or Level 3 in accordance with the Accountability and Assistance System developed by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). According to the DESE, 80% of schools in Massachusetts are classified as Level 1 or 2 and the lowest performing 20% of schools in Massachusetts are classified as Level 3. The lowest achieving Level 3 schools are eligible for Level 4 or Level 5 classifications. No schools in this study were classified as Level 4 or Level 5. Level 1 schools are meeting gap narrowing goals for all students, including high-needs students. Level 2 schools are not meeting gap narrowing goals for the aggregate and/or for students in one
or more high-needs subgroups. As mentioned above, Level 3 schools are the lowest performing 20% of schools in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2012). Schools are categorized in one of the five levels based on their cumulative Progress and Performance Index (PPI) score. A school’s PPI is calculated using seven indicators: (1) narrowing proficiency gaps in English language arts; (2) narrowing proficiency gaps in mathematics; (3) narrowing proficiency gaps in science; (4) student growth in English language arts; (5) student growth in mathematics; (6) annual dropout rates; and (7) cohort graduation rates (Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2014).

**Review of Data Analysis Procedures**

Data collected during the 10 interviews were analyzed following the six-step data analysis process identified by Smith et al. (2009). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by a certified transcriptionist. As Smith et al. (2009) suggest, the first four steps of the analysis process were completed in order for each participant individually. Each case was considered individually until the final step in the process where the researcher searched for patterns across cases.

The first step in the analysis process was to read and re-read the transcripts for each interview session (Smith et al., 2009). This was done while listening to each audio file. Repeatedly listening to each audio recording and reading each transcript forced the researcher to slow down and keep the participant at the center of the analysis. Step one also helped the researcher actively engage with the data and begin to identify the development of rapport and trust between the researcher and each participant (Smith et al., 2009). In keeping with the six-steps by Smith et al. (2009), the researcher then completed step two, initial noting. During this
step, the researcher continued to become more familiar with each transcript and made descriptive comments, linguistic notes, and conceptual comments. During this step, the researcher also began to identify the things that mattered most to each participant (Smith et al., 2009).

During step three of the analysis, the researcher identified emergent themes for each participant using notes made during steps one and two. The data set grew significantly during steps one and two. During step three, the researcher reduced the data by grouping information thematically (Smith et al. 2009). Step four involved the identification of super-ordinate themes through the process of abstraction. According to Smith et al. (2009), abstraction is the process of “putting like with like and developing a new name for the cluster” (p. 96). The process of subsumption was also employed where emergent themes became super-ordinate themes (Smith et al., 2009).

After searching for connections across emergent themes for the first participant, the researcher repeated steps one through four for the remaining four participants before moving on to the sixth and final step, looking for patterns across cases. For this step, the researcher considered the following questions: What connections exist across cases? How does a theme in one case help illuminate a different case? Which themes are the most potent? This led to the renaming of existing themes (Smith et al., 2009).

Summary of Interviews

Principal Smith. The first study participant, Principal Smith, is the principal of Clear River High School, a medium-sized suburban high school located in a semi-rural town in Massachusetts with a population of approximately 18,000 people. Enrollment at Clear River High School is roughly 800 students in grades 9-12, but Principal Smith explained that enrollment is slowly increasing. There are approximately 65 professional staff with another 25
to 30 support staff. Principal Smith described his district as “one of the fastest growing around” and said that the population is mostly white, suburban, middle class but the population is “moving more towards upper middle class.” He said that he thought the population of the community has become more diverse in recent years. Principal Smith has spent his entire 30-year career in the same district. Prior to being appointed principal, a position he has held for 10 years, he taught social studies, worked as a department head, and served as an assistant principal.

Principal Smith described his leadership style as collaborative. He said he is skilled at bringing people together to find solutions. He also said that he believes he is accessible both in the “open door policy” respect and because he spends time among teachers and students in an effort to seek feedback directly. He identified his passion for his school community as his strongest attribute and when asked to identify a weakness, he said that because the principalship is so encompassing, he often struggles to take the necessary time to stop and carefully reflect on what people are saying. When asked to talk about what principals can do to influence student achievement, he identified “being in classrooms” as the most important activity. He said that observing classes helps him assess the effectiveness of his teachers in relation to student performance.

Several emergent themes were identified during the analysis of the two interview sessions with Principal Smith. These emergent themes were organized under four super-ordinate themes: (1) the principal’s development and perception of the role; (2) collaboration, relationships, and visibility; (3) the principal as the instructional leader; and (4) the principalship and the federal accountability system. These themes are discussed in the subsections below.

A principal’s development and perception of the role. When discussing his journey from the classroom to the principal’s office, Principal Smith talked about how his leadership was
influenced by those that he worked for as a teacher, department head and assistant principal. He shared his experiences working for two different principals with opposing leadership styles and said, “I took all of that and kind of went in the middle. It was interesting because you get different perspectives.” Principal Smith also recognized that teaching experience is something that successful principals must have. He stated, “You have to know where classroom teachers are coming from.” Principal Smith shared that when he was originally “offered” the principalship of the school, he turned down the offer because he wasn’t ready and thought that taking the job too early in his career would not be “fair to [him] or to other people.” When discussing strategies to manage the stress that comes with the principalship, he talked about taking care of himself physically and having the ability to prioritize and compartmentalize.

**Collaboration, relationships, and visibility.** When discussing collaboration and relationships, Principal Smith talked at length about “bouncing” ideas off of people that he works with and the importance of partnering with teachers. He said, “Teachers are a big part of the work we do. They have to be. They are on the front lines.” Principal Smith discussed the importance of the principal having a good relationship with the superintendent.

Principal Smith also talked about the impact that the administrative structure and size of a school has on the principalship. He said, “If you have multiple people [on your administrative team] you can delegate.” As a follow-up to that comment, he said, “You have to have good people working with you. Smart people that pay attention to details.” Principal Smith also made connections between building relationships and visibility. He talked about the importance of being “out and about” and specifically mentioned the value in being seen inside classrooms where teaching and learning is taking place.
The principal as the instructional leader. When discussing instructional leadership, Principal Smith shared that he did not receive any formal training in this area. He said that he learned to be an instructional leader informally from other administrators and from teachers. With respect to instructional leadership, Principal Smith said, “I know where my strengths are and I rely on other people when I need to.” Principal Smith defined instructional leadership as working with others to bring about positive change in a school. He described instructional leadership as an important aspect of the role, but recognized that it takes time to do it well and that time is limited. He stated, “I think for me the number one thing is being in classrooms. You’re in the trenches and listening to what their conversations are from the teacher’s view.” Principal Smith said that when he runs meetings, he uses modeling as an instructional leadership strategy by exhibiting behaviors that he expects to see from teachers in classrooms.

Since becoming principal, Principal Smith said that he has worked to change the culture of faculty meetings making them less about the “nuts and bolts” and more about instruction and assessment. To accomplish this, he has tried to use teacher leaders in meetings. He said, “I want teachers to tell us what something means.” This collaborative approach to instructional leadership was a recurrent theme throughout the interviews with Principal Smith.

The principalship and the federal accountability system. When asked to discuss the federal accountability system, Principal Smith indicated that mandates have changed the principalship in recent years. He said that the accountability system places more scrutiny on curriculum, instruction, and assessment and that there are more things that “principals need to be aware of.” Principal Smith described a connection between the mandates associated with the federal accountability system and instructional leadership. He said, “Teachers are saying that all these things are taking away from teaching. I try to circle back – these things assist with
teaching.” When asked to describe the impact of the federal accountability system on the principalship specifically, he said that mandates sometimes force a principal to focus less on teaching and learning and more on whether or not the school is “hitting the mark.”

Clear River High School is categorized as a Level 2 school according to the DESE’s accountability and assistance rating system. When asked about the impact of the Level 2 designation, Principal Smith indicated that the accountability system could be used as a means of applying positive pressure on a school. He said, “There are some things we need to work on. We meet them head-on and deal with them.” Principal Smith also credited the accountability system for pushing his school and district to increase their use of data when making decisions about instruction and assessment. When asked to discuss strategies he uses to meet the demands of the federal accountability system, Principal Smith talked about not “getting worked up” about things you can’t control.

**Skills of a successful principal.** The second interview ended with a discussion about skills. Principal Smith identified being a good communicator, being a good listener, being reflective, being visionary, and being empathetic as the most critical skills or characteristics that a principal should possess. He placed communication and listening skills in the same category and branded them as the most important of all of the skills he identified. Principal Smith said, “Principals need to be able to communicate the simple things and also the more difficult things well.” He talked about the importance of “getting the message out.” Principal Smith discussed the significance of listening, while recognizing that having the time to listen to everything in a focused manner is a challenge. He also acknowledged time as an enemy of reflection, but described being reflective as an important skill. He said, “You need to be willing to reflect and not make quick decisions. There is nothing wrong with saying ‘I’m not sure.’” When asked at
the end of the second interview to identify something that he would like to see change about the principalship, Principal Smith said, “I think if more people understood what we go through, what we handle when those kids come to our school. We handle a lot of different things. If people could see the different roles we play.”

Table 2 summarizes emergent themes and super-ordinate themes identified through the two interviews with Principal Smith.

Table 2

*Super-Ordinate and Emergent Themes: Principal Smith*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-Ordinate Themes</th>
<th>Emergent Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The principal’s development and perception of the role</td>
<td>▪ Influenced by the leadership of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Teaching experience is critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Prioritize tasks and compartmentalize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Learned to be an instructional leader from other administrators and teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ It’s important to know what you don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Offered the principalship before feeling ready</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Aspiring to become a principal to have a broader impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Physical health impacts performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Most rewarding to see students achieve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ More people need to understand the role of the principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration, relationships, and visibility</td>
<td>▪ Collaboration and shared decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Relationship with the superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Communication with all stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Presence in classrooms (informally)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Visibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Teacher-led discussions at faculty meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ The size of your administrative team impacts the principal’s role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ The culture of your school impacts your effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The principal as the instructional leader</td>
<td>▪ Instructional leadership is working collaboratively to bring about change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The principalship and the federal accountability system

- Mandates have changed the role
- Accountability system and mandates take away from teaching and learning
- Not getting “worked up” about things you can’t control
- The accountability system can lead to positive change
- Increased focus on data

Principal Williams. The second study participant, Principal Williams, is principal of Green Hill High School, a small Massachusetts suburban high school located in a former mill town with a population of roughly 13,000 residents. Enrollment at Green Hill High School is roughly 375 students in grades 9-12. Principal Williams described the community as “blue collar” with strong ties back to when the “mills were booming.” She frequently referenced challenges with the school budget, but said that the schools enjoy “strong community support” and that teachers “work very hard” and are “very proud of the work they do for their students.” Principal Williams also indicated that Green Hill High School “competes” with a local regional technical high school. In an effort to keep students at Green Hill High School, she described a strong focus on college and career readiness and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) programming. Green Hill High School has a professional staff of fewer than 40 with a support staff of 25. Principal Williams has been in education for approximately 25 years. Prior to being appointed principal at Green Hill High School, Principal Williams taught health and physical education, served as an athletic director, and worked as a department head in other schools. She served as an assistant principal at Green Hill High School for 3 years prior to becoming principal 9 years ago.
Principal Williams described herself as a collaborative leader. She said, “I am someone who willingly works with others. I’m really trying to make connections.” She also said she is a “hands-on principal” citing her background as a health and physical education teacher as experience that taught her how to “fight for programs.” Principal Williams identified her ability to improve school culture as her biggest strength and said she is always working on bolstering her instructional leadership skills. When asked how principals can best influence student achievement, Principal Williams talked about the importance of developing strong relationships with students and finding ways to let students know that she is aware of their issues and cares about them. She said that relationships are forged in classrooms through regular visits and through individual conversations with students about their school performance and future plans.

Several emergent themes were identified during the analysis of the two interview sessions with Principal Williams. These emergent themes were organized under four super-ordinate themes: (1) the principal’s perception of the role and outside influences; (2) the importance of visibility and building relationships; (3) collaboration and the principal as the instructional leader; (4) the impact of the federal accountability system and mandates on the principalship. These themes are discussed in the subsections below.

**The principal’s perception of the role and outside influences.** When asked about her rise to her current role, Principal Williams was very clear that she did not originally aspire to become a principal. She had an early career goal to become a teacher and athletic director, which she accomplished. Principal Williams said, “I’m not sure I ever really thought about leaving the classroom. I think it was more opportunities that were presented, truthfully.” She reflected on her career in the years prior to moving to an administrative role and cited encouragement from a principal she worked for as the catalyst for her eventual move towards an
administrative position. While she eventually took the step towards administrative licensure, she waited until she felt ready to move out of the classroom.

Principal Williams described the complex and demanding nature of the role in multiple ways. She talked about the difficulty of striking a balance between work and family. Having young children, she said she has found it necessary to include her children into the life of the school. Principal Williams said, “My kids come here all of the time. They have become a part of the school community.” She described the hours as “long” and said the principal is expected to be on-call 24 hours each day and seven days a week. She said, “I work more than I need to, and part of that is probably efficiency, and part of that is accessibility.” To help balance the demands of the role, Principal Williams is firmly committed to maintaining her own physical health. She said, “I exercise every day. My exercise is huge to me.”

Green Hill High School is a small school with a very small administrative structure. Principal Williams described the limited number of school-based leadership positions as a challenge. Throughout both interviews, she talked about how more responsibility falls on the principal when there are few other leadership positions in the building. Principal Williams stated, “If you’re missing key support positions, it is very taxing because the issue comes to me or my assistant principal.” She described her role as “all encompassing” as she and her assistant principal are solely responsible for teacher evaluations and curriculum, instruction, and assessment initiatives.

*Visibility and relationships.* Principal Williams talked about the importance of building relationships and how her visibility throughout the school community is a key element to the process of building these relationships. She described building relationships, building school culture, and building trust as interrelated. When asked to describe her first few years in her role,
Principal Williams said, “I really focused on the culture and gaining the respect and the trust of the staff because there was a lot of dividing.” She described her school as having a very different culture now than it did when she first became the principal. She said that the changed culture includes a higher level of teacher leadership and volunteerism.

Principal Williams talked at length about making connections with her students. With a limited guidance staff, she said she often finds herself involved in discussions with students about their post-high school plans, their academic standing, or even social-emotional issues. She said it’s important to her that students know that she is aware of the challenges they are facing.

Being visible is important to Principal Williams. She talked about greeting students each morning, being visible between classes, and most importantly, being present in classrooms to watch students learn and teachers teach.

**Collaboration and the principal as the instructional leader.** When asked to define instructional leadership, Principal Williams said, “Instructional leadership is the ability to guide and lead teacher leaders and collaborate with them to build a strong foundation.” She also said that instructional leadership is closely connected to the vision and culture of the school and that it is the principal’s role to work closely with teachers to “develop a curriculum that supports the mission and the vision and the culture of the school.” As stated above, Principal Williams is responsible for curriculum and instruction in her building. Until recently, a K-12 curriculum coordinator supported Principal Williams and her principal colleagues in the district, however, the person occupying this role resigned mid-year and there is no immediate plan to fill the vacancy. In the absence of the curriculum coordinator, Principal Williams works with teacher-leaders in her building during the contractual time provided to deliver professional development related to curriculum, assessment, and instruction. She said, “Over the last couple of years, I
have been giving segments of faculty meetings to teachers saying, ‘Here you go. This is the topic.’ We are transitioning in this respect and trying to incorporate teacher-led agenda items more regularly.” At the district level, Principal Williams said there has been an effort to ensure that principals have a “common instructional language.” She said, “I think [the principals] work well together. I think we all respect what we each do. We try to work off one another and we share.” She said that each principal works hard to send a similar message to staff regarding professional learning. Principal Williams cited the district’s willingness to send principals to off-site trainings and conferences to support their professional growth as instructional leaders.

Overall, however, her instructional leadership training has been piecemeal.

**Accountability and mandates.** When asked to describe how the federal accountability system has impacted her role, Principal Williams indicated that the impact has been significant. She said, “In the past few years, it has been the demands of the state coming down. [The role] has changed completely.” Principal Williams took pride in the fact that Green Hill High School’s accountability and assistance level improved from a Level 2 in 2013 to a Level 1 in 2014. While her pride was evident, she was also guarded about the school’s recent improvement. Principal Williams said, “I also quietly say, ‘But it could be a Level 2 next year because it’s all about the cohort.’” She said that the staff at Green Hill High School is not complacent and they were continuing to work on “different services and different approaches” to support students.

When asked if there is a public focus on the school’s accountability status, Principal Williams said that there was not. She recognized that this might be different in a district that is at a lower level. She said her strategy to maintain or improve the school’s performance level is to focus her efforts on teaching and learning, not on the state’s label. She said it is important for
principals to make connections between the data and instruction. Her final thoughts on the accountability system focused on a need for more resources. She said, “Having the resources would make [the principalship] so much easier even with all of the demands coming down.”

**Essential skills for principals.** The second interview session with Principal Williams concluded with a discussion about skills. Principal Williams identified listening, instructional leadership, and interpersonal skills as the three most critical skills that principals must possess in order to find success. She said, “Listening, I believe, will get you the feedback that you are looking for. Listening will provide that ownership that teachers need to buy into situations. Listening allows for reflection and listening builds relationships.” Principal Williams identified instructional leadership as another important skill for principals. She indicated that the biggest change in the principalship has been the move from a management role to a leadership role. She also stated that being a true instructional leader is one of the hardest things for a principal to do because it is so time consuming. Lastly, Principal Williams asserted that principals need to be personable and be able to build relationships, which she said is connected to building an overall positive school culture. When asked what she would change about the principalship, Principal Williams cited the need for more resources. She stated, “Just knowing that I don’t have to worry, ‘Am I going to have this person next year? How are we going to service these kids?’ It is those types of worries that not everybody knows about.”

Table 3 provides a summary of emergent themes and super-ordinate themes identified in the two interviews with Principal Williams.
Table 3

*Super-Ordinate and Emergent Themes: Principal Williams*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-Ordinate Themes</th>
<th>Emergent Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The principal’s perception of the role and</td>
<td>• Didn’t pursue the principalship</td>
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<tr>
<td>outside influences</td>
<td>• Offered the principalship, but wasn’t ready</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Need to find time for reflection</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Physical well-being is important</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Include your family into your school life</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• I’m working more than I should or need to</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• When support is limited, more falls on the principal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Expectations around accessibility have increased</td>
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<tr>
<td>The importance of visibility and building</td>
<td>• Building relationships, trust and culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationships</td>
<td>• Visibility inside and outside of the classroom</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• You must schedule time to be “out and about”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Principals need to be strong at culture building</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaboration and the principal as the</td>
<td>• District-wide collaboration on professional development</td>
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<tr>
<td>instructional leader</td>
<td>• Professional development topics discussed by district-wide team of administrators and teachers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The principal is responsible for curriculum</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• It’s important to stay current in your field</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Instructional leadership is collaborating with and guiding teachers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Training as an instructional leader is piecemeal.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Faculty meetings have changed in recent years to focus more on curriculum and instruction.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Important to utilize teacher leaders to promote instructional leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The impact of the federal accountability system and</td>
<td>• Mandates have changed the role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mandates on the principalship</td>
<td>• Proud of the school’s accountability (PPI) level, but not complacent and didn’t focus on it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Principal Miller. The third study participant, Principal Miller, is the principal of Gray Stone High School, an urban high school, located in a city in central Massachusetts with a population of roughly 41,000 people. The city is very much a working class community. Enrollment at Gray Stone High School is approximately 1,175 students in grades 9-12. Principal Miller described the student population as a “majority minority” with over 70% of the population self-identifying as minority. Forty-eight percent of the population self-identifies as Hispanic and Latino. He indicated that the low-income population is high with roughly 80% of families in the district receiving free or reduced lunch. He also said that English is not the first language for approximately 35% of students enrolled at Gray Stone High School. Principal Miller highlighted the transient nature of the student population at Gray Stone High School stating that since the start of the current school year 145 students have withdrawn and another 160 new students have enrolled. Before becoming a principal, a role he has held in two different schools, Principal Miller taught high school English, served as a dean of students, and as an assistant principal. This is Principal Miller’s fourth year as principal of Gray Stone High School. He served as principal for four years at a suburban high school prior to his move to Gray Stone High School.

When asked to discuss his leadership style, Principal Miller said that he values collaboration. He said, “I don’t know about physics or chemistry or music or art or gym. The list goes on. So it’s important to have faculty willing to lead and important for me to support that kind of culture.” He also said he takes responsibility for mistakes and “shares the wins.” Principal Miller said his strength is his ability to communicate - both in writing and verbally. He
said that he is consistently working to improve his ability to give specific feedback in a way that isn’t demoralizing. When asked to discuss how a principal can impact student achievement, Principal Miller said that he works to establish and maintain high expectations at Gray Stone High School and keeps the focus with teachers on instruction.

Several emergent themes were identified during the analysis of the two interview sessions with Principal Miller. These emergent themes were organized under five super-ordinate themes: (1) the individual principal’s evolution and balancing the demands of the role; (2) the impact of demographics; (3) the impact of the federal accountability system; (4) collaboration, visibility and presence; and (5) the principal as the instructional leader. These themes are discussed in the subsections below.

**Evolution and balance.** Principal Miller indicated that when he became an educator after earning his undergraduate degree that he had no intention of ever becoming a school administrator. He said that when he began investigating master’s degree programs, he had no interest in school administration. However, he ultimately decided that a degree in this area would give him “more flexibility” later in his career. Principal Miller credited the leadership of many mentors and colleagues as having shaped him as a principal. He said that while he was an assistant principal, he was fortunate to work under a principal who gave him a significant amount of responsibility. He stated, “I did all of the scheduling. I did a lot of the budget stuff. I did a lot of different things that principals traditionally do.” Principal Miller said the biggest adjustment for him when he became a principal was accepting the fact that he was now the individual expected to make the decisions. He said, “You’re no longer the one knocking on someone’s door. Now every problem comes to you and you need to decide.”
Principal Miller said the role has become more difficult every year and he referenced accountability, oversight, and numerous federal and state mandates as the primary reasons behind the increased complexity. While reflecting on long-term sustainability, Principal Miller said, “I feel like I have worked harder each year, which has gotten me to the point of ‘I don’t know if I can do this anymore.’” He described consistently long work hours with frequent evening commitments and many instances of needing to work from home both before and after the regular workday. Principal Miller recognized the importance of prioritizing family saying that he works very hard to be present for his kids and cited his ability to compartmentalize as a strategy to achieve this. Lastly, Principal Miller discussed how physical well-being is critical given the demands of the principalship, indicating that he works out regularly and tries to eat well in order to stay physically and mentally fit.

**Demographics.** Gray Stone High School is the only urban school included in this study. Principal Miller leads Gray Stone High School, having spent the earlier part of his career as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal of a suburban regional high school serving middle to upper middle class communities. He frequently referenced his previous district in an effort to highlight the role that demographics plays in a school. Principal Miller chose to leave the suburban environment seeking a new challenge and throughout both interviews, it was clear that while his current job is demanding, he relishes the work and feels like he is making a difference. When asked if he felt that principals of urban schools need to have a different skill set than principals of suburban schools, he said:

> I think there are different factors for sure. In terms of the skill set, I think that doesn’t matter so much because kids are kids. Teachers are teachers. Parents are
parents. I think you have to be more cognizant of some of the other factors that you just have to be aware of.

Principal Miller went on to describe the principal as someone “in charge of a planet.” He said that suburban schools are planets with one moon and city schools are planets with a multitude of moons. Principal Miller mentioned the challenges associated with having such a large population of students who do not speak English as their first language and how so many students enroll and withdraw each year. He indicated that the transient nature of the population is an annual challenge. Principal Miller spoke about the constant need for translations of written documents and the need for individual translators to be present in meetings. He also recognized how important Gray Stone High School and the staff of the school is to the urban community they serve.

The federal accountability system. Several of Principal Miller’s comments about the federal accountability system were connected to demographics and the school’s Level 3 designation within the accountability and assistance system. Level 3 schools are categorized as the lowest performing 20% of schools in the state. Principal Miller talked about how hard his staff is working to move Gray Stone High School to Level 2 and ideally Level 1 status. He said that his teachers are “embarrassed” by the school’s Level 3 designation and that the performance level is a motivator. When asked to discuss compliance with federal mandates and meeting expectations for student performance, Principal Miller said:

I understand the need for [the federal accountability system], but I also feel like in the school where we are here, there are so many other factors that I didn’t have to contend with in the previous school where I worked, and yet we’re really under
the same umbrella rules. That is frustrating. The task is so much harder in certain environments based on just the population needs.

Principal Miller elaborated by discussing elements of the urban environment that simply cannot be controlled, including the transient population and the large number of students who do not speak English as a first language.

Principal Miller indicated that mandates have made the principalship more demanding and that “nothing has been taken off of the principal’s plate at all.” He said that the accountability system puts pressure on everyone and that while teachers are under a great deal of pressure, the principal takes on the “lion’s share” of that pressure and needs to deflect some of it away from teachers. Principal Miller indicated that in general, the public is “probably not” aware of the fact that Gray Stone High School is a Level 3 school or what a Level 3 designation actually means. He said that although he sends out the annual “school report card” as mandated by federal law to inform the community of Gray Stone High School’s accountability status, he has never received a phone call from a concerned parent. Principal Miller did recognize the pressure that is associated with knowing that the school district, school committee, and state are fully aware of his school’s accountability status. He indicated that he believes accountability is necessary, but wishes that the system were more equitable and efficient. He indicated that the system was pervasive and could be counterproductive.

**Collaboration, visibility, and presence.** Collaboration was a recurring theme during the two interview sessions with Principal Miller. He discussed collaboration in terms of working closely with teachers and with his school’s leadership team. When asked about his work with teachers, Principal Miller said, “The teachers teach me a lot. I find their innovations, their energy, their creativity gives me a lot of ideas and that we have an interplay of bouncing back
and forth.” He also talked about a culture at Gray Stone High School where teachers are comfortable collaborating with one another. He said that teachers frequently work in teams developing and refining curriculum, instructional practices, and assessment strategies. As principal, he said he has worked to set up structures within the school to foster this kind of collaboration. While Principal Miller recognized that some teachers are more willing to collaborate than others, he believes he has established professional collaboration as an expectation. For Principal Miller, collaboration reaches beyond the walls of his school. He spoke about partnerships that have been forged between Gray Stone High School and local agencies and programs designed to support both teachers and students. Principal Miller’s comments about the culture of Gray Stone High School consistently focused around teamwork.

Visibility and presence were a separate but related theme to collaboration. Principal Miller discussed his commitment to being in the halls, cafeteria, and classrooms. He said, “I try to be out in the hallways between every period to be visible, to talk to kids, to get a sense of things, to reinforce our rules.” He said he works hard to be out of his office as much as possible. He said, “The kids need to see me. I need to talk to them. They need to be able to talk to me. It’s a burden on time, but it’s also energizing.” He admitted that while he strives to visit classrooms every day, that it doesn’t always happen. Principal Miller discussed the importance of the principal “being the one out front.” He said that the principal needs to deliver the message and must be prepared to take responsibility when things go wrong.

The principal as the instructional leader. When asked to define instructional leadership, Principal Miller said, “Instructional leadership is a huge part of the role, in terms of setting a vision and then providing the resources to support teacher growth instructionally.” When he was asked to discuss his training as an instructional leader, Principal Miller described a series of
unconnected professional development experiences, some formal and some informal. He spoke about conferences sponsored by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), work he partnered in with a local university, Research for Better Teaching (RBT) courses, and his affiliation with the Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators Association (MSSAA). Principal Miller expanded on the discussion about instructional leadership by explaining that he is “learning all the time” about instruction from the teachers in his building.

Principal Miller considers himself responsible for instructional leadership in his building. With input from his teachers and department facilitators, he sets the professional development agenda for his building, enjoying significant autonomy to do so from his superintendent. He said he receives support from his superintendent with regard to his building’s professional development activities provided there is a connection to the school’s improvement plan, the general mission, or the school’s accountability status. Principal Miller identified classroom observations with direct and timely feedback as the most important instructional leadership tool. Principal Miller said he works hard to keep the focus on instruction. He said, “I think it’s really maintaining the focus and discussion around instruction. How do we improve instruction? How do we improve the way we assess student learning?” Principal Miller also discussed the importance of maintaining high expectations as an element of instructional leadership. He described what he called “high expectations with flexibility” as the ability to set high standards and then find creative ways to ensure that those high standards are attainable for all students. He said it is important for schools to avoid goals that start with the words “all students will” unless there are multiple options for students to achieve those goals.

Principal Miller is very protective of the professional development time he has with his staff. He said he almost always runs staff meetings, although he often works collaboratively
with his department facilitators to develop agendas and activities. He described himself as a “control freak” when it comes to “getting the professional development message out.” He said that teachers need to hear the message from him before they break out into groups to do the work.

**Skills.** Principal Miller identified communication, empathy, flexibility and adaptability as the most important skills or characteristics of a successful principal. He said that communication is “so much of what you do” as a principal. He described communication as multifaceted and said that it included speaking, listening, as well as written communication. Principal Miller said that principals need to be empathetic. He stated, “We’re all coming at it from different angles, different agendas, different backgrounds, and with different anxieties. You have to be empathetic to teacher situations, student situations, and parent situations.” Principal Miller also said that principals need to be flexible and adaptable. He said, “You’re constantly learning new things, what you thought two years ago was going to be the big, new thing might end up on the scrap heap. So, you better be ready to adjust on the fly.”

Table 4 provides a summary of emergent themes and super-ordinate themes identified in the two interviews with Principal Miller.

**Table 4**

*Super-Ordinate and Emergent Themes: Principal Miller*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-Ordinate Themes</th>
<th>Emergent Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The individual principal’s evolution and balancing the demands of the role | ▪ No intention of becoming an administrator  
▪ Experiences and who I worked for shaped my leadership style  
▪ The adjustment from assistant principal to principal  
▪ The role is more challenging each year  
▪ Long term sustainability  
▪ Very long hours |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Points</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prioritize family</td>
<td>- Prioritize family</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Physical health</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Compartmentalize</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Rewarding to help make success possible</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Reflection</td>
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<tr>
<td>The impact of demographics</td>
<td>- Demographics present a challenge</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Urban versus suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Difficult to be held to the same standards as suburban schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The impact of the federal accountability</td>
<td>- Mandates have made the role more challenging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>system</td>
<td>- The accountability system puts pressure on everyone</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Some things you just can’t control</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- The PPI level is embarrassing</td>
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<td>- The PPI level is not an issue with the general public</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- PPI is pervasive</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- The principal takes the lion’s share of the pressure</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Accountability is necessary, but should be more efficient</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaboration, visibility and presence</td>
<td>- Learning from teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Taking a collaborative approach to address accountability</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Collaboration with outside partners</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Sharing best practices</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Collaboration to achieve instructional leadership goals</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Visibility: Halls, Café, and Classrooms</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Getting into classrooms every day</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Avoid “office work” during the school day</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- The principal needs to be the one out front delivering the message</td>
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<td>- The principal takes the lead on professional development</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Reinforce the vision in all communications</td>
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<tr>
<td>The principal as the instructional leader</td>
<td>- Instructional leadership: Setting a vision and providing resources for growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- No formal training on instructional leadership practices</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Learning about instruction from teachers</td>
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Principal Davis. The fourth study participant, Principal Davis, is the principal of Blue Lake High School, a medium sized regional high school with 730 students in grades 9-12 coming from two different towns. One of the sending communities has a population of roughly 6,000 residents and the other community is slightly larger with roughly 7,200 residents. Both sending communities are considered rural, with one having an agricultural history and the other being a former mill town. Blue Lake High School employs approximately 50 professional staff and 10 to 15 support staff. Principal Davis described the school community as “not very diverse.” To illustrate this point, he indicated that the school currently has an English Language Learner (ELL) population of five students with just one of those students receiving services. Principal Davis has worked in education for 29 years, all in the same school district. Before being appointed as the principal of Blue Lake High School, he taught English and history for 19 years and served 2 years as the school’s assistant principal. He has been the principal of Blue Lake High School for 8 years.

When asked to describe his leadership style, Principal Davis said, “I think I’m definitely a player’s coach.” He said he tries not to operate from an “ivory tower” and works hard to keep the “teacher perspective” in his mind. He described himself as a hands-on principal with high expectations based on productivity. He said it is not about how many hours an individual works; rather it is about whether or not people are getting the job done. He said he takes this approach
with everyone “from the classroom teacher to the custodian.” Principal Davis said his strongest attribute is his ability to have a sense of humor about himself. He said the principalship can be “very political” and that it is important to have a “thick skin” and not take things personally. He said he has the ability to “let go and move on” when necessary. When asked to identify a weakness, Principal Davis said that he needs to pay more attention to detail. He said that his assistant principal and dean are very “detail oriented” and recognized that “principals can get into trouble” if they aren’t aware of the details. Principal Davis said that he thinks principals have the biggest impact on learning indirectly by helping to establish a school environment that is focused on success.

Several emergent themes were identified during the analysis of the two interview sessions with Principal Davis. These emergent themes were organized under seven super-ordinate themes: (1) the importance of relationships; (2) the impact of the federal accountability system; (3) responsibilities of the instructional leader; (4) roles and responsibilities of the principal; (5) collaboration and sharing the work; (6) professional evolution and balancing the demands of the role; and (7) autonomy to establish professional development priorities. These themes are discussed in the subsections below.

*Relationships.* The importance of building and maintaining relationships was a repeated theme during both interview sessions with Principal Davis. He said that it was critical for a principal to surround himself with good people that he can trust. Principal Davis talked about his relationships with his assistant principal, dean, and department heads and how much he relies on their support and counsel. He also talked at length about a principal’s relationship with his superintendent. Principal Davis shared that his current superintendent was retiring at the conclusion of the current school year. His comments both highlighted how much he values the
relationship he currently has with his superintendent and the anxiety that is associated with the pending arrival of a new superintendent.

Principal Davis discussed the strong relationship he has with the local teacher’s union. He said that his relationship with his building union representative is very collegial. He said, “He comes down almost daily during his prep period and asks, ‘Is there anything I need to know about?’ If there is, then we have that dialogue.” Principal Davis cited his own experience in a leadership position within the union while he was working as a teacher as having given him a broader perspective on the union’s relationship with the administration. Lastly, Principal Davis talked about relationships with students. He talked about missing the kinds of relationships that he used to be able to develop with students as a teacher and a coach. He said that as a principal, “There is a very small group of students that I can say I know well. I don’t know every kid that walks through here. When I walk through the hallways, they know me.”

**The federal accountability system.** Blue Lake High School is categorized as a Level 2 school according to the DESE’s accountability and assistance system. According to Principal Davis, Blue Lake High School dropped from a Level 1 to a Level 2 at the start of the current school year. Principal Davis said that the level change has acted as a motivator for the staff:

- I think we all have professional pride. We feel like we have a very good school here. So, to be told you are not perfect, I think a lot of people got angry with that. There was anger directed at the state in the way they do their accountability. We don’t want to be a Level 2.

Principal Davis said that he was pleased to see that teachers were eager to tackle the issue and said that while the administrative team was concerned about the level drop, they quickly worked together to identify an action plan for improvement. Principal Davis said that there was little to
no reaction from the general public about Blue Lake High School’s level change, but the school committee was looking for information. To respond to the school committee, Principal Davis worked collaboratively with his department heads and assistant principal to put together a presentation explaining the results and describing the steps that would be taken to improve performance. Principal Davis said that the federal accountability system pushed his teachers and leadership team members to look more closely at student achievement data. He said that he reviewed data with the district’s curriculum coordinator and his building-based department heads. He added that department heads in math, science, and English took the data analysis down to the teacher level. Principal Davis said that MCAS data has focused the work of the teachers at Blue Lake High School, something that he describes as a positive change.

**Instructional Leadership.** Principal Davis identified modeling as the primary component of instructional leadership. He said:

We try to model what instructional leadership should be. It can occur at a faculty meeting. It can occur at a department meeting. It can occur in our communications that we send out. When we do things here, we try to model what we expect a teacher to be doing in the classroom.

Principal Davis made a connection between the school’s culture and instructional leadership asserting that principals need to establish an atmosphere where “teachers are comfortable experimenting.” Principal Davis also asserted that classroom observations with specific and timely feedback are critical components of instructional leadership, but he also said that instructional leadership couldn’t be accomplished through supervision alone. When asked to discuss any training he had engaged in directly related to instructional leadership strategies, Principal Davis first mentioned the administrative licensure program he completed prior to
becoming a principal. Beyond his work in the licensure program, Principal Davis cited attendance at conferences and other training sessions supported by his superintendent as opportunities to hone his skills as an instructional leader. Principal Davis takes a collaborative approach to instructional leadership. He frequently mentioned his assistant principal, department leaders and teachers as key players in the creation and delivery of professional development related to curriculum, instruction and assessment.

**Roles and responsibilities of the principal.** Principal Davis said that one of his most important responsibilities is to provide teachers with what they need to do their jobs successfully. He said, “Part of our responsibility is to make [teachers] jobs easier because their jobs are tough enough. Dealing with the stresses and the demands that are coming from outside, we try to really minimize the demands coming from us.” Principal Davis also talked about being the person responsible for the “big picture.” He stated:

As the building principal, I need to decide what we need to accomplish. I need to identify the deficiencies and come up with a plan to address them and hopefully see those results come. It’s handed off to [teachers and department heads] and they do the nitty gritty work and then they report back to me.

While he identified the “big picture” as his primary responsibility, he also recognized the importance of being aware of the details as well. He said, “I think the nature of the job tends to be more big picture, but if you’re not aware of the details, that can get you in trouble.”

Principal Davis explained that it is also his responsibility to create a “culture and mindset of success” within the building. He said that he tries to frequently acknowledge examples of success throughout the school and reinforce the message that “you’ll get out of it what you put into it” at Blue Lake High School. He believes that it is his responsibility to foster an
environment where students and teachers believe that what they do every day matters and that it is important for everyone to work as hard as they can to achieve their goals. Principal Davis said that establishing this culture requires him to be accessible and visible. He arrives at school early each morning to be out among students and staff. He said that visibility is partially a function of supervision and keeping the school environment safe and orderly and partially about cultivating the kind of school climate he is proud of at Blue Lake High School.

**Collaboration and sharing the work.** As mentioned above, Principal Davis approaches his work collaboratively. He relies on the skills and experience of his building-based leadership team and places a great deal of trust and responsibility in the hands of the teachers in his building. He expects his department heads to function as conduits between the administration and the teachers with respect to professional development. In departments without leadership, Principal Davis and his assistant principal assume the leadership role. While department heads facilitate professional development activities, Principal Davis coordinates with them at regular department head meetings and reviews department meeting agendas, minutes, and work completed during these meetings. To ensure consistency and a logical flow to the work, Principal Davis described the following progression, “We usually start at the department head meeting. [Department heads] bring the issue up at their department meetings the following week, and then it comes up again at the full faculty meeting the week after that.” Principal Davis said he strives to provide teachers with a voice in determining the kinds of professional development opportunities they are provided. He said when he is not required to address a certain mandate, he tries to focus on what teachers say they need.

**Professional Evolution and Balance.** Principal Davis shared that he was not initially looking to become a school administrator. He said, “I was extremely happy as a teacher and
would have been very happy doing that for my entire career.” He said that when the principal he was working for began to prepare for retirement, he asked Principal Davis if he had an interest in school administration. Principal Davis told him that he would not consider administration “under any circumstances.” He volunteered to be on the search committee to replace the principal and said that they ended up appointing the assistant principal to the position leaving the assistant position vacant. After a failed attempt to replace the assistant principal, Principal Davis applied for the position after being encouraged by his teacher colleagues. A few years later, when the principalship opened again, Principal Davis expressed an interest and was appointed by the superintendent. Principal Davis said that he uses all of the experiences he gained as a teacher, coach and union leader in the principal’s office. Principal Davis also credited the principals he worked under for helping him to develop his leadership style. He spoke about the value he found in working with different kinds of leaders and how learning what “not to do” can be just as important as learning what to do.

Principal Davis said that it’s difficult to fully prepare yourself for the principalship. He stated, “I don’t think you’re ever really prepared because even now after 9 years new things still come up.” He said the workdays are long and he purposely stays later to avoid bringing work home when he can. He said, “I don’t want to bring work home. I’ll stay here until 5 or 6 o’clock. If we have a night meeting, even though I live in town and I could just shoot home, I tend to just stay. It’s just easier.” Principal Davis has three children. Two are currently students at Blue Lake High School and one graduated from the school a few years ago. He said that having his children at Blue Lake High School makes it easier for him to prioritize his family.

*Establishing professional development priorities.* Principal Davis said that he feels that his superintendent gives him a high level of autonomy to set the professional agenda for Blue
Lake High School. With this autonomy, Principal Davis has worked to shift the focus of faculty meetings away from simple information sharing to more authentic professional development activities. He said, “We try to have a meeting focus. I hated faculty meetings as a teacher. When I became principal I said, ‘We need to do this differently.’” He said that he now tries to incorporate some level of discussion on a school-wide topic during each meeting. He said, “It’s not really professional development, but it helps teachers feel empowered and that they have a say in what’s going on.”

While the level of autonomy given to Principal Davis to establish professional development priorities at Blue Lake High School is high, he spoke about the need for some alignment with district-level initiatives. He said that a district leadership teams meets each week and that agenda items from these meetings help him “match-up” school-level professional development to work being accomplished district-wide. He noted that the district drives some professional development topics. He referenced an upcoming training on the district-wide administration of the PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) assessment. Principal Davis referred to this training by stating, “There are just some things that we don’t have a choice about.” Principal Davis spoke positively about having the flexibility to set the agenda for most of the professional development at Blue Lake High School. He said he tries to keep up with the current educational literature and seeks to facilitate professional development activities that are connected to the latest trends in education.

**Skills.** The second interview concluded with a discussion about skills. Principal Davis identified communication, empathy, and consistency with flexibility as the three most important skill areas or characteristics for principals. He said that communication skills are the most important. He said, “Whenever I get in trouble, it’s always around a lack of communication.”
Principal Davis also discussed communication in relation to decision-making. He talked about the need to communicate the reasons for his decisions, especially when people don’t think it was the right decision to make. Principal Davis discussed the need for principals to be empathic:

As a principal you quickly learn that you’re not the boss of anyone. You work for the superintendent and the school committee through the superintendent. You also work for the teachers. Teachers expect you to be an advocate for them. You’re an advocate for the kids, so you work for the kids. You work for the parents too. Being empathetic is about trying to understand where people are coming from, listening to someone else’s argument, and making them feel like they have been heard.

Consistency with flexibility was the third skill identified by Principal Davis. He said that it takes skill for a principal to “consistently treat every issue individually.” He said that a principal can’t look at each decision as precedent-setting and needs to take individual elements of each situation into consideration. He also recognized that in the end, principals still need to “appear consistent because inconsistency can be perceived as a weakness.”

Table 5 summarizes emergent themes and super-ordinate themes identified through the two interviews with Principal Davis.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-Ordinate Themes</th>
<th>Emergent Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The importance of relationships</td>
<td>• Surround yourself with good people that you trust</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Relationships are critical</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Anxiety about new superintendent coming in</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Good relationships with the union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Relationships with students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| The impact of the federal accountability system | • Expectations have changed for teachers  
• No pressure from the superintendent about PPI  
• PPI level has pushed us to look at data  
• PPI level as a motivator  
• No public outcry about PPI level  
• MCAS focused the work of teachers and curriculum leaders |
| Responsibilities of the instructional leader | • Try to get into classrooms every day  
• Instructional leadership is modeling  
• Instructional leadership can’t be through supervision alone  
• Instructional leadership training was piecemeal  
• Principal leads faculty meetings  
• Observations with feedback are an instructional leadership tool  
• Establishing an environment where teachers take risks |
| Roles and responsibilities of the principal | • Principal’s responsibility to make the teachers job easier  
• The principal worries about the big picture while teachers and department heads do the work  
• Visibility  
• Assuming the role of department head for smaller departments  
• Rewarding to play a role in student success  
• Creating a culture / mindset of success |
| Collaboration and sharing the work | • Department heads responsible for implementation  
• Strategies to address PPI level are identified collaboratively  
• Information progresses from department head meetings to department meetings to faculty meetings  
• Seek feedback from teachers about professional development |
| Professional evolution and balancing the demands of the role | • Wasn’t looking to become an administrator  
• Teaching and coaching experience provided leadership and management experience now used as a principal |
### Principal Jones

The fifth study participant, Principal Jones, is the principal of Gold Meadow High School, a large regional high school serving students from 5 sending communities in grades 9-12. Enrollment at Gold Meadow High School is 2,125 students. There are roughly 150 professional staff and almost 70 support staff. The five communities that feed this regional school have populations ranging from 3,400 residents to 17,000 residents with a total population of 42,000 between all 5 communities. While the profiles for each of the communities varies, they all have history in agriculture and textiles. Today, while they vary in size, they are all considered “bedroom communities” as many residents commute to larger cities that are located within a 40 mile radius for employment. Two of the towns are more suburban than the other three, which are more rural. Principal Jones described the socio-economic status of most families as middle to upper-middle class and mostly white. He described the school as “high performing” and said that over 90% of graduates go to college after graduation. Principal Jones is proud of the school’s MCAS scores and is surprised that the school is considered a Level 2 school. Principal Jones did not begin his professional life as an educator, although he mentioned

| Broader perspective because of union leadership experience |
| Learned different approaches from working with different principals |
| You are never fully prepared for the role |
| Staying at school late to avoid bringing work home |
| Prioritizing family |

| Autonomy to establish professional development priorities |
| Shifting focus of faculty meetings |
| Autonomy regarding professional development |
| Aligning professional development from school to school not a district priority |
| Professional development aligned to current literature read by principal |
having an interest in teaching while earning his undergraduate degree in business. He said that he spoke to his college advisor about this interest and that his advisor “talked him out of it.” After graduating college and working in “industry” for a few years, he took additional courses to earn his educator’s license and become a teacher. Principal Jones taught social studies for 5 years, became an assistant principal in an urban middle school, moved to an assistant principalship at a high school in the same district, and then moved to Gold Meadow High School as principal where he has served for the past 8 years.

When asked to describe his leadership style, Principal Jones said that an outside observer might see him as “laid back.” He used the term “management by walking around” to describe his style. He said he is always around watching teaching and learning and that this activity generates several questions. He said he likes to be “drenched with information” that he gathers from observations and conversations. Principal Jones also said he is a consistent yet flexible leader who understands the need for delegation. He identified his biggest strength as “management” and said that he feels confident in his ability to motivate people that work for him to do what they need to do to realize the school’s vision. When asked to share a weakness, Principal Jones said, “I let things go sometimes.” He talked about the complexity of the principalship and said that there are some things that he simply sets aside and sometimes forgets about because there are so many things that he has to do. Principal Jones identified ensuring the quality of teachers as the most important thing a principal can do to impact student achievement:

Several emergent themes were identified during the analysis of the two interview sessions with Principal Jones. These emergent themes were organized under seven super-ordinate themes: (1) the principal as the CEO; (2) building relationships; (3) the impact of accountability; (4) becoming an instructional leader; (5) sacrifice and balance; (6) lack of job security; and (7)
setting the professional development agenda. These themes are discussed in the subsections below.

**Principal as CEO.** Principal Jones used language throughout his interview that painted a picture of the principal as the chief executive officer of the school. He spoke about his original career in business and finance as something that influenced him as a teacher and principal:

In private industry, you are held accountable for your actions. There is not a union contract standing behind you. The way you are rewarded is through your efforts and success. It’s pretty measurable. If you’re a salesman, it’s your sales numbers. That work ethic or that desire to work hard and do better, I think came from that aspect of my career.

Principal Jones said that the management aspects of the principalship came “naturally” to him and that his interest in managing people fueled his aspirations to become a principal. He said that the principalship combines teaching and management. Principal Jones said that the size of his school plays a role in the need for him to have a heavy management focus.

Principal Jones said that his role is about the “big picture” and that he relies on his administrative team to focus on the smaller details. His team includes four assistant principals, a guidance director, a special education director, an athletic director, and several curriculum coordinators. He said that while the budget at Gold Meadow High School is not adequate, he has “a lot of people” assigned to the building as resources. Principal Jones said that his department heads are the “educational leaders” in the building. He meets with these people as a group regularly and uses these meetings to push information out to directors as well as to gather information from them. He also said he uses his department heads to facilitate school-wide meetings. The faculty is so large, that he often breaks them into smaller groups during meetings.
to increase productivity and effectiveness. He said his department heads are critical to this process.

**Building relationships.** Principal Jones made frequent connections to the importance of relationships during both interview sessions. He said when he first came to Gold Meadow High School his number one priority was to develop relationships with key individuals. He said that he encountered a “this is the way we do things here” attitude among teachers. Principal Jones said he “lived within that atmosphere” as best he could until he could develop his administrative team and begin to “knock down some of the walls.” Principal Jones said he slowly started to gain the respect of the staff as they realized that he was there to support them. Principal Jones was candid about the challenges he faced when transitioning to the principalship and how a lack of relationships in the very beginning of his tenure intensified these challenges. He said, “When I started, I didn’t know the administrative team and there were people here that I didn’t really trust.” He also said there was a general lack of trust in the administration that preceded him. He said he quickly developed a relationship with the new superintendent who was previously a principal in the district. Principal Jones said that in addition to his superintendent, he called colleagues from his previous district and other high school principals within the region for support. Eventually, he said he built a school-based team and developed relationships across the building and the district.

Principal Jones said that building relationships is connected with visibility and accessibility. He arrives to school early each morning and tries to be “where the kids congregate.” He reads the pledge of allegiance and the daily announcements every morning so everyone hears his familiar voice. He said he feels that this routine helps people to “know the ship is steering in the right direction.” Principal Jones said he does a lunch duty every day and
people know they can “catch him at that time.” He said he is very careful not to become bogged down with office work. He said he could “easily spend 12 hours each day answering emails” so he forces himself out of his office regularly to walk around the building. Principal Jones also discussed his relationship with the local teacher’s union. He said that he enjoys a good working relationship with the union and that the union wants the administration to hold people accountable. He said, “We function much better because of that and because we have this shared belief that you have to do the right thing.”

**Accountability.** Principal Jones said that the federal accountability system gives him less time to do what he needs to do. He described this as a change from when he first became a principal:

> I really feel like in the beginning that I was in the classrooms more and able to do the nitty-gritty stuff a lot more. I was able to meet with a lot more kids. I feel like I had more time. It feels like the time to be on the front lines is less.

Principal Jones said that the workload has increased as expectations have increased.

Principal Jones said that accountability is necessary, but it needs to be appropriate. Gold Meadow High School is classified as a Level 2 school according to the DESE accountability rating system. Principal Jones talked about this kind of accountability as misleading. He explained that Gold Meadow High School allows students in substantially separate special education programs with significant cognitive disabilities to take the regular state assessment each year even though the state has an alternative assessment for these students. According to Principal Jones, the decision to allow these students to test impacts the overall performance rating of the special education subgroup at Gold Meadow High School which has a direct impact on the school’s accountability rating. He said, “We are a Level 2 school but by no means do I
ever think of us that way. Our school is very good except for one area, but no matter where I go we are a Level 2 school.” When asked if he believed that the intended outcomes of the federal accountability system were being realized, he said:

I agree with some level of accountability. I think it needs to be objective. I think it needs to be appropriate, and I wish that society was such that we had faith in individual schools to create mechanisms for accountability.

Principal Jones said that the general public is not aware of Gold Meadow High School’s accountability status, but there is talk about it within the school committee. He said, “The common folk doesn’t care that much about it or doesn’t understand it, but I have a huge school committee. They care about it. They talk about it.” Principal Jones also talked about the impact of Gold Meadow High School’s accountability status on teachers. He said that the school’s Level 2 status has not changed attitudes among his teachers who he said are “confident in what they do.” He also said that he believes his teachers feel that they are “above” the rating structure associated with the accountability system. Principal Jones said that Gold Meadow High School’s Level 2 designation did not necessarily serve as a catalyst for change.

Principal Jones also talked about what he described as inequities within the current accountability system. As a principal who previously worked in an urban environment, he discussed the relationship between the accountability system and school demographics:

I don’t know how fair it is to compare our school to a school that is in a lesser-advantaged situation. I don’t think it’s a level playing field. I couldn’t imagine being the principal of my previous school and being held to the point of having to get out of whatever level they’re in.
When asked specifically about federal mandates, Principal Jones said, “I can’t stand the DDM stuff that is eating up our life. It’s just sucking the time out of me and the life out of my teachers. It’s just killing them.”

**Instructional Leadership.** Principal Jones defined an instructional leader as the person who helps to develop a vision and works to move people towards achieving the principles of that vision. He also said that an instructional leader is someone who holds people accountable. Principal Jones recognized instructional leadership as a “deficit area” for himself:

> I believe in my case this is probably my deficit area, and I say that because I don’t think I had the basic foundation as many principals have because I came in as a person who had a changed major. I don’t think I had that solid foundation that maybe others had.

Principal Jones explained that he has learned about instructional leadership “on the job.” He said he deliberately spends time in classrooms and holds conversations with what he described as “quality teachers” to learn more about teaching and learning. He said he never considered himself a “master teacher” but he can recognize a master teacher and enjoys engaging with them about instruction. Principal Jones identified classroom observations, creating a vision, being aware of trends, and looking at data as the most important instructional leadership strategies for a principal. He said that it is important for him to be in classrooms and teacher workrooms so he can have conversations with teachers and students, keep his “ear to the ground,” and know what is working and what is not working. Principal Jones also discussed the importance of staying current with educational trends. He said he tries to keep up with educational journals and the latest books and connects what he reads to the work he does whenever possible. Lastly, he said
that principals should review and understand the data that is presented to them and should be able to use the data to inform their decisions.

*Sacrifice and balance.* Principal Jones frequently mentioned the incredible demands of his job and the need to find more time to do the things he wants and is expected to do. He said that the time he needs to devote to his job is constantly pulling away from time in his personal life. As the father of five children, Principal Jones recognized that finding a balance is difficult, but critical. Principal Jones said he tries to include his own children into the life of Gold Meadow High School as much as possible. His oldest child is a graduate of Gold Meadow, a second child is currently enrolled there, and he has three younger children who are not yet high school age. He said, “I bring my kids to events so that covers me in both places.” He said that part of the issue is that he enjoys his job so much that he likes being present at events.

When asked to describe his typical day, Principal Jones said he is usually at school by 6:30 each morning and if he doesn’t have an evening commitment, he is in his office until at least 5:00 o’clock each evening. He said that when he has evening commitments at school, he often stays through because he likes the quiet time between the end of the typical workday and the start of the night event. Principal Jones said that demands of the job are having an impact on his physical well-being. He said, “I’m not in shape, I can tell you that. I think the time I would use for health and wellness gets pushed aside.” Principal Jones also talked about the importance of finding time to reflect. He said that his job is so busy, that he rarely has a moment to just sit and think. He said that this is why he often stays at school on days that he has a night meeting.

To help balance the demands of the role, Principal Jones said he relies heavily on the people that work for him, especially his leadership team. He plans agendas, professional development, and discusses his vision with them. He said he also utilizes teacher leaders
whenever possible. This is something that he said has become more regular in the years since he became principal at Gold Meadow High School. Principal Jones frequently spoke negatively about the lack of fiscal resources in the district, but spoke positively about the level of human resources available to him.

Job security. Principal Jones made several comments about the importance of principals feeling secure in the job. He spoke about coming to Gold Meadow High School as a brand new principal and experiencing a certain level of insecurity during the first year in particular:

It was the craziest job that I have taken in my life. I didn’t know what I was in for. The school was going through it’s fourth principal in as many years. There was a messy construction project going on. I don’t think I can really remember the first year or two. I was asked a lot of questions that I didn’t really have the answers to.

Principal Jones said that he made many mistakes during his first year and learned from those mistakes. He said he made many “bad decisions” during the first year but was never afraid to take responsibility for them. Principal Jones also discussed superintendent turnover as a cause of insecurity for principals. He explained that he has worked for three different superintendents during his eight-year tenure at Gold Meadow High School. He said that the amount of turnover in his district has principals “pointing in different directions.” While he was mostly positive about the relationship he has with his current superintendent, he said that the fact that the superintendent does not have high school experience has had an impact on his work. Lastly, Principal Jones spoke about principals working under short-term contracts and the impact this can have on a principal’s sense of job security. He said, “Get rid of the contract situation. Make me confident that I have a job, and I think I could do things a little bit differently.”
Setting the professional development agenda. Principal Jones said that he feels that he is afforded with the necessary autonomy to set the professional development agenda for his building. That said, he recognized that there are district-based initiatives, usually related to state and federal mandates, which supersede his building-based professional development needs. Principal Jones said that he believes that teachers need to influence the kind of professional development they engage in. Principal Jones said that he asks teachers for suggestions for professional development every year through a year-end survey. He said that teachers are always asking for content-based professional development and while he strives to provide some of what they are looking for, other things often get in the way.

When asked to discuss how he typically organizes his monthly faculty meetings, Principal Jones said that he does not always use the monthly meetings in the traditional sense. He said, “Faculty meetings are a slot of time. I’d say about 60 or 70 percent of the time I don’t use that faculty meeting as a meeting.” He said he often uses the time to have teachers work together or to have teachers work with their department heads. When he does hold a traditional faculty meeting, he said he tries not to use the time for “housekeeping” items. He said, “We typically do some kind of PD as a staff whether it be reading an article and do some kind of pair-share or break into groups. I try to mix it up as much as possible.” Principal Jones said that there is no district-wide plan for professional development. He said that the turnover in superintendents has made it difficult to create and follow a plan that is articulated across all levels. He said that the new superintendent has created a district leadership team that meets monthly and that the new superintendent is committed to moving in the direction of a common framework for professional development.
**Skills.** The second interview with Principal Jones concluded with a discussion about skills. When asked to identify the most critical skills or attributes that principals must possess, Principal Jones said communication, flexibility, and decision-making. Principal Jones said, “I don’t think I’m the best communicator in the verbal or written sense, but I think that listening, providing opportunities to have people have a voice and responding to their voice is important.” He also said that principals need to be flexible:

You have to sacrifice yourself to do this job in a decent way. If you are notified today that you have to be somewhere tomorrow night, to support the school, you go do that. A teacher saw me today and said she has to be out until May. I have to come up with a flexible, outside of the box way to solve that problem.

Principal Jones said that principals need to be skilled at making decisions in a timely manner. He said that during his first year at Gold Meadow High School he didn’t make a lot of decisions. He said, “I put things off, and that can be painful for people. It was not a show of strength.” Principal Jones said that principals need to make decisions all of the time and be ready to take responsibility when their decisions are not necessarily right.

Table 6 summarizes emergent themes and super-ordinate themes identified through the two interviews with Principal Jones.

Table 6

*Super-Ordinate and Emergent Themes: Principal Jones*

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<tr>
<th>Super-Ordinate Themes</th>
<th>Emergent Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The principal as the CEO</td>
<td>• Career changer</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Principal as manager</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Big picture</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• School size impacts the role</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Heavy reliance on administrative team</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Department heads are the educational leaders</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Building relationships | Administrators must remember what it’s like to teach  
| | Building relationships is a first step  
| | Who do you call when you need help?  
| | Working collaboratively with the superintendent  
| | Visibility and accessibility  
| | Trust and relationships  
| | Strong partnerships with the union  
| The impact of accountability | Having less time to do the job  
| | As expectations increase, work increases  
| | Accountability is necessary, but needs to be appropriate  
| | The public doesn’t care about the schools accountability level  
| | Not fair to compare schools to schools – it’s not a level playing field  
| | Teachers are not directly impacted by the accountability level.  
| | Eliminate mandates  
| Becoming an instructional leader | Instructional leadership is about vision  
| | Instructional leadership is a deficit area  
| | Learning to be an instructional leader on the job  
| | Classroom visits as an instructional leadership tool  
| | Creating a vision is instructional leadership  
| | Being aware of trends is critical to instructional leadership  
| | Looking at data is critical to instructional leadership  
| | Professional development should be teacher-driven  
| Sacrifice and balance | Finding time for your personal life  
| | Tough to find time for informal observations  
| | It’s a long day  
| | Sacrificing physical health  
| | Including family in school life  
| | Reflection  
| | Plan agendas with the administrative team  
| | Use teacher leaders  
| Lack of job security | Learning on the job |
### Learning from your mistakes
- Superintendent changing leads to uncertainty
- Contracts make principals feel less secure

### Setting the professional development agenda
- Set high expectations and hold people accountable
- Faculty meetings not consistently used as formal meeting time
- Not good use of time to cover “housekeeping” items at faculty meetings
- Autonomy from the superintendent, but mandates really set the direction
- There is no district-wide professional development plan

### Common Themes Across Participants

While several emergent and super-ordinate themes were identified through the analysis of the interview data, six predominant themes emerged as common across participants. This section will provide a summary of these six themes beginning with the first theme, that sharing leadership is a key aspect to the principalship. This theme includes collaboration, building relationships, and the importance of visibility and accessibility. The second theme, which focuses on the principal as the instructional leader, comprises training provided for the participants in instructional leadership strategies as well as how autonomy impacts a principal’s ability to be an instructional leader. The third and fourth themes include accountability both as a catalyst for school improvement and as an impediment to progress. The fifth theme centers on how principals balance the demands of the role and the relationship between balance and job satisfaction. Finally, the section will close with a brief summary of what participants shared when asked to identify the most important skills or attributes successful principals should possess.
Sharing leadership responsibilities is a key aspect of the principalship. All five participants described leadership as a shared process. In doing so, all participants talked about the need to collaborate, the importance of building relationships, and the necessity for visibility and accessibility. The participants discussed these things both in the context of good leadership practices and as strategies to cope with a role that they all described in one way or another as complex. When asked to discuss their leadership style, four out of the five participants immediately identified collaboration as the first attribute. Collaboration was discussed as shared decision-making with other leaders within each participant’s school or school district, and in some cases empowering teachers to participate in the decision-making process. Participants discussed collaboration in the context of sharing work. For Principal Williams, sharing the workload was not only a leadership strategy, but also a survival technique because of the limited human resources she has at her disposal in such a small school. Principal Jones, on the other hand, spoke of collaboration almost exclusively with respect to the large administrative leadership team assigned solely to his sizable school. Participants discussed the importance of working collaboratively with all stakeholders to identify and address deficit areas within their schools.

All five participants discussed the importance of building and maintaining relationships. Participants said that positive relationships were necessary in order for collaboration to be effective. Each participant spoke about their relationships with current and former superintendents. Four of the five participants described at least one moment where that relationship was tenuous and how the dynamic of the principal-superintendent relationship can have a significant impact on the overall job experience. All participants talked to some degree about building relationships with students, but there was little to no discussion about building
relationships with parents. Relationships were discussed in the context of trust and school culture. All five participants described the culture of their schools as positive with high levels of trust between the administrative team and the staff. Two participants mentioned the benefits of having a strong working relationship with the local teacher’s union.

Collaboration and relationships often were discussed alongside the topics of visibility and accessibility. All of the participants described themselves as accessible, although they each recognized that to be accessible takes great effort. The participants talked about the need to be deliberate about being out of the office among students and staff during the school day. For some participants being “out and about” served the dual function of building supervision and visibility. Each participant has established routines and rituals to help increase visibility and accessibility, including covering lunch duty, reading the daily announcements, stepping out of the office each time the bell rings, and arriving early to greet students. All participants described themselves as easy to access with open-door policies. One participant talked about how technology has increased accessibility to the point where principals are on call 24 hours each day. All five participants discussed how important it is for them to be visible in classrooms.

The principal should be the instructional leader. All five participants recognized instructional leadership as a core responsibility for principals. While each principal provided a slightly different definition of instructional leadership, all five considered it as something that leaders and teachers do together; not as a behavior that principals exhibit alone. None of the participants described comprehensive training in the area of instructional leadership. They all implied that their instructional leadership skills grew out of their teaching experience. The five participants also talked about improving their instructional leadership skills through classroom observations and discussions with teachers and administrative colleagues. There was a general
sense of “on-the-job” training for the participants relative to instructional leadership and it was considered more as a frame of mind than as a set of strategies or skills.

Participants talked about demonstrating instructional leadership through their actions as facilitators of meetings and professional development as well as supervisors of instruction. All five participants talked about how they worked to change the way faculty meetings are organized in their buildings. For each principal these changes focused on limiting the “stand and deliver” model where principals use meetings to simply share-out information and increasing the amount of time where staff members work together to discuss a topic or solve a problem. All participants said that they felt like they had sufficient autonomy to act as the instructional leader of their school. This autonomy included the freedom to establish or at least prioritize the professional development agenda for their buildings with little to no interference from their superintendents. Using supervision and evaluation as an instructional leadership strategy was a common theme across all five cases. The participants all discussed the importance of leveraging the state’s educator evaluation system as a tool to support teachers in the areas of instruction and assessment. While instructional leadership was viewed as a critical component of the principalship, participants recognized that having an impact as an instructional leader takes significant time.

**Accountability can be a catalyst for change.** All participants described the federal accountability system in overwhelmingly negative terms, but it is clear that they are all resigned to the fact that the system will be a part of public education in one form or another going forward. In the context of this feeling, the five principals each discussed positive elements of the federal accountability system with a “make the best of it” attitude. All five participants described the accountability and assistance label (Level 1 through Level 5) as a motivator.
While the specific kind of motivation varies between schools at different levels, it was evident that all five principals considered the possibility of being classified at a lower level or achieving a higher level as a reason to work hard. Principal Williams, who works at a school classified as Level 1 talked about living with the concern of dropping a level, while Principal Miller, who works at a school classified as a Level 3 talked about his school’s label as “embarrassing.”

Principals discussed how the label pushes teachers to work harder to improve, forces teachers and administrators to analyze and use data more regularly to inform practice, and increases the overall level of attention given to curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

**Accountability can be an impediment to progress.** Discussions about the federal accountability system were almost always two-fold. While participants discussed trying to find the positives in an effort to make the most out of a challenging situation, all five principals discussed the negative aspects of the accountability system. Each participant talked about how increasing federal and state mandates have significantly changed the role over the past several years. They discussed how complying with mandates takes time away from the important work of improving curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The participants shared frustration with the underfunded or completely unfunded nature of most mandates and how this is particularly acute given the challenging fiscal landscape public school districts everywhere are navigating.

All five principals discussed the high level of pressure that the accountability system places on all parties. Multiple participants talked about their efforts to shield teachers from the pressures associated with the accountability system so they are able to teach without feeling burdened.

The participants described a general lack of interest by the public about the label placed on their schools. Principals indicated that the public was either unaware of what the accountability and assistance level assigned to each school meant or was simply disinterested.
They discussed that while the general public was not particularly interested in a school’s accountability status, school committees were, thus making the issue political and often raising the level of anxiety for superintendents and ultimately principals.

**Balance has a relationship to job satisfaction.** When asked to discuss balancing bureaucratic compliance with instructional leadership, the participants indicated that they tried to consider the two in concert with one another rather than as two responsibilities competing for time. While this approach was clearly not possible all of the time, participants said they connected accountability mandates with instruction and assessment when appropriate. According to the participants, this approach helped them accomplish tasks associated with mandates while keeping the focus on teaching and learning for their teachers. All five participants described the principalship as an overwhelming job with incredible responsibility. They were all asked to share a “typical day” and although each participant’s day varied slightly, they all expressed a small number of key commonalities. All participants described a workday beginning in the early morning hours, sometimes at home on the computer, and ending in the early evening, unless a night meeting or event required them to stay well into the evening hours. Working from home during the week and on weekends to keep up with the demands of the job was described as commonplace by all participants. Family was a common thread across all participants when they were asked to discuss balance. All participants were married with children and discussed including their families in the life and activities of their schools as a necessity at one time or another. All of the participants made mention of a supportive spouse and making a conscious effort to be present for their families. This was particularly acute for the four participants who still had school-aged children.
None of the participants said that they started their careers in education with the intent of becoming a principal. All of the principals described their shift to school leadership as an almost unexpected opportunity. Each participant’s journey from the classroom to the principal’s office varied slightly, but they all talked about being influenced to make the move by colleagues and mentor principals who thought they were well-suited for school leadership. While all of the participants identified individuals who influenced their leadership, none of them talked about mentoring after they assumed the role.

All five participants mentioned reflection as an important element of the principalship, although none of them said that they felt like they had the time to be reflective. Discussions about reflection were frequently connected to overall wellbeing in the sense that participants indicated a need to slow things down from time to time – something they also felt like they could not necessarily do. Each participant raised the importance of being physically and emotionally healthy in order to meet the challenges of the role. Some of the participants have developed nonnegotiable routines that are built around exercise schedules while others talked about the need to take better care of themselves.

**The most critical skills for principals.** All five participants were asked to identify the skills they considered to be the most critical for principals. Regardless of how the question about skills was phrased, responses tended to vacillate between skills and characteristics. The three most common skills or characteristics discussed were communication, empathy, and flexibility. All five participants named communication as the number one skill for principals. This skill was discussed in the context of written and verbal communication as well as listening. Empathy was the second-most common characteristic. The participants discussed empathy in terms of interpersonal connections and being able to understand and respect the perspectives of others.
The final common skill or characteristic identified was flexibility, which was identified by one participant as adaptability. Participants saw this characteristic as important given the fast-moving and ever-changing nature of the role. Schools are vibrant and unpredictable places and the participants asserted that principals need to be flexible and be willing to adapt in order to succeed in the role.

Several other skills or characteristics were identified by one or more of the participants including the capacity to be reflective, consistent, and decisive when making decisions.

Divergent Themes

As Tables 2 through 6 show, an analysis of the interview transcripts led to the identification of several emergent and super-ordinate themes. In addition to these themes, two divergent themes were identified: (1) the principal should be the Chief Executive Officer (CEO); and (2) the demographic profile of a school has an impact on the principalship.

The principal should be the CEO. Principal Jones was the only participant who discussed his approach to the role specifically in the context of management. Many of his answers were centered on managing people, which seemed to be linked to his experiences working outside of the field of public education before changing careers to become a teacher. Principal Jones was the only “career changer” who participated in the study, so his perspective was unique in that sense. Like the other four participants, Principal Jones’ approach to the principalship was described as collaborative, however, his view of the principal as a manager was not seen in any of the other cases. Principal Jones referenced the size of Gold Meadow High School when talking about management saying, “This is such a big place that it’s more of a management job than a teaching job.” Principal Jones also was the only principal with a full leadership team assigned to his building. He described a leadership structure that portrayed
himself as a chief executive officer with his assistant principals, department heads, and directors
working as his executive board. All of the other participants had a much smaller administrative
team than Principal Jones, much smaller enrollments, and did not have noteworthy experience
working outside of the realm of public education. It is reasonable to think that these factors
played a role in the appearance of this divergent theme.

The demographic profile of a school has an impact on the principalship. The
demographic make-up of each of the five schools included in this study was largely similar with
the exception of Gray Stone High School, the only urban school and the only school where the
majority of the students were racial minorities. Gray Stone High School also had a significantly
higher percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. These demographic differences
set Gray Stone High School and Principal Miller apart from the other four schools and
participants. Principal Miller was the only participating principal of a Level 3 school, which
colored his answers to many of the questions about the federal accountability system. While
some of the other principals recognized the disadvantages and additional struggles of urban
schools, only Principal Miller was able to describe the impact of demographics first hand. While
Principal Miller took a “kids are kids” approach, he also expressed a level of frustration about
urban schools being expected to meet the same expectations as suburban schools in more affluent
communities. Two other principals in the study discussed this perception of inequities within the
accountability system, but their comments were more theoretical rather than practical. Principal
Miller was the only principal who was directly experiencing the challenges associated with
socio-economic and demographic components. He was also the only principal who referenced
role sustainability during the interviews.
Conclusion

This chapter summarized the findings of an interpretative phenomenological analysis that explored the lived experiences and perceptions of high school principals, how they make meaning of the myriad responsibilities associated with the role, the leadership challenges they face, and the skills they think are most critical for success in the current high-stakes and bureaucratic environment of public education. The study was conducted with five public high school principals from schools in Massachusetts varying in size and demographic make-up. The chapter began with an overview of the research process used for this study, information on interview protocols, and the steps used to analyze the data obtained from those interviews. Chapter 4 included a detailed summary of the transcripts from the 10 interviews (2 interviews for each of the 5 participants) and a listing of emergent and super-ordinate themes. Following this summary and the identification of emergent and super-ordinate themes, common themes found across all cases were presented. These common themes were examined followed by a discussion of the skills and characteristics the participants identified as most critical for principals. Lastly, two divergent themes were identified and presented. Table 7 summarizes the six common themes and two divergent themes as they relate to each participant.
Table 7

**Summary of Common and Divergent Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Principal Smith</th>
<th>Principal Williams</th>
<th>Principal Miller</th>
<th>Principal Davis</th>
<th>Principal Jones</th>
<th>Common or Divergent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharing leadership responsibilities is a key aspect of the principalship</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The principal should be the instructional leader</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability can be a catalyst for change</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability can be an impediment to progress</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance has a relationship to job satisfaction</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most critical skills for principals:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Communication</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Empathy</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Flexibility</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The principal should be the CEO</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Divergent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The demographic profile of a school has an impact on the principalship</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Divergent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter 5 will provide an analysis and interpretation of the six primary findings of this study. After a review of the problem of practice and the research methodology, each primary finding will be interpreted in relationship to the two theoretical frameworks considered for this study, the literature, and the research question. The chapter will conclude with implications for current practice and future research.
Chapter 5: Interpretations, Recommendations, and Conclusions

Introduction

Through this interpretative phenomenological analysis, the researcher explored the lived experiences of five public high school principals to identify how they make meaning of the myriad responsibilities associated with the role, the leadership challenges they face, and the skills they think are most critical for success. Each principal participated in two semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher. The interviews sought to address the research question for this study: How do public high school principals describe the balancing of instructional leadership practices with their other responsibilities in this era of high-stakes accountability?

This chapter explores the primary findings in relation to the two theoretical frameworks: skill leadership theory and situational leadership theory. This chapter also discusses how the primary findings confirm, complicate or contradict aspects of the literature explored in chapter 2 and the relationship between the findings and the research question. The chapter concludes with a section on the implications for current practice and considerations for future research.

Interpretation of Primary Findings

The primary findings of this study fall within six categories derived from common themes identified across all participants through the analysis of the 10 interviews conducted. The categories include: (1) sharing leadership responsibilities; (2) the principal as the instructional leader; (3) accountability as a catalyst for change; (4) accountability as an impediment; (5) balance and job satisfaction; and (6) critical skills for principals. In the subsequent sections, these six categories will be interpreted in relation to the theoretical frameworks employed for this study, the literature that was reviewed in chapter 2, and the research question.
Sharing leadership responsibilities is a key aspect of the principalship. Although the specifics vary for each participant, each of them described their leadership as a shared activity. Situational leadership theory, which is strongly integrated with the relationships leaders have with their subordinates, asserts that leaders need to adjust their leadership approach based on both the situation they are facing and the developmental level of those working for them. The five participants described leadership approaches that connected with all four styles associated with situational leadership theory: (1) directing; (2) coaching; (3) supporting; and (4) delegating. It was clear from the responses of all five participants that their approaches were closely linked to the structures found in each of their schools, the resources at their disposal, and the trust they had in their teachers.

Comments made by participants related to sharing leadership were almost always connected to discussions about relationships. This connection can be considered through the lens of the human skill (Katz, 1955) or interpersonal skill (Mumford et al., 2007) domains of skill leadership theory. These domains focus on a leader’s ability to work effectively with others, to develop a collaborative working environment, and the art of negotiation and persuasion. Comments by all five participants indicated that they considered their ability to develop and maintain relationships with the individuals they work with to be essential to their leadership success. Collaboration was a common thread found within this particular category.

The primary findings related to shared or distributed leadership largely confirmed what was identified in the literature. Shared leadership is explored in several places within the literature review of this study. According to the literature, as early as the 1960s the principalship began to move away from the autocratic role that it was since its inception to a democratic role where shared decision-making and leadership became the norm (Beck & Murphy, 1993; Brown,
2005; Kafka, 2009). Each participant described his/her leadership as inclusive and rarely discussed instances where he/she was the sole decision maker. They all recognized themselves as the individuals ultimately responsible for making decisions, but indicated that they almost always included others before making a final decision. When participants discussed examples of making decisions without involving others, the examples were frequently related to compliance tasks associated with state or federal mandates.

Harris (2006) identified three dimensions of shared leadership that relate to the primary findings of the study. According to Harris (2006), shared leadership reflects changing leadership structures in schools, reflects a new leadership style to accommodate an increased workload for principals, and aligns with schools working as professional learning communities. All five participants spoke about the significance of the changing role of the principal, specifically increased expectations around instructional leadership and the increased work that comes as a byproduct of ever expanding state and federal mandates. Professional learning communities (PLCs) were not considered formally by any of the participants during the interviews, although individual elements of PLCs were discussed by multiple principals relative to collaboration and relationships. Leithwood et al. (2008) identified distributive leadership as a critically important leadership practice for principals. While participants didn’t refer to the practice of distributed leadership by name, the primary findings certainly indicated that the participants consistently practiced this type of leadership and relied on it as a practice to help them manage the complex nature of the principalship.

This primary finding is significant when considered in relation to the research question, which focuses on how principals balance instructional leadership with their other responsibilities. Responses from all five participants indicated that shared leadership was critical to principals...
and that while they employed shared leadership practices for a variety of reasons, they relied upon shared leadership strategies to help them meet the demands associated with the role. The size of the participant’s schools, the number of years of experience they possessed, and the number of other leaders within their buildings were all factors that led to differences in the leadership behaviors exhibited by each participant. Shared leadership and other collaborative practices, however, seemed to be applied by these principals consistently regardless of these other factors.

**The principal should be the instructional leader.** Instructional leadership was a central component of this study. When considering this primary finding through the lens of skill leadership theory, it became clear that in order to successfully practice instructional leadership, participants needed to demonstrate competency in all skill areas identified by Katz (1955) and Mumford et al. (2007), with the exception of business skills, which were not relevant to the primary findings of this study. Participants discussed instructional leadership as an endeavor practiced collaboratively with teachers not by the leader alone. This collaborative approach relies on both the human and the interpersonal aspects of skill leadership theory that focus on a leader’s ability to work with others and to create a cooperative working environment. Participants indicated that they often attempted to demonstrate their instructional leadership through their actions, which is aligned to Katz’s (1955) assertion that human skills are most-often demonstrated through the behaviors of the leader. It is clear from the comments made by each participant that the technical and cognitive aspects of skill leadership are relative to this primary finding. These aspects of the theory refer to a leader possessing an understanding of a specific kind of activity as well as speaking, active listening, writing, and critical thinking skills. Each participant defined instructional leadership and instructional leadership practices.
differently. However, they all recognized it as a critical element of the principalship requiring knowledge and skills related to the field of education. Participants were also well aware of their individual strengths and weaknesses with respect to instructional leadership. Finally, the conceptual and strategic aspects of skill leadership theory were also relative to this primary finding. When responding to questions specific to instructional leadership, participants often linked their practices to the vision of their school or district. They described the importance of exhibiting instructional leadership behaviors both in faculty meetings and when visiting classrooms as behaviors critical to the process of developing a common vision.

When this primary finding is considered within the context of situational leadership theory, it becomes clear that once again, relationships are central to a principal’s success. As stated above, each participant’s confidence with respect to instructional leadership varied. As such, each participant relied on subordinates differently when working in the realm of instructional leadership. Some participants gave department heads high levels of control, which is aligned within the delegating quadrant of situational leadership theory. Other participants indicated that they maintained tight control of activities within their buildings that fell under the realm of instructional leadership through behaviors that aligned with the directing and sometimes coaching quadrants. The data collected from each participant showed that these differences were related to the level of each individual’s self-confidence as well as the level of confidence each individual had in his or her staff.

While the literature defined instructional leadership in a variety of ways, all of the definitions connected to activities outside of the realm of traditional building management tasks. The five participants defined instructional leadership in ways that were consistent with the literature. When asked to describe their instructional leadership, participants often discussed
using practices in meetings that they would expect to see teachers use in classrooms. All five participants talked about approaching faculty meetings differently in recent years, moving away from the informational meeting and trying to use the time for professional development, planning, setting a vision, and collaboration. All of these activities align with how instructional leadership was identified within the literature. While the literature clearly outlined a transformation of the principal from building manager to instructional leader, it did not specify how principals were expected to master instructional leadership skills. Participants made it clear that their instructional leadership training was piecemeal at best and that they carried the instructional skills they mastered as teachers forward when they became principals. This creates the potential for a significant variance among principals with respect to instructional leadership competency. This variance was evident among the five participants of this study as they all described different levels of instructional leadership confidence and slightly different instructional leadership definitions and expectations. The five participants indicated that they considered their experiences in the classroom as critical to their development as instructional leaders. Given the fact that each participant taught for different periods of time, taught different subjects and levels, worked in different schools with different expectations, and left the classroom at different moments in the ever-changing realm of public education, it is logical to assume that a heavy reliance on teaching experience as a component of instructional leadership development could lead to inconsistencies.

In general terms, participants described instructional leadership as a collaborative effort where principals worked to provide teachers with the supports and resources they needed to be successful with respect to curriculum, instruction and assessment. Responses in this area largely confirmed what was found in the literature. Instructional leadership was presented as a low
priority for principals (Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Jenkins, 2009). Responses from all five participants varied slightly on this issue, but it was clear that they struggled to find the time to act as instructional leaders given the myriad tasks they were expected to manage related to state and federal mandates. The literature indicated that while principals were spending more time focusing on instruction, they were not necessarily using the time effectively, and more importantly, the additional time spent was not having a widespread impact on student achievement (Fullan, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2008; Ravitch, 2010). This assertion aligns with the primary findings on instructional leadership from this study. Participants all agreed that principals needed to be instructional leaders and were able to articulate what they considered to be instructional leadership practices. However, they were less confident when pushed to connect those instructional leadership practices to improved teaching and learning.

This primary finding has a strong relationship to the research question of this study, which focuses on how principals balance instructional leadership with their other tasks. When considered in the context of the research question, data from this study indicates that principals struggle to balance these demands for two primary reasons. First, participants recognized that effective instructional leadership takes significant time and they described their experiences within the role in such a way that indicated that time was limited because of their numerous responsibilities. Second, results identified instructional leadership training as inconsistent at best leaving room for significant interpretation as to what instructional leadership should look like.

**Accountability can be a catalyst for change.** The impact of the federal accountability system on the role of the principal was explored through this study. This primary finding focuses on how accountability can be used by principals to improve teaching and learning. While participants consistently expressed negative views of the federal accountability system,
they also described ways that the system could be used to a principal’s advantage. An interpretation of this primary finding in relation to skill leadership theory highlights the connection between the finding and the human and interpersonal elements as well as the conceptual and strategic elements of the theory. All participants recognized that the accountability and assistance label (Level 1 through Level 5) could have a negative impact on the morale of a school’s staff. That said, participants indicated that the possibility of dropping a level motivated some staff members to work harder. Participants also recognized how their own perception of the accountability system could influence how their teachers perceived the system. This concept aligns with Katz’s (1955) assertion that human skills are about a leader’s ability to understand how their own perspective impacts the perspective of others within an organization.

In addition to human and interpersonal skills, this primary finding aligns with the conceptual and strategic elements of skill leadership theory. Katz (1955) described conceptual skills as a leader’s ability to understand the impact of organizational change and how the perception of change will impact implementation and sustainability. This concept connected with some of the examples of student achievement data work participants said they were involved with in their buildings.

With respect to situational leadership theory, participants regularly described leadership behaviors in the coaching or directing quadrants of the theory when discussing the accountability system. While all participants frequently operated within the delegating or supporting quadrants, they recognized that when something needed to be done to satisfy a federal or state mandate, it was often easier for them to either do it themselves or provide high levels of direction to subordinates as they completed necessary tasks.
This primary finding focuses on the federal accountability system as a catalyst for change. While participants in the study cited instances where the accountability system has promoted change or pushed teachers to focus their efforts with respect to curriculum and instruction, the study did not uncover any noteworthy evidence of improved student achievement directly related to these changes. This is somewhat aligned with the literature which indicated that the federal accountability system operates on a number of assumptions, the most important being that by labeling schools on a performance scale without additional resources will lead to improvement (Fullan, 2014, Ravitch, 2010). The effort of the principals in the study to develop their teachers’ skills in data analysis and the use of analyzed data to inform practice also aligned with the literature. According to Fullan (2014), principals should be focusing on building capacity among teachers so they have the skills they need to meet the complex demands they face in the classroom. While participants did not use the term “capacity building,” the professional development activities they described were frequently focused on providing teachers with the time and resources they need to improve their instruction, strengthen curriculum, and analyze assessment data. Overall, this primary finding is in disagreement with the literature, which described an insignificant correlation between accountability standards, sanctions, teacher motivation, and student achievement gains (Fullan, 2010, 2014; Leithwood & Earl, 2000; Munoz & Barber, 2011; Ravitch, 2010). This primary finding doesn’t claim to make a link between accountability measures and student achievement, but it does show that participants have found accountability to be both a motivating factor and a catalyst that has pushed teachers and administrators to use data to inform practice and focus more heavily on curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
This primary finding is significant to the research question, which focuses on how principals find balance in this era of high-stakes accountability. Exploring the idea that participants partially view accountability as a catalyst for change, distorts the perspective on accountability slightly. Rather than thinking of accountability as a series of unreasonable expectations, this primary finding demonstrates that principals are willing to take advantage of some of the potential motivational power associated with the accountability system.

**Accountability can be an impediment to progress.** Like the previous finding, considering accountability as an impediment also connects with the human and interpersonal and conceptual and strategic aspects of skills leadership theory. Participants described how increasing state and federal mandates significantly changed the principalship and public schools as a whole over the past several years. Participants also discussed how these changes could trickle down from the administrative level to the classroom unless the principal makes an effort to prevent this from happening. Four principals indicated that it was the principal’s role to shield teachers from the bureaucracy of federal and state mandates to ensure they have the time to focus on instructional practices, curriculum, and assessments. This awareness requires human skills, as defined by Katz (1955), so they are able to alter their behavior in order to show sensitivity to the needs of others within the organization. Conceptual or strategic skills are relative to this primary finding because as the interview data indicated, principals need to demonstrate an ability focus the work within their schools on teaching and learning when bureaucratic compliance becomes distracting. Situational leadership theory is also relevant to this primary finding. Participants indicated that increasing demands associated with state and federal mandates have increased the complexity of the principalship and taken time away from the important work of improving teaching and learning. Interview data suggested that this complexity makes if necessary for
principals to heavily rely on their subordinates. However, as participants noted, a principal’s role adjusts depending on the nature of the work and the developmental level of the staff. For example, Principal Williams who works in a small school with little administrative supports, shared how cognizant she is at all times about the capabilities of her staff members and how she consistently adjusts her approach and level of active participation relative to who is working with her on a particular project.

The literature provides evidence that the existing accountability system can have adverse effects on schools (Fullan, 2014; McGhee & Nelson, 2005; Rutledge, 2010; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Sunderman et al., 2006). This primary finding largely confirms what was found in the literature. Participants frequently discussed the negative impact of federal accountability expectations on school climate, specifically citing the DESE’s accountability and assistance leveling system as a key issue they have to overcome. While participants consistently noted that their school’s level was not necessarily something that the general public paid close attention to, they all indicated that the label was noted by staff and certainly by the superintendent and in some cases the school committee. The literature highlighted the problems associated with punitive forms of accountability and how there is little evidence linking labeling schools and imposing sanctions on schools labeled as underperforming with higher student achievement (Fullan, 2010; Leithwood & Earl, 2000; Munoz & Barber, 2011; Ravitch, 2010). Evidence supporting this primary finding showed that the participating principals worked to minimize the impact of their school’s level to keep teachers from focusing on the label. This attitude was present in all participants, including Principal Miller, a leader of a school categorized as a Level 3. Principal Miller, however, spoke to the fact that regardless of how he approached the situation, his teachers remained aware of the reality that Gray Stone High School is a Level 3 school and
that the label largely embarrassed them. The literature also discussed an assumption within the federal accountability system that schools labeled as underperforming will be able to show improvement over time without additional resources, promoting the idea that school improvement is a regulatory issue and not a problem closely connected to inequality and other social conditions out of the control of the schools themselves (Fullan, 2014; Ravitch, 2010; Sunderman et al., 2006). This was largely confirmed through this primary finding. There was only 1 school in the study categorized as a Level 3. That same school was the only urban school and the school with the highest percentage of poverty and the largest minority enrollment in the study. The only participant leading a school categorized as Level 1 spoke of her reluctance to celebrate her school’s status because a difference in the testing cohort from one year to the next could quickly change a school’s accountability and assistance level. This attitude is another example supporting assertions within the literature that labeling schools in not necessarily a motivating factor.

One area where this primary finding appears to contradict the literature is with respect to capacity building. The literature asserted that while there is evidence that accountability and mandates have pushed more principals to focus on instructional leadership, the focus shift is rooted in bureaucratic compliance rather than a true desire to build capacity among teachers to improve instruction (Fullan, 2014; Rutledge, 2010; Sunderman et al., 2006). All of the participants discussed instructional leadership as a fundamental part of the principalship and rarely made explicit connections between compliance with state and federal mandates and instructional leadership practices.

This primary finding provides important context relative to the research question for this study. The question seeks to understand how principals balance the responsibilities of the role in
the current environment where public education is heavily regulated by the current federal accountability system. Results related to this finding demonstrate how participants perceive the accountability system’s negative impact on their schools and on themselves.

**Balance has a relationship to job satisfaction.** It is difficult to connect the two theoretical frameworks employed for this study to this particular primary finding. This finding focuses on the participant’s abilities to manage the responsibilities of the role within the context of their own personal lives. As a result, data relative to this finding are less about how each participant interacts with others or the specific skills each participant utilizes to find balance or to prioritize, and more about how they perceive the impact of the role on themselves and those around them.

This primary finding does, however, connect with the literature considered for this study. The problem of practice focuses on the increased complexity of the principalship and an increasing perception that the demands of the role have become too much for one individual to successfully navigate. The literature review outlined the evolution of the principalship since the emergence of the role in the late 19th century (Brown, 2005; Goodwin et al., 2005; Hallinger, 1992, Kafka, 2009; Pierce, 1935; Reller, 1936; Rousmaniere, 2007). What the literature described as the modern day principalship was largely confirmed through this study. Participants described the role as demanding with consistently long hours and a large spectrum of responsibilities. The literature also showed a connection between increased accountability and an increased workload and stress level for principals (Brown, 2005; Howley et al., 2005; Pounder & Merrill, 2001). This was confirmed through this study as the participants all identified state and federal mandates as a significant complicating factor in the evolution of the role over the past decade.
Connected to balance and prioritization is the concept of job satisfaction. The literature described the principalship as having become a less desirable career choice in recent years, as evidenced by the decreasing number of qualified candidates applying for these leadership positions (Battle & Gruber, 2010; Conrad & Rosser, 2007; Tekleselassie & Villareal, 2011). This assertion was confirmed by this study. None of the participants indicated that they aspired to become principals when they entered the field of education or during their years in the classroom. Participants typically described their ascensions to the role as a matter of opportunity brought on by retirements or sudden vacancies due to the unexpected illness of others occupying leadership roles in their buildings. More than one participant described being asked to consider a leadership role before they felt they were ready. The literature discussed the principalship as increasingly complex, as a source of considerable stress, lacking support, requiring long hours, and as a role that has a negative impact on an individual’s family life (Howley et al., 2005). This primary finding confirmed all of these assertions as each participant discussed these elements as being synonymous with the role. Each participating principal discussed the need to frequently blend their personal and professional lives together in order to find ways to spend time with their families.

The literature highlighted burnout and turnover as factors that negatively impacted the principalship (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Friedman, 2002; Friedman et al., 2008; Gates et al., 2006; Tekleselassie & Villarreal 2011). This primary finding contradicts this assertion as all five participants have served as principals for eight to ten years. Additionally, the responses of most of the participants showed that they were satisfied in their current roles and did not indicate a desire to change positions or schools.
Lastly, the literature review discussed the affective or emotional dimensions of the principalship. According to the literature, principals who feel that their work is having an impact, enjoy a high level of autonomy, and feel that they have support, are generally more satisfied (Sutter, 1996; Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). This primary finding confirms this assertion as all members ultimately described their work as impactful and meaningful, indicated that they felt supported by their school communities and enjoyed adequate autonomy from their superintendents and school committees.

This primary finding is also important when considered in relation to the research question for this study. In order to interpret how principals describe the balancing of instructional leadership practices with their other responsibilities, it is important to have a general a sense of how principals perceive the impact of the role on themselves. This primary finding not only highlights how participants perceive their responsibilities, but also considers how the level of job satisfaction they possess colors their overall perception of the efficacy of their work.

**Critical skills for principals.** The final primary finding focuses on the skills the participants identified as critical for principals. While several skills were discussed during the 10 interview sessions, three skill areas in particular were mentioned the most: communication, empathy, and adaptability. It is most logical to interpret information related to this primary finding through the lens of skill leadership theory. The three skill areas mentioned above align most closely with the human or interpersonal skill components of the Katz (1955) and Mumford et al. (2007) models. Human and interpersonal skills are defined as a leader’s ability to work effectively with subordinates, peers, and supervisors. When participants discussed communication skills, they highlighted the importance of providing clear, open, and regular
communication to the individuals working in their buildings in order to ensure that everyone was working together towards the same goal. This aligned with Northouse’s (2010) assertion that human skills are needed in order for a leader to facilitate the attainment of an organization’s common vision. Participants also discussed the importance of effective written and verbal communication with all of the different constituents found within a school. Additionally, four of the participants included listening in the same category as communication, a behavior also requiring strong human or interpersonal skills. Communication skills also aligned with the technical and cognitive skill areas of the theory. Being able to write, speak, and listen effectively requires a certain level of proficiency in these areas.

Empathy was also identified by the participants as a critical skill area for principals. Like communication, empathy is aligned closely to the human and interpersonal components of skill leadership theory. Participants discussed empathy when talking about relationships and in relation to having the ability to understand and respect the opinions and perspectives of others. This concept connects with the work of Katz (1955) who stated that human skills are exhibited when a leader is able to alter his or her behaviors in an effort to be sensitive to the needs of others. Participants identified adaptability or flexibility as a critical skill area for principals. Adaptability was mostly discussed in relation to having the ability to make changes and adjustments as needed depending on the situation. This skill is related to the conceptual or strategic components of the theory. According to Katz (1955), conceptual skills require a leader to demonstrate an understanding of how an organization works and how change will impact both individuals and the organization as a whole. Similarly, Mumford et al. (2007), identified systems perception, objective evaluation skills, and problem identification skills as key elements to the strategic skill set. Participants discussed the need to be able to make adjustments at any given
time because of the fluid nature of the school environment while keeping the school’s vision and mission in mind whenever these adjustments are made. Principal Miller and Principal Davis both discussed adaptability with respect to decision-making indicating that it is important to be consistent and to avoid setting precedents that cannot be sustained.

Leithwood and school leadership. The portion of the literature review dedicated to skills was organized using the seven assertions about school leadership identified by Leithwood et al. (2008). Using this construct to interpret findings related to skills provided a framework with which to expand the interpretation of this primary finding beyond the relatively small number of critical skills identified by participants and discussed above. To explore the first assertion of Leithwood et al. (2008), that school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on student learning, the participants were asked how they felt principals best impacted student achievement. Answers to this question included: (1) ensuring that there are high quality teachers in each classroom; (2) providing resources so teachers can do their jobs; (3) being visible in classrooms and understanding what is happening in classrooms; (4) establishing a mindset of success; and (5) maintaining high expectations. All of these answers support claims in the literature that principals have the most impact through behaviors, practices, and the employment of skills that are indirect in nature (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Fullan, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2010; Roe, 2013).

The second and third assertions of Leithwood et al. (2008) have been combined for the purposes of this interpretation. These assertions are that almost all successful leaders utilize the same basic leadership practices and that the application of these practices demonstrates responsiveness to the contexts in which they work. Leithwood et al. (2008) identified four core leadership practices that are central to these two assertions: (1) building vision and setting
directions; (2) understanding and developing people; (3) redesigning the organization; and (4) managing the teaching and learning program. Each participant reflected upon these practices during the interviews. One participant specifically identified being a visionary leader as a critical skill. Developing a shared vision was discussed in a variety of contexts throughout the interview sessions with all of the participating principals. The literature clearly asserted that this is a critical skill area for school principals (Fullan, 2014; Leithwood & Beatty, 2009; Prothroe, 2011; Roe, 2013; Senge, 2013; Yukl, 2006). Closely connected to the idea of establishing a shared vision, is the importance of working with people. The literature spoke at length about the value of relationships and the need for principals to invest time in working with the people of their school communities (Fullan, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2008; Robinson, 2010). The participants consistently discussed the importance of relationships relative to the development of a common vision or meeting common goals. According to Leithwood et al. (2008), principals need to be agents of change who develop shared norms, establish positive conditions for teaching and learning, and involve the staff in the decision-making process within the school. The results of the study support this assertion, but responses were inconsistent. Only two of the participants spoke specifically about including teachers in the decision-making process, and while they all alluded to shared norms, none of the participants mentioned the development of shared norms explicitly. All five participants discussed establishing positive conditions for teaching and learning. The final core leadership practice that Leithwood et al. (2008) associated with these two assertions is managing the teaching and learning program. Skills associated with this leadership practice are closely connected to the instructional leadership practices discussed by each participant. The concept that principals need to apply the skills associated with the core leadership practices discussed above in order to adapt to different contexts was also supported by
the results of this study. The participants discussed the need to be adaptive and flexible in order to be able to manage the variety of issues that present themselves, often unexpectedly, in a school environment.

The fourth assertion by Leithwood et al. (2008) is related to principals improving teaching and learning through influence on staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions. This assertion is most closely connected to participant’s comments focusing on school climate, but was not a significant theme identified through the analysis of the results. This assertion is also related to the ability of principals to develop the capacity of teachers to ensure that students are achieving at high levels. Connections to this concept were evident through discussions about instructional leadership practices and professional development.

Distributing leadership is the focus of the fifth and sixth assertions by Leithwood et al. (2008). This topic was discussed at length earlier in this chapter as shared leadership practices were identified as one of the primary findings of the study. As such, no further discussion is warranted here.

Finally, Leithwood et al. (2008) asserted that a small number of personal traits are connected to leadership effectiveness. While this study did not focus specifically on traits, the topic was explored indirectly. Leithwood et al. (2008) stated that the most successful school leaders are “open-minded, ready to learn from others, flexible, persistent, resilient, and optimistic” (p. 36). The interpretation of the interview data reveals the presence of many of these traits. Participants came across as very open-minded and ready to learn from others. This was evident in the discussions about instructional leadership where many of the participants discussed learning about instruction from their teachers. Flexibility and resiliency were also common themes that can be seen through the analysis of the interviews. The literature
recognized that traits matter, but that leadership success should not be based on traits alone (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). Because traits are not considered a reliable measure of leadership potential and because they were not an emphasis of this study, the discussion of traits will conclude here.

While skills and characteristics of successful principals are not specifically found within the language of the research question driving this study, one cannot explore how principals describe the balancing of the demands of the role without considering these constructs. Data related to this primary finding helped the researcher to interpret the behaviors demonstrated by principals when balancing the demands of their work, a key component to the research question.

**Implications for Practice and Recommendations**

This study explored the lived experiences of five public high school principals in Massachusetts with a focus on how these principals balance instructional leadership with their other responsibilities in this era of high-stakes accountability. Common themes identified through the analysis of ten semi-structured interview sessions, two sessions with each participant, informed the following implications for current practice for principals.

**Principals need mentoring.** Like teachers, principals need practicum experiences and mentoring. While the five participants completed the requisite number of practicum hours to earn the licensure necessary to hold their positions, none of them had an opportunity to participate in a formal mentoring program. According to the DESE, teachers are required to complete a one-year induction program with a mentor and a one-year follow-up program continuing the teacher-mentor relationship in order to be eligible for a professional-level license. This two-year program is facilitated by each individual school district. New superintendents also participate in a two-year induction program facilitated by the Massachusetts Association of
School Superintendents. This program matches new superintendents with experienced superintendents, often retired, and includes observations with feedback as well as participation in regular mentoring meetings with a regionalized cohort of new superintendents. Educators seeking principal licensure work with a mentor during the licensure process, but there is no mentoring or induction program for principals in their first year in the role. A formal mentoring and induction program for new principals, similar to what has been developed for new superintendents, should be created and facilitated collaboratively by individual districts and the Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators’ Association (MSSAA). With a program like this, new principals could be matched with experienced principals from their own districts, from other districts, or with principals who have retired from the role. This recommendation does not call for a state-mandated mentoring program for principals. However, if an organization like the MSSAA facilitated a consistent and viable program, superintendents could require their new principals to participate as a condition of their initial contract.

While the results of this study indicated that some mentoring occurs informally, the level of support varies greatly from district to district. The five participants described much of their development as principals in the context of “on the job training.” Given the complexity of the role, there is no scenario where this can be avoided completely, however, providing a structured mentoring program for new principals would certainly help mitigate some of the challenges associated with someone being new to a school or role. Since each new principal has different needs, it is recommended that a formal mentoring program provide flexibility and operate under suggested guidelines focused in certain core areas. Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that these areas include instructional leadership, understanding the accountability system, community outreach, personnel management, and a variety of leadership approaches.
**Principals need instructional leadership training.** Evidence from this study suggests that instructional leadership varies widely as a component of licensure and master’s degree programs and that principals mostly learn instructional leadership strategies from individual conferences, from the teachers in their buildings, or they draw from their own experiences as teachers. All of these things are important, but instructional leadership should be a much more prominent component of principal licensure programs and master’s degree programs focusing on school leadership. All of the participants provided different definitions of instructional leadership. While all of these definitions were loosely connected, there clearly was not a common understanding of what constitutes instructional leadership among the five principals participating in this study. Since instructional leadership is viewed as such a critical component of the principalship, there cannot be a “catch-as-catch-can” approach to this element of the role.

**Principals should employ distributed leadership practices.** While none of the principals in this study used the term “distributed leadership,” they all described practices that were closely aligned with this leadership approach. Distributed or shared leadership practices were most prevalent in discussions about instructional leadership and accountability. The results of the study indicated that principals utilize distributed leadership as a strategy to help them balance the demands of the role. Results also showed that distributed leadership is used to help principals build relationships, improve school culture, and develop buy-in. Given how tightly woven distributed leadership practices were across all of the participants in this study, it is recommended that distributed or shared leadership concepts be a component of principal preparation programs and mentoring and induction programs. It is also important that superintendents support and encourage principals who wish to employ distributed leadership.
strategies. Without explicit support from the superintendent, principals may not fully embrace distributed leadership fearing that it makes them look less competent or confident in the role.

**Principals need support from other principals.** This study focused heavily on how principals effectively balance the demands associated with the federal accountability system with instructional leadership. Results indicated that principals often manage their responsibilities in isolation at the building level. Operating in this manner is challenging, particularly when faced with the task of making a difficult decision. The participants talked about collaborating with other building-based administrators and teachers, but there was less data supporting a broader collaboration with other high school principals, either from within the same district or from other districts. While the DESE provides some level of support for principals around accountability compliance measures, the participants largely viewed the DESE as the organization imposing the system and sanctions on schools not as a support vehicle for principals. As a result of this negative view of the DESE, principals can take a “circle the wagons” approach rather than attempting to reach out for the support they require. Data from the study indicated that principals do benefit from interactions with principal colleagues from other districts; however, the opportunities to do this vary and can be limited because of time and access. Results of the study also indicated that while principals may feel comfortable confiding in their superintendents when they need help, the fact that the principal is a subordinate of the superintendent might limit this comfort level.

The study also showed that all five of the principals have similar concerns and stressors, but little opportunity to discuss these concerns and stressors with professionals who share the same role. Collaboration with assistant principals and curriculum leaders is important, but the people in these roles have different levels of responsibility that could impede their ability to fully
relate with a principal’s perspective. More regional or statewide opportunities should exist for principals to network with other principals as they manage the responsibilities associated with the role. Job-a-like groups organized by region that meet regularly would provide principals with the opportunity to develop relationships with others facing similar challenges. Principals who take advantage of such groups, would have a safe environment where they could process decisions before making them or analyze the end results after decisions are made. Study participants talked about the lack of time they have to reflect meaningfully on their work. Belonging to regional job-a-like groups would provide them with an opportunity to be reflective with other practitioners who may be experiencing similar issues.

**Principals need to collaborate with curriculum specialists.** Instructional leadership was a central theme of this study and participants both defined instructional leadership and described their own instructional leadership practices in different ways. Results from the study showed that principals with access to and trust in curriculum specialists appeared more confident and comfortable when discussing instructional leadership. Whether high school principals have building-based curriculum leaders or work with a district-level curriculum specialist, close collaboration between principals and curriculum specialists is necessary. That said, principals must not allow building-based or district-level curriculum specialists to reside at the top of the instructional leadership pyramid in their schools. It is important that principals are viewed as the instructional leaders who direct the actions and initiatives of curriculum specialists or are at least viewed as co-instructional leaders with curriculum specialists in order to ensure meaningful implementation of initiatives related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Taking a secondary role with respect to instructional leadership can cause principals to focus too heavily on building management than on the quality of teaching and level of learning in their schools.
The role may need to be redefined to ensure sustainability. The research question for this study focused on how principals described the balancing of the many aspects of the role. While the results certainly provided data in relation to the question, a clear recipe for balance was not uncovered. Participating principals identified different strategies to manage the role, but none of them described their work as balanced. The literature review explored the noteworthy evolution that the public school principalship has experienced over time. Considering how each of the study participants described the role in connection with the problem of practice and what was explored in the literature review, it is hard to consider the next iteration of the role as sustainable. While there was no evidence that participants were ignoring mandates or leadership responsibilities, there was evidence that in order to manage their work, they were forced to spend less time than needed on different components of the role in order to meet all of the demands of the role.

The question of sustainability is a critical one without a well-defined answer. Participants were clearly operating under the assumption that the role was not going to become simplified in the future and referred to the fact that the role had only become increasingly complex over the past several years. Redefining the principalship at this critical juncture may require heavier reliance on assistant principals and curriculum specialists as members of school-level instructional leadership teams. It would also require an analysis of the relationship between current responsibilities associated with state and federal mandates and district-level initiatives, needs, and priorities. Results from this study support the idea that the principal is, more often than not, expected to be the individual responsible for everything associated with a school. While this notion makes sense on the surface, when one considers all of the elements necessary for a modern-day public high school to function, it becomes clear that the expectation is
unreasonable. Principals not only need the support of assistant principals and curriculum specialists, but may benefit from the creation of new positions that could specifically help them manage some of the more cumbersome aspects of the role. For example, new staff or existing support staff could address some of the more mundane tasks associated with state and federal mandates, help with family outreach activities for special populations in a school (special education, English language learners, low income), or foster relationships between local businesses and the school. Larger urban districts may already have positions to address some or all of these things, but smaller suburban districts do not, as evidenced by the schools participating in this study. A restructured principalship will most-certainly need to focus heavily on collaboration and shared-responsibility.

**Considerations for Future Research**

This chapter discussed several areas for consideration relative to future research connected to specific findings. In addition to these areas, future studies may want to consider a broader analysis of the principalship. This study focused only on high school principals and four of the five participants worked at suburban schools. Exploring the question of balance with elementary or middle school principals could yield different results. While each level may present different challenges, a study comparing elementary, middle, and high school principals may provide interesting data to consider about the role itself, sustainability, and leadership.

This study included a disproportionate number of suburban principals, with only one of the five participants working in an urban environment. The differences seen in the responses of the urban school participant when compared to the responses of the other four participants are stark enough to warrant further research. The literature clearly delineates urban from suburban in the context of the role of the principal, but there is limited research specific to how the
individuals occupying principal’s offices in urban schools make meaning of the role in comparison with their suburban counterparts. Also, the study included a disproportionately high number of male participants, with only one of the five participating principals being female. Further research could explore whether or not there is a relationship between a principal’s gender and their perception of the role.

Lastly, while this study investigated only a small number of principals, it is noteworthy that none of the participants talked about aspiring to become principals earlier in their careers. The five principals involved in this study were either pushed by principals they worked for to pursue an opening or came upon the opportunity because of factors that were beyond anyone’s control. When considered in the context of the literature that described a leadership crisis at the principal level due to a shortage of qualified or interested candidates, future research about the barriers to the principal’s office seems warranted. If the accountability system’s goal of improving public schools is to be realized and the role of the principal is as critical to this endeavor as the literature claimed it is, then researchers must identify and understand why there are so few quality educators seeking to step out of the classroom and into the principal’s office.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the principalship by studying the lived experiences of a small number of sitting high school principals focusing specifically on how they balance the demands of the role. Discussions with the five participants confirmed much of what has been discussed in the literature relative to the principalship: the role is complex and demanding, expectations placed on principals have increased over time, and balancing compliance tasks with instructional leadership is both time-consuming and challenging. The primary findings, which are displayed in Table 7 on page 128 of this document, were interpreted
relative to the two theoretical frameworks employed for this study as well as the literature and were organized into the following categories: (1) sharing leadership responsibilities; (2) the principal as the instructional leader; (3) accountability as a catalyst for change; (4) accountability as an impediment; (5) balance and job satisfaction; and (6) critical skills for principals.

The findings indicated that principals rely heavily on the work of others to accomplish their jobs. This reliance includes collaboration, sharing the work, and the distribution of leadership. Such distribution of work is employed both as a leadership strategy and as a means of survival. The findings also revealed that while principals understand the importance of instructional leadership, the definition of instructional leadership and the application of instructional leadership practices are far from consistent. Data from this study also revealed that principals consider the federal and state accountability system both as a factor that can help facilitate change and as a cumbersome exercise in compliance that has little impact on teaching and learning. Results related to balance and job satisfaction indicated that while participants found their work overwhelming, they also found it rewarding. This contradicted much of what was found in the literature relative to job satisfaction among principals. Lastly, the primary findings included the skills that the participants felt were critical to principal success. These skills were interpreted using the work of Leithwood et al. (2008).

The primary findings led to six implications for future practice including formal mentoring for principals, professional development focusing on instructional leadership and distributed leadership practices, strong relationships between principals and curriculum specialists, and suggestions for redefining the role. Finally, the study concluded with several suggestions for future research on the principalship. These suggestions include an expanded study that includes a more diverse sample from other levels (elementary and middle school),
more principals from urban districts, and more female principals. Additional research was also recommended on the barriers that may be responsible for the lack of interested or qualified candidates for principal vacancies.
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Appendix A

Interview Questions: Session 1

**Background / General Questions about the Principalship**

1. Please describe your school community. Include total enrollment, number of professional staff, administrative staff, and other demographic information you feel is important.

2. How many years have you been in the field of education?

3. How many years did you teach prior to becoming an administrator?

4. Did you move to the principalship directly from the classroom? If no, which position(s) did you hold after leaving the classroom prior to becoming a principal? How many years were you in each of these roles?

5. Why did you want to become a high school principal? How many years have you been in your current role?

6. How much do you believe previous roles/experiences influence your leadership practices?

7. Is the principalship what you expected it to be? If no, in what ways does it differ from your expectations?

8. How has your role changed over your tenure?

**The Principalship / Accountability**

1. Describe a typical day at your school.

2. What is your view of the current federal accountability system? How does this system impact the principalship and teaching and learning?

3. What strategies do you use to achieve accountability?

4. How do you balance the demands of the role?

5. What do you find most rewarding about being a principal?

6. If you could change three things about the principalship, what would you change?
Appendix B

Interview Questions: Session 2

**Instructional Leadership**

1. What does the term “instructional leadership” mean to you?

2. Please describe any training you received on instructional leadership. This can include coursework in a degree or licensure program or stand-alone professional development activities.

3. Describe a typical agenda for a faculty meeting?

4. Discuss how the level of autonomy you feel your superintendent affords you as a principal impacts you as an instructional leader.

5. As an instructional leader, what are the most important activities you engage in?

6. How do you decide which professional development programs or opportunities are implemented in your school?

**Skills**

1. What would you identify as the three most critical skills that a principal must possess to be successful and why are these skills important?

2. What do you consider to be your strongest attributes as a principal? What are your weakest attributes?

3. How can/do principals influence student achievement?

4. Discuss your leadership style.
Hello [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 “The Changing Role of the High School Principal: Instructional Leadership in and Era of Increased Accountability.”

The Principal Investigator for this study is Dr. Sandy Nickel. Dr. Nickel is my advisor at the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University. As the student researcher, I have selected you as one of six participants because you have worked successfully as a principal 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 high school principal as they relate to the challenges associated with the complexity of the role and pressures stemming from compliance with state and federal mandates.
Appendix D

Signed Informed Consent Document

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. This study is seeking to understand the lived experiences of public high school principals. We are asking you to be in this study because you are a principal of a public high school.

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<th>Why is this research being done?</th>
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<td>The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the complex role of the public high school principal with a particular focus on how principals define instructional leadership and balance instructional leadership practices with all of the other responsibilities associated with the role. This study seeks to provide high school principals with an opportunity to share their lived experiences and possibly impact the role of the principal in a broader context.</td>
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<th>What will I be asked to do?</th>
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<td>If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in 2 interviews with the student researcher. Both interviews will be audio recorded and the student researcher will take notes. The recordings will be transcribed by a professional transcriptionist and coded by the student researcher. You and your school will be assigned a pseudonym to protect confidentiality. The first interview will focus on your professional background, your perceptions of the principalship and how it has evolved during your career, and your opinion of the impact of federal and state accountability systems on the principalship. The second session will focus on instructional leadership and the skills critical to principal success.</td>
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<th>Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?</th>
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<td>Both interview sessions will take place in your office or at a time and place that is convenient for you. Each interview will take approximately 60-minutes. You may be required to participate in a follow-up conversation with the student researcher if additional questions arise as the data is being coded.</td>
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<th>Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?</th>
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<td>There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort for individuals participating in this study. You and your school will be assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.</td>
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<th>Who will see the information about me?</th>
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<td>Your identity as a participant in this study will not be known. The student researcher will know that the answers provided during your interviews were provided by you, but nobody else will be able to match your</td>
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answers to you. You and your school will be assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Audio recordings of each interview will be stored on the student researchers laptop with a back-up copy on an external hard-drive also owned by the student researcher. These audio recordings will be maintained in these two locations for a period of 2 years following the conclusion of the study. Hand written notes taken by the student researcher during the interviews and coding documents will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the student researcher’s home for a period of 2 years following the conclusion of the study. After this time period, audio recordings and electronic documents will be deleted and hard-copy documents will be destroyed.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other participants 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 Board 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 of the interview questions. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have questions about this study, please feel free to contact:

Brian Reagan, Student Researcher  
21 Alberta Drive  
Hudson, MA 01749  
978-760-2882  
reagan.br@husky.neu.edu

or

Dr. Sandy Nickel, Principal Investigator  
Northeastern University  
360 Huntington Avenue  
Boston, MA 02115  
617-513-2215  
s.nickel@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 of Human Subject Research Protection  
Northeastern University  
960 Renaissance Park  
Boston, MA 02115  
617-373-4588  
n.regina@neu.edu

You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
You will not be paid for participation in this project.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

You will not incur any costs participating in this project.

**I agree to take part in this research.**

Signature of person agreeing to take part

____________________

Date

Printed name of person above

Signature of person who explained the study to the Participant above and obtained consent

____________________

Date

Printed name of person above