SUPERINTENDENT ENGAGEMENT IN COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE: AN INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Modern public school superintendents are often faced with managing conflict as a result of the divergent interests that constituent’s hold (Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000; Grissom & Andersen, 2012). A superintendent’s job navigating a dynamic and politically charged landscape can be a thorny professional endeavor. In this regard, the collective decision-making process of town governance often serves as the medium by which superintendents interact with constituents holding divergent opinions regarding a complex and layered budgetary process. As informed by two frameworks associated with collaborative governance (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson, Nabatchi & Balogh, 2012,) the purpose of this research was to better understand the experiences of public school superintendents and explored the ways in which they engage with stakeholders. This qualitative study was guided by a single overarching research question: How do superintendents’ understand their experiences engaging with divergent stakeholders in collaborative governance? Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2012), the researcher investigated the lived experiences of eight superintendents serving in small suburban towns in eastern Massachusetts. Five themes emerged revealing how these superintendents have come to understand the importance of: (1) building relationships, (2) seeking consensus, (3) understanding the perspectives of stakeholders, (4) leveraging community support, and (5) managing disagreements. While affirming what the academic literature illustrates, the findings of this study support superintendent engagement with oppositional stakeholders despite common obstacles obstructing the process of governance. These findings stress the importance of building positive relationships with stakeholders.

Keywords: collaborative governance, superintendent, school committee, finance committee, budgeting, stakeholder engagement
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Chapter 1: Introduction

It is well established that PK-12 leaders cannot function effectively from isolated positions; collective engagement is needed to address the growing complexities facing modern education (Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2007; Hall & Hord, 2006; Hargreaves & Fink, 2012; Spillane, 2012). A host of challenges face modern public schools, such as inequity of student achievement, rising rates of poverty, budgetary shortfalls and shifting demographics. In response to these interdependent challenges, researchers advocate that educational leaders must apply greater collaborative approaches, such as distributed (Spillane, 2012), facilitative (Cufaude, 2004; Hall & Hord, 2006) or sustainable leadership (Hargreaves & Fink, 2012) to foster diverse stakeholder support for systemic educational change. While the body of knowledge surrounding leadership theory is comprehensive, little is known about educational leaders’ interpersonal navigation of this system, which is far more complex and politically interconnected than typically recognized by the public. To clearly focus upon this challenge, understanding how superintendents engage with stakeholders when leading school districts was necessary. The following vignette is presented as a concrete example of the types of challenges with which public school superintendents are frequently faced, illustrated in the context of an imaginary, publicly held budgetary hearing, and demonstrative of the potential collision of constituents’ disparate viewpoints.

Vignette

Imagine an auditorium, packed with concerned parents, outspoken citizens and anxious taxpayers, both young and old. The school committee agenda for the evening is set to discuss the proposed budget for the upcoming school year. Ominously however, this year’s budget is already in the red with a $750,000 shortfall, and it is still only December. One by one, concerned
citizens approach the microphone to comment on the budget and offer opinion in this public forum. Some in the crowd, conspicuously members of the local teacher union, hold signs and proudly display stickers advocating against any cuts to the school budget, while in contrast elderly residents rise to the microphone to express concerns that any proposed budgetary increases would only serve to further tax their fixed-incomes. The public school superintendent sits stoically as members of the public continue to comment upon all aspects of the proposed school budget. For the past several weeks, the local newspapers have been closely reporting on this budget process and highlighting a contentious public debate. While approximately 90% of the proposed budget constitutes salaries and benefits, the superintendent already knows that there really is no fat left to trim. What hangs in the balance are the proposed expenditures allocated for increasing technology in the classrooms, professional development to promote educator cultural proficiency, and the adoption of a new PK-12 English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum. Without an increase in funding provided by the proposed budget, these new initiatives will not be possible. The superintendent knows that the proposed budget and the countless hours spent preparing, researching, compromising and communicating it ultimately await judgment by constituents holding differing positions.

The vignette above reveals a plausible example of the potential collision of viewpoints stakeholders may hold and the potential impact of such divergence upon the education system. Given the importance of meeting the needs of all students, the ability of a superintendent to lead and drive organizational change is crucial. In an effort to foster wider stakeholder support for educational change, it is necessary to better understand how superintendents approach collective engagement with constituents. Despite its importance however, there is a dearth of research
examining how superintendents make sense of the political landscape in an effort to engage constituents holding divergent positions.

Problem Statement

As illustrated above, modern public school superintendents have challenging and complicated roles as they are tasked with leading and improving complex organizations within a dynamic, diverse and conflicted political landscape. Often faced with conflict as a result of stakeholders’ divergent interests (Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000; Grissom & Andersen, 2012), the superintendent’s job can be a thorny professional endeavor. Navigating the frequent collision of viewpoints held by stakeholders presents a challenging, yet essential task for superintendents.

Three interrelated components comprise this problem statement: (a) superintendents’ practice faces a certainty of conflict; (b) yet they are expected to work collaboratively with stakeholders, specifically with school and finance committee members, whose membership itself can be divided; (c) superintendents are charged with leading a budget building process in political environments populated with constituents who support divergent interests. Indeed, a superintendent’s ability to identify, engage with, and find common ground among stakeholders is critical to effective collaborative governance, yet little is understood about this phenomenon.

Conflict. One constant facing superintendents is the likelihood of conflict when making decisions involving high stakes issues, such as the expansion of school budgets. As Blumberg (1985) stated upon finding pervasive conflict in his seminal study seeking to understand the experiences of twenty-five superintendents: “…a seemingly absolute condition of the superintendency is that there are only rarely days when the superintendent is not called upon to make a decision that will create some conflict” (p. 1). Facing conflict and the reality that not all stakeholders bring shared interests or motivations to participate in collaborative governance,
superintendents are tasked to lead a PK-12 district and as a result they need to skillfully resolve divisions between and among stakeholders participating in town governance.

**Expectation of Collaboration.** Given the prevalence of professional conflict facing superintendents, it is necessary yet challenging for superintendents to collaboratively lead a school district. Illustrating this point, superintendents interact with a variety of stakeholders, such as district administrators, town managers, finance committee members, principals, students, teachers, parents, labor union leaders, the voting public, and school committee members, among many others (Alsbury, 2008a; Björk and Kowalski, 2005; Grissom, & Andersen, 2012; Hawk & Martin, 2011; Mountford, 2004; Orr, 2006). The term *stakeholder* is broadly defined by Bryson (2004) as, “persons, groups or organizations that must somehow be taken into account by leaders” (p. 22). Of all the various stakeholder groups, superintendents must first and foremost be able to find political consensus with other participants in town governance who formally have a voice in decision-making such as school and finance committee members.

There is a process of collaborative governance in public education, whereby a superintendent engages with the elected individuals serving on a school committee to jointly lead a school district. Fundamentally, a school committee is a political organization composed of elected representatives who serve a community. Shared decision making in this environment is a highly charged political process marked by coalition building, bargaining, competition, and compromise (Gemberling, Smith & Villani, 2000). Adding complexity to the problem is the fact that school committee members themselves bring divergent opinions (Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986), which pose additional challenges for superintendents with whom they may disagree. Given that school committee members are responsible for evaluating the superintendent’s performance (Glass et al., 2000; Mass. Gen. Laws Ch. 71, § 63N, 2014), and some or even all may oppose the
superintendent’s proposals, negotiating with the school committee can be complex and difficult. Surrounded by such political division generally, which is exacerbated by the occupational and organizational reality that disagreeing with the group who evaluates your performance presents inherent risk, it is critical that superintendents are able to collaboratively govern with school committee members with whom they are responsible for the oversight and approval of the budget. Furthermore, it is necessary that the superintendent and the school committee are able to engage with other town departments and committees, specifically the board of selectmen and finance committee, to advocate for funding.

The Budgetary Landscape. While superintendents must necessarily work with their respective school committees to address a variety of important issues such as collective bargaining, district liability and student safety, it can be argued that the budget building process is the most important matter they face collectively. In the context of financial leadership, the budgetary process poses a challenge in which superintendents must directly engage with constituents, many of whom hold divergent opinions regarding the allocation of public money. Additionally, superintendents and educational leaders alike frequently face stakeholder opposition in response to proposed change, and, in essence, budgets encompass the educational priorities for a PK-12 school district.

Despite the importance of the budget, some critics (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Kowalski, 2012) argue that it is unproductive for superintendents to spend the significant time on the budgetary process when the budget is typically an item over which they have little direct control. These critics also claim that this unproductive circumstance is in part a result of the conflicted political landscape surrounding what is already a complex process. Superintendents' reports of professional struggles coping with pressure exerted by community groups during the
budgeting process adds credibility to what may be described as a dysfunctional condition (Glass, et al., 2000). Indeed, negotiating with frequently oppositional constituents is both challenging and problematic, given the extent to which these stakeholders can oppose the allocation of financial resources (Glass et al., 2000; Mountford, 2004). Accordingly, an exploration of the ways in which superintendents are able to effectively guide an oppositional constituency towards collaborative governance was warranted, especially given the potential for the budgeting process to be contentious.

While there are numerous challenges with which school superintendents are confronted that provide worthy contexts for investigating the ways they manage their political landscapes, the importance of collaboration on the budget building process was selected as the most in need of understanding and improvement. Given the potential for conflict outlined above, this particular responsibility may yield the greatest insights into the ways in which the modern superintendent makes sense of and engages with a divergent constituency in an effort towards collaborative governance. While the literature illustrates a decidedly political role for superintendents, it also reveals that little is known about how educational leaders traverse their complex political landscapes (Björk & Gurley, 2005; Bredeson, Klar & Johansson, 2008; Kowalski, 2005; Orr, 2006). This study addressed this gap.

**Significance Statement**

The significance of this research into school superintendents’ management of a complex political budgeting process is described in three main parts. First it addresses the gap in the body of knowledge surrounding superintendent engagement with stakeholders in collaborative governance. Second, more specifically, this research helps educators to gain a better understanding of the ways PK-12 leaders are effective in engaging stakeholders in collaborative
governance. Indeed, to the extent that findings from this research can provide better insights into the challenges confronting current superintendent practice, there are implications for improving superintendent leadership. Third, the numerous layers of federal and state regulations that serve to constrain the educational system, and which directly impact superintendent leadership in the area of financial collaborative governance, are described to aid current management and future research into this complex process.

**The Knowledge Gap.** Despite limited research on achieving successful collaborative governance, one common finding is that efficiently and strategically navigating the political landscape may be one of the most essential characteristics of highly effective educational leaders (Glass et al., 2000). Despite its importance however, the body of knowledge pertaining to effective superintendent engagement with divergent stakeholders in collaborative governance is inconclusive. On the one hand we know that developing shared motivation, establishing mutual trust, agreeing on commitment, and developing a capacity for joint action among stakeholders are important conditions to collaborative governance (Emerson, Nabatchi & Balogh 2012). On the other, we also know that successful collaborative governance is difficult to achieve (Johnson, Hicks, Nan & Auer, 2011; Ravitch, 2001; Wagner, 2010). Thus, the importance of developing this skill set is clear (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bryson, 2004; Emerson et al., 2012). However, searches for literature on research reporting how effective leaders identify, analyze and engage with a group of constituents holding divergent positions returned limited results, exposing a gap in knowledge of effective school leadership. To better understand this problem, this dissertation research collected and analyzed how eight practicing school superintendents described their diverse experiences engaging with oppositional stakeholders in town governance. As such, it contributes to closing this gap in the body of knowledge.
Educational Leadership. With so much at stake in education, gaining a better understanding of the ways in which leaders effectively engage stakeholders in collaborative governance is essential. Both practicing superintendents and those preparing for the role can gain from understanding how others have encouraged participation and arrived at shared decisions with both the school and the broader community. Superintendents must be able to accurately understand the political landscape and collectively engage with their constituents and studying analysis of how others have done so will help them prepare for the challenge (Alsbury, 2008a; Henig, 2011; Kelleher & Van Der Bogert, 2006). Lacking these insights, superintendents who take an adversarial approach to resolving conflict among constituents or those who employ a closed decision-making process rather than seeking input from their constituents, decrease the potential for democratic participation in public education (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Those superintendents unable to successfully build effective relationships with stakeholders and create an environment of collaborative governance will have less leadership capacity to devote towards other urgent educational initiatives (Hess & Meeks, 2010). In contrast, those organizational leaders who genuinely include all stakeholder positions, despite initially divergent viewpoints, have been able to foster collaborative governance through cooperation (Ljungholm, 2014). Clearly, gaining a better understanding of the ways in which leaders have engaged stakeholders in collaborative governance is important. Indeed, it may be all the more important, given expanding federal and state level policy constraints, which have a direct impact on superintendent leadership.

Policy Constraints. The task of collaborative school governance facing superintendents has grown in complexity due to the changing policies regulating governance and PK-12 education from the state and federal levels. The stakes are high for superintendents to improve
academic achievement for all students, which are regulated by the federal and state government, measured by standardized assessments, and monitored by school committees and the public at large. These policy constraints from the federal and state governments add complexity to the daunting task of school governance for superintendents. In explaining the policy constraints in greater detail below, it is important to note that this research was situated in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for the following reasons.

**Increasing Federal Regulation.** The increasing accountability from federal regulation to local public education systems though the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RTTT) legislation provided triggers for punitive measures based upon strict timelines for the improvement of student learning, determined as Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). Failure at the district level to make AYP targets could result in warnings and mandated sanctions for both schools and school districts based upon non-compliance or low-performance (Hess, 2010), which could lead to principal and superintendent termination.

Superintendents in 2015, when this research was conducted, faced a variety of professional challenges not experienced by their predecessors, especially given recent reforms of accountability. For example, the introduction of NCLB greatly increased the power and authority of the federal government over local education systems (Sunderman & Kim, 2007). This authority was manifested in the form of heightened measures of accountability for local districts, and thereby superintendents, based upon student performance on standardized assessments (Sunderman & Kim, 2007). Standardized assessment results, disaggregated at the school and district level, are often published in local newspapers and other media sources and quickly become topics of discussion at Parent Teacher Organization meetings, especially if achievement levels need improvement. As the highest ranking official in a school district, the superintendent
typically receives credit when performance is positive and becomes the target for blame as concerns arise (Chingos, Whitehurst & Lindquist, 2014). Given these compliance driven changes upon the local education system and the growing scrutiny of school accountability, superintendents must be able to effectively manage the political landscape populated with potentially dissatisfied stakeholders as they govern.

**Regulations in Massachusetts.** In general, the problem of practice presented above poses a unique challenge facing all superintendents; however, this research may be particularly salient for those in Massachusetts as the result of complex school finance and local meeting laws regarding the governance of public education in the commonwealth. Specifically, *Proposition 2 ½*, a law restricting towns and cities from raising property taxes above 2.5% annually, constrains communities in Massachusetts in raising funds for education (Mass. Gen. Laws Ch. 59, § 21C, 1980). “Prop 2 and a half” effectively imposes a fixed ceiling for the taxation of property that is the major source for school funding. Since its implementation in 1982, this constraint has forced communities to make difficult choices over the allocation of scarce fiscal resources for public services (Bradbury, Mayer & Chase, 2001; Wallin & Zabel, 2011). These political choices play out on a public stage as stakeholders, such as parent organizations, organized labor, and financial watchdog groups advocate for and against proposed spending changes. Similar to other states, Massachusetts law requires local governments, including school committees and superintendents, to hold meetings that are inclusive of open public participation (Mass. Gen. Laws Ch. 71, § 38N, 2014). In accordance with open meeting law, and reflected in the opening vignette of this research, stakeholders have the legal right to publicly advocate for the positions that they support. Given the abundance of stakeholders, superintendents in Massachusetts must provide educational leadership in the absence of isolation and as such, they must be able to
effectively navigate these divergent positions adroitly. The legal and political constraints surrounding school governance in Massachusetts warranted this exploration into superintendent practice.

At the most practical level, this research study examined the ways in which participating PK-12 educational leaders engaged with constituents, and is important given the challenges with which superintendents are confronted, the most essential of which may be publicly advocating for continual educational improvement. To this end, its findings are critical to improving understanding of how superintendents successfully manage school governance to promote education equity and academic excellence, especially because it has proven to be exceedingly difficult for superintendents do so (Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Noguera & Wing, 2006).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this dissertation research was to gain a better understanding of the ways in which participating Massachusetts’ superintendents made sense of and engaged with a divergent constituency within the wider context of school governance. While the specific nature of constituents’ viewpoints and their specific interests varied from school district to school district, superintendents across the board commonly report professional challenges that center upon issues pertaining to financial matters, community pressures and school board relationships (Glass et al., 2000, p. 66). As such, this study, which investigated the experiences of eight Massachusetts superintendents as they navigated town governance, contributes to the existing body of knowledge regarding PK-12 leadership by addressing a known dilemma of superintendent practice.
Positionality Statement

Positionality statements are written to identify and describe the perspectives the researcher held in respect to the study in general, and specifically to the problem of practice. The problem of practice the proposed research investigated was the daunting task superintendents confronted as they operated in a political landscape populated with constituents holding divergent positions. In this context, it was important to recognize and compensate for how the researcher’s identity might affect the study in general. Briscoe (2005) stated that dimensions of positionality include gender, social class, race, ethnicity, demographics, and ideological perspectives (p. 24). While it is impossible to eliminate all bias in a qualitative study, examining how the identity of the superintendent was framed offers an important lens through which to view my positionality as researcher.

Identity. Education researchers have noted a dominant hiring pattern of male superintendents in American public schools (Glass et al., 2000; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013; Skrla, 2000). Most superintendents have been white, middle age married men (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999; Kowalski, 1995). More specifically, the last four decades of employment data in the twentieth century found that American superintendents were disproportionately male (86.6 %), and that the vast majority (94.9%) was white (Glass et al., 2000, p. 15). This historical pattern, while reduced, is still notable in more recent data from the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), which found that 24 percent of superintendents in 2010 were women and 76 percent were men (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). Gewertz (2006) has claimed that, “The nation’s 14,000-odd district superintendents are overwhelmingly white and male” (p. 2). Based upon superintendent staffing
patterns, it is likely that gender and racial expectations surround the expected identity of the superintendent.

As a researcher investigating how superintendents make sense of and engage with a divergent constituency, it was important that I acknowledge and compensate for my biases to obtain a clear understanding of the various lenses I brought to bear when viewing this phenomenon. I identify as a Caucasian male and, it is clear that my positionality parallels that of the majority of practicing superintendents. This commonality might have been advantageous for this research, especially during the data collection process. To this point, Briscoe (2005) states that research participants can be unwilling to share sensitive information during the interview process directly with others who are not members of the same perceived group. From this, I observed from the outset of this research that the participants might be more willing to share such information with someone who appeared to be a member of their same group. In addition to the concept of identity, and given my administrative experiences associated with school governance and financial management, I clearly already held opinions regarding the problem of practice.

**Beliefs.** At the time of this research, my professional experiences in education were fairly diverse, ranging from public to private schools and located in urban, suburban and international communities. Whether the context involved budgetary cuts, school reaccreditation, collective bargaining agreements, or a curriculum review process, I had found that the viewpoints of constituents can be passionate and deeply held. I also believed that leadership engagement with stakeholders was an important aspect of effective school governance, especially when disagreement and conflict were likely. Additionally, in the course of encountering divergent stakeholder positions, I had attempted to perceive the commentary from constituents as feedback
that adds value to the decision making process. However, it is important to acknowledge that the superintendents who participated in this research might, or might not have shared my belief that engagement with constituents is valuable. As such, it was critical that I checked my preconceived personal understandings involving the importance of collaboration and ensured that my assumptions did not impact the research study, specifically the data collection process. To this point, I crafted interview questions in my semi-structured interview protocol that would not lead participants toward positions that I held (Appendix A). Given this existing bias and because of my beliefs, which are grounded in practice, it was critical that I also carefully examined and accounted for confirmation bias in the design, analysis and conclusions arrived at in this research. Specific steps taken to mitigate my researcher bias are discussed in the qualitative methodology chapter of this dissertation.

**Research Questions**

Research questions narrow the purpose statement into concrete questions for which the researcher seeks a better understanding (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Creswell, 2012). As the purpose of the research study was to understand the experiences of public school superintendents and explore how they managed a dynamic and politically charged landscape populated by a divergent constituency, the study was guided by a single overarching research question:

- How do superintendents’ understand their experiences engaging with divergent stakeholders in collaborative governance?

In an effort to address the research question, I aimed for a sample of four to eight public school superintendents in Massachusetts using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a methodological approach. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) describe IPA as, “a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life
experiences” (p. 1). Because the phenomena investigated centered upon how superintendents made sense of the collision of viewpoints held by various constituents, the IPA was well suited as a research tradition and epistemological approach for this qualitative research study.

A key feature of this dissertation’s research question was investigating how superintendents understand and manage the frequently contentious process of collaborative governance. Any study aiming for better understanding of a complex phenomenon such as this, benefits from the clarity of terms. The following paragraphs define two key terms that are used throughout this research study, one of which is explicitly stated in the research question and one of which is implicit: (1) collaborative governance and (2) principled engagement.

**Collaborative Governance.** Collaborative governance is defined as, “a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets” (Ansell & Gash, 2007, p. 544). This concept serves as a conceptual anchor for the proposed research because it situates the process and structures of collaborative governance at an organizational level. In other words, superintendents and school committee members are the public agencies who directly engage with stakeholders who are not formally represented in the existing governmental structure. In this regard, the collective decision-making process serves as the method by which superintendents interact with constituents within the medium of a complex and layered budgetary process. Given this budgetary context and stated function of collective decision-making, Ansell and Gash’s (2008) definition of collaborative governance aligns well with the problem of practice, specifically the notion of direct engagement with stakeholders.
**Principled Engagement.** Principled engagement, though not explicitly referenced in the research question, is what will be meant throughout, when using the term, “engage” or variations thereof. Engagement is meant to refer to a process of principled engagement by which people with divergent goals work across their respective boundaries to solve problems and resolve conflicts (Emerson et al., 2012, p. 10). This concept is useful to the research as it specifically centers upon the dynamics of collaborative governance that involve how leadership engages with stakeholders. The process of principled engagement is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2 Literature Review. Lastly, both terms, collaborative governance and principled engagement, are extracted from theoretical frameworks relevant to the problem of practice.

**Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical framework serves as a lens through which one examines a particular topic in a research study. Given that the problem of practice centers upon the concept of collaborative governance and that the purpose of the proposed research is to specifically investigate superintendent engagement with constituents holding differing motivations, it was essential to review the relevant literature on PK-12 educational leadership. Upon reviewing numerous frameworks associated with areas of educational leadership, public policy and political science, two models, Ansell and Gash’s (2008) *Model of Collaborative Governance* and Emerson et al.’s (2012) *Integrative Framework of Collaborative Governance* emerged as the most useful in structuring this research. Together, these two models provided the best theoretical lens through which to examine the problem and frame the proposed research. It is important to note that the two models complement each other, though each falls a little short on its own, hence the combination thereof.

**Model of Collaborative Governance.** Ansell & Gash’s model of collaborative governance was developed from a meta-analysis of 137 cases of collaborative governance
identifying those characteristics associated with effective collaboration in school governance. They found that several characteristics, specifically the importance of trust building, committing to the process, developing a shared understanding, and the importance of face-to-face dialogue between participants, were most important to effective collaborative governance.

While Ansell and Gash’s (2008) model is a good fit because of its focus upon collaboration the model has limitations with respect to the present research. One limitation is that it was quantitatively focused. In other words, Ansell and Gash’s (2008) model of collaborative governance was built upon a series of quantitatively measurable variables indicating causal relationships in the characteristics of collaborative governance. This cause-and-effect pattern is not matched directly with the aim or scope of this qualitative research. A second limitation of Ansell and Gash’s (2008) model is the lack of emphasis on how superintendents engage with stakeholders. Despite these limitations, the model does offer useful components, notably the definition and process of collaborative governance. Furthermore, the limitations of the Ansell & Gash model were mitigated by combining those aspects that were salient for this research study with Emerson et al.’s (2012) model, which lends itself to use with qualitative research methodology.

**Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance.** Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh’s (2012) Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance builds upon Ansell and Gash’s (2008) model, extending the concepts of collaborative governance for qualitative use. Emerson et al.’s (2012) framework facilitated finding the meaning of the rich lived experiences of public school superintendents through the IPA research methodology. In addition to being better suited for a qualitative study, this model also includes a theoretical description of leadership engagement with stakeholders in collaborative governance, and places importance
upon civil discourse and inclusive communication balanced by representation of constituents’ positions (p. 11). In general, the framework posits that leaders embrace open and inclusive communication with all stakeholders - regardless of opposing viewpoints. Thus, relevant features of Ansell & Gash’s (2008) model and Emerson et al.’s (2012) model were employed in the data collection and analysis of this research to deepen understanding of how superintendents interact with stakeholders in the process of collaborative governance.

Given the complementary nature of these two theoretical frameworks, in light of their advantages and limitations for the proposed research, it is clear that an intersection of the two provided the best lens through which to examine the problem of practice. Furthermore, the use of Emerson et al.’s (2013) and Ansell and Gash’s (2008) theoretical frameworks has helped to ground this research in the wider academic discourse involving collaborative governance. These frameworks helped to explore the engagement processes, including the dynamics and challenges as experienced by practicing superintendents. These theoretical frameworks are further discussed in Chapter 2 Literature Review.

**Organization of this Study**

This doctoral research study is divided into five chapters. The first chapter, presented above, provides an introduction to the research topic and articulates the problem of practice, centering upon superintendent engagement with collaborative governance, especially the challenges posed by interacting with constituents holding divergent positions. Chapter Two offers a comprehensive review of the literature that situates this study within the wider context of existing scholarship on educational leadership. The third chapter presents the methodology employed for conducting this qualitative research, and Chapter Four reports the research findings
and emergent themes. The fifth, and final chapter, provides a discussion of the research findings in relationship to theory and practice. Lastly, references and appendices are offered.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to deepen understanding of how participating school superintendents in Massachusetts engaged with divergent stakeholder opinions within the wider context of school governance and financial management. In an effort to document both theory and practice regarding this topic, this review synthesizes the relevant literature surrounding collaborative governance, stakeholder relations and the school budgeting process.

During the literature review, three themes emerged as being particularly salient for this research study. First, the need for superintendents to be thoroughly knowledgeable of their political landscape and build positive relationships with stakeholders is an occupational necessity (Alsbury, 2008a; Björk and Kowalski, 2005; Blumberg, 1985; Glass et al., 2000; Grissom, & Andersen, 2012; Hawk & Martin, 2011; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986; Mountford, 2004; Orr, 2006). Secondly, how superintendents interact with and navigate stakeholder positions, especially as they are commonly required to do so when in the course of governing school districts, is not yet well understood (Bird, 2011; Björk & Lindle, 2001; Kowalski et al., 2011). However theoretical models centering upon collaborative governance do illustrate the processes and dynamics associated with the superintendent’s role in what is often a politically charged atmosphere (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). Finally, the budget-building process (Abshier, Harris & Hopson, 2011; Hess, 2010; Johnson, 2012; Mountford, 2004; Slosson, 2000) emerges as a frequent context in which agreement between the school committee, superintendent and key stakeholders, is simultaneously contentious and vital.

This literature review is organized into several sections describing the findings of previously published research on the three main themes described above. First, however, the
following paragraphs employ relevant research in defining four terms that are used throughout the literature review: superintendent, school committee, finance committee and governance.

Next, research on the topic of superintendent engagement with stakeholders, specifically situated in collaborative governance, and is reviewed for findings on both theory and practice. The findings in this area of the literature reveal the dangers posed by community dissatisfaction and the necessity for superintendents to develop positive relationships with stakeholders. Lastly, and because superintendents commonly report political challenges associated with financial management, the PK-12 budget building process is outlined. This process reveals a complex and multilayered process marked by numerous opportunities for stakeholder dissention.

**Key Terms**

Four key terms, superintendent, school committee, finance committee, and governance, are used throughout this research study. These are complicated concepts that are important for the reader to understand and are critical to establish clear definitions.

**Superintendent.** In the context of the PK-12 public school system, a *superintendent* is the professional hired to serve as the leader for an entire public school district. As leaders, superintendents’ roles include those of chief executive, instructional leader, political leader, managerial and personnel leader, financial head, and chief of communication and vision for the entire school district (Antonucci, 2012; Hanks, 2010; Hoyle, Björk, Collier & Glass, 2004). In leading so many areas, superintendents are often faced with a wide variety of urgent and frequently conflicting challenges demanding their time, energy and focus. Copeland (2013), for example, classified four major thematic roles that superintendents must perform: manager, listener, communicator, and community liaison, all of which may be simultaneously active and competing for the superintendent’s attention. The literature has demonstrated that the
superintendents’ ability to effectively engage with conflicted constituents is critical to fulfill their professional roles and responsibilities (Grissom & Anderson, 2012; Kowalski, Young & Peterson, 2013; Orr, 2006).

Superintendents must regularly communicate with a wide range of individuals, including, but not limited to community members, district administrators, town managers, financial committee members, principals, labor union leaders and school committee members. Being able to effectively engage with stakeholders and adeptly manage a wide range of issues has been found to be a critical skill for superintendents, without it, they risk negative repercussions, in the form of failed proposals or underfunded initiatives. For example, Björk and Lindel (2001) concluded that political pressure from stakeholders in the community impacts the relationship between the superintendent and the school committee. Further, other researchers have found that of all the constituents with whom a superintendent must communicate, maintaining a positive relationship and communicating effectively with the school committee is paramount (Grissom & Anderson, 2012; Nauyokas, 2009).

**School Committee.** A *school committee,* or *school board* as it is known in some regions, refers to an elected political body comprised of local residents for the purpose of overseeing a public school district. While the responsibilities of school committees may vary from state to state and from district to district, most include the hiring and firing of superintendents, reviewing and approving school budgets and establishing educational policies and goals for the school district (Hess, 2010; Mass. Gen. Laws Ch. 71, § 38N). Of all the school committees’ roles, approving financial management may be the most important because it makes all other aspects possible.
The budget building process for a public school district is a common point of contention for stakeholders, and a school committee provides a structured public forum for the community to officially exert pressure on fiscal appropriation (Abshier et al. 2011; Bird, 2011; Björk & Lindle, 2001). The pressure put forth by constituents during the budget-building process is emblematic of the legislative role for school committees. In other words, the school committee is the governing body setting policies and adopting budgets (Kirst, 1994) and the process of financial management is frequently marked by divisive politics resulting from stakeholder and committee members’ competing interests. Considering that the voting public in any community elects individual school committee members, it is no surprise that differing interests and priorities emerge between and among the committee members.

Once elected, school committee members may face common challenges such as targeting specific issues for improvement, feeling pressure to appease voters and acting passionately to evoke change. Kirst (1994) found that, “many [school committee] members believe that an essential part of their role is to ‘fix’ complaints, because failure to respond may mean defeat at the polls” (p. 379). To the extent that constituents’ complaints represent competing agendas, the budget allocation poses a significant challenge for a school committee to act as a single governing body and for the superintendent to navigate.

Added to the challenge of negotiating competing interests, like all government elected positions, school committee members must often run for office, which underscores their accountability to their voters. In Massachusetts, for example, school committees are required to have a minimum of three or more elected citizens, each serving for a three year term (Mass. Gen. Laws, Ch. 41, § 1C). The appearance of lawn signs announcing candidates running for school committee serves as a visual reminder of electoral change in membership and as such, school
committees continually operate and make decisions within a highly charged political process. This process is simultaneously marked by coalition building and the desire to accomplish individual divergent interests, meaning that school committee members can and do act both cooperatively and independently (Gemberling et al., 2000; Orr, 2006). Despite these differences, superintendents and school committees must work together in governing public school districts.

**Finance Committee.** A finance committee is an elected political body of local residents who are responsible for the financial planning of a town. In accordance with Massachusetts General Laws (Mass. Gen. Law, Ch. 40 §6. & Mass. Gen. Law, Ch. 39, §16) the primary responsibility of a finance committee is to play an advisory role by making recommendations yearly to town meeting regarding the anticipated income and expenditures for the town, which holds implications for the budget of the public school system. As the passage of the town budget is subject to vote by the community, finance committee recommendations also serve to determine the annual property tax levies on town residents, which can be a controversial issue in local communities (Dorata & Phillips, 2015). In addition, a finance committee is typically involved in the preparation of municipal budgets and commonly provides guidelines for spending limits and reductions. In this context, it is important to note that a finance committee engages in town governance with various stakeholders such as police, fire and school departments. However, just as the relative financial health fluctuates from town to town, so do the structure and practices of town governance (Coderre, 2015).

**Governance.** Governance is defined by Gong (2006, p. 435) as, “the general exercise of authority within a system of control and accountability.” In this view and given the legal structures in Massachusetts, school committee members and superintendents are mutually responsible for the governance of the public school system. When governing, it is imperative
that superintendents be able to work collaboratively with constituents such as school and finance committee members, to create shared motivation, establish mutual trust and commitment, and foster a capacity for joint action (Emerson et al., 2012). This requires the engagement of constituents by superintendents in the process of governing.

The shared process of community involvement in deciding the actions of various community departments is known as collaborative governance. Ansell and Gash (2008) view collaborative governance as, “a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets” (p. 544). This view of collaborative governance was adopted in this dissertation research because it emphasizes a formal, consensus-oriented process emblematic of the structured forum a school committee provides. It is precisely in this simultaneously competitive and collaborative yet formal context that public school superintendents face a politically charged landscape marked by stakeholder differences.

**Superintendent Engagement in the Process of Collaborative Governance**

Having defined the key terms associated with the problem of practice, it is important to remind the reader that research to date is inconclusive regarding superintendent engagement with divergent stakeholders when governing (Bird, 2011; Björk & Lindle, 2001; Bryson, 2004; Kowalski et al., 2013). For example, Björk and Lindle (2001) investigated superintendents’ relationships with their school boards and communities and detected a politically charged, interest driven environment surrounding school governance. While this is certainly not a new revelation, the researchers found that political pressure from stakeholders amplified the pressures in a politically charged governance landscape. They concluded that when superintendents avoid
politics in adopting apolitical approaches, tensions were actually exacerbated rather than reduced (p. 86). Clearly then, superintendent engagement of stakeholders is necessary, yet as Innes and Booher, (1999) report, it remains elusive how superintendents build consensus among divergent constituents.

The literature describes a wide range of techniques and strategies for leaders to engage constituents, yet consensus on recommended techniques to be applied to school governance and financial management is lacking. Bryson (2004) advocates that because attention to stakeholders is so important, organizational leaders, such as superintendents, must employ stakeholder identification and analysis techniques, yet does not recommend which of fifteen approaches cited are preferable for superintendent engagement with constituents holding different viewpoints (p. 26). Given the conflicts associated with the allocation of resources involving the budget building process, Bird’s (2011) research recommends that superintendents actively seek involvement from their community of constituents and use procedures that are open, published and transparent (p. 161) yet again specifics are lacking in the engagement process.

Despite the lack of empirical research on specific engagement strategies, there are several models that conceptualize the process of collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Duit & Galaz, 2008) and the dynamics associated with leadership engagement (Emerson et al., 2012; Ljungholm, 2014; Newman, Barnes, Sullivan & Knops, 2004). As mentioned above, two models, Ansell and Gash’s (2008) Model of Collaborative Governance and Emerson et al.’s (2012) Integrative Framework of Collaborative Governance were useful theoretical lenses through which to analyze the phenomena of superintendent engagement with stakeholders in the context of collaborative governance. A description of how both models pertain to
superintendents’ engagement with divergent stakeholder opinions when governing collaboratively is presented next.

**The Process of Collaborative Governance.** Ansell and Gash’s (2008) model of collaborative governance outlines several conditions found to be conducive to the overall process of collaborative governance and provided a useful analytical framework for this dissertation research. Their model is process-based and highlights a collaborative course for stakeholders that stress the importance of trust building, commitment, shared understanding, intermediate outcomes, and the necessity of face-to-face dialogue, as illustrated in Figure 1.

![A Model of Collaborative Governance](image)

*Figure 1. Ansell and Gash’s (2008) Model of Collaborative Governance. The arrows indicate directional influences between various elements in the collaborative governance process.*
Ansell and Gash’s model position the idea of facilitative leadership as an important contributing factor to the process of collaborative governance. Facilitative leadership is characterized by Ansell and Gash as a leadership style that promotes and safeguards the collaborative process by setting and maintaining clear ground rules, building trust, facilitating dialogue, and exploring mutual gains with constituents (p. 554).

**Importance of Facilitative Leadership.** The literature surrounding governance reveals that facilitative leadership offers an important leadership approach to bring stakeholders together to engage in consensus seeking activities such as a budget building process (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Ozawa, 1993; Rees, 2005). In this light, the role of facilitative leadership is found to be conducive to a process through which stakeholders ultimately arrive at agreement. To this end, Ansell and Gash’s (2008) model suggests that facilitative leadership is a preferred approach given the process of collaborative governance. In a seminal education research study, Hord (1992) advocated that facilitative leadership is necessary to drive change in schools and points out that administrators, and specifically superintendents, are uniquely positioned within the education system to foster systemic change by spanning boundaries between stakeholders. Arriving at consensus is not easy, yet Ansell and Gash’s claim of the importance of facilitative leadership to the process of governance is further supported by a lengthy history of empirical research providing confidence in its use (Chrislip & Larson 1994; Ozawa 1993; Pine, Warsh & Maluccio 1998; Reilly, 1998; Van Maasakkers, Duijn & Kastens 2014).

Given that facilitative leadership has been found to be a key ingredient in the process of collaborative governance, this dissertation research analyzed how participating leaders engaged with stakeholders through two theoretical models. Ansell and Gash’s (2008) theoretical model
deconstructs the process of collaborative governance and emphasizes the importance of facilitative leadership. While Ansell and Gash (2008) argued that face-to-face dialogue is a necessary component of the collaborative governance process, they did not analyze how leaders navigate the political landscape when engaging with constituents. Combining Ansell and Gash’s (2008) model with Emerson et al.’s (2012) *Integrative Framework of Collaborative Governance* theoretical model focusing on the engagement process mitigated this limitation.

Having outlined several aspects found to be conducive to the overall process of collaborative governance such as consensus-oriented decision making, trust building, face-to-face dialogue, and developing a shared understanding, it is necessary to examine how leaders engage with constituents. This is necessary because superintendents are required to do so as PK-12 educational leaders.

**Engaging with Constituents.** It is precisely in the formal setting of shared governance with a school committee that superintendents must manage politically charged landscapes marked by stakeholder differences. How superintendents engage effectively with constituents in collaborative governance has not yet been fully described through empirical studies (Bird, 2011; Björk & Lindle, 2001; Kowalski et al., 2013). However, Emerson et al.’s (2012) *Integrative Framework of Collaborative Governance* is useful in addressing this problem because it focuses upon the inner-workings of collaborative governance and includes the concept of leadership engagement. Additionally, Emerson et al.’s (2012) framework is useful because it complements Ansell and Gash’s model. Emerson et al.’s (2012) work in collaborative dynamics, specifically the notion of *principled engagement*, builds upon Ansell and Gash’s (2008) model and centers upon leadership interactions with divergent stakeholders in collaborative governance. Emerson et al. (2012) describe the concept of *principled engagement* as a process through which people with
divergent goals work across their respective boundaries to solve problems and resolve conflicts (p. 10). Their model posits that principled engagement functions along with shared motivation and the capacity for joint action as the three, inter-related concepts of the dynamics of collaborative governance as illustrated by Figure Two.

Figure 2. Emerson et al.’s (2012) Integrative Framework of Collaborative Governance. This figure illustrates three interrelated elements composing collaborative dynamics: (a) shared motivation; (b) capacity for joint action; (c) principled engagement.

The Emerson et al. (2012) framework is similar to Ansell and Gash’s (2008) model regarding the dimensions of shared motivation and capacity for joint action, yet differs regarding the function of leadership. Both models also conceptualize similar factors of collaborative governance such as mutual trust and shared commitment as integral in fostering stakeholder consensus. However, Emerson et al.’s (2012) model differs from Ansell and Gash’s (2008) as it centers upon how leaders engage with constituents.
**Principled Engagement.** Emerson et al. (2012) postulate that the *principled engagement* by leaders in a collaborative governance process includes four basic elements (a) discovery; (b) definition, (c) deliberation; (d) determination. These steps of engagement provide useful conceptual understandings to this present research.

The element of discovery in the process of *principled engagement* involves a leader’s acquired understanding of the positions, interests and concerns held by various stakeholders. Emerson et al. (2012) assert that the process of discovery first centers upon the identification of the shared interests, but later shifts to involve a deeper analytic investigation. Van Maasakkers et al. (2014) support the efficacy of this discovery process and advocate that facilitative leaders first identify stakeholders and then categorize the positions held in an attempt to investigate links between and among stakeholders. Van Maasakkers et al. (2014) insist that leaders gather information from stakeholders through person-to-person interviews, over the phone, and/or collect it via surveys. Once facilitative leaders have gathered all the information necessary to understand the position of each stakeholder, Emerson et al.’s (2012) *Integrative Framework of Collaborative Governance* contends that leaders engage in a process of definition, or defining expectations. In the definition stage of *principled engagement*, Emerson et al. (2012) contend that leaders set and communicate clear expectations of the collaborative process for all participants. In their model the definition stage is followed by a “deliberation” stage.

The deliberation stage is marked by open communication among all stakeholders and is facilitated by leadership. Emerson et al. (2012) maintain that conflict in the deliberation stage is likely, especially when constituents hold differing positions. They further highlight that managing and embracing conflict is exceedingly critical for facilitative leaders in the context of collaborative governance. The process of deliberation requires the examination of the issues
raised, listening to other constituent’s perspectives and ultimately coming to a shared understanding. The deliberation stage leads to a final stage of determination, which results in an agreement or recommendation as the output of collaborative governance process. Throughout the process of collaborative governance, superintendent leadership plays a key role in engaging with stakeholders to develop positive relationships.

**Stakeholder Relationships.** An oft-quoted quip from public school superintendents is that, “the school committee that hired you is never the same as the one that fires you” (Williams & Tabernik, 2011). This statement highlights the importance of building and sustaining an effective relationship between school committee members and the superintendent. As superintendents are charged with leading the school district and the school committee oversees a superintendent’s professional performance, a positive working relationship between the superintendent and school committee is critical and necessary for the effective governance of the school district.

Research into internal school committee dynamics and relationships with superintendents provides insight into both positive and negative influences upon school governance and organizational outcomes. Existing academic literature (Townsend, Johnston, Gross, Lynch, Garcy, Roberts, & Novotney, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Weiss, Templeton, Thompson & Tremont, 2015; Williams & Tabernik, 2011) underscores the importance of effective school committee and superintendent relationships as it pertains to the efficient functioning of collaborative governance. Specifically, Townsend et al.'s (2007) highlight the need for creating a unified district vision and setting clear goals and found that, “It is particularly important during times, often highly emotional and tense ones, that the superintendent work with board members as a governance team with the goal of reaching consensus” (p. 63). In contrast, vaguely defined
school committee roles, dysfunctional relationships and frequent board and superintendent turnover, can foster dissatisfaction from the community over the perceived poor governance of public schools.

**Community Dissatisfaction.** Williams and Tabernik (2011) investigated the interrelationships among school boards, superintendent practices and changes in student achievement. They utilized mixed methods and their data sources included: superintendent surveys, interviews, and changes in student scores on the Ohio Achievement Assessment and Ohio Graduation Test data. A key finding from Williams and Tabernik was that superintendent understanding of a *dissatisfaction theory* is critical as it pertains to school governance, especially involving the relationships with school committee members.

As first postulated by Lutz and Iannaccone (1986), *dissatisfaction theory* describes the political landscape surrounding the local election process for school committee positions that ultimately lead to superintendent turnover. The defining characteristic of *dissatisfaction theory* is that community perception of school governance initiates a cycle where stakeholders initially become frustrated by a non-responsive collaborative process. Dissatisfied stakeholders then become motivated to create change and as a result they campaign as challengers to unseat incumbent school committee members. Finally, *dissatisfaction theory* postulates that once newly elected, these dissatisfied stakeholders seek superintendent termination.

Research from Alsbury (2008b) lends support for *dissatisfaction theory* specifically pertaining to the dynamics of superintendent and school board turnover. Alsbury (2008b) found a correlation between declining student test scores and superintendent transition and school board turnover, especially in districts of smaller sizes (p. 203). Alsbury (2008b) found a statistically significant relationship between student achievement on the Washington Assessment of Student
Learning (WASL) in districts with less than 500 students (p. 203) with superintendent or school board turnover. This research illustrates the negative impact that leadership instability has upon student outcomes.

**Importance of Positive Relationships.** In contrast to dissatisfaction theory, a positive working relationship with clearly defined roles between superintendent and school committee members has been found to be associated with higher rates of student achievement and effective school governance (Johnson, 2012; Mountford, 2004). Johnson (2012) examined specific school board leadership practices such as practicing unified governance and connecting with district leadership, and found that there was a significant difference in reported practices between districts with higher student achievement than from lower achieving districts (p. 480). Similarly, Johnson (2012) conducted a literature review that revealed effective school board practices were linked with higher rates of student achievement (p. 90). Johnson stated that twelve key school committee and superintendent practices of governance were associated with high rates of student achievement, regardless of varying demographic characteristics of school districts:

1. Creating a vision
2. Using data
3. Setting goals
4. Monitoring progress and taking corrective action
5. Creating awareness and urgency
6. Engaging the community
7. Connecting with district leadership
8. Creating climate
9. Providing staff development
10. Developing policy with a focus on student learning
11. Demonstrating commitment

Johnson’s (2012) twelve key practices associated with high rates of student achievement is further supported by Kotter’s (2007) research on organizational transformation. Kotter (2007) outlined similar steps to transform organizations such as creating a vision, communicating the
vision, empowering others to act on the vision, planning for and creating short-term wins and institutionalizing new approaches (p. 126). Kotter’s (2007) steps are consistent with the collaborative process as described by Ansell and Gash’s (2008) model. Johnson (2012) offers a clear description of what is currently understood regarding effective governance practices, yet the author stops short of offering insight into how superintendents navigate the political landscape of collaborative governance.

Given all that is understood about practices of effective governance and importance of positive relationships between stakeholders, it is not surprising then that Glass et al. (2000) found poor relationships between the superintendent and school committee was the leading reason for termination of superintendents. Additionally, Glass et al. (2000) found that superintendent financial mismanagement as the second leading cause for superintendent dismissal. Clearly, the budget-building process offers a rich context in which to examine how achieving agreement between the school committee, superintendent and key stakeholders has the potential to be contentious and yet is vital to learning outcomes.

**Budgeting**

In the context of the budgeting process, the literature demonstrates the essential need for superintendents to understand their political landscape and build positive relationships with groups of stakeholders (Alsbury, 2008b; Björk and Kowalski, 2005; Blumberg, 1985; Glass et al., 2000; Grissom, & Andersen, 2012; Hawk & Martin, 2011; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986; Mountford, 2004; Orr, 2006). Given the importance of positive stakeholder relationships, the budget-building process provides a context in which agreement between the school committee, superintendent and key stakeholders has proven to be challenging as the list of financial wants and needs of a PK-12 district often exceed available funding. Superintendent decisions centering
upon the allocation of public money are reflected in the creation of a school budget, which is fundamentally political in nature.

The following overview summarizes the budget building process and highlights the interdependent roles of the superintendent, school committee, and stakeholders. Building a school budget is a complex and lengthy process in which superintendents must engage with stakeholders. Additionally, as the following overview illustrates, the process is marked by a multitude of opportunities for stakeholder participation a superintendent must manage.

School budgets are important legal public documents that outline the level and cost of educational services to be provided. Witt (2003) defined a school budget as, “a document that displays the educational services that the school division provides along with the expenditures for the services and the estimate of the revenues that will be used to pay those expenditures” (p. 6). Public elementary and secondary education is funded in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts by a combination of local district revenue, state and federal aid. Local revenue is primarily funded through the collection of real estate taxes from the community. A less common source of school funding is donations from corporations and wealthy individuals. While it is important to point out that public education is funded through a variety of sources, the vast majority of public school funding originates from local property taxes (Nguyen-Hoang, 2013). As a result, stakeholders consist of property owners, parents and local citizens concerned about the quality of public education and their level of taxation that supports it.

Stakeholders have numerous opportunities to voice their concerns throughout the budget building process. Annual school budgets are prepared, directed and implemented by the superintendent. However, the budget-building process requires a collaborative effort and this process typically follows a predictable timeline. The key points of the budget timeline include
(a) the initial preparation of a baseline budget; (b) gaining input from constituents; (c) completion of the superintendent’s recommended budget; (d) public hearing and school committee approval; (e) final vote in a town meeting. Each of these key points of the budget building process is described in detail below. Lastly, as this dissertation research was located in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, a description of unique legal constraints that add complexity to the process of governance and financial planning is discussed.

**Complexity of the Budgeting Process.** The process of creating a school budget is lengthy, complex and frequently plays out on a public stage. As the majority of school funding is directly linked with property taxes, the potential for conflict is ever present when superintendents attempt to increase budgets. Stakeholders have numerous structured opportunities to share their perspectives and influence the budget building process through collaborative school governance.

**Baseline Budget.** Typically the first step in the creation of a budget requires the creation of a *baseline budget*, which reflects a provision of level services as outlined by the prior year’s budget (Auerbach & Gale, 2000). This first draft of the school budget is typically prepared by the town finance director or business manager and includes necessary adjustments based upon increased cost-of-living expenses. These adjustments reflect negotiated wage increases, changes in student enrollment, and debt service requirements meeting inflation and interest rate obligations. In many towns in Massachusetts, the baseline budgetary guidelines are provided to the superintendent from the finance committee or in some cases the board of selectmen. The baseline budget provides the superintendent with a blueprint of all the fixed costs necessary to run the school district in the town for the upcoming year. Once informed by the baseline budget projections, the superintendent begins a formal process of *school budgeting*, which is defined by
Sielke (2006) as, “…the process for securing resources and allocating those resources to provide instructional and non-instructional programs that support student learning” (p. 89). As superintendents need to identify the particular needs of the school district and allocate requested funding, input from administrators is required. This stage of the budget building process is emblematic of Emerson et al.’s (2012) concept of discovery, as the superintendent attempts to understand the positions, interests and concerns held by various stakeholders, notably those of the finance committee.

**Input from Constituents.** Creating the budget is not a one-person endeavor and the superintendent will solicit input from principals, department heads and district-level leadership to evaluate all proposed changes to the baseline budget. This is typically an iterative process marked by numerous meetings in which budget requests and cuts are discussed in a series of group and individual meetings. These discussions represent Emerson et al.’s (2012) concept of the deliberation stage of principled engagement. Procedurally, the superintendent commonly distributes budget worksheets to district personnel, which is illustrative of Emerson et al.’s (2012) notion of open communication and shared understanding. While the initial format or model used to create a school budget can vary, all budgets in public education ultimately evolve into line item budgets common in standard accounting practices. Sielke (2006) described line item budgeting in this manner: a process occurs by literally examining each line item and making a decision as to whether last year’s budgeted amount should be increased, decreased, stay the same, or possibly be eliminated” (p. 89). Throughout this process, conflict is certain to arise because all proposed increases may need to be offset by reductions in other line items, unless the superintendent otherwise supports requesting additional revenue from the community. Regardless of the type of budget model used, gaining input from administrators is a critical step
so that the superintendent is optimally informed to propose the recommended budget to the school committee for approval.

*Superintendent’s Recommended Budget.* Based upon constituent input and the baseline budgetary information, the superintendent proposes a recommended budget to the school committee. It is in this context that the superintendent occupies the central decision making position for the public school district. At this stage, effective superintendent communication is critical, both with administrators advocating for budgetary increases and also with school committee members. In consultation with district leadership the superintendent may strive to reach consensus, however, responsibility for the final decisions rests with the superintendent. These decisions are represented in Emerson et al. (2012) model as the process of determination, which results in a shared agreement as the output of the process of collaborative governance. Slosson (2000) adeptly pointed out that, “The budget isn’t just about money – it’s about politics. It’s about feeling valued and affirmed. If you don’t pay attention to all the social and emotional aspects, you’ll hurt the school’s working climates” (p. 54). It is in this politically charged atmosphere that the superintendent must make and communicate all budgetary decisions to all constituents. To accomplish this challenging task, it is imperative that the superintendent engages the public.

*Public Hearing and School Committee.* Before a school committee can vote on a proposed school budget, members of the community are provided with the opportunity to comment on all aspects of the proposed budget during a public hearing. The time, date and location of the budget hearing must be announced and held in an accessible location and copies of the entire proposed budget are required by law to be available at least two days before the hearing (Mass. Gen. Laws, Ch. 71, § 38N). Massachusetts General Laws are explicit that during
the budget hearing, “all interested persons shall be given an opportunity to be heard for or against the whole or any part of the proposed budget” (Mass. Gen. Laws, Ch. 71, § 38N). After all interested members of the public are provided with the opportunity to comment on the proposed budget, the school committee can decide to vote and adopt the proposed budget or recommend that the superintendent make specific changes before sending the proposed budget to the town for approval.

**Town Meeting.** Given Massachusetts’ laws, once approval is granted through a school committee vote in the budget hearing, the proposed school budget is still not finalized. The next step depends on whether the type of local government in operation is of a city or a town. In the context of a town government, the proposed school budget is added as a financial article to the Town Warrant, or the official agenda listing all proposed appropriated money necessary to run the town. At this time, the proposed school budget is also reviewed by members of the town’s finance committee, which the Massachusetts Department of Revenue (2014) describes as the, “official fiscal watchdog for a town” (p. 29). As was previously described, a finance committee is a key participant in the process of town governance. The watchdog function of a finance committee serves as another example of a stakeholder functioning within the landscape of governance.

As it is challenging for all taxpayers to be completely informed about all aspects of a town’s finances, finance committees were created to conduct a thorough review of municipal finance expenditures on behalf of all citizens (Massachusetts Department of Revenue, 2014, p. 29). In this role, finance committee members frequently employ a watchdog approach that leads to increased scrutiny over what is considered appropriate levels for spending and taxation. The finance committee then provides advisory recommendations to the proposed school budget in
preparation for the annual *Town Meeting*, the yearly gathering of the town’s eligible voters typically held in February, March, April or May. During town meeting, ‘Yea’ or ‘Nay’ votes are cast on warrant articles such as the proposed school budget. In this capacity, Town Meetings serve as a legislative body similar to the United States House of Representatives. Town Meetings are open to the public and, according to William Galvin, the Massachusetts Secretary of the Commonwealth, they offer a “valuable means for many Massachusetts taxpayers to voice their opinions and directly affect change in their communities” (Galvin, 2014, p. 3). In the case of a city, the city council or board of aldermen serve the same legislative function as a town meeting.

Then each spring, local governments in cities and towns across Massachusetts vote on these proposed school budgets and officially approve funding. Local governments must be mindful of not overspending on budgets or risk breaking laws restricting unauthorized increased taxation.

**Limitations upon Budgetary Increases.** Complicating the school budgeting process in Massachusetts, local governments are constrained by *Proposition 2 ½*, a law that restricts towns and cities from raising property taxes above 2.5% annually (Mass. Gen. Laws Ch. 59, § 21C). This law effectively imposes a fixed ceiling upon the taxation of property and forces communities to publicly make choices over the use of limited fiscal resources. It is important to point out that this fixed ceiling is not tied to inflation. As a result the law places an artificial cap the growth of school budgets, detached from conditions set by fluctuating financial markets.

As the financial cost of running a school district has grown as result of rising cost of health care for employees, increasing and variable fuel costs for heating and transportation, and negotiated salary increases for employees as outlined by collective bargaining agreements, superintendents often must advocate for spending increases. The above-mentioned costs consume a large portion of school budgets, leaving limited amounts to fund systemic
improvement efforts. However, tax revenues often do not grow quickly enough to support the funds necessary to expand educational services as requested by superintendents as well as other town expenditures. To address this possibility, the legislation included a process for gaining a waiver of the limit imposed by Proposition 2 ½.

Proposition 2 ½ provided that towns have the ability to increase property taxes above 2.5%, however, they can only do so after a special vote. A special ballot question is offered as a referendum to voters in a town wide election and is commonly called a tax override. These special elections have the potential for creating animosity and division in communities because they can polarize voters representing various demographic profiles.

Local demographics such as age, income, and household size factor into voting patterns for, or against, tax overrides and can foster passionate stakeholder opposition or support for the proposed budget. For example, Hilber and Mayer (2009) found that only approximately 30% of all households in America have children in public schools (p. 74) and this demographic segment is critical because these voters are the direct beneficiaries of educational services and will likely vote to support a tax override. In contrast, taxpayers without school-aged children may not directly benefit from increased spending on education and may not support a tax increase for that purpose.

To the extent that education related expenses utilize 48% of expenditures of local budgets (Massachusetts Department of Revenue, 2014, p. 14) further funding requests for education are often not widely supported by elderly taxpayers on a fixed income. All citizens can directly participate in the budget process and have the right to advocate for or against funding increases to education. Compounding this problem for superintendents, elderly citizens typically have
higher voter turnout rates than other voting members of the community (Harder & Krosnick, 2008), which can constitute a constituency resistant to increased school funding.

Because the outcome of a tax override vote is far from certain, superintendents can be reluctant to engage the community in this type of public legislative referendum over education funding. Additionally, a defeat at the polls over a tax override may be viewed by some as a vote of no confidence from the community in the superintendent’s ability to lead. The literature (Ford & Ihrke, 2015; Glass et al., 2000; Hess, 2008; Townsend et al., 2007) concludes that superintendents and school boards who are faced with these complex legislative and demographic realities during a budget-building process benefit from being properly informed about the makeup of their political landscape and working collaboratively together.

Despite the constraints imposed by Proposition 2 ½, and the lengthy and complex approval process required of proposed public school budgets in Massachusetts, superintendents are fundamentally responsible for advocating for proposed school budgets to all stakeholders. This process is marked by negotiation, compromise, and constant communication from the superintendent to members of the local government and the community at large. Complicating this problem, the budgetary decision-making process to fund public education plays out on the local public stage. Because not all taxpayers equally benefit from increased funding to education, this problem involves numerous stakeholders who bring differing and at times, oppositional positions. This is the political landscape through which a public school superintendent must be able to navigate.

Summary

This literature review offers insight into the process and dynamics associated with collaborative governance to understand what is currently known about how superintendents
engage with constituents holding divergent positions. A comprehensive analysis of the literature suggests that while it is necessary for superintendents to function effectively within their political landscape and build positive relationships with stakeholders (Alsbury, 2008a; Björk and Kowalski, 2005; Blumberg, 1985; Glass et al., 2000; Grissom, & Andersen, 2012; Hawk & Martin, 2011; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986; Mountford, 2004; Orr, 2006), the ways in which superintendents are successful in doing so is not fully understood (Bird, 2011; Björk & Lindle, 2001; Kowalski et al., 2013). Further, this literature review found that there is limited qualitative research exploring the phenomenon of superintendent engagement with stakeholders when governing. Even though there is an abundance of quantitative research on superintendents’ effectiveness (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Duit & Galaz, 2008), quantitative studies are limited in their explanatory power of the complex sociological processes of school governance. This dissertation research investigation uncovered new findings to inform future practice and contribute to the overall body of knowledge on how superintendents engage with constituents holding divergent positions.

The literature reviewed in this chapter reveals that the budget-building process is a common context in which agreement between the school committee, superintendent and key stakeholders has proven to be both necessary to achieve and politically challenging to reach. Indeed, the budget building process may be the quintessential experience illuminating the extent to which superintendents must navigate a politically charged landscape marked by stakeholder differences. Given the high stakes associated with the budget as outlined in Chapter One, in conjunction with the limited research examining this problem in depth, this qualitative exploration into how participating superintendents engaged with stakeholders was clearly warranted.
Chapter 3: Qualitative Methodology

The purpose of this research is to understand how superintendents, in accordance with Massachusetts’ law stipulating community involvement in the school budget building process (Mass. Gen. Laws, Ch. 71, § 38N), manage their involvement in the coordination and collision of viewpoints held by stakeholders. This chapter outlines the qualitative methodology employed in this dissertation research to closely investigate this problem of the superintendent’s practice and is organized into six sections. First, the overarching research question and sub questions are presented. Second, the research methods are presented. Specifically, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is presented as the primary method selected to investigate the lived experience of participating public school superintendents as they engaged in collaborative governance. Included in this section are the assumptions, advantages, and limitations of applying IPA. The third section addresses the alignment of the IPA qualitative methodology with Emerson et al.’s (2012) and Ansell and Gash’s (2008) theoretical frameworks selected for their usefulness in analyzing the data collected in this research. The fourth section presents the criteria utilized for selecting the population of superintendents who participated in this research including considerations for gaining access to them. Fifth, the procedures for data collection and analysis are presented. Lastly (sixth), a discussion of ethical considerations and the steps taken to protect human subjects in this dissertation research are presented.

Research Questions

This research investigated how eight participating superintendents managed their involvement in their school district’s political environment surrounding collaborative governance. An overarching research question and two related sub questions were formulated to focus the direction of this research.
**Overarching Research Question.** Agee (2009) and Creswell (2013) recommend that qualitative researchers use overarching research questions to guide their research because they can function as a thematic umbrella to unify inquiry and support emergent understandings. Creswell (2013) stated that an, “overarching question can give direction for the study design and collection of data and offer potential for developing new, more specific questions during data collection and analysis” (p. 435). Given Creswell’s (2013) view, an overarching research question offered direction for conducting this qualitative research study.

With an overarching research question providing direction, the next step is to apply a question that is well suited to the IPA type of qualitative investigation. In support of this alignment, researchers (Agee, 2009; Creswell, 2013; Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007) stress the importance of word choice and phrasing of research questions in qualitative studies. Specifically, Creswell (2013) recommends qualitative research questions that are open-ended and non-directional in format because they can foster deeper exploration of phenomenon and do not simply lead to yes or no responses. Equally important, Creswell (2013) contends that qualitative research questions start with the words “how” or “why” because this phrasing deliberately conveys an exploratory focus of inquiry (p. 130). Based upon these recommendations, the overarching research question for this qualitative study was:

- How do superintendents’ understand their experiences engaging with divergent stakeholders in collaborative governance?

Given that this research centered on how multiple superintendents experienced this phenomenon, it was important to understand the similarities and differences of their perspectives. It was useful in this research to use sub questions to support a more deeply layered inquiry to better understand these distinctions.
**Sub Questions.** Using sub questions allows the researcher to explore various aspects of the phenomenon at a deeper level. Agee (2009) supported this point and contended that sub questions help narrow the focus of the overarching research question to explore specifics of the phenomenon (p. 436). Because the topic of collaborative governance and superintendent engagement is complex, the following sub questions for this research brought further focus to the inquiry:

- How do superintendents identify and understand viewpoints held by constituents?
- How do superintendents engage with constituents holding divergent viewpoints?

**Research Design**

When participating in and leading a school district in a town’s political environment, superintendents face a thorny dilemma that includes the expectation of collaboration and brings with it a near certainty of conflict. Because the nature and context of the positions held by stakeholders varies from school district to school district, it was necessary to understand how superintendents engaged various constituents. The IPA methodology employed in this research supported the deliberate effort to understand the similarities and differences of the lived experiences of the participating superintendents (Clarke, 2009; Pringle, Hendry & McLafferty, 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

IPA was an optimal choice because it allows the researcher to approach and interpret the “lived experience” of superintendents as they encountered and interacted with the divergent positions held by constituents. Smith et al. (2009) defined IPA as, “a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences.” (p. 1). Smith et al.’s (2009) view of IPA was well suited to address the problem of practice in this explorative qualitative study because it offered an approach to research necessary
to interpret the personal experiences and understandings held by the participating superintendents.

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.** The IPA research approach is based upon a Husserlian philosophical tradition that emphasizes the importance of personal experiences in generating knowledge (Priest, 2003). Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher, was noted for establishing phenomenology as an empirical approach. The epistemological, or the theory of knowing, position of IPA research centers upon exploring the personal experiences held by others, specifically how individuals perceive objects or events (Smith, 2004). The historical emphasis Husserl placed upon systematically investigating the meaning people make of their lived experience supported the employment of phenomenology for this research. It is important to note however, that the use of a strictly phenomenological approach would have been limited in order to fully interpret and analyze how superintendents made sense of their actual experiences. This was the case because no direct observations of superintendent behaviors were made in this research. Rather, this research focused on how eight participating superintendents in Massachusetts interpreted their engagement with stakeholders when governing. However, IPA offers a flexible approach that met the needs of this dissertation research.

Researchers frequently describe IPA as both phenomenological and hermeneutic in nature because it focuses on understanding phenomena as experienced by others (Hefferon & Gil-Rodiguez, 2011; Pringle et al., 2011; Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). This research utilized IPA both to investigate and to interpret the lived experiences as perceived by the participating superintendents who were and had been engaged in the complex process of collaborative governance. Drawing a distinction between the duality of IPA research, Pringle et al. (2011) points out that phenomenology centers upon exploring meanings and hermeneutics serves to
interpret these meanings. The dual phenomenological and hermeneutic characteristics of the IPA research tradition provided the methods needed to gain understanding of the problem of practice examined in this research. Using an IPA approach for this research study also brought several ontological assumptions, most fundamentally the belief in multiple realities rather than a single truth and the central position of the researcher.

Assumptions. The selection of a research approach is commonly understood to involve ontological assumptions. A major assumption accompanying an IPA study is the positioning of the role of the researcher in analyzing and generating new understandings. For example, Guba and Lincoln (1994) contend that the IPA researcher is actively involved in the data collection and analysis process. This point is well aligned with the assumption that IPA is double hermeneutic in nature (Priest, 2003; Pringle et al., 2011; Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). Double hermeneutic is loosely described as the process of an individual constructing meaning based upon the understanding held by another individual. Focusing upon the central role of the researcher, Pringle et al. (2011) adds that phenomenological analysis requires a two-stage interpretation process through which the researcher tries to interpret the participant’s sense-making activity (p. 21). IPA is in alignment with a constructivist and interpretive paradigm. Given the role of the researcher in the process of analysis, supporters and critics alike have shared both advantages and limitations of IPA.

Advantages. The selection of an IPA approach to address the problem of practice offers several advantages. An ideographic method focuses on individual cases or events as distinct from a nomothetic method, which focuses on general statements that account for larger social patterns that form the context of single events or individual behavior and experience. The idiographic characteristic of IPA research was essential in understanding how superintendents
manage the collision of viewpoints held by constituents within the particular context of the collaborative governance. This point is important because school governance is deeply rooted in situational complexity. Thus, the use of IPA allowed the researcher to closely approach the problem of practice as experienced by each superintendent. Further, IPA was advantageous in approaching the problem of practice examined in this research because it is both descriptive and interpretative in nature. The dual nature of this phenomenological and interpretative approach was directly aligned with the aim of the study.

IPA was advantageous to study this problem of practice because it offered an interrogative approach that can be reflective of existing theories and models (Brocki & Weardon, 2006, Priest, 2003; Smith, 2004). This means that, in addition to exploring the lived experience, IPA research can also involve existing theory, specifically Ansell and Gash’s (2008) *Model of Collaborative Governance* and Emerson et al.’s (2012) *Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance*. This flexible aspect of IPA and the ability to examine theory as situated in practice was advantageous given the complex nature associated with the dynamics of school governance and superintendent engagement.

Finally, IPA was a useful approach for this research study because of the flexible analytic nature in which the tradition can illuminate understandings that emerged. This final point is important because superintendents likely have different experiences engaging with stakeholders in collaborative governance. IPA was a helpful approach to understand the similarities and differences of superintendent experiences for several reasons. For example, Smith et al. (2009) advocate that the IPA researcher initially focus upon understanding each individual’s experiences. Once the gestalt of the lived experience has been achieved for each research participant, IPA allows the researcher to conduct a cross-case analysis to explore emergent
themes as they are present, or not, in other participants’ experiences. Moustakas (1994) described cross-case data analysis as *horizontalization*. In this process the researcher interprets and captures the essence of the phenomena as experienced by each participant, in this case by each superintendent. *Horizontalization* was an important analysis element in this study because it enabled later comparisons between and among the lived experiences of all of the participants. This specific analytical technique allowed this research to expand beyond each superintendent’s experiences and draw connections. It is for these stated advantages that IPA was well aligned to explore, analyze and understand the phenomena of superintendent engagement with stakeholders in the context of collaborative governance.

**Limitations.** IPA does have limitations. For example, Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006) caution that while many researchers gravitate to the flexible and accessible nature of IPA; conducting IPA research can be easy to do poorly and it can be misaligned to the aim of the proposed research (p. 103). Specifically, Larkin et al. (2006) warn that weak IPA studies have the tendency to become overly descriptive in exploring personal meaning held by others. Hefferon (2011) also addressed this concern in stating that IPA research placing phenomenological emphasis may result in, “…broadly descriptive IPA that lacks depth and therefore demonstrates little difference to a standard thematic analysis” (p. 756). Hefferon and Gil-Rodiguez (2011) also underscore the importance of finding a balance between the dual descriptive and analytic approaches of IPA research. To specifically avoid the pitfall of conducting an overly descriptive study, this proposed research used cross-case analysis, specifically *horizontalization*, and was also informed by relevant theoretical frameworks involving collaborative governance.
A second criticism of IPA research is the influence of the researcher upon the study (Clarke, 2009). Despite this criticism, proponents of IPA research are quick to point out the prominent, and albeit necessary analytic role that researchers play in making sense of the lived experience of others (Smith et al., 2009). While the central role of the researcher is a frequent criticism of qualitative research designs in which the researcher derives meanings based upon lived experiences of individuals, such as narrative inquiry and IPA, the positionality statement in this research study serves to disclose existing biases held by the researcher.

It is important to acknowledge that a close relationship between the researcher and participant(s) can present a challenge, especially during the shared construction, and reconstruction, of knowledge. For example, Duff and Bell (2002) raise a specific concern of the researcher’s role in warning of the ethical concerns of re-storying (p. 210). They describe re-storying as the process of repackaging other people’s stories into a larger narrative and thereby imposing meaning upon the lived experiences of others (p. 201). While addressing the criticism of IPA researchers interpreting the lived experiences of others, Behar-Horenstein and Morgan (1995) contend that the qualitative data, and the meanings derived, are ultimately byproducts of both the researcher and participants’ worldviews, which makes generalizability challenging (p. 149).

The limitation of the researcher imposing meaning on the data collected from participants was mitigated in two ways. First, the researcher was deliberate and transparent in all communication regarding the purpose of the study. Furthermore an informed consent and disclosure statement was shared with all participants (Appendix B). This was done to alleviate the ethical concern of ownership, as recommended by Savin-Baden and Niekerk (2007) who stress that the researcher should acknowledge that participants and researcher alike are both
creating new meaning. This limitation was explicitly stated to all research participants in order to provide clarity to the analytic process when drawing conclusions based upon another individual’s understanding of a phenomenon. Second, the researcher employed member checking, a process by which each research participant had the opportunity to review their transcripts and subsequent researcher analysis. Each participant also was given the opportunity to participate in a follow-up interview to clarify any miss-perceived information, as well as to allow the participant to elaborate. Despite these limitations, IPA provided an advantageous research tradition conducive to investigating the problem of practice that was the focus on this research.

**Alignment of Theoretical Frameworks**

As previously discussed in Chapter Two, a comprehensive review of theoretical models associated with school governance and superintendent leadership was conducted. While no one single model was found to best frame the complex nature expressed in the problem of practice investigated, the combination of the most salient aspects of Ansell and Gash’s (2008) *Model of Collaborative Governance* and Emerson et al.’s (2012) *Integrative Framework of Collaborative Governance* served as a useful theoretical lens through which to examine this problem, specifically the concepts of principled engagement in the process of collaborative governance. It is important to note that these two models complement each other and that framing the investigation with a combination of the salient components from each yielded a better understanding of the ways in which superintendents engage in the process of collaborative governance.

**Population**

This section presents the criteria used to select research participants, including the steps taken to recruit and gain access to the population. As the purpose of this research study was to
gain a better understanding of how superintendents engage with constituents holding divergent viewpoints within the wider context of school governance, it is necessary to state the criteria utilized in selecting the desired research participants.

**Criteria.** Clear criteria were used to determine the population of research participants in this research study. Importantly, all research participants had professional experience as a public school superintendent. The distinction between a public and private superintendent is an important one for this study because while private superintendents also need to engage with divergent stakeholders, the funding sources and decision-making processes for private schools differ significantly from those in public schools. Given the unique budgetary constraints posed by *Proposition 2 ½* and the legally required structure of shared governance in Massachusetts’ towns, the research participants all had experience as public school superintendents in Massachusetts. Furthermore, superintendents currently leading smaller sized school districts, quantified with a total district enrollment of less than 3,500 students, were solicited to participate in this research based upon anticipating that they would be more likely to bring comparable experiences engaging with the world of small town politics.

**Recruitment and Access.** This dissertation research study utilized purposive sampling to identify the population of superintendents based upon three inclusion criteria. First, it was necessary that all research participants have professional experience as a public school superintendent. Second, and given the unique regulations involving the structure of school governance, town meeting laws, and budgetary constraints, all research participants were employed in a town located in Massachusetts. The reason for exempting superintendents from Massachusetts’ cities was due to the differing structure for school governance between cities and towns. The third and the final criterion was that each of the school districts was located in towns
considered “comparable” according to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s District Analysis Review Tools (DART). DART was used identify comparable school districts derived from public datasets including grade spans offered, total student enrollment, rates of student achievement and demographics, among other variables.

**Justification of Sampling Strategies and Procedures.** This study used purposeful sampling to narrow the pool of potential research participants. Creswell (2012) describes purposeful sampling as when, “The inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 156). Given the nature of the research problem and the use of an IPA approach, purposeful sampling was warranted as it increased the probability that each potential research participant would bring experience in managing divergent stakeholder positions within the context of collaborative governance.

**Site and Research Participants.** The literature on IPA methodology advocates that studies involve a small sample size, yet agreement of the precise number is lacking. Researchers (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Clarke, 2009) advocate that IPA studies involve small sample sizes, including individual case studies. Smith (2004) recommends that IPA studies, especially those conducting cross-case analysis, include between five and ten participants. Smith et al. (2009) advocate for somewhat of a middle ground, suggesting that IPA researchers include between three and six participants. Based upon these recommendations, a target population of between five and ten superintendents was desired for this study. Ultimately, eight superintendents participated in this research study, which fell within the recommended ranges as outlined by the IPA literature.
The qualitative data was collected at a location, date and time that was most convenient for each participating superintendent. This was done deliberately to make each research participant feel as comfortable as possible in an effort to foster conditions that were conducive for research participants to share their lived experiences in an open and honest manner. This is an important point supported by Clarke (2009) who states that the “IPA interview is led by the participant but guided by the researcher, who is both empathic and questioning” (p. 38). Finally, the researcher collected qualitative data at each site using an established semi-structured interview protocol.

Data Collection

Given the purpose and the design of the proposed research, this study used semi-structured interviews as the main data collection tool. Johnson and Christensen (2012) stress the importance of selecting a data collection method that best approaches the aim of the proposed research (p. 137). Collecting data using a semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to closely explore how superintendents engaged with constituents holding colliding viewpoints. The semi-structured interview data collection method also aligns with IPA as a research method.

Semi-structured Interviews. A semi-structured interview protocol also was used to promote consistency of questioning across the population of research participants and because it allows flexibility for the researcher to explore emergent themes. In comparison to a structured interview, an informal conversational interview, or even the use of surveys to collect data, semi-structured interview protocol closely positions the researcher to flexibly approach the lived experience shared by superintendents.

Relevant literature recommends specific techniques and phrasing of questions to enable data collection during semi-structured interviews. Turner (2010) suggests that semi-structured
qualitative interview questions should be open-ended and provide the participants with the opportunity to elaborate upon concepts. Additionally, Turner (2010) states that these interview questions should be neutral and clearly worded (p. 758). Similarly, DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) advocate that the first interview question posed be non-threatening, broad and reflective of the subject under inquiry. To this point, the researcher used “warm up” questions intended to break the ice and establish a small measure of familiarity. Boyce and Neale (2006) recommend that after these initial warm-up questions, researchers employ a list of probing questions to refocus participants on the subject at hand. Based upon these recommendations, a semi-structured interview protocol using a non-threatening initial question, with neutrally worded, open-ended and broad follow up questions was created.

Prior to interviewing superintendents, interview protocols were field tested to gather feedback regarding the utility for collecting qualitative data. Supporting this practice, Creswell (2012) recommended that, “typically researchers go to a panel of judges or experts and have them identify whether the questions are valid” (p. 162). The semi-structured interview protocol was separately field tested with two educational administrators and the data collected also served as practice for the researcher. Additionally, during the field testing, feedback was solicited regarding the content and wording of the interview protocol questions from the pilot test participants. Specifically the researcher requested feedback upon the phrasing, clarity, language, instructions and ease of access. Based upon this feedback, the interview protocol questions were refined. This practice is supported by Yin (2014) who recommended that researchers conduct pilot testing as a way to practice and make any needed adjustments to planned data collection procedures. Similarly, Creswell (2013) advocates that researchers conduct pilot testing of data collection based upon access, convenience and location. In addition to the semi-structured
interview protocol, which served as the primary data collection tool, the researcher examined relevant documents as a secondary method to search for emergent aspects of the phenomenon shared by research participants.

**Document Analysis.** Researchers outline alternative tools used to collect data when using an IPA approach. While acknowledging that interviews are often used as the main data collection methods in qualitative inquiry, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) contended that document analysis of a lived experience, such as letters, field notes and, autobiographical writing can also be useful (p. 6). Similarly, Cooper and Heck (1995) recommended that qualitative studies include document analysis in addition to interviews to provide a closer understanding of, “the internal, almost invisible process that has been difficult to measure through quantitative data collection techniques” (p. 207). Document analysis was important for this research study because it elaborated the interview data on the problem of practice investigated. For example, Cooper and Heck’s (1995) concluded that a largely invisible process surrounds how superintendents make sense of their political landscape. However, document analysis shed light on aspects of this unseen process. As the governance of public schools is a public affair, a multitude of public documents such as meeting minutes, agendas and reports are available for public access as well as research analysis.

The combined use of interview and document analysis afforded the researcher to use complementary methods to collect qualitative data. Offering caution, Creswell (2013) warned researchers that document analysis as a data collection method can be limited by issues of access, especially pertaining to analyzing private journals and diaries. However, given that public meetings involving the superintendent and school committee are required to abide by Open Meeting Law in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (Mass. Gen. Law. Ch. 30A, § 18-25),
Creswell’s (2013) caution, is this case, did not pose a limitation to data collection. Specifically, open meeting law stipulates that meetings of public bodies must be open to the public, and are often documented with video recording of meetings and also by the formal records of meeting minutes and documents. Based upon this legal requirement, it is common practice for the minutes of all school and finance committee meetings to be archived and made available to the public.

Other researchers (Land, 2002; Land & Stringfield, 2005; Nowakowski & First, 1989) have also used document analysis to empirically study the interworking of local government. For example, Nowakowski and First (1989) used document analysis as the primary data collection method to explore school committee minutes in Illinois. The researchers analyzed and categorized school committee minutes by thematic issues surrounding school reform. For these reasons, document analysis was used to complement semi-structured interviews for this research study.

Procedures

This dissertation study involved several steps in identifying research participants and for collecting data. First, the researcher used employment and demographic data to identify a pool of potential research participants who are currently the superintendents of smaller sized school districts. Specifically, the MDESE district analysis review tool was used to identify school districts that are considered to be comparable when examining data regarding the total student enrollment, percentage of students with disabilities, percentage of students who are English Language Learners and percentage of low income students. As a result, the researcher identified a pool of twenty potential research participants who were then employed as the superintendents
for these communities. Given the use of convenience sampling based upon physical proximity to the researcher, towns in excess of a sixty-mile radius of the researcher were excluded.

Second, after identifying a sample of potential participants, the researcher contacted the superintendents via email explaining that their participation was being sought in a research study. The email also informed the superintendents that a follow up telephone call would be forthcoming within three business days. Third, upon phoning each superintendent the researcher used a telephone protocol and explained the purpose of the qualitative research. During this phone conversation the researcher clearly stated that each potential participant was free to either participate or not without any negative consequences, and that they may withdraw at any time. This telephone script was adapted from Tremblay’s (2014) dissertation at Northeastern University, who similarly applied an IPA approach to study superintendent leadership. During the phone conversation, the researcher asked each superintendent if they had questions and if they were interested in participating in the study. If the superintendent verbally consented to participate in the study, the researcher next scheduled an appointment for an interview at a time and location convenient for the superintendent. The researcher then verbally informed each participant that an electronic informed consent document (Appendix B) would be sent via email within one business day of the telephone call. The researcher explained that a paper copy of the informed consent form would also be provided before the start of the scheduled interview.

A sample of eight superintendents agreed to participate in the proposed research. The researcher collected all semi-structured interview data in a location familiar to each research participant. It was explained that it was necessary that a quiet environment, conducive to an uninterrupted and private conversation, must be used to maintain confidentiality. All superintendents opted to hold the interviews in their offices. This is important because the
interview setting must afford privacy allowing for open and honest dialogue to emerge. The interviews ranged in duration from approximately one to one and a half hours.

The researcher used a digital audio recording device to accurately collect all data in the semi-structured interviews. This device was used openly and with the full permission of each researcher participant. The use of recording devices to accurately collect qualitative data is a common practice used by researchers during interviews (Creswell, 2013; Johnson & Christensen, 2012). This practice is also in alignment with the recommended procedures to conduct IPA research, as Smith et al. (2009) stated that IPA requires a semantic record of the interview to enable analytic techniques to be used later (p. 74). The use of an audio recording device provided the researcher with the opportunity to actively listen to each research participant. Participants were encouraged to talk freely and to tell stories about their own experiences as the researcher facilitated the process of reflective inquiry.

The researcher verbally posed questions to each participant during the semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview protocol question sheet (Appendix A) was provided in advance of the interview for each participant in a deliberate attempt to increase transparency. During the semi-structured interviews the researcher strived to remain as objective as possible. Turner (2010) provides advice for researchers to remain neutral, not to show strong emotional reactions to answers, and to provide transitions between major topics (p. 759). The researcher incorporated this advice during the interview protocol questioning and also explicitly stated to participants.

Following each interview session the digital recordings were transcribed, verbatim, by the researcher. This raw qualitative data was then later analyzed and the transcriptions made available. Each research participant had the opportunity to review both the verbatim transcription
and the subsequent analysis to help address issues involving accuracy, reliability, validity and credibility of the study. As was previously discussed, the technique of member checking can be helpful because it allows research participants to validate that the researcher did not misinterpret the data. In addition to analyzing the semi-structured interview data, the researcher conducted a document analysis of school and finance committee meeting minutes and other relevant documents that were referenced by superintendents during the interviews. These documents included newspaper articles, budget documents, public opinion survey data, and in one case an excel budget spreadsheet. While this data was incorporated into the analysis, it mainly served to complement the themes emergent from the semi-structured interview data.

**Data Analysis**

This research used data analysis process known as the *Colaizzi method* (Chan, Fung & Chien, 2013; Shosha, 2012). Outlining this process, Shosha (2012) described the *Colaizzi method* of phenomenological data analysis to include seven steps:

1. Each transcript should be read and re-read in order to obtain a general sense about the whole content.

2. For each transcript, significant statements that pertain to the phenomenon under study should be extracted. These statements must be recorded on a separate sheet noting their pages and line numbers.

3. Meanings should be formulated from these significant statements.

4. The formulated meanings should be sorted into categories, clusters of themes, and themes.

5. Findings of the study should be integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study.

6. The fundamental structure of the phenomenon should be described.

7. Finally, a validation of the findings should be sought from the research participants to compare the researcher’s descriptive results with their experiences. (p. 33).
The Colaizzi method directly situates the data analysis process upon the lived experience of each research participant as captured by the raw transcripts. Based upon this understanding, the researcher was then able to derive meanings by a deep line-by-line examination of each transcript.

Deep Description. In accordance with recommendations made by IPA researchers (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Crist & Tanner, 2003) the first phase of data analysis was a critical evaluation of each interview transcription using an inductive approach. Similar to the first three steps of the Colaizzi method, Larkin et al. (2006) recommended that the descriptive analysis should aim to capture the essence of the phenomena as experienced by each participant. By first centering the data analysis process solely upon the interview transcriptions, the researcher maintained a direct focus upon describing the lived experience of each participant. This was accomplished in accordance with Smith et al.’s (2012) recommendations that IPA researchers conduct a close, line-by-line analysis of each transcript. Each transcript was examined independent of one another and significant statements noted. Significant statements from all of the interview transcripts were later categorized to reveal trends in how superintendents have come to understand their engagement with divergent stakeholders in collaborative governance.

In developing a deep description, the researcher first analyzed the descriptions of the lived experience of each research participant by identifying emergent themes on a case-by-case basis, which were then categorically analyzed. Then, after the researcher comprehensively examined each lived experience as reflected in the verbatim transcriptions, emergent themes that are individual to each research participant were identified. To accomplish this analytical task, Bleakley (2005) recommended that IPA researchers use a categorical framework to inductively create categories from the raw narrative data (p. 537). In this framework, Bleakley (2005)
stressed that the categorical coding of qualitative data remain fundamentally descriptive in nature (p. 538). Given this understanding, the researcher identified emergent themes describing how each superintendent engaged with stakeholders in the process of collaborative governance. After deeply describing and thematically categorizing the experiences of all eight superintendents, the researcher next conducted a cross-case analysis.

**Cross-case Analysis.** As emergent themes developed out of the deep description of each lived experience, the next stage of analysis established connections across each participant’s experiences. In this analytic process, coding was used that specifically referenced each transcription line and as a result patterns emerged revealing the most salient aspects of how superintendents interact with their political landscape surrounding collaborative governance. In many instances, the researcher revisited the numbered transcription lines and the digital audio files for clarity and verification. Crist and Tanner (2003) supported this type of recursive analytic process and concluded that an interpretative search for shared meaning is both non-linear and iterative. Finally, every emergent cross-case theme was checked against all of the transcriptions from each research participants’ experiences in a type of triangulation. Triangulation was deliberately used as a method of the cross-case data analysis process to promote the confidence in the credibility of findings as experienced across the population of participants.

**Threats to Credibility and Dependability**

IPA is similar to other qualitative methods in that it relies upon other criteria to support credibility, reliability and dependability. When conducting this research with the IPA method, attention was paid to address ethical concerns associated with interpreting and synthesizing the lived experiences of others. During the data collection stage the researcher acknowledged and then bracketed biases and took precautionary measures to mitigate impact. As previously stated,
the risk associated with a ‘re-storying’ process posed an ethical issue in conducting this research. To address this concern, Dodge, Ospina and Foldy (2005) recommended using transparent communication with all research participants involving the purpose of the study and the use of data collection methods. To address this threat, the researcher provided each research participant with the opportunity to review the transcribed interview, analysis and conclusions. Additionally, the researcher took deliberate steps to protect all human subjects participating in, or referenced by the participants, throughout all stages of this research.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Conducting social science research always involves the risk of possible harm to participants. Outlining the ethical need to protect human subjects of research studies, Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun (2012) stated, “It is the fundamental responsibility of every researcher to do all in his or her power to ensure that participants in a research study are protected from physical or psychological harm, discomfort, or danger that may arise due to research procedures” (p. 63). In response to Frankel, Wallen and Hyun’s concern, what follows is a statement and a discussion of the ethical considerations of this research study and a disclosure of risks to participants.

This research mitigated the risk of harming participants by explicitly and transparently communicating an informed consent and ensuring the confidentiality of research participants and the subsequent data. To protect all research participants from possible harm, an informed consent was developed and a disclosure statement displayed to all participants (Appendix B). Deception, as a research method, was not used in this study. Furthermore, all research participants were treated with respect and informed of the researcher’s general interest and topic of inquiry. In addition, the researcher explicitly discussed any likelihood of risk and reminded participants that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without fear of repercussions. Lastly
this research study was approved by the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the human subjects were appropriately protected from any potential harm. Because this research study presented minimal risk to participants and deliberate steps were taken to mitigate the potential for individual harm, the research was awarded a category II classification of expedited review from the IRB.

This research study ensured the confidentiality of all research participants. Research participants were assigned a numeric value in a deliberate measure to respect privacy and confidentiality. Comporting with the recommendations from research (Creswell, 2013; Johnson & Christensen, 2012), the names of all research subjects and the identities of all referenced school districts and stakeholders were removed from the data and any resultant visualizations, graphs and matrices. Additionally, names of individual research subjects are never to be used in any publication describing the research study. Once the dissertation has successfully been defended, all electronic individual interview recordings and transcription files will be deleted and physical paper copies shredded by the researcher to further protect participant confidentiality. As a result of the steps taken to ensure participant confidentiality it is expected that all research participants were protected from possible harm.

Conclusion

The principle goal in conducting this study was to understand the lived experiences of superintendents as they engaged constituents holding divergent viewpoints in collaborative school governance. Sampling techniques and communication strategies were utilized to recruit the desired population of research participants. Critical components of this study, such as the format of research questions, interview protocol, and analytic techniques were intentionally selected for their usefulness in closely examining the phenomenon as experienced by each
research participant. Triangulation in the cross-case stage of data analysis strengthened the credibility of findings. Lastly, as described above, deliberate steps were taken to identify and mitigate any threats to the human subjects participating in this study.
Chapter 4: Report of Research Findings

The aim of this research was to gain a better understanding of the ways in which participating Massachusetts’ superintendents made sense of and engaged with their divergent constituencies in the wider context of their respective school’s governance. As the purpose was to understand the experiences of these public school superintendents in managing a dynamic and politically charged landscape, this research study was guided by a single overarching research question: How do superintendents’ understand their experiences engaging with divergent stakeholders in collaborative governance? This research question underpins the following report of research findings, which begins with a description of the eight research study participants and the communities they served. Following these portrayals, each theme that emerged from the semi-structured interview data is described. Finally, a summary of the research findings is presented.

Participant Profiles

Eight superintendents participated in this research study. At the time of the research, all eight participants were employed full time as public school superintendents averaging approximately five years of experience in this professional role. Additionally, all superintendents served in small New England towns, with less than 25,000 residents. Every community in this study was governed according to a town meeting format, which provided a common platform for constituents to exert political pressure with which all eight superintendents had to contend. It is also important that all school districts led by superintendents in this study had an average enrollment of 2,800 students. Additionally, these superintendents led high achieving suburban public school districts, with seven out of the eight communities rated in the top 33% by Boston Magazine in 2015 (Recck, 2015). While certainly not a perfect ranking, Boston Magazine’s
comparisons of 125 local eastern Massachusetts school districts was based upon class size, per-pupil spending, student-to-teacher ratio and student achievement data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and reflected a perception of high quality public schools represented in this research study. The relatively small population of the towns, the similar enrollment and high achieving reputations of the school districts, and the parallel local government structures were important characteristics because, while certainly not exactly the same, they could be considered comparable. As such, all superintendents who participated in this study experienced a small town world of local politics. Despite these similarities, it is also necessary to acknowledge the wide variety of professional experiences that each research participant brought to the job of understanding his or her town’s governance.

Presented next is a description of each research participant including his or her professional experiences and of the communities in which they served. In addition, the ways in which each superintendent engaged with stakeholders and how they experienced the challenges of collaborative governance is described in the context of each community. In alignment with IPA research methodology, this description captures the essence of how they engaged in town governance as the superintendent of schools. As such, the following descriptions highlight their perceived struggles and priorities. It is important to note that in the following profiles, all superintendents were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. Furthermore, all quotations included in this chapter were extracted from interview transcriptions and are directly attributable to each superintendent. Following the description of research participant profiles, a cross-case analysis of the emergent themes is offered.

Superintendent # 1. The first research participant, Mr. Peter Browne, had been a superintendent for four years at the time of this research. Peter also brought twelve years of
experience as a High School Principal, also in the same district, to his position as superintendent. Prior to that, he was a curriculum leader in social studies as a high school department head. In addition, he also had classroom experience as a social studies teacher in a large urban school. A National Urban League award winner, Mr. Browne also had earned a Master’s Degree in Educational Leadership.

Mr. Peter Browne led a PK-12 district with an enrollment of 2,500 students in an affluent suburban community in a small New England town. The governance structure of this town was fairly typical for a community with less than 15,000 residents; it had an open town meeting structure with a town manager, a board of selectmen, a school committee and a finance committee. The affluent town was conveniently located near major transportation routes for commuters to access a major city. In addition several successful medium sized technology companies were located in the town. Throughout the interview, Mr. Browne presented as a thoughtful and reflective school leader. He often paused to think for several seconds before responding, as if to weigh how to best share his thoughts and frame his responses.

It was clear from our interview that when interacting with the world of local politics, Mr. Browne held three core beliefs. First he emphasized the importance of building relationships with stakeholders on both formal and personal levels. To this point, his beliefs highlighted that disagreement with stakeholders should not be situated at a personal level. Secondly, Mr. Browne shared that when he engaged with divergent stakeholders, he placed a premium upon being clear and intentional in his communication, especially when advocating for the needs of students in the district. When approaching the budgeting process, he decidedly occupied a needs-based position in his communication with the financial committee. During the interview he shared that negotiating with the finance committee posed a challenge, one that was shared by numerous
superintendents in this study and is described in greater depth below. Lastly, Mr. Browne was clear that he perceived, and operated within, a collaborative environment of town governance. He stressed the importance of learning about the political complexity in town governance and he was resolute in his belief that respectful and civil discourse was necessary, especially when differing positions arose among stakeholders.

Superintendent # 2. The second research participant, Ms. Susanna Moore, had two years of experience in the role of superintendent at the time of this research. In our interview, she readily acknowledged her “newness” of being a superintendent and she was very thoughtful about how this shaped the way she engaged in collaborative governance. Prior to becoming a superintendent of schools, she spent six years as an assistant superintendent in a neighboring community. Additionally, Ms. Moore had also served as a K-5 elementary principal in two school districts in Massachusetts and had teaching experience at both the middle and elementary levels.

Ms. Susanna Moore led a PK-12 district with an enrollment of 3,500 students located in a suburban community equidistant between two New England cities. This small town of less than 20,000 residents was governed by an open town meeting and headed by a board of selectmen, a finance committee and a school committee. Superintendent Moore’s public school district had a strong tradition of academic success as measured by student achievement on standardized assessments. Recently, the town had become a popular bedroom community for technology and pharmaceutical employees, drawn in large part by the public schools. As a result, the community had seen an influx of new students prompting Ms. Moore to note that, “We are one of the fastest growing communities in the area, so our enrollment is really expanding and the planning necessary to face the complexity of building schools and what that does to a town budget is
probably the largest complexity facing town governance.” In her understanding of how the small community was rapidly changing, she was aware of friction within the governance process, notably surrounding school enrollment issues and town planning. Despite this friction, she did not view it as a challenge. Rather, she embraced the viewpoint that this was simply the work needing to be done in the town.

When discussing how she managed her involvement in the political landscape surrounding the town governance, Ms. Moore presented as a reflective, thoughtful leader who valued collaborative decision-making that was supported by building relationships with stakeholders. While relatively new to her position, especially in comparison with the other superintendents whose voices were included in this study, Ms. Moore was strategic in her efforts to establish relationships with stakeholders, such as veteran groups and senior citizens. During the interview, she expressed that being relatively new to her position, it was important for her to be visible in the community and for her to get to know the constituents. As such, she made a concerted effort to march in town parades, attend community events, luncheons, and sporting events. Reflecting on her navigation of the governance process, it was evident that while she was focusing on cultivating relationships, Ms. Moore was doing so in a deliberate effort to understand the different viewpoints held by constituents. Finally, Superintendent Moore understood her experiences engaging with divergent stakeholders in collaborative governance though the lens of consensus seeking. Highlighting this point, she described how she engaged in the process of town governance as both collaborative and inclusive in nature.

Superintendent # 3. The third research participant, Ms. Elizabeth Hopkins, had five years experience as a public school superintendent and eight years as an assistant superintendent. She brought experience as a K-8 curriculum director of English Language Arts, Social Studies,
teaching experience at the elementary and middle school levels, and service as a district-wide literacy specialist to her position as superintendent. She also had experience as a Title One director and held a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies.

Ms. Hopkins led a PK-12 district with an enrollment of 2,700 students located in a suburban community halfway between two New England cities. Similar in size to the other communities in this study, this small town had less than 20,000 residents and was governed by open town meeting. The major official participants in the town governance included a five-member board of selectmen, a finance committee, a school committee, and a town manager. The town was composed of many small neighborhoods yet was unique in that it was also the home of a large, local industry leader.

Ms. Elizabeth Hopkins presented as an outgoing and sociable educational leader, enthusiastically sharing several examples of how she engaged with stakeholders in the community. Easily the most gregarious of the eight participating superintendents, it was somewhat ironic when Ms. Hopkins reflected that, “I don’t like politics that much. But I learned that I don’t really need to love politics or budget anymore than I did five years ago; I just need to not be half bad at them.” In her political engagement, she relished the opportunity to address any misperceptions held by constituents and in doing so she was proactive in her outreach. Specifically, she implemented a wide-ranging stakeholder survey to collect perception data and then publicly analyzed the data during school committee meetings. In addition, she engaged the senior community by actively planning school visits during which a school bus picked up community members and brought them into the school for tours to see teaching and learning as it happened. She did this strategically in an effort to build relationships, to highlight the implementation of town funding, and to illustrate a compelling need to support proposed
budgets. In our interview, she affirmed the notion that all politics are local, and in her understanding, she aimed to appeal to local common interests of stakeholders and find support for the public schools. One quote is particularly relevant in how she leveraged community support and built relationships:

   If you have a high stakes publically visible person, or company in your community, which I think many of us do…I think that relationships are built on our personal relationship, never by asking. They do a lot for us, but our relationship is not – when I need something, I go to him with my hand out. Our relationship is built on the fact that I acknowledge him as a great champion of the schools.

As she self-identified as a people person, Ms. Hopkins commentary reflected how she prioritized strategically building relationships with key stakeholders including official participants of town governance. For example, in discussing her engagement with school committee members Ms. Hopkins noted that, “We don’t have a lot of real disagreements.” However, she also expressed being keenly aware of her need to accurately understand the priorities held by each individual participant. To this point she stated:

   So the challenge of governance is [to determine] that what is happening publicly at the meetings and the direction they [individual members] are driving the school committee. Behind the scenes, I need to know what make each of the five members tick and what works. I cultivate relationships with them.

Building relationships with stakeholders, both with official participants in town governance such as school and finance committee members, and with other stakeholders such as senior citizens, was a core value in how Ms. Elizabeth Hopkins engaged with the local political environment.
Superintendent # 4. The fourth research participant, Mr. John Billington, had a public accounting and finance background and was formerly a C.P.A. He also brought to his position as superintendent eight years of classroom experience as a high school history and business teacher, nine years of building-based educational administrative experience, four years as an assistant high school principal, and five years as a high school principal. At the time of this research, Mr. Billington had two years of experience as a public school superintendent.

Mr. John Billington was the superintendent for a PK-12 district with an enrollment of 2,500 students located in a suburban community. Historically a rural community, the small town of less than 20,000 residents was, similar with numerous other communities in this study, located equidistantly between two New England cities making it an attractive location for commuters. While not having an abundance of major industry in the community, the town mainly relied upon local property taxes to support public services. The local government operated in an open town meeting format, and Superintendent Billington held the view that the community had a fiscally conservative leaning. To support this notion, Superintendent Billington shared that the community had never passed a proposition 2½ override vote, despite numerous attempts to do so. The town had recently experienced a construction boom of new housing units and was seeing an increase in student enrollment that was driving up class size and posing space use issues for the public school district.

Superintendent Billington presented as an educational leader who valued being in classrooms on a weekly, if not daily basis, and he applied a student centered decision-making approach to governance matters. Numerous times during the semi-structured interview, Mr. John Billington commented upon the importance of making the right choices for students. In his political engagement with finance committee members on financial planning, he stressed his
need to work within the budgetary recommendations provided, presumably guided by his understanding of the fiscally conservative nature of the community. To this end, Superintendent Billington had desired to maximize efficiency by reorganizing the public school district. He shared a challenge of doing so in stating that, “But you know, cost cutting is the only thing…. we are 80% labor”. Given that such a large portion of the school’s operating budget was based upon collectively bargained wages, Superintendent Billington commented that it was challenging to continually identify new areas to cut costs. To support his task of financial management, he was in constant communication with stakeholders, such as the finance committee, to look for opportunities with other governance participants to combine resources. Furthermore, while the community had not yet supported a tax override, he was persisting in his engagement with stakeholders through attending open houses at school, events at the library, and participating in community coffees. He did so in a deliberate effort to build relationships with these stakeholders and described his motivation in stating:

The senior citizens play a critical role because we need to be out there forging that relationship when it becomes budget time. If we are ever looking for an override, and if we are ever asking fixed income families to support schools and town services in a manner in which they are not accustomed, I think that the outreach is critical to every person in the community.

While all the communities in this study certainly placed limits upon school budgets, unique to Superintendent Billington’s experiences were the ways in which the town’s resources were controlled by the local government. Superintendent Billington held the belief that key stakeholders in the process of town governance were aligned to limit the budgetary expansion for the public schools. He thought this had to do with the political dynamics within town governance
and described his understanding in stating that, “unfortunately this community has had a history of the finance committee being fully aligned with the board of selectmen, and believing that the schools are just a necessary component of running the community.” In engaging with this culture, Superintendent Billington directly engaged with stakeholders in an effort to illustrate the compelling need for funding. In his strategy to engage with senior citizens in the community, Superintendent Billington aimed to be visible and approachable with finance committee members. Moreover, he strived to be transparent with the finance committee in his communication when building the school budget in close alignment with its recommended spending guidelines.

Superintendent # 5. Mr. Richard Warren, the fifth research participant, was the most experienced superintendent of the group at the time of this study as he had twelve years of experience as a superintendent of schools, all in the same district. Prior to becoming superintendent, he served for four years as an assistant superintendent in a regional public school district and also held the position of Director of Administration and Finance in another Massachusetts public school district. Mr. Warren’s experience included being a manager of a high tech firm as well as earning an M.B.A.

He led a PK-12 district with an enrollment of 2,500 students located in a small suburban community of less than 15,000 residents. Somewhat inconveniently located for the modern bedroom commuter, the town was not directly accessible along major transportation routes connecting the region and thus was predominantly residential. The local tax base was funded, almost exclusively, through property taxes. Similar to many other towns in this research study, this small community was governed by open town meeting. In describing the town, Superintendent Warren saw the community as both intimate and supportive of the schools. Both
of these characteristics drew him to this district over a decade ago, “I fell in love with this community primarily because of its size. It is a community that is really committed to education and makes a lot of sacrifices to do that.” The community’s commitment to education was reflected in their high performing school system, one of the highest scoring in the state.

Superintendent Warren’s engagement and advocacy for the district’s financial needs was decidedly more politically authoritative than the other research participants in this study. He presented as an astute political leader who had come to understand that in his role in town governance, he needed to be a vocal, and at times forceful, advocate for the school district. He knew his political activities would ultimately support students. Consider his commentary reflective of his participation in governance:

I don’t shy away from giving my opinion [to the finance committee and board of selectmen]. I believe that this community needs a visible, articulate, strong, loud leader. And to be very clear about people’s decisions upon the classroom; so I am doing the job as I think it needs to be done and advocating for the resources for what I think kids need.

Superintendent Warren shared his belief that the official participants in town governance, such as the finance committee and board of selectmen, brought fiscally conservative perspectives to budgeting. Nevertheless, he remained confident in his positions when proposing school budgets in excess of the spending guidelines recommended by the finance committee. He did so by leveraging the family oriented community, which he believed would support his proposed school budgets. The following statement reflects how he viewed his participation in the governance process,

My job is to tell the community what the school system needs, not what it can afford. Their [finance committee] job is to tell the community what it can afford. And ultimately
it is up to the community to decide between those two things. I certainly am very comfortable in advocating positions when it comes to resources and what I feel will meet the community’s expectations to maintain a high quality school district. So that...kind of sets up the conflict from the very beginning. I guess that I do this on purpose because I think it is important to juxtapose the, ‘this is what I need’ versus the, ‘this is what I can afford’.

Finally, it is important to add that Superintendent Warren shared that he managed his engagement with his local political landscape through the many relationships that he had established with stakeholders over the years.

**Superintendent # 6.** The sixth research participant, Dr. Edward Tilley, had a PhD in education from the University of Wisconsin as well as a Masters of Teaching. He had nine years of experience as a superintendent at the time of this research. Previously he had served as an assistant superintendent and also worked for the Consortium for Policy, Research and Education and specialized in the area of school policy and finance. In addition he had experience as a classroom teacher, during which he had participated in the negotiation process to collectively bargain for teacher’s contracts. Lastly, he also brought private sector experience to his position as superintendent through a finance and business background.

Superintendent Tilley led a PK-12 district with an enrollment of 3,500 students located in a suburban community. This town was by far the most economically developed, in terms of the commerce and industry, of any community included in this research study. The population of the community swelled during daytime and had population numbers that would be expected in a city, but at nighttime the numbers dwindled considerably; meaning that there are tens of thousands of non-resident employees in the town. As a result, this community directly benefited
from a more substantial and diverse source of revenue, which was markedly different from other communities in this study that predominantly relied upon residential property taxes to fund public services. Perhaps because of this abundance of resources, Superintendent Tilley shared that the culture in town governance was decidedly non competitive among official participants:

Our town has the resources, and I know that this is different from other communities, and we have set up a model [collaborative governance]. We have tried to be proactive in that [budget allocation], and then it is a matter of fitting your needs into the model, not fitting the model into your needs.

Interestingly, Superintendent Tilley held the belief that because the town served as a center of commerce for the neighboring area, the private sector community represented a constituency that was critical in supporting the public schools. His comment on local taxation illustrates the importance of this issue to him as superintendent of schools, “So the tax rate, the rental square footage price for commercial property, is almost as important to me as the residential tax rate.” His perspective on taxation was not typical of the participants in this research study and was not experienced to the same degree by other superintendents.

Superintendent Tilley understood his experiences engaging with stakeholders in town governance largely through a collaborative lens when it came to budgeting. He followed the budgeting guidelines set forth by the town finance committee and stated that if he elected to disregard and exceed the guidelines this would be perceived as “greedy” by other stakeholder. That he emphasized the importance of getting in line and taking turns with the other stakeholders such as the police and fire departments reflected the value he placed on being collaborative. The essence of his understanding is illustrated in one of his statements:
I can’t get every project that I want, but if I have planned for the project and get the project in the pipeline, and everyone in the community, the town manager and the financial team know it is in there, and I get approval, then typically the funding is taken care of.

Superintendent Tilley had come to understand that the stable and collaborative culture that prevailed in the governance of the town in which he served as superintendent was due in no small part to a lack of competition for the allocation of resources. Within a context of ample resources, he engaged with stakeholders in a supportive and reciprocal fashion. When asked if push came to shove and he felt the need to be more forceful in his advocacy he responded:

Now if I was desperate for a hundred thousand dollars and if I would have to stand up and say, ‘we need it for kids’, then I would. And there are communities that do manage to the last dollar, but we have some wiggle room, and I think that wiggle room allows for collaborative governance.

Superintendent # 7. Mr. William Brewster, the seventh research participant in this study, had three years of experience as a public school superintendent, all in the same district. He had previously served as an assistant superintendent for five years and before that he worked for fourteen years as a director of the Massachusetts Teachers’ Retirement Board (MTRB). In addition, he earned an undergraduate degree in legal studies and held a graduate degree in public administration.

Superintendent Brewster led a PK-12 district with an enrollment of 2,500 students located in a suburban community. Like many New England towns, the community was governed by an open town meeting. In addition to those registered voters who attended the annual open town meeting, other official participants in town governance included: the elected members to
the Board of Selectmen, the School Committee, and the Finance Committee. The town had some lightly developed industry along with banking, professional, retail and service establishments that you would expect in a rather affluent suburban community. Situated conveniently along a major transportation corridor, this picturesque town had less than 15,000 residents many of whom commute to a major city for employment. The town approached the stereotype of a quintessential New England village; one marked by tall church steeples, woodlands and single family homes. The public schools were noted for high achieving students, the majority of whom upon graduation went on to attend a four-year university or college.

It was clear that from our interview, Superintendent Brewster engaged with his world of local politics and stakeholders by building positive relationships and leveraging a supportive community of parents. Superintendent Brewster perceived that town governance ran very smoothly within a trusting environment among participants. Furthermore, he had come to understand that disagreement, when it does happen, tended to be infrequent and occurred behind closed doors. Additionally, Superintendent Brewster shared that the small size of the community facilitated building relationships with key stakeholders:

I think that some of the luxuries that I have here in town is that I do know everybody. It is small enough that I know everyone. The parents truly, truly care. They are involved if we need them for things. We like each other and we trust each other.

In the interview he commented on how the community as a whole tended to be proud of the public school system and was very supportive of education. When specifically discussing the culture among official participants in town governance, Superintendent Brewster described having exceptional partnerships with the town manager, the school committee, the selectmen, and the finance committee members stating that, “this is such a great place to work right now
because the town and the schools are completely in synch.” He shared that he spent a lot of time nurturing relationships with stakeholders in a deliberate effort to generate trust. Furthermore, he stressed the importance of being transparent with stakeholders especially on matters pertaining to financial planning. He described having collegial relationships with the town manager, the police chief and the fire chief, and how they collaboratively supported each other’s financial needs. He also was quick to point out that his prior experience with governance in a different community was nowhere near as positive, “In my previous district it was a war. It was a war between the town and the schools”. When asked why he thought the town ran so smoothly and that the process of governance worked so efficiently, he quickly responded:

I think that this is really simple. It is a community that has the ability to be self-sufficient. There are resources. It is not wealthy, but it is a stable financial community and I attribute it all to the relationships that we have in place now.

Superintendent Brewster had come to understand that his engagement with stakeholders was critical. He stressed the importance of building relationships with newly elected members to the school committee or the finance committee, especially if they enter the position bringing misunderstandings or inaccurate preconceived notions. His engagement with his political landscape was distinctly based on spending time, energy and political capital in an effort to build partnerships:

I am the superintendent of schools because I can build relationships. I can make people believe that they can do things that they didn’t think was possible. I think that works at the town level too. You can show people that by working together you can maximize resources. If you can show them the way, you can make things go.
Superintendent # 8. Dr. Sam Fuller had a total of seven years of experience as a public school superintendent in two different regional school districts. In addition, his past administrative leadership experiences included that of a high school principal, assistant principal and housemaster. He earned a doctorate in education as well as a bachelor and master’s degrees in biology. Superintendent Fuller also brought classroom teaching experience at the high school level to his work as school district leader.

Superintendent Fuller led a PK-12 public school district with an enrollment of approximately 2,000 students. Unique to this study, Dr. Fuller led a regional public school district that served two small towns with a combined population just short of 20,000 residents. While most public school districts in Massachusetts served a single town at the time of this research, two or more communities may join together and form a regional school district. A regional school district offered a way for two or more communities to pool their fiscal resources to better serve the needs of students. Superintendent Fuller shared that both towns were separately and independently governed by open town meetings, whereby each town had a board of selectmen, a finance committee and a school committee. In essence, Superintendent Fuller engaged with two different political constituencies who shared the common interest of public education. He described what he viewed as both constituencies being supportive in stating that, “They are communities that strongly support their schools, in terms of finance. I think that I have a parent and school committee body that is really committed to help me make this district successful.” While acknowledging that the parent community across both towns was generally supportive, Superintendent Fuller also explained a time when one of his stakeholder groups was oppositional.
In the following example, Dr. Fuller described his nuanced approach to engaging with stakeholders, especially when it came to hotly contested financial issues involving the regional school district. He relayed that both towns originally joined together and formed a regional school district to address space issues and improve long-term fiscal stability. However, Dr. Fuller shared that following the regionalization, certain stakeholders, notably the board of selectmen from one town, held expectations of financial savings that were not met. Faced with opposition from one of the towns, Superintendent Fuller described his situation: “So every single public meeting that I would go to, one of the selectmen or the finance committee members would be like…where is our 1.8 million and why aren’t you delivering it?” Confronted by a group of frustrated stakeholders, who were also active participants in the process of town governance; Superintendent Fuller described his understanding of the root cause:

My belief is that there was a miscalculation by the [one of the town’s] finance director at the time and he did not anticipate how the money would fall out. I think that there was an anticipation that one town was 73% of the pie and that they would see 73% of the savings. So as you can imagine, when I am not delivering 73% of the savings it was a tough pill to swallow.

Superintendent Fuller, while not desiring to place blame in a public way, decided that it was necessary to address the misunderstanding. As such, he held a presentation and brought in financial experts to analyze and comment on the issue. Unfortunately it did not meet his desired end, “And even after that presentation, it was as if the presentation never happened. Because, it was like, they wanted what they wanted. They didn’t want to hear what the reality was”. When the Board of Selectmen subsequently proposed a significant cut in school funding, Dr. Fuller decided to “roll up my sleeves and fight.” He wrote a public letter and called for a meeting to
share the potential impact of the selectmen’s proposed budget cuts on the schools. The meeting was well attended by the parent community and he discussed ways to mitigate impact. Leveraging the supportive community, parents strategically attended selectmen meetings to vocalize concerns. Dr. Fuller described the outcome, “So about a month after they made this vote [to cut funding], they completely reversed their decision”. It was clear from the interview that Superintendent Sam Fuller engaged with his political landscapes skillfully and precisely, especially in his engagement with stakeholders. While initially attempting to understand the perspectives of oppositional stakeholders, in the example he shared Dr. Fuller ultimately used community support to apply leverage to the process of collaborative town governance.

Based on the profiles and experiences shared by each participating superintendent, several themes related to their engagement in collaborative governance emerged across these cases. The next section presents these emergent themes.

**Emergent Themes**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analyses focuses upon understanding a particular phenomenon as experienced by others, which may be unique for each individual. With this in mind, each interview transcription was reviewed using an inductive approach and analyzed for categorical descriptions. Careful cross-case analysis then identified several themes that described and categorized how the research participants engaged with divergent stakeholders in collaborative governance (Appendix C). Based upon this analysis, the data showed that the participating superintendents had come to understand their experiences in a variety of ways, each unique to the local context; however, common themes also emerged. Five superordinate themes were identified: (1) cultivating relationships, (2) seeking consensus, (3) understanding the perspectives of stakeholders, (4) leveraging community support, and (5) managing
disagreements. Significantly, there were also similarities and differences reflective of each superintendent’s experiences within the five superordinate themes. Thus, subthemes are also described below that illustrate the complexity of superintendent interpersonal engagement with his or her surrounding political landscape. A description of the ways in which the participating superintendents experienced the five emergent themes and associated subthemes is presented next.

**Cultivating Relationships with Stakeholders.** Through this research, including the literature review, my reflection on the participants’ lived experience, and in these research findings, it emerged that cultivating positive relationships with stakeholders was among the most important aspects of how the participating superintendents engaged with their constituents in collaborative governance. All of the participants emphasized the necessity of building positive relationships with key stakeholders and shared in the belief that these relationships, once established, facilitated the process of collaborative governance. However, it is important to point out that the superintendents in this research study held differing notions regarding the identification of stakeholders as well as how they approached building positive relationships. The following two subheadings, identifying stakeholders and building relationships, illustrate the essence of the research participants’ understanding of their experiences.

**Identifying Stakeholders.** Participants in this study identified a wide range of stakeholders with whom they needed to engage, some stakeholders who officially participated in town governance and many more stakeholders who did not. Superintendent Tilley’s notion that stakeholders are a ubiquitous component of public school governance exemplifies this description. In his comment below, he identifies a wide range of stakeholders and in doing so, he also delineates among them:
I think that there are all different levels of stakeholders. I think that my job is to communicate to all of them and to connect the dots. We have direct stakeholders; our students are our direct stakeholders. Their parents. Your employees. You have your taxpayers. You have your commercial, you have your residential. You have people who have kids in school; you have people who never have had kids in school who are still paying half of their property tax to support what you do. They are stakeholders as well. I don’t think we are ever a stakeholder free environment, being a public school.

Tilley classified students as “direct stakeholders” and other superintendents echoed the belief that students were a focal point when they identified and described stakeholders. Offering a similar message, Superintendent Elizabeth Hopkins explained that stakeholders are, “everyone who cares about education or our schools for any reason. For me, it is obviously: students, parents, and staff.” In articulating his understanding of the importance of students as stakeholders, Superintendent William Brewster emphasized:

First and foremost, we have our students and staff, families and the community. Those are the biggest. Those are the four most important stakeholders. Then you have the peripheral ones; the business community, the booster clubs and those other people that get involved, in and out of the organization.

In his comments, Superintendent Brewster described the relative importance among different groups of stakeholders and used the phrase “peripheral,” which distinguished some groups from the centrality placed upon students, staff, families and community. Other superintendents in the study also held this stratification in describing a wide array of stakeholders. Superintendent Susanna Moore’s commentary further illustrates this topic:
I think of stakeholders as all of the parties who touch the life or the work of schools. So you have stakeholder groups with your parents, you have your students…they are actually user groups because they are the people you shape and work with.

In her view, she considered a stakeholder to be those individuals and groups who influence education. Notably, Superintendent Moore described students as “user groups,” identifying them as the recipients of the education all the others produce. Similarly, Superintendent Peter Browne identified students as a primary group of stakeholders in this comment:

I think that the first stakeholders are kids. Then I think of parents and the parent community as the next group of stakeholders. Then I think of the broader citizenry who foot the bill for education in this community. Then I think of Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and other agencies that have an investment in education. And then the legislature, really because we depend on them.

When analyzing the various stakeholders identified in Superintendent Browne’s comments, he suggests a micro to macro-level focus. Through this lens of analysis, he identified students first. By placing students as the primary stakeholder group, Browne suggests the distinction between students and subsequent groups of stakeholders, similar to Superintendent Moore’s distinction between users and influencers. Other participants also situated students as being the recipients of influence exercised by other stakeholders. Illustrating this hierarchical concept among identified stakeholders, Superintendent Richard Warren unambiguously remarked:

And so as far as I am concerned the only stakeholders that I ultimately am here to serve are students. Parents, teachers, administrators, school committee members and superintendents are all within that same realm: to serve students. The only stakeholder here, in my view of the world, is students. I believe that taxpayers are not stakeholders.
Taxpayers’ jobs are to serve the students. The board of selectmen’s job is to serve the students.

Superintendent Warren’s understanding was clear; all stakeholders in town governance should serve students. Contrast this understanding with that of Superintendent Billington, who while disagreeing with the semantics associated with using the term stakeholder, nevertheless described his understanding:

I think that everyone has an invested interest in our schools and I think that there is no such thing as a set group of stakeholders. One could identify parents, community members, selectmen and right on down the road. They are all invested in our community. I believe that we are all part of the community. We are not separate from town government, or the town’s finance. We are truly just part of it, because we are a cog in it. I just think that everyone in this community, to use the term, is a stakeholder.

While Billington does not hierarchize stakeholder groups, he certainly agrees that there are stakeholders. In his understanding and among those held by the other research participants, it is clear that superintendents consider students as stakeholders. Additionally, in this idea the participating superintendents expressed understanding that stakeholders other than school personnel influence students. In the context of town governance, the main stakeholders include the official participants in local government such as the board of selectmen, the school committee, the finance committee and other department heads like the police and fire chiefs. In this theme, the research participants also identified teachers, faculty and other school personnel as stakeholder groups. While this study did not directly focus on the internal school side dynamics, because the role of the superintendent provides a measure of institutional authority, the superintendents had significantly less authority over external constituents who, when
participating in town governance, would impact students. Therefore the superintendents needed to engage with other, potentially oppositional stakeholders, and as the second subtheme exemplifies, they did so by cultivating relationships.

**Building Relationships.** Despite some differences in who superintendents considered to be stakeholders, the research participants universally shared their belief that building positive relationships with stakeholders was critical for collaborative governance. Superintendent Billington captured the importance of cultivating relationships with stakeholders in stating:

> It really is about building relationships. This is not a hard business if you can forge relationships and be genuine and sincere about that. People can see right through it if you are not genuine.

In another example, Superintendent Billington again illustrated his perception towards cultivating relationships when he emphasized the necessity of being a genuine and approachable leader for stakeholders. Next, consider the perspective of Superintendent Browne who, in a deliberate effort to engage with those engaged in town governance, such as the fire chief, police chief, members on the board of selectmen, public works, or the town manger, strongly saw the value in cultivating personal relationships with stakeholders:

> The superintendent, in my experience, really has to build clear communication with all of those [official stakeholders in governance], and I think with whatever degree possible, personal relationships are helpful in terms of making the formal relationships more successful.

Superintendent Browne saw the value of establishing strong relationships to facilitate the process of collaborative governance. He talked about how he strategically attends finance committee meetings and also other formal town presentations in an effort to be visible, supportive and
accessibility for stakeholders. Browne continued to describe how he forged personal connections with other stakeholders in town governance:

He [finance committee chair] and I meet and work this stuff out. I have gone out of my way to play golf with him. I’ve gone out of my way to play golf with the police chief to cultivate a personal aspect to the relationship.

The superintendents in this study all valued cultivating positive relationships with stakeholders, both professionally and personally. A common thread of this understanding was that positive relationships with stakeholders generated trust, which in turn supported the process of collaborative governance. All together, these superintendents shared numerous stories about town fiscal planning, school building projects, proposed schedule changes, strategic engagement of residents without school aged children, escalating out-of-district special education costs, curriculum reviews and technology integration. Through these many examples, the superintendents highlighted the importance of having positive relationships with stakeholder groups. For example, Superintendent Brewster shared his understanding of cultivating stakeholder relationships and building trust in stating, “So if I can build those relationships and get people to trust that we are spending their money wisely and that we are making solid decisions, and to like me, it can make a lot of things go.” Operationalizing this understanding, Superintendent Brewster said that he consistently endeavored to be inclusive with stakeholders and looked to apply the strengths and expertise of stakeholders, specifically mentioning a district initiative to change the math curriculum. In this one example, he was inclusive of parents, community members, teachers and students. Superintendent Elizabeth Hopkins also highlighted the importance of stakeholder relationships, especially in describing how she engaged with stakeholders when these important relationships were first forming. Her description also
underscored the importance of being authentic as a leader and emphasized the value of establishing trusting relationships prior to negotiating:

My philosophy is to take time and engage with stakeholders when no requests or high stakes discussions are on the table. Because then they get to know who you are and they trust you. And then when something controversial comes up, they already have a sense of who you are. That you are not going to be dishonest. You are a genuine person. I always say that, you really need to develop relationships outside of the high stakes discussions, to get people on the side of kids.

Finally, the views held by Superintendent Edward Tilley reveal a belief that that positive stakeholder relationships support the efficient functioning of committees, who as political entities officially engage in town governance. Similar to other research participants in this study, Superintendent Tilley expressed understanding that building trust with stakeholders was critical. He also held a belief that overtime, all constituents benefited from trusting relationships that facilitated collaborative governance. His comment regarding trusting relationships and the collaborative culture of governance in his community exemplifies his belief:

I have a very stable school committee, which allows there to be consensus among the school committee members. So we are not internally squabbling. I think that there is a relatively good relationship between the school committee and the selectmen; which again allows that consensus to happen.

**Seeking Consensus.** In addition to the importance placed upon cultivating relationships with stakeholders, superintendents in this research study also desired to seek consensus with the stakeholders in town governance. Common patterns for doing this emerged from the comments of the participating superintendents; while they initially desired consensus, they also remained
mindful of the difficulty in achieving it. Given the challenges they associated with reaching consensus, superintendents were keenly aware of the necessity of moving ahead in the governance process without achieving full stakeholder agreement or complete buy-in. The strategies the superintendents reported that they used to seek consensus reflected their experiences. Two subthemes, struggles and strategies, emerged that illustrate the strategies they employed and the struggles the superintendents experienced in working to achieve consensus with their stakeholders.

**Struggles.** At times, superintendents in this study expressed frustration interacting with and advocating for the schools in the political environment of small towns, notably with oppositional stakeholders. Experiencing a challenging governance landscape, Superintendent Richard Warren stated, “It is at the political level, the town board level where there is a lack of collaboration”. During the interview Superintendent Warren was specific about his challenges in building consensus with members of the finance committee. Given the lack of collaboration from oppositional stakeholders, he reflected on his approach in saying that, “we manage things at that level with less consensus and more political pressure”. This point was also reflected by Superintendent Peter Browne, who offered a nuanced understanding of his own consensus seeking engagement with constituents in collaborative governance. Consider his commentary in which he expresses his desire to foster stakeholder consensus, to strengthen support for public education in the community:

Are there times when you have to move without consensus? Sure, and even in consensus there are always outliers. There are always people who are not buying in, and they do have to comply. As so, it is not perfect. In terms of the other stakeholders, in terms of governance; outside of the schools, again I think it is the school’s best interest to achieve
In a similar vein, yet more emphatically, Superintendent Edward Tilley commented, “A consensus of certain stakeholders is important. But I do not need consensus from everybody; because that is a fool’s errand”. Superintendent Tilley was clear in his views that when disagreements arise, some participants will seek compromise, yet others will remain oppositional and will not change positions. In this way, the views of Superintendents Warren, Browne and Tilley reveal the understanding that finding complete consensus is problematic. However, as some stakeholders yield greater influence, they require greater effort for consensus seeking engagement from superintendents. Lastly, Superintendent Fuller reflected on his struggles and how he approached working with oppositional stakeholders in town governance:

There are a couple of school committee members that I think have some good ideas but they end up taking a constant anti-tone to the way that they operate. I end up calling them up, having some coffee…trying to find ways to build unanimous consensus and find ways to support their causes too. It is like this delicate little tight rope that you are trying to walk sometimes.

Superintendent Fuller’s comment, similar to those of other superintendents, highlights how he worked at building consensus, yet recognizes the difficulty of doing so. Despite the challenges associated with seeking consensus with oppositional stakeholders, Superintendent Moore shared her experience that if an initial agreement with stakeholders can be reached, it can lead to future collaboration:

So for me, governance, I think you are always trying to work for consensus, because when you have consensus then they are going to be participants. I can get on the phone
with the planning board or the town manager because the other things we did together
were collaborative. And so each time we can hit on a collaboration or a consensus, the
next relationship piece is easier.

These optimistic comments reveal Superintendent Moore’s understanding of the struggles
associated with reaching consensus with oppositional stakeholders. She shared the high stakes of
this activity in stating that reaching consensus at one time can support subsequent agreements in
matters of town governance. Given the relatively high stakes of consensus building, the
participating superintendents described utilizing a variety of strategies to engage with
stakeholders in the effort to reach consensus.

**Strategies.** Many research participants viewed arriving at consensus with stakeholders as
challenging and at times even untenable and applied numerous approaches to engage with
oppositional stakeholders. Superintendent Tilley, in reflecting on his experiences with a member
of the finance committee who consistently hindered consensus, shared one such strategy of
engagement:

He would be part of a budget discussion and then you come to the public vote on the
budget and you think that there is complete consensus and you end up seeing it shot down
by him. But the budget passes that they are going to present but he was the constant no
vote on everything. Having to spend some time on just sitting down with him and saying
look, ‘unless you can go and find some ways to meet in the middle, the good ideas that
you have aren’t going to see light’.

Superintendent Tilley’s example highlights his direct approach to achieving consensus with an
oppositional stakeholder. In this case, he met individually the finance committee member and
applied political pressure indicating that unless some degree of compromise was offered, other ideas presented could not be supported.

Other participants mentioned applying similar political strategies to drive consensus. For example, Superintendent John Billington discussed that when he negotiated with the finance committee to build a school budget, he constantly framed each financial decision from the perspective of how it may impact students. Specifically, he shared this strategy, “well you have to walk them through the ‘what ifs’ for sure. You do you if/then statements. If you do this…then that is going to happen”. Superintendent Billington went on to explain that he created a strategic plan for the entire school district and that this strategic plan drove his ongoing budget conversations with finance committee members. In his understanding of how he engaged in consensus seeking activities, his strategy involved constant communication marked with an aim to compromise:

So we are talking budget from day one. It is a give and take. So we are trying to figure out if we [the school department] get 70% of the revenues…. or 65% or whatever that number is. I let my school committee board know. I let the community and parents know. I send out budget memos every two weeks. But this is the process that we take because the finance committee has asked us to prepare a level funded budget, a negative 2% budget, and a plus 2% budget. So you have to show the options.

Consensus seeking remained a valued and challenging task facing superintendents. Despite this challenge, Superintendent Susanna Moore, like many other superintendents in this study, expressed a continual desire to persist in consensus seeking activities with stakeholders by leveraging existing relationships and understanding the perspectives of others:
I think, OK, they didn’t wake up in the morning and think ‘how I can screw the schools.’ That is not how they get out of bed. They are trying to do work for the town as volunteers. They work for the community. They are trying to achieve something. It doesn’t come from a bad place. And so, I think, the way that we leverage is through understanding. I want them to understand my perspective and I want to understand theirs. And I think we build a relationship in the middle.

In addition to cultivating relationships and seeking consensus with stakeholders, the superintendents in this study valued understanding the perspectives of constituencies as they pertained to matters of town governance.

Understanding Stakeholders’ Perspectives. The third theme that emerged from the data was the superintendents’ desire to understand stakeholder perspectives. Especially in the context of town governance, the superintendents in this study shared their desire to ascertain the motivations and priorities of stakeholders. While the examples provided by superintendents for this theme vary, a common feature was how they desired to understand prevailing concerns and tried to anticipate potential reactions by constituents in the community. Illustrating this notion, Superintendent Hopkins shared a story about the need to fully grasp the positions held by constituents in the town; in this case as it pertained to understanding attitudes surrounding proposed financial plans:

We are always taking the pulse of the town and the community. And thinking to ourselves, what is the ‘ask’ that would be OK? We do this with everything; the small things, large things and it is important to be intuitive about that. We always have our facts. We have our data. If we don’t think the timing is right, we will back off and wait until we have other pieces in place.
The belief that accurately understanding to what degree different groups of constituents in the community support or oppose particular issues was viewed by the participating superintendents as especially significant when engaging in the politics of governing small towns. For example, Superintendent Hopkins described her viewpoint that understanding the perspectives of stakeholders was helpful in her management of the collaborative governance process in stating that, “The behind the scenes works is really important. How does each constituent feel and what is the key to turning them around? I always said, appeal to what matters to them”. Embedded in Superintendent Hopkins’ understanding was the value that acknowledging the concerns held by oppositional stakeholders is important. She held strongly the belief that people just want to be heard. Furthermore, she placed value on identifying stakeholder perceptions and she systematically collected survey data from stakeholders regarding the culture and climate of the public school system. In analyzing the survey data, she sought participation from all parents, staff members, and students in grades 5-12 in her community in a deliberate effort to understand how stakeholders viewed the public schools. Superintendent Hopkins described this stakeholder survey:

This is all perception data. So we ask… ‘What is their perception on a variety of issues: student achievement, curriculum, school programs, student support and school culture’.

We ask very in depth questions and have a lot of people participate.

After gathering perception data, she relished any opportunity to meet with stakeholders and address any misconceptions they might hold. Because the perception survey was administered yearly, the response data could be analyzed longitudinally and viewed within the context of a five-year trend. Additionally, the survey response data from stakeholders could be compared by how the various groups of stakeholders view school issues differently. Superintendent Hopkins
also recounted the importance of understanding that, especially in small towns, stakeholder groups are interconnected and therefore the concerns and positions are likely shared:

In the stakeholder groups in a small suburban town like this, there is crossover everywhere. So you’ve got somebody in the police department who also lives in town who is married to a teacher. You’ve got a teacher who lives in town that grew up with the fire chief. The stakeholder groups are quite intermingled, and I always keep that in mind. They are really one stakeholder group.

In a view similar to Hopkins, Superintendent Brewster also valued understanding the perceptions of stakeholders in the community when he engaged in town governance. His comments revealed how thoughtfully he considered the perspectives of stakeholders and forecast the impact:

I think that you are just navigating the political landscape with everything you do. With every decision you make, you need to think through who it is going to effect. Everything is systemic. Everything is connected to something else and you need to be thinking about that with every decision you make. Who is going to be personally impacted by it, how is it going to impact, what are the optics of it, what are the short and long-term ramifications? Is it sustainable?

In addition to identifying the importance of accurately reading the political landscape in the community, superintendents in this study also engaged with stakeholders by soliciting participation in the governance process. Specifically, Superintendent Moore described how she reached out to stakeholders and included them in the process of governance in a deliberate attempt to share perspectives:

Where leverage comes from is them [stakeholders] understanding your needs and feeling included in the process. So for me, leverage is about letting them understand my
perspective and welcoming them into the process. And so, to have leverage, you need to give leverage.

While participating superintendents’ endeavors to create a mutual understanding of perspectives between and among participants in town governance was clear, it was also clear that the research participants had come to understand that the oppositional perspectives of stakeholders typically center on funding issues. At the heart of this understanding, these superintendents held that oppositional stakeholders, commonly reported to be finance committee members or outspoken fiscally conservative taxpayers in the community, can operate antagonistically and as a result, the superintendents sometimes embraced a less collaborative approach in the governance process. A comment made by Superintendent Brewster highlighted his understanding regarding oppositional stakeholders, “There are a set of people in one’s constituency who often doubt that the schools are doing the right thing fiscally and are pushing back”.

Even in the face of certain conflict, superintendents in this study found it important to understand the perspectives of oppositional stakeholders. Superintendent Brewster illustrated this understanding in stating that, “My experience to manage conflicts that arise between stakeholders is really to be honest but also to understand what other people need”. The participating superintendents were steadfast in their belief that understanding the perspectives held by constituents was important when confronted with conflict. These superintendents had come to understand, especially in matters involving school funding, that certain groups of stakeholders participate in the process of collaborative governance with essentially contrary views. Superintendent Browne further elaborated this perspective:

With the finance committee it is a push-pull because their starting point is how to sustain the town’s budget and the needs of all departments over time. They come from an
inherently conservative approach to fiscal management. And the schools come from the needs that we have. So we start off from a conflicting point of view.

Sharing a similar view toward understanding the perspectives of oppositional stakeholders, Superintendent Warren also acknowledged that disagreement typically involves school funding issues. Consider how he interprets his role as a superintendent and that of the finance committee:

  But my position is that my job is to tell the community what [the school system] needs, not what it can afford. Their job is to tell the community what it can afford. And ultimately it is up to the community to decide between those two things.

Superintendent Warren’s comment captures an understanding of the divergent perspectives held by many participants in town governance. Sharing a similar view with Warren and Browne regarding understanding stakeholder perceptions, Superintendent Fuller described his role in advocating for the needs of the district with fiscally conservative stakeholders:

  So this morning I met with a member of the finance committee. He is a fiscal conservative and he wants the best for his kids; but here he is saying to me, ‘your school budget is too much’. All I can do is impress upon him and his group by saying, ‘look at where our budget is and look at the things we are trying to provide’.

Superintendent Fuller’s comments underscore the understanding that engaging directly with oppositional stakeholders offered both participants an opportunity to share perspectives. Additionally, Fuller used the engagement as an opportunity to advocate for proposed increased funding to support public education. In a similar light, consider the perspective of Superintendent Moore who elaborated the thinking on engaging with oppositional stakeholders expressed by the other superintendents in reflecting on her experience with finance committee members when budget conflicts arose:
A successful strategy is to invite people in for conversations and answer questions. To give them the data they want, within reason. Because when you are working with the financial committee and when you are working with the town, they want to audit you. What they want to do, their natural inclination is to audit your books to try and reconcile down to the penny and try to understand what you did and then have opinions about it. But you have to stop and understand their context and what they are trying to achieve.

The data related to the theme of understanding constituencies’ perspectives made clear that the participating superintendents placed a premium on understanding the perspectives held by oppositional constituents. Furthermore, these superintendents also understood that certain constituencies, specifically finance committee members, could and often did bring a fiscally conservative perspective to budgeting. The superintendents in this study also perceived that these stakeholders, as a result of this fiscally conservative perspective, typically entered into the governance process from an oppositional starting point. In their management of this difference, the superintendents directly engaged with these stakeholders in an effort to justify the needs of the school district as they pertained to proposed spending increases. Superintendent Susanna Moore, who reflected on how she personally coped with oppositional stakeholders and advisers, made a concluding point on the character needed to manage conflicting perspectives:

This is a job that you can feel just fragments into very intense, different needs at all times. And I think, to navigate that landscape you have got to be able to center yourself. So your own wellness, your own emotional wellness, your own balance, I think is essential. You see a lot of people talk about that, ‘being mindfulness’, because it keeps you from overreacting or from feeling run over.
A notable component of Superintendent Moore’s reflection was how she maintained personal balance for herself as she sought support for the schools when engaging with a dynamic and politically charged landscape. Another method that she and other participating superintendents utilized in contending with their respective political landscapes was through leveraging community support.

**Leveraging Community Support.** The fourth theme that emerged was how the participating superintendents employed community support in the process of governance. Superintendents in this research study reported seeking to identify shared interests and to leverage that as support in advancing the interests of public education in the governance process. This theme emerged time and again as reported in the experiences of the participants. Illustrating this point, Superintendent Susanna Moore remarked that identifying supportive constituencies in the community was important to help her engage in the process of collaborative governance. Specifically she would look for opportunities to get to know the various “players in the community” and attempt to understand what was really important to them. Recognizing the importance of leveraging different support constituencies, she commented:

> One thing that is really important is knowing your community and understanding the values that ground them. Right? Because those stakeholders will have different levels of intensity to you. They are all important, and you want to know and understand them all, but some of them will have more weight, because of the values in the town.

A common view expressed by research participants was that building strategic alliances with like-minded stakeholders could offer leverage important in influencing the governance process. The superintendents repeatedly mentioned the parent population as being a very supportive group of stakeholders. Articulating this understanding, Superintendent Richard Warren reflected:
One of the advantages and one of the things that you try to leverage in the community is the popularity of the public schools. The fact that many people live here because of the schools…so as a result, you have a bunch of parents that feel really passionate about their schools. And they vote. And they can be leveraged.

Superintendent Warren valued parent participation and sought to actively leverage their influence in the governance process. One example of how he did this was to marshal support to vote for a proposed tax override. He explained his desire to collaborate with other stakeholders in town governance and his plan to leveraging supportive parents:

In light of the fact that we were going to be seeing lower state support in education than we did the previous year, the school committee and I decided together that an override was going to happen. We specifically reached out to other departments and said, ‘we are going to need an override and we feel that we can bring a lot of parents to the table’.

Come to find out, [later] the override passed.

Similar to Superintendent Billington’s view of leveraging parents in the governance process, Superintendent Warren understood that parents were essential allies in the community.

Superintendent Billington viewed the interests of the parent population as directly aligned with that of the public school system. In this context, Billington shared how he engaged with parents:

You have got to strategically find the families, the partners, in our community that are really invested in the schools. So, I really think part of it is being visible and approachable. The superintendent who sits behind the desk all day, will not last. So being visible…showing your face, going to open houses, holding community coffees for families…. I do a community book read where I choose a book and I invite the entire
community to participate. We ran it through the library, which is a great way for me to
get to know many families.

In addition to identifying and leveraging constituencies in the community who are supportive of
public schools, the participating superintendents also expressed the belief that it is critical to
understand where community support is lacking. Superintendent William Brewster, who was
keenly aware of the importance engaging with, or at times without, certain stakeholders in
collaborative governance, refined the point even further:

    You have to be strategic in who represents the stakeholder groups or who you engage in
    being the representative of the different groups; otherwise you can get jammed up on one
    particular issue with one small constituency.

In further elaborating the superintendent’s role in leveraging community support in the
governance process, Superintendent Elizabeth Hopkins was also attentive to when public
perception dictated that she should occupy a less publicly visible position. She commented, “I
would much rather have the outcomes that I want. It doesn’t matter if it is me or not.”

Recognizing the importance for community support, these comments revealed her astute
understanding of appealing to public perception. She continued, “It wasn’t going to be me that
was going to convince them. It was going to be youth groups. It was going to be people who will
use it all the time.” Additionally, Hopkins reflected:

    Sometimes it is just getting the right people out in front. So when we were going to do a
    more robust security camera system, we decided that it would be the Police Chief that
    would stand up at the town meeting floor and not me. I was ready, willing and able, but
    when the Police Chief stands up and talks about the issue [snaps fingers]. Very little
    discussion. We talk a lot about who is the best person to get up there and front the issue.
Superintendent William Brewster rounded out the extent to which leveraging community support was a crucial activity of the position in sharing a story of how the parent community actively supported the public schools in response to an oppositional board of selectmen:

We have a select board that has five selectmen. None of which had children in the schools. And the parents rallied; so the two seats that were open now have parents with children in the schools in those slots. And I am quite confident that the selectperson’s seat that is open for this year, has very much tempered her approach to the schools.

Throughout the data on the theme of leveraging community support, superintendents repeatedly expressed their understanding that parents constitute a critically supportive constituency they could leverage during the process of collaborative governance for the benefit of the public schools.

**Managing Disagreement.** The final theme that emerged out of the research participants’ experiences involved how superintendents managed disagreements in matters of governance. In this context, these superintendents expressed a desire to avoid disagreeing in public, especially during town meeting, with other participants of town governance. For example, Superintendent Tilley, speaking of his experiences navigating budget conversations with the finance committee, emphasized a desire to avoid airing disagreements in public settings, “If there is a disagreement; we tend to work it out. Last thing anyone of us wants to do is to have that disagreement on town meeting floor. So yes, we build consensus there”. Superintendent Browne also echoed the desire to avoid engaging in public disagreements with stakeholders:

The goal has always been to try to compromise so that we don’t fight this out on the town meeting floor. I think in many ways we [the school department] have a greater chance of winning on town meeting floor because of the ability to mobilize parents, but that would
forever change the relationship. In a lot of towns that is an acerbic relationship and it is hard to get it back.

They ways in which the superintendents reported managing conflict varied, however many expressed a desire to negotiate behind closed doors to arrive at agreements with stakeholders. Superintendent Sam Fuller reinforced the notion of getting participants in town governance on the same page before engaging in public hearings on the budget:

I meet monthly with the town managers and finance directors of both towns. My finance director and I meet, and sometimes the treasurer will be there and be involved. We try to get budget understandings before you have to go take it to the board level. So last year we had worked out the budget behind closed doors with the partners.

Expressing a similar goal of limiting public disagreements, Superintendent Warren reported placing a premium on communicating directly with stakeholders regarding contentious issues. Specifically, he recounted the importance of meeting privately with school committee members to inform them of issues, preferably before conflicts arose. He shared his view that meeting privately with stakeholders could allow him to manage misperceptions and thereby limit disagreements that would then play out in the public eye of school committee meetings, which are governed by Open Meeting Law in Massachusetts:

The worst offense that a superintendent can ever make is to have a school committee member surprised. So my job is to make sure that there are no surprises. Part of that is, explaining during orientation that these are some of the big issues that tend to come up from time to time. These folks are connected.

While attempting to manage disagreements that arise in the process of town governance, Superintendent Moore acknowledged that the complexity of the school budget building process
could be confusing for stakeholders unfamiliar with school finance laws. In this context, she remarked on how she found it necessary at times to both educate and counter the positions of finance committee members. To this end, Moore reflected:

The budget is very complex with the complexity of codes and accounts and regulations. It is not easy. And so, you have people on the town side who think business law for how budgets and accounting work; and a lot of them are auditors. They come to this and they are the auditors of the town, but the rules and the laws are so different for circuit breaker and what you can actually do in the allocations. So there is this tension. I am trying to educate them, while working with them. It is very complex.

Building and defending a school budget from an auditing process by critical finance committee members is rooted in line items and expense analysis. Superintendent Billington explained his strategy to tell the story behind the budget:

I think it is about telling the story about where the schools are today. It is writing the narrative that we are a very successful district and that the families that have moved into our community have come to expect a high quality education and that it comes at a cost at times.

Superintendent Hopkins made a point about being authentic as a way to connect with the constituents that provides a concluding insight into the complexities of the superintendent’s role in engaging with the town budgeting process:

My success in this job, I think, is that I am a very genuine person. I say what I think and I really don’t hold anything back. When you get to know me, you know I am who I am. And that really matters to people, because in the end all politics is local. And I keep that in mind because they care about this community. But all politics really is local.
Summary of Research Findings

The purpose of the research was to gain a better understanding of the ways in which eight Massachusetts superintendents made sense of and engaged with a divergent constituency in the wider context of school governance. The findings of this research study reported in chapter 4 clustered around five emergent themes. First, participating superintendents placed a premium on cultivating professional and personal relationships with stakeholders who actively participated in town governance. Second, while this engagement was marked by an initial desire to reach consensus, the participants were also intensely aware that complete agreement with stakeholders could be unobtainable at times. Third, in an effort to resolve differences that arose, superintendents consistently made a concerted effort to understand the perspective of these stakeholders. Fourth, while engaging with the political environment surrounding town governance, the superintendents also sought to leverage constituencies in the community that were most supportive of their own positions. Fifth, the final theme that emerged from the findings involved the perspective that participating superintendents desired to manage disagreements with stakeholders in private.

This chapter also introduced the eight public school superintendents who participated in this IPA research study. It is important to acknowledge that these findings only represent the experiences of the eight research participants and are reflective of their comparable, yet ultimately individual perceptions of small town politics. After hearing how these multiple voices from educational practice engaged with stakeholders in collaborative governance several conclusions can be drawn. The next chapter discusses these conclusions and the data from which they are drawn through existing theoretical models of collaborative governance. It also situates these research findings into the context of the body of literature that was reviewed in Chapter
Two and suggests further how this research makes new contributions to the knowledge of how superintendents engage with and manage their complex roles as school leaders.
Chapter Five: Discussion of Research Findings

Chapter five presents a discussion of this dissertation’s research findings in the context of the extant literature and theory. The research problem the research centered on are the difficulties public school superintendents have encountered when engaging with their respective political landscapes of town governance (Bird, 2011; Björk & Lindle, 2001; Kowalski et al., 2011), especially when faced with oppositional stakeholders during the budget building process (Abshier et al., 2011; Hess, 2010; Johnson, 2012; Mountford, 2004; Slosson, 2000). I examined the phenomenon of superintendent engagement in collaborative governance using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009). I present three major findings from this qualitative research study in light of the review of relevant academic literature and theoretical models of collaborative governance presented in chapter two (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). The three findings are as follows: (1) participating superintendents influenced the political landscape by cultivating positive relationships with stakeholders; (2) superintendent engagement with stakeholders is contextually dependent upon local conditions; and (3) superintendent engagement with stakeholders in small town governance is shaped by experience. Finally, I discuss the implications of this research on the problem it addressed and considerations for further research.

Revisiting the Purpose of the Study

The goal of this IPA study was to better understand how superintendents engage with stakeholders when governing. While listening to dissatisfied constituents is certainly part of a superintendents’ job, it is in the context of town governance where a superintendent must interact politically with school and finance committee members, as well as with municipal department heads in order to build collaborative decisions necessary to plan, implement and manage public
services. Among the superintendents’ various responsibilities for participating in collaborative
governing, developing a budget poses an especially challenging task because superintendents are
required to solicit public feedback. Massachusetts law requires local governments, including
school committees and superintendents, to hold budgetary hearings that are inclusive of open
public participation (Mass. Gen. Laws Ch. 71, § 38N, 2014). Because the process of town
governance is decidedly collaborative in nature, shared-decision making can easily become
encumbered by conflict from oppositional stakeholders who compete over fiscal resources. To
achieve its purpose given this context, this study especially focused on how superintendents
engaged with oppositional stakeholders in the process of collaborative town governance
commonly encountered in the budget-building process.

**Reviewing the Methodology**

This qualitative study investigated how eight public school superintendents serving in
suburban Massachusetts towns understand their interactions with stakeholders who, at times, can
be oppositional. The dissertation was guided by the use of an Interpretative Phenomenological
Analysis (IPA) methodology to describe, analyze and interpret the experiences shared by the
research participants (Clarke, 2009; Pringle et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009). The sample of eight
superintendents fell within the recommended range of five to ten research participants as
outlined by IPA research (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Clarke, 2009; Smith et al., 2009).
Additionally, IPA was employed to specifically investigate the interpersonal approaches of the
eight superintendents as they engaged in their respective political landscapes of small town
politics. Given the aim and context of the study, the research was guided by a single overarching
research question:
• How do superintendents’ understand their experiences engaging with divergent stakeholders in collaborative governance?

Two sub questions further focused this inquiry in an effort to more deeply probe the phenomenon of superintendent engagement in collaborative governance:

• How do superintendents identify and understand viewpoints held by constituents?
• How do superintendents engage with constituents holding divergent viewpoints?

Guided by these research questions, I gathered qualitative data using semi-structured interviews as the primary instrument. Then, using a recursive process of a deep descriptive exploration (Chan et al., 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Shosha, 2012), the transcript data resulting from the interviews was thematically coded. The first step of the analysis was a line-by-line reading of each interview transcript to summarize the essence of the phenomena as experienced by the superintendent. Through this initial analytical step, emergent themes were identified that were specific to each superintendent and descriptive of their engagement with stakeholders.

Next, connections in the ways in which the eight superintendents engaged with divergent stakeholders across all cases were drawn. This second step was accomplished using Moustakas’ (1994) cross-cases analytic process of Horizontalization. Using Horizontalization was an important analytic step for this research because it enabled comparisons and highlighted similarities and differences in the participants’ understandings and perspectives.

As the report of research findings in Chapter Four described, five themes in the ways which the eight superintendents understood their engagement with stakeholders emerged through the analytical processes. These cross-case themes indicated that the participating superintendents managed their engagement with the political landscape and engaged with stakeholders by: (1) cultivating relationships, (2) seeking consensus, (3) understanding the perspectives of
stakeholders, (4) leveraging community support, (5) and, managing disagreements with oppositional stakeholders in private. It is necessary to acknowledge that while the five emergent themes paint a robust and complex portrait, these themes and the subsequent findings discussed in this chapter only represent the experiences of the eight research participants. While the five themes were distinct, they were also interrelated leading to further consolidation into three major findings. Discussion of the three findings with respect to the research questions, the academic literature, and the theoretical models of governance are presented next.

Based on the themes that emerged from interview data collected in this study, the three major findings from this study are as follows:

1. Participating superintendents influenced the political landscape by cultivating positive relationships with stakeholders.
2. The scarcity and accessibility of financial resources influence the ways in which superintendents navigate the political landscape and engage with stakeholders in town governance.
3. Superintendent engagement practices with oppositional stakeholders within the collaborative governance process relate to their past experiences.

It is important to acknowledge that the experiences of each one of the eight research participants were situated in an environment of governance located in different small, affluent suburban towns. The theoretical work of Ansell and Gash (2008) and Emerson et al. (2012) help to capture both the participants’ unique and shared experiences and present the complex dynamics at play.

**Theoretical Framework**

for this dissertation. They are both complementary and have conceptual overlap when viewing
the phenomena of superintendent engagement with stakeholders. First and foremost, Ansell and
Gash’s (2008) model of collaborative governance outlined several dynamics associated with
effective collaborative town governance. Specifically, the model is process-based and highlights
the importance of trust building, commitment, shared understanding, and the necessity of face-
to-face dialogue. As discussed in Chapter Four, these dynamics were widely reflected in the
experiences shared by the eight superintendents in this dissertation research. In comparison,
Emerson et al.’s (2012) *Integrative Framework of Collaborative Governance* is distinct from
Ansell and Gash’s (2008) model because it focuses on the concept of engagement in governance.
The concept of engagement was a central aspect of this research study, and one not theoretically
addressed by Ansell and Gash’s model. Further, Emerson et al.’s (2012) construct of *principled*
engagement, which is composed of four fundamental components, (1) discovery; (2) definition;
(3) deliberation; (4) determination, was infused throughout all three findings of this study. Taken
together, the two models provide more comprehensive framework for understanding the
participants’ experiences and how this dissertation research contributes to the literature on the
complexities of the school district superintendent’s position.

The findings of this dissertation research consider both the distinct and interrelated
influences of collaborative governance, the budget-building process, and interpersonal
engagements with constituents in small town politics that describe superintendent engagement
with stakeholders. It also contributes to the existing research on the school superintendent’s role.
For example, Ljungholm (2014) recognized a gap in the literature regarding how stakeholders
work collaboratively in the process of governance. Similarly recognizing a gap, Grissom (2014)
concluded that there has been surprisingly little research on the interpersonal aspect of conflict in
education governance. Additionally, Newman et al. (2004) declared that issue of difference, dissent and conflict have been rarely addressed by academic research centering on governance. Despite the lack of comprehensive prior empirical research in this highly specific context of inquiry, limited aspects of this phenomenon have been investigated and are subsequently reflected in the following discussion of findings.

Findings

The findings represent the complex dynamics of the participants’ experiences, informed by both the common themes shared by the participants and the unique contextual differences specific to each town. Furthermore, the three findings were in accordance with three other elements that contributed to this research: (1) they largely confirm what is already understood in the literature; (2) they reinforce the value of the overlapping elements from the two theoretical models of governance employed in analyzing the data (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012), and (3) they further define a complex, collaborative and conflict-laden phenomenon of superintendent engagement with oppositional stakeholders. These relationships are elaborated below in the discussions of each one of the three following findings: relationship building, role of context and experience-informed engagement.

Participating superintendents influenced the political landscape by cultivating positive relationships with stakeholders. The superintendents expressed the importance of nurturing and leveraging positive relationships with stakeholders to the process of collaborative town governance. This first finding strongly echoed in the experiences shared by all eight participants. While there was diversity in the participants’ experiences and a unique array of examples shared, superintendents in this study consistently stressed the importance of cultivating positive relationships with stakeholders. Furthermore, building positive relationships was
understood by the superintendents to be an especially valuable political tool within town governance. The following discussion of the first major finding cites the sub concepts associated with how the superintendents cultivated relationships with stakeholders that emerged in the data. These help to explain the major elements of how they cultivated these relationships and included: trust building, direct dialogue, understanding stakeholder concerns and developing a shared understanding.

**Trust-building.** In this study, superintendents held a nearly synonymous understanding between trust-building and the importance of cultivating relationships with stakeholders. It became evident through this study that superintendents valued fostering relationships with school committee, finance committee and board of selectmen members, among many other constituencies, in an effort to establish creditability and build effective relationships. Ansell and Gash’s (2008) concept of trust-building as an element of the collaborative process of governance was widely supported by the experiences of the research participants. Time and again superintendents commented on the necessity of being genuine and approachable for stakeholders as a benefit to governance. A comment from Superintendent Moore exemplifies this notion, “I think that good quality leadership and governance interactions, in terms of bringing the stakeholders together, is built on trust, relationships and loyalty.” As an engagement technique for building trust, superintendents understood the importance of intentional and transparent communication with stakeholders. Finally, the superintendents in this study explained that they attempted to establish trust by building both professional as well as personal relationships with stakeholders.

**Direct Dialogue.** Communication with stakeholders on an individual level was strongly preferred by superintendents in this study in an effort to build relationships. Uniformly then,
these research participants provided support to Ansell and Gash’s (2008) claim that, “direct dialogue is necessary for stakeholders to identify opportunities for mutual gain” (p. 558). The superintendents in this study stressed the importance of engaging with stakeholders in a private and face-to-face setting. Furthermore, they expressed as especially important the value of this type of communication with oppositional stakeholders during times of conflict. The research participants shared a desire to avoid public disagreements and work out conflict with stakeholders behind closed doors. They also relished the opportunity to manage misperceptions on an individual level, which again highlighted the desire to govern through positive relationships.

When engaging with stakeholders, the participating superintendents continuously expressed a desire to communicate clearly, consistently, and with open intentionality with stakeholders. Adding complexity to their engagement, the superintendents also shared that many stakeholders can be unfamiliar with school finance regulations. As such, some superintendents felt compelled at times to simultaneously educate and push back upon finance committee recommendations. Throughout their engagement with oppositional stakeholders in town governance, superintendents desired reaching consensus. However, they also understood the challenge associated in doing so and reported experiencing conflict in this stage of governance.

A key component of superintendent communication with oppositional stakeholders was the importance of listening. The superintendents commonly desired to communicate on an individual level with stakeholders while deliberating over conflicting points of view. In times of conflict, the superintendents generally sought to leverage a supportive community and apply political pressure to advance the interests of public schools. However, in analyzing the process
leading up to public disagreement, it was unmistakable that the superintendents valued acquiring a better understanding of the positions held by stakeholders, especially in managing conflict.

**Understanding Stakeholder Concerns.** Superintendents in this study strongly desired to understand the perspectives of stakeholders and sought opportunities to address misconceptions. Specifically, several superintendents understood that this required pro-active communication methods and directed outreach on their part to engage with oppositional stakeholders. They reported doing so by strategically attending public events in an effort to demonstrate visibility and willingness to listen. The discovery stage in Emerson et al.’s (2012) *Integrative Framework of Collaborative Governance* model involves the ways in which superintendents acquired an understanding of the positions, interests and concerns held by stakeholders. Furthermore, the superintendents in this study intentionally interacted with stakeholders in the community such as senior citizens groups, veterans, members of the business community as well as other participants in town government like the board of selectmen and finance committee members in an effort to better understand existing concerns. In this way, these findings have many similarities with that reflected in Ansell and Gash’s (2008) concept of shared understanding.

As the participating superintendents sought to discover stakeholders’ beliefs and positions, they also valued identifying areas where interests of stakeholders aligned. They placed a premium on categorizing the positions held by stakeholders and investigating links between stakeholders. For example, one superintendent in this study formally collected perception data from stakeholders using a wide-ranging survey. A characteristic common to superintendents’ experiences was how they desired to understand prevailing stakeholder concerns and anticipate potential reactions by constituents.
Developing a Shared Understanding. Throughout this study, the superintendents reported valuing a shared understanding with oppositional stakeholders. A common characteristic of how they desired understanding prevailing concerns was as an aid to anticipate potential reactions by constituents. Specific to the context of collaborative town governance and the budget-building process, the superintendents commonly were frustrated by an inability to reach initial consensus with finance committee members. When engaging in the back and forth negotiations with finance committee members associated with building the school budget, superintendents expressed a common need to better understand the perspectives, priorities and motivations of the finance committee and also communicate the perspectives of the public school district. They reported doing so by gathering and analyzing perception data and actively and openly engaging with oppositional stakeholders. Additionally, in an effort to foster this shared understanding, the superintendents were deliberate in their communication and strategic in their patterns of engagement. Superintendent Tilley’s comment expresses some of the motivation behind this behavior:

You know you have to put yourself out there. You don’t only choose the friendly places for you to show up and to meet. I think there is a lot that we can do proactively using social media.

Despite the belief that developing a shared understanding with oppositional stakeholders was conducive to effective town governance, superintendents in this study remained earnestly aware of the difficulty in doing so. Their statements commonly reflected their understanding that reaching consensus with oppositional stakeholders was difficult.

In developing a shared understanding with stakeholders, superintendents in this study also understood the importance of identifying and celebrating small wins when engaging with
oppositional stakeholders as a way to build support for future collaboration. Sharing this view, Ansell and Gash (2008) concluded, “If prior antagonism is high and a long-term commitment to trust building is necessary, then intermediate outcomes that produce small wins are particularly crucial” (p. 561). Expanding on this point, the superintendents in this study demonstrated a desire to find initial areas of collaboration with stakeholders as a way to build momentum and also cultivate relationships. They did so by including oppositional stakeholders in low stakes projects in which both sides shared a common interest. Additionally, superintendents in this study also desired to support the projects and goals that other stakeholders valued. In an effort to foster reciprocity and political horse-trading with stakeholders, superintendents expressed a willingness to offer minor concessions in the short term if they perceived the possibility for long-term benefit for the schools.

**Connections to the Literature.** Researchers have found that effective superintendent leadership is defined at least in part by the ability to build positive relationships (Goens, 2009; Phillips & Phillips, 2007). The research also is clear that superintendents need to develop relationships with key stakeholders in the political landscape surrounding public education (Alsbury, 2008; Björk and Kowalski, 2005; Blumberg, 1985; Glass et al., 2000; Grissom, & Andersen, 2012; Hawk & Martin, 2011). These prevalent concepts noted in the academic literature were also found in the experiences reported by superintendents in this study. Specifically, the superintendents attempted to foster positive partnerships with the other participants in town governance, such as members of the board of selectmen, finance committee, school committee, and other municipal department heads. The superintendents in this study also expressed a desire to build relationships with constituent groups in the town such as, senior citizens, parents and members of the business community.
The academic literature confirms the notion shared by research participants that establishing positive relationships, on both personal and professional levels, with stakeholders supports the process of collaborative governance. When cultivating positive relationships with stakeholders, superintendents in this study expressed understanding the benefit of deliberate and inclusive communication. Moreover, in an effort to build these relationships, the superintendents engaged with stakeholders using direct, open and strategic methods of communication to connect. Superintendent Tilley captured this well in stating, “We need to be very proactive in our communication because the way things work today is that if you are not actively communicating; someone else is filling that void.” Existing academic literature confirms this position (Bird, 2011, Björk & Lindel, 2001; Kowalski, 2012). For example, Bird’s (2011) research recommends that superintendents must actively seek stakeholder involvement and use open communication methods. Providing a contrasting example that serves to also support active superintendent communication, Björk and Lindel (2001) concluded that superintendents who do not engage with stakeholders could actually exacerbate conflicts.

Superintendents in this study reported understanding the importance of identifying areas of common ground as conflicts with stakeholders emerged. They did so by first identifying key constituencies, gathering and analyzing perception data, attempting to build alliances, and including supportive stakeholders into the process of governance. This finding parallels Bryson’s (2004) claim that organizational leaders should engage with stakeholders for the purpose of identifying and analyzing concerns. Similarly, Van Maasakkers et al. (2014) advocates that leaders identify stakeholders and categorize the positions held in an effort to explore links between groups. The research participants in this study continuously stressed the
importance of establishing and nurturing relationships with key stakeholders in the belief that these relationships can support collaborative town governance.

While there is little research into superintendent engagement with stakeholders and political activities in town governance, other research into differences in school board and superintendent relationships does offer some insights valuable to the present discussion of the research findings. Specifically, Hatrick (2010) emphasized the importance of reaching consensus with stakeholders and stressed the political benefit of forming allies:

Personalities and interpersonal relationships play a large role in the success of superintendents and school boards, especially when board members and the superintendent have differences of opinion and cannot reach consensus about the goals and the direction of the school district (Hatrick, 2010, p. 42).

Hatrick’s (2010) comments are consistent with the findings in this dissertation that the foundation of positive relationships with stakeholders is solidly built upon conditions of trust, developing a shared understanding, and the discovery of common interests. The experiences of the research participants in this study confirm the importance of building authentic relationships with stakeholders. Adamson (2012) stated that, “…the relationship must be nurtured, not to artificially manipulate an outcome or to placate the partnership, but rather because the task of oversight and operation exceeds the individual capabilities of one or the other” (p. 10). The analysis of superintendents understanding in this study ultimately support that nurturing positive relationships with stakeholders is beneficial to navigating the political landscape, especially in the context of financial leadership in town governance.

Superintendent engagement with stakeholders is contextually dependent upon local conditions. Participating superintendents reported that the scarcity and accessibility of financial
resources of the local community directly influenced the ways in which they engaged with the political landscape and with stakeholders in town governance. They also cited the context of the local community as well as the culture in their town’s governance as influencing the ways in which they participated in the political landscape. This second research finding was especially pronounced when comparing the stakeholder engagement experiences of the eight research participants. Throughout this study, those superintendents serving in communities with an abundance of fiscal resources have shared a greater tendency to abide by the budgetary guidelines and recommendations set by forth by the finance committee. In contrast, superintendents in this study situated in communities with less fiscal resources reported being less inclined to follow the budgetary guidelines proposed from the financial committee than their colleagues serving in communities with ample funding sources.

Moreover, the superintendent’s inclination to disregard the budgetary guidelines proposed by finance committees was especially noticeable when it was understood that a supportive parent community could be leveraged in town governance. As such, a relationship emerged in the data surrounding the scarcity of financial resources in the town and a superintendents’ belief in a supportive parent community, which ultimately affected the degree of collaborative commitment on the part of the superintendent.

**Variable Commitment in the Collaborative Governance Process.** Superintendents in this research study reported experiencing inconsistent stakeholder commitment to the process of collaborative town governance. Furthermore, some superintendents admitted that they themselves did not always enter into collaborative town governance process bearing a committed aim to collaborate. The oppositional and non-collaborative stance surrounded the formal guidelines associated with building a school budget. Specifically, several superintendents
understood that members of the finance committee were oppositional in collaborative town governance as a result of the differing initial starting points respective to budget recommendations.

Given the division between superintendents and oppositional stakeholders, some superintendents reported being less committed than others to the process of collaborative governance. It is important to note that in these cases, the superintendents had come to view their non-participation in collaborative governance with oppositional stakeholders through a lens of doing what is in the best interest for students. Additionally, in these instances it is important to point out that superintendents also understood that a greater scarcity of resources in the community heightened competition among participants in governance. Conversely, in those towns with more abundant resources, superintendents generally appeared more committed to the process of collaborative governance. Emblematic of the dynamic between ample and accessible financial resources and collaborative governance, Superintendent William Brewster described his understanding, “I think that this is really simple. It is a community that has the ability to be self-sufficient. There are resources. It is not wealthy, but it is a stable financial community.” While the superintendents’ interpretations of the financial and political landscape in each of their towns differed with respect to conditions of scarcity and accessibility, they all strongly valued understanding the pulse of the community.

The eight superintendents in this study were highly aware and concerned about public perceptions of the schools. They stressed the importance of knowing the community and being able to understand the values and priorities of stakeholders. Additionally, when reflecting on how they managed their engagement in the political landscape, several superintendents in this study remarked that their advocacy for the schools in town governance was actually in alignment
with the interests of the community. In their engagement with stakeholders in the governance of small towns, superintendents in this study reported having come to understand a complex political environment. The superintendents’ engagement with stakeholders and willingness to compromise was uniquely tied to how they understood the political environment of the community.

Expanding on this point, the superintendents as a group reported navigating the financial political landscape with an eye for seeking stakeholder consensus; however this way of operating also appeared to be heavily contextualized and influenced by the political environment unique to each town. Superintendents in this study, especially in certain communities, communicated feeling compelled to openly disagree with other members in governance. While limited, these instances of open disagreements were worthy of further analysis. The superintendents who had expressed a willingness to openly disagree with the proposed budgetary guidelines and recommendations put forth by the finance committee did so when they perceived an urgent need for additional resources and the unwillingness to compromise from opposing stakeholders. These superintendents also shared the belief that a culture of competition over fiscal resources was prevalent in town governance. In sharp contrast, superintendents who had come to view town funding sources as originating from healthy and accessible fiscal conditions expressed a greater desire to, “play by the rules”, and “get along” with the other participants in town governance. In the communities where superintendents deemed it necessary to openly oppose the finance committee, they shared an understanding that established and positive relationships with the parent community were a valuable asset to be leveraged politically in town governance. It is important to add however, that in this context, superintendents also understood that their school boards were unified and supportive of their open opposition. Given the variable commitment
from stakeholders and superintendents to collaborative governance, it is no wonder that the budget-building process was described as a complex political endeavor.

**Complexity of Budget-building Process.** In the experiences reported by the research participants in this study and cited in the academic literature (Hess, 2010; Johnson, 2012; Mountford, 2004; Slosson, 2000), the budget-building process emerged as a frequent context in which agreement between stakeholders and superintendents was challenging. The academic literature is clear that superintendents need to be able to successfully manage school finances (Abshier et al., 2011; Dlott, 2007) and the literature is also clear that when superintendents struggle to do so, turnover is likely (Glass et al., 2000). Specifically, superintendent financial mismanagement has been the second leading cause for superintendent dismissal (Glass et al., 2000). The superintendents who participated in this dissertation expressed understanding the critical nature and high stakes associated with effective financial management. Furthermore, the superintendents understood that positive relationships with stakeholders could support the process of building budgets. The comments made by Superintendent Susanna Moore were emblematic of this understanding:

> I’ll like to have a more fluid command of directing my business manager to what I want.

> You don’t want that relationship inverted. A big stakeholder relationship is that relationship. It is a huge relationship [superintendent and business manager]. That is the one that you lose your job over. Right? It is always the money.

It was commonly reported by superintendents in this study that engaging with the political environment of small towns was at times frustrating. This frustration involved the difficulty of engaging with oppositional stakeholders, such as finance committee members, notably during the budget-building process. As research has indicated (Choi & Robertson, 2013), collaborative
governance is intended to be a deliberative process, however during the stage of deliberation superintendents in this study commonly faced local political obstacles involving school budgets.

To overcome these challenges, superintendents in this study reported using strategic and inclusive engagement practices with stakeholders. The notion that superintendents should involve key stakeholders in the goal setting process, and communicate with constituents in a timely manner is strongly supported by the academic literature (Banks, Maloney, Stewart & Webber, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006). The experiences shared by the research participants in this study were largely reflective of the academic literature. For example, superintendents in this study strategically communicated with stakeholders in an effort to describe the “what-if scenarios” and highlight the possible impact of proposed school budgets upon students. Furthermore, superintendents also framed their financial management and advocacy with stakeholders in a narrative fashion in a deliberate attempt to “tell the story behind the budget.” Superintendents described that their purpose for using strategic plans was to lay out a clear vision for the district for stakeholders. Finally, superintendents in this study reported understanding the importance of communicating a “needs-based” budget with stakeholders to gain broader political support in the community. When building a “needs-based” school budget, superintendents were also aware of the benefit of including stakeholders in the governance process to promote buy-in and develop a shared understanding. Regardless of the differing stakeholder and superintendent commitment to the process of collaborative town governance and the inherent complexity of the school budget-building process, financial agreement must be reached.

**Financial Determinations.** Ultimately, an output of the collaborative town governance process is the determination of the approved school budget. Officially this is achieved by a prior
compromise among participants in town governance, or marked by a vote on town meeting floor. Should a financial compromise not be reached, it is important to remember that local governments are constrained by *Proposition 2 ½*, a law that restricts towns and cities from raising property taxes above 2.5% annually (Mass. Gen. Laws Ch. 59, § 21C). While many superintendents in this study expressed a desire to compromise and avoid *Proposition 2 ½* entirely, some still felt compelled to bring an override vote forward. The superintendents’ understanding in this path was largely based upon the degree to which a supportive parental constituency could be leveraged for political support. Overall, the superintendents in this study reflected on their experience of the town governance process in both collaborative and non-collaborative terms, which depended to a degree upon how superintendents’ understood the local conditions in the community at the time.

The participating superintendents understood that conflict with oppositional stakeholders was at times unavoidable, especially when constituents held differing positions and if there was noticeable competition over fiscal resources. In their clear communication with oppositional stakeholders, the superintendents used a variety of engagement strategies. One superintendent constantly framed each financial decision in terms of how it would impact students, while many other participants reported using a strategic plan for the school district in an effort to drive ongoing budget conversations with finance committee members. These superintendents reported a common strategy was to simply be open and available to meet with stakeholders to hopefully arrive at agreements. These identified differences reflected the diverse experiences of practicing superintendents mediated by the unique conditions found in the local political and fiscal environment.
Connections to the Literature. The ways in which superintendents understand their financial engagement with oppositional stakeholders in collaborative town governance has not been fully researched and reported in the academic literature (Bird, 2011; Björk & Lindle, 2001; Kowalski et al., 2011). Furthermore, the literature thus far has emphasized the importance of politically savvy superintendents who are able to build trust, mobilize support, and promote buy-in with constituents (Goens, 2009; Portis, & Garcia, 2007; Tremblay, 2014). However, research had yet to directly focus on how superintendents managed the political and financial environment of town governance until this dissertation research was completed (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Hatrick, 2010; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986). Moreover, academic research offers contradictory conclusions regarding the dynamics in the local political landscape regarding stakeholder opposition and has focused upon superintendent turnover. Most notably, Lutz and Iannaccone’s (1986) seminal ethnographic research titled, “The Dissatisfaction Theory of American Democracy: A guide for Politics in Local School Districts,” postulates that rising stakeholder discontent can ultimately contribute to superintendent turnover. Research participants in this dissertation understood the idea that oppositional stakeholders can mobilize against superintendents. Superintendent Richard Warren, whose comments are illustrative of Lutz and Iannaccone’s (1986) Dissatisfaction Theory provided this perspective:

I have always maintained that one of the reasons that I haven’t lost my job is that because if I was running counter to the culture of this community, people would of…it would have created such tension in the community, that someone or a group would run on an anti-superintendent platform and eventually I would be out of work.

Within Dissatisfaction Theory, Lutz and Iannaccone (1986) concluded that an increase in the number of “special interest groups”, or oppositional stakeholder groups, could lead to the defeat
of incumbent town board members at the polls and eventually foster superintendent dismissal (p. 13). This theory, however, is not fully supported by the academic literature. In sharp contrast, Grissom and Andersen (2012) concluded that superintendent turnover is mostly “apolitical in nature” as turnover has been associated with moves for career advancement, retirements, resignations, as well as terminations (p. 1173). Despite these differences in the reasons for superintendent departures, research has demonstrated a tendency to focus on outcomes of school governance and not on the superintendent’s inter-personal engagement with the political system.

Abshier et al.’s (2011) research study titled, “Superintendent Perspectives of Financial Survival Strategies in Small School Districts” is highly relevant to this finding. Their qualitative narrative study investigated the financial management perceptions of seven superintendents from small school districts in rural Texas. The purpose of their research was to identify effective financial management practices. While governance was not the focus, Abshier et al. concluded, “Each of these superintendents emphasized the importance of involving stakeholders in the process of operating the district” (p. 7). Abshier’s et al.’s research did not investigate they ways in which superintendents involved stakeholders, however their research did support the need for an inclusive and relationship centric process of governance.

It is important to remember that in this study not all participants in town governance, including superintendents themselves, shared a commitment to collaboration. Interestingly, a key aspect of Ansell and Gash’s (2008) model is that all participants who engaged in collaborative governance held a commitment to the process. In addition, Ansell and Gash’s (2008) model is rooted in conditions that foster effective process of collaborative governance, including trust building, committing to the process, developing a shared understanding, and the importance of face-to-face dialogue between participants. However, this dissertation shows that stakeholder
interactions are dependent upon local conditions of the political environments, and the findings emphasize that superintendents navigate collaborative work within complex as opposed to ideal conditions.

**Superintendent engagement with stakeholders in small town governance is shaped by experience.** Superintendents’ prior professional experiences inform how they navigate conflict and opposition within the collaborative governance process. While it is really no surprise that experiences influence behavior, the third finding of this dissertation research adds realistic complexity to the understanding of stakeholder engagement in collaborative town governance. Based on the experiences reported by the superintendents in this study, stakeholder engagement practices are intrapersonal in nature and change overtime. The superintendent’s approaches towards oppositional stakeholders were informed at least in part by the length of tenure in the district and their previous engagement with other stakeholders.

As the superintendents accumulated political experiences with stakeholders over time, their methods of developing relationships and interacting with stakeholders changed. It is important to point out that all superintendents have unique approaches to engaging stakeholders in collaborative governance, and in accordance with IPA research, there is not a “right way” to think about it. Among this group of participants, it seems that those with more experience tended to approach stakeholder engagement in less collaborative and more direct ways. It is prudent to acknowledge the tentative nature of this conclusion, as it was derived from the small sample size which does not intend to suggest such relationships have implications in any generalizable way. Nevertheless, the superintendents’ experiences and stories captured in this study support the finding that engagement approaches are deeply informed by professional experience and evolve toward over time, sometimes toward a more directive approach.
**Veteran Superintendent Engagement.** The more experienced research participants in this study communicated a greater willingness to engage with oppositional stakeholders using less collaborative approaches in governance. In comparing the ways in which veteran superintendents understood engagement, they more frequently commented upon the necessity for direct action. Superintendent Fuller, a veteran with 9 years of experience, reflected upon how he had changed his engagement approaches with oppositional stakeholders in governance over time:

> I have now started to come out more directly and ‘in your face’. I think my first couple of years as a superintendents, I was less likely to roll up my sleeves and fight if I needed to. Nowadays, I have adopted a mentality that we superintendents have a limited shelf life and what is best for our constituency is to roll up your sleeves and fight for them.

Perhaps motivated by a clear understanding that time in the superintendency was limited, the veteran superintendents in this study were keenly aware of their own professional mortality. The average amount of professional experience for all research participants in this study was a little over five years (Appendix D). This figure falls between the national average of eight years in total experience and two to three years average length of tenure in one position (Glass et al., 2000, p. 42). With these national figures in mind, the veteran voices of Superintendents Fuller, 9 years, Tilley, 8 years, and Warren, with 12 years of experience, echo the sense of urgency and a greater willingness to fight with oppositional stakeholders, noticeably more so than was reported by their less experienced colleagues.

The veteran superintendents were also aware that unresolved conflicts and opposition can grow over time. Superintendent Tilley shared:

> I think that you [a superintendent] have a grace period when you come in and I think that there is some novelty. I think that, like in any relationship, you can have that 7 or 8 year
itch. I have some people who are tired of me. Maybe you have had some conflicts over
time and those…you tend to accumulate those over time and that can be a problem.

Superintendent Warren, the most experienced of all research participants, summarized his firm
understanding for direct civic engagement, “If it is worth fighting for; it is worth fighting for.
And if you do not have that belief, then in my view you do not belong in the superintendency to
begin with”.

Interestingly, and adding complexity to the third finding, the less experienced
superintendents framed what effective approaches to obstacles and opposition differently. While
they understand that the tenure of a public school superintendent can be brief and tenuous, they
continue to focus on consensus and relationship building as opposed to “fighting for” something.
Superintendent Billington, in his second year, remarked:

Superintendents do not last long. The average life span is between two and three years in
the district. It is no longer the person who is going to stay around. I am hoping to change
that model. So the challenge there is forging relationships within the community.

Billington suggests that instead of giving up on relationship building and collaboration, he hopes
to “change the model.” His point has implications because current school reform research shows
that schools are the community’s responsibility as opposed to just that of the school district’s

Similarly, consider Superintendent Susanna Moore’s comments, who similar to Mr.
Billington was in her second year: “A big part of what you are trying to do when you are new as
a superintendent…you really are trying to build up connections; you try to spend time with
people.” Her statements underscore an understanding that it is critical for newly hired
superintendents to spend time building relationships with stakeholders and adopt a collaborative
approach towards governance. Through the lens of Ansell and Gash’s (2008) model of collaborative governance, the absence of shared responsibility for school reform and improved student outcomes, hinders superintendent effectiveness and longevity. While finding that the length of superintendent experience influenced their governance practices, it is important to simultaneously acknowledge and embrace the complexity of an array of additional factors found in the literature that may also affect superintendent engagement practices.

**Connections to the Literature.** The finding that superintendent engagement with stakeholders is contingent upon interpersonal understanding is yet to be fully researched. Quantitative empirical research by Kowalski et al. (2013) examined the extent to which superintendent age, gender, educational level and district type contributed to variability in community involvement. While Kowalski et al.’s (2013) research was not directly situated within the context of collaborative governance, the dependent variable did center upon civic engagement and community involvement practices of superintendents. The results were generally inconclusive; however, superintendent engagement in smaller sized districts were found to have higher reported levels of community involvement than their counterparts in larger sized school districts (p. 11). However, it is also important to acknowledge that the factor of superintendent experience, especially in-district experience, was not accounted for in Kowalski et al.’s (2012) study. Multiple factors influence superintendent engagement in collaborative governance, including a superintendent’s interpretation of the political landscape in the community and beliefs about how to get things done. Logically, superintendent engagement with stakeholders in a process of town governance is influenced by prior experience and is also shaped by identity. This claim is supported by Glass et al.’s (2000) research:
Superintendents’ roles are learned through informal and formal professional socialization as they progress in their careers as teachers, principals, and central office staff, as well as in the position of chief executive officer. They successfully advance their careers, not only because of their mastery of administrative skills, but also because of their perceived congruence with the norms, beliefs, attitudes, and values of schools (p. 26).

In a similar manner, Newman et al.’s (2004) research acknowledges the complexity in the interaction between an individual’s interpretations of the environmental conditions. Newman et al.’s research, which focused on public participation in collaborative governance, found that “questions of difference, dissent and conflict highlighted in the literature are of central importance, but are rarely addressed in the governance literature” (p. 221). Given the gap identified by Newman et al. (2004) and the relationship between professional experience and approach to collaborative governance found in this study, it is of little surprise that a paucity of quantitative support exists given the extremely difficult, if not impossible, task of accounting for the complex and contextually specific factors at play.

Existing qualitative research in the realm of superintendent financial planning does not highlight differences associated with superintendent tenure or length of experience as influencing how they engage with oppositional stakeholders. In analyzing effective superintendent and school board practices pertaining to budgetary communication and the involvement of constituents, research by Townsend et al. (2007) does call for active engagement, “The superintendent cannot be passive, but rather must ensure the guidelines are distributed widely and then must actively solicit input from staff and the broader community, both informally and through structured meetings” (p. 70). Despite their call for action, Townsend et al.’s analysis
does not capture the person- and context-specific aspects of superintendent engagement with stakeholders.

Cooper, Bryer and Meek (2006) position that educational leaders have a responsibility to answer five questions in relation to public inclusion and civic engagement:

1. Who should be involved?
2. Who should initiate the process?
3. Why are citizens given the opportunity to participate?
4. Where will the engagement occur?
5. How will citizens be involved? (p. 83).

Cooper et al.’s (2006) five guiding questions may help foster important dialog about what true collaborative governance requires. Such dialog must happen, though, with an awareness of the legally defined structure of open meeting laws in accordance with Massachusetts General Laws (Mass. Gen. Laws, Ch. 39, § 16N; Mass. Gen. Laws, Ch. 71, § 63N). Similarly, the requirements for community input into the school budget building process is well defined (Mass. Gen. Laws, Ch. 71, § 38N). Nonetheless, building clearer community understanding about why collective governance matters, how it is built and who is responsible for making it happen attends to some of the common contextual barriers contemporary superintendents face. A superintendent’s role is embedded both within a school district and within the community that district serves. These participants’ experiences and obstacles illustrate the role of personal style and perspective in their approaches to district leadership. Their stories also suggest that effective district leadership and school improvement are hindered when district stakeholders and governance structures do not support the structures and conditions that make effective leadership possible.
**Summary of Research Findings.** The ways in which superintendents engaged with oppositional stakeholders found in this dissertation are widely reflected by concepts expressed in Ansell and Gash’s (2008) *Model of Collaborative Governance* and in Emerson et al.’s (2012) *Integrative Framework of Collaborative Governance*. However, they also shed light on a narrow and context-specific gap identified in the academic literature. Specifically superintendents in this study had come to understand their engagement experiences with stakeholders in town governance mainly through the medium of building positive relationships within messy structures that can undercut relationship-building efforts. The participating superintendents reported that they understood the importance of leveraging a supportive parent constituency to the political benefit of public schools in town governance. Moreover, in relation to the focus of the first sub research question, superintendents in this study strongly valued identifying and understanding the viewpoints held by multiple constituents.

The second sub research question asked: How do superintendents engage with constituents holding divergent viewpoints? Superintendents in this study engaged in collaborative governance with oppositional stakeholders with an aim for seeking consensus and when faced with a need for compromising, attempted to avoid public disagreement with participants. However, the findings also showed that those superintendents who viewed heightened competition in town governance and had an urgent need for financial resources shared a greater willingness to *openly* disagree with oppositional stakeholders. This behavior appeared to be especially pronounced when superintendents believed that a supportive parent constituency could be politically leveraged.

Lastly, superintendent engagement with stakeholders was found to be contingent on the interpersonal understandings held by superintendents themselves. The ways in which the
superintendents engaged with oppositional stakeholders within the collaborative governance process were somewhat related to their unique prior professional experiences. It is certain that these engagement experiences were shaped by and intertwined with the participants’ identities, experiences, attitudes, and assumptions and in accordance with conducting IPA research there exists no “right way” of experiencing a phenomenon.

Limitations and Considerations for Future Studies

This qualitative study followed well-established guidelines for conducting an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Hefferon & Gil-Rodiguez, 2011; Pringle et al., 2011; Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009) in investigating the lived experiences of superintendents who engaged in collaborative governance. Because IPA is rooted in exploring how participants make meaning of a particular phenomenon, a small sample size was necessary for conducting a deep and comprehensive analysis and prioritizing individual stories rather than drawing general conclusions.

Limitations. A specific intention of this study was to investigate the voices of public school superintendents serving in smaller sized districts. This intentional focal point necessarily omitted other perspectives on collaborative governance. For example, careful attention was placed in this study to include only those communities governed by a town meeting form of local government. As such, communities governed by a city form of local government were excluded. Therefore the experiences of superintendents from large urban districts, rural settings and schools from poor and working poor communities were excluded from this study. Because context is so important to the findings, attempts to transfer these findings to substantially different districts should be done with caution.
The sampling criteria used in this research study only examined the experiences of superintendents who led school district with student enrollment less than 3,500 students. Moreover, each of the school districts represented in this study were considered to be “comparable” according to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MDESE, 2015). This is an important consideration, as the MDESE uses a variety of data points, such as the student achievement rates, percentages of low income, English Language Learners (ELL), and Students with Disabilities (SWD), in determining the comparability of these districts. Specifically the eight districts in this study had an average enrollment 2,800 which was composed of 12% low income, 16% SWD and 4% ELL students (Appendix D).

In more general terms, the school districts represented in this study are located in affluent, suburban towns in smaller sized school districts with a majority of high achieving students. Furthermore and unintentionally, all of the superintendents who participated in this research study are Caucasian and 75% male. These characteristics are consistent with the widespread employment trends revealing that white men constitute the majority of public school superintendents (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999; Kowalski, 1995). Certainly the ways in which one’s identities as well as the dominant identities expressed throughout the community can impact the intra- and interpersonal ways in which a superintendent engages in the local political landscape, so it is important to acknowledge the identities of the research participants and communities represented in this study.

In addition, because this study sought exclusively to understand the experiences of superintendents, the multitude of other voices present within the rich political landscape of small town politics are not considered or represented. This study reflects the participating superintendents’ experience, interpretations and perspectives about their professional contexts.
Furthermore, employing the collaborative governance theoretical frameworks focuses the investigation and analysis on certain aspects of the phenomenon while obscuring others. Finally, all the qualitative data collected, analyzed, and discussed in this research study solely represents the experiences of the eight participants; therefore, generalization based upon this study was not intended. Nonetheless, the thick description and carefully supported conclusions should provide adequate detail for other superintendents, school leaders and community members to transfer relevant aspects of this work into other contexts.

**Recommendations for Future Research.** With these limitations in mind, future studies will be well served to consider the following five avenues for further empirical research. First, future researchers may elect to repeat this study with superintendents who have differing demographic characteristics to those represented by the participants in this research and the communities they served. It will be worthwhile and interesting to explore the ways in which public school superintendents that identify from other racial, cultural or linguistic groups navigate the political landscape surrounding town governance. Similarly, future research may investigate experiences of superintendents who lead larger sized school district with student enrollment greater than 3,500 students and with a differing set of demographic characteristics than were present in this study.

Secondly, because public school superintendents represent only one perspective on the governance process, an investigation into how other stakeholders engage in town governance as it relates to school leadership would allow a more comprehensive, community-level analysis. Future research may desire to explore the perspectives of stakeholders such as taxpayers, finance committee members, other town departments like fire and police, constituents on fixed incomes, parents, teachers, students and elected officials. Additionally, research focusing entirely and
solely on one community using a longitudinal approach might yield a multilayered understanding of collaborative governance. Similarly, it could prove interesting to conduct a social network analysis (Hoppe & Reinelt, 2010) and examine the third stage of Emerson et al.’s (2012) concept of principled engagement in the process of collaborative governance.

Third, future studies could explore the factors that influence superintendents’ inclination to prioritize a collaborative approach to town governance. For example, the participants in this study with a longer tenure within a district engaged less collaboratively in the governance landscape. There are a number of possible explanations for why that might be the case. For example, being new to a school district would require a greater amount of time dedicated to building relationships with stakeholders. Alternatively, perhaps some superintendents reach a personal tipping point where the amount of energy expended fostering collaboration does not seem proportionate to the resulting gains. Perhaps newer superintendents are more aware of the degree to which school reform requires community partnership and shared responsibility rather than adaptation to existing structures and status quo. Future studies might explore what influences the ways in which, or whether, superintendents participate collaboratively and seek consensus in town governance.

Fourth, it is also important to acknowledge that the superintendents generally described healthy financial climates in each of the eight communities represented in this study. While differences in funding certainly emerged, none of the superintendents in this study were faced with making significant cuts to proposed school budgets. This is a critical point because future research ought to consider examining the ways in which superintendents engage with stakeholders during times of economic stress. Perhaps when faced with a greater sense of urgency for making budgetary cuts, superintendents may approach stakeholder engagement
differently. Similarly, investigating superintendent engagement with the political landscape situated in a community undergoing a Proposition 2 ½ override may also provide a unique context for future inquiry.

Finally, and because the findings of this research showed that superintendents first and foremost engage with town governance by building positive relationships with stakeholders, future studies could also reconsider the selection of a theoretical lens as a viewpoint toward the phenomena. For example, future studies may consider applying a Cultural and Social Capital lens (Bourdieu, 1986; Leana & Pil, 2006; Saatcioglu, Moore, Sargut & Bajaj, 2011). Further research may also consider investigating issues of social justice, especially the exploration of power disparities among participants in town governance and the ways in which superintendents promote equity. Future social justice research for collaborative governance would be well served by applying Purdy’s (2012) Framework for Assessing Power in Collaborative Governance to describe how resources, power, and authority influence the collaborative governance process. Finally, examining town governance from an organizational standpoint (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Schwandt, & Szabla, 2007) rather than a superintendent’s perspective may also allow for greater empirical scrutiny into the functioning of social networks in town governance. An examination of the stakeholder relationships in town governance may reveal unique and meaningful distributions of political power.

**Implications for Educational Practice**

The findings of this research hold implications towards the professional practice of public school superintendents and the communities within which they work. Current superintendents, as well as aspiring superintendents, might make use of these findings in order to consider the relational, contextual and personal factors that influence their approaches to collaborative work
with town governance. Participating superintendents understood their engagement with stakeholders in this study in the context of their interpretations of the culture of town governance and the varied perspectives and priorities at play. Knowing this may position superintendents to consider their role in fostering consensus building and the potential for collectively creating a culture in the governance body that embodies the conditions that support mutually beneficial collaborative efforts. Similarly, new superintendents would be well served, to the extent possible, to spend time learning about and understanding the prevailing culture in town governance. When interviewing for positions, candidates may benefit from framing the interview process as two-way conversation in an effort to collect as much information as possible about the values, priorities and expectations of stakeholders. Superintendents are also encouraged to review public meeting documents, especially video clips from school and finance committee meetings, and assess the climate in town governance, especially communication patterns between participants.

The findings of this research certainly reinforce the importance of cultivating positive relationships with stakeholders. Superintendents may benefit from continuing to seek opportunities for building working relationships on both professional and personal levels. When setting out to strengthen stakeholder relationships, superintendents might first seek low risk situations where common interests are shared and avoid public conflict when private meetings might provide a safer space for careful listening and cooperation. Furthermore, during these cooperative opportunities, superintendents demonstrate collaborative commitment and build trust when they include stakeholders representing multiple and opposing perspectives in the decision making process.

The principle finding of this research underscores the importance of identifying and understanding the viewpoints held by constituents. Especially when engaging with oppositional
stakeholders, practicing public school superintendents aim to actively collect data about concerns, positions and priorities within the community. Superintendents can collect perception data using surveys or simply meeting with varied constituents and community leaders to gather multiple perspectives. In either case, it is essential that superintendents take the time to question and double check their understanding of the varied perspectives so as not to misrepresent community voice. Regardless of the methods, this research makes clear that deliberate and strategic investigation, communication, outreach and engagement is critically important.

Educational practitioners and academic researchers are the primary intended audience for this dissertation. Given this audience, it is important to acknowledge the tight focus of this study as it pertains to the transferability of findings. Since this research was situated in New England, town meeting offered a unique and distinct format of local governance and one that is far less common in other regions. While it is certain that the formats and structures in local government will vary across the nation, the findings from this research are transferable for educational leaders engaging with stakeholders outside of the northeastern United States. Specifically, the research findings of this study highlight the importance and benefit of superintendent engagement with stakeholders in service of collaborative leadership.

It is also necessary to acknowledge the complexity of the local school budgeting process in the political and economic landscapes of the particular communities within which these findings might be relevant. While the economic contexts and laws described in this research are New England specific, communities across the nation have similar constraints related to tax regulations, such as Proposition 13 in California (Rosen, 1982), Ballot Measure 5 in Oregon (Waters, Holland & Weber, 1997) and the Taxpayer Bill of Rights in Colorado (James & Wallis, 2004). In fact, Anderson (2006) found that limitations on property taxation are widespread across
the nation, “with 43 states having some form of limit” (p. 685). Given that public perception over taxation is an issue that is as old as the nation itself, this general topic of dissertation is relevant for superintendents practicing outside of Massachusetts, especially as they engage with stakeholders regarding school spending.

**Reflection**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research is double hermeneutic in nature. Double hermeneutic is loosely described as the process of an individual constructing meaning based upon the understanding held by another individual. To this point, as I reflect on this study and what I have learned by hearing multiple voices representing superintendent engagement in collaborative governance in small Massachusetts towns, three issues became prominent. First, the work of engaging oppositional stakeholders is often complicated, complex and murky. In the rich conversations that I had with the eight superintendents, it became clear that there was no “correct” way to engage with stakeholders; however it was clear that non-engagement with constituents was not an option. While the identities of these research participants must remain confidential, these individuals truly are accomplished superintendents in the field, each with decades of experience in educational leadership. I am astonished how open, honest and reflective each research participant was as they recounted their engagement practices with stakeholders and shared with me their professional challenges and struggles. I sincerely hope that each of their truly unique voices have been accurately reflected in this dissertation.

Secondly, public school superintendents are constantly facing political conflict, yet they are simultaneously expected to collaborate with a wide array of stakeholders who at times represent competing interests. Delicately balancing collaboration in the context of conflict has
been revealed by these superintendents to be challenging, rewarding and essential. Additionally, I have come to learn that the context provided by the local community directly matters to issues of governance; perhaps even more so that I first expected.

Finally, investigating this phenomenon using the qualitative approach outlined in this dissertation was fundamentally necessary to investigate superintendent interpersonal navigation of the political landscape. The landscape surrounding local public education varied by community but was marked by complexity. Using of qualitative methods to approach this landscape, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), truly posed an opportunity for me to grow and expand as an educational researcher. Additionally, it is also important to acknowledge that theory verification was not a goal of this study. As such, the combined use of theoretical models of collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012) ultimately served to support this research as the focus was placed directly upon the complex dynamic of stakeholder engagement. Reflecting upon this research process and my growth as a scholar-practitioner, using a qualitative methodology was helpful to better understand this problem.

Conclusion

It was the intention of this study to learn from practicing public school superintendents and better understand the ways in which they engaged with stakeholders who can be oppositional in the process of town governance. Superintendents are well positioned as PK-12 educational leaders to drive substantial change to benefit students; however superintendents must be able to engage effectively with a dynamic and politically charged and changing landscape. Expanding on this notion, the collective decision-making process of town governance often serves as the medium by which superintendents interact with constituents holding divergent opinions.
regarding a complex and layered budgetary process. Furthermore, academic research has
highlighted the difficulty of achieving successful governance in a truly collaborative manner
(Johnson et al., 2010) that has also been described as a demanding and time consuming process
(Ansell & Gash, 2008; Chrislip & Larson, 1994). The principal findings of this dissertation
research study illustrate the importance of building relationships, as understood by public school
superintendents, within a context of collaborative governance. Factors such as trust,
commitment to the process, and a willingness to engage in a constructive dialogue have been
found to be essential aspects to effectively manage collaborative town governance.
REFERENCES


Appendices

Appendix A: Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Date: 

Interview location: 

Time of interview: 

Interviewer: Mr. Matthew Mehler, doctoral student

Interviewee (name): 

Position of interviewee: 

Opening Comments:

The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of how superintendents make sense of and engage with a divergent constituency within the wider context of school governance. While the nature of constituents’ viewpoints and their specific interests will likely vary from school district to school district, superintendents commonly report professional challenges involving issues pertaining to financial matters, community pressures and school board relationships. Qualitative data collection methods will be employed to capture the lived experiences of superintendents.

The data collection tool will be today’s semi-structured interview. It is expected that this interview will take approximately one hour. This interview session will be recorded digitally and then later transcribed, verbatim, in accordance with recommended interpretative phenomenological research practices.

The raw qualitative data will be analyzed and researcher’s interpretation will be made available to you, in order to validate that the researcher did not misinterpret your experiences.

A follow-up interview may be conducted to clarify the researcher’s interpretation, as well as to allow you to elaborate further, should you desire.

Before we start the today’s interview you will be provided with Northeastern University’s Human Subjects Consent-to-Participate Form. Please understand that your identity will be kept confidential and you can withdraw from this study at any time.

While there are several guiding questions to help us stay focused, this one-hour discussion is an opportunity for you to share your stories and experiences in response to my questions. Please take your time in thinking and in responding.
Appendix B: Format for Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University

**Name of Investigator(s):** Matthew Mehler, Doctoral Student EdD., College of Professional Studies

**Title of Project:** Superintendent Engagement in Collaborative Governance. An Interpretive Phenomenological Approach

**Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will inform you about the study in general, however the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask the researcher any questions that you have. Your participation is completely voluntary, however if you decide to participate; the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy for your records.

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

You are being recruited to participate in the research study because of your professional experience as a K-12 public school superintendent in an eastern Massachusetts town.

**Why is this research study being done?**

The purpose of this research is to better understand how superintendents engage with their stakeholders when navigating their collision of viewpoints.

**What will I be asked to do?**

If you agree to take part in this study, I will ask you to share your experiences navigating the political landscape. As the researcher, I will collect and analyze data in the following stages:

1. **Semi-structured Interview:** The researcher will use a digital audio recording device to record the interviews. This device will be used openly and with the full permission of each researcher participant. The use of recording devices to accurately collect qualitative data is a common practice used by researchers during interviews.

2. **Raw Interview Data:** Following the interview session the digital recordings are to be transcribed, verbatim. The raw qualitative data will then be analyzed and the researcher’s interpretation will be made available with you. This is helpful because it allows you to validate that the researcher did not misinterpret your experiences.

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

You will be interviewed in your office or place and time that are convenient for you. The interview will take about one hour.
**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

There are no foreseeable risks, harms, discomforts or inconveniences that you will experience as a consequence of participating in this research.

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

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study as you will not be financially compensated. However, the interview may prove rewarding to you as you reflect upon your experiences as an educational leader, given that the information you share may help to improve future practice for other K-12 superintendents navigating similar situations.

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

Your participation and identify will remain confidential throughout the research process and you can withdraw from this study at any time. Please understand that your name and district will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and only the researcher will know your identity as a participant. You will be assigned a pseudonym and once the dissertation has successfully been defended, all identifiers between you and the pseudonym will be destroyed, including recorded interviews and any scheduling information.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information regarding 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 or if applicable the sponsor or funding agency e.g. NIH, NSF, FDA, OHRP to see this information.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participating in this research. It is not anticipated that there will be any need for compensation.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate, you can refuse to answer any question and you are free to stop at any time.

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

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

**Mr. Matthew Mehler**
Doctoral Student

You may also contact:

**Dr. Jane Lohmann, Ph.D.**
School of Education
Northeastern University
Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?

Participants will not be paid.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

There is no remuneration offered.

I agree to take part in this research.

____________________________________________ ______ __________________
Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part   Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

____________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the   Date
participant above and obtained consent

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

Depending upon the nature of your research, you may also be required to provide information about one or more of the following if it is applicable:

1. A statement that the particular treatment or procedure may involve risks to the subject (or to the embryo or fetus, if the subject is or may become pregnant) which are currently unforeseeable.
2. Anticipated circumstances under which the subject’s participation may be terminated by the investigator without regard to the subject’s consent.
3. Any additional costs to the subject that may result from participation in the research.
4. The consequences of a subject's decision to withdraw from the research and procedures for orderly termination of participation by the subject.
5. A statement that significant new finding(s) developed during the course of the research which may be related to the subject’s willingness to continue participation will be provided to the subject.
6. The approximate number of subjects involved in the study.
## Appendix C: Cross-Case Categorical Analysis of Emergent Themes

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<td>INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION</td>
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## Appendix D: Comparable District and Community Characteristics

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