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From Networked Learning to Operational Practice: Constructing and Transferring Superintendent Knowledge in a Regional Instructional Rounds Network

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FROM NETWORKED LEARNING TO OPERATIONAL PRACTICE: CONSTRUCTING
AND TRANSFERRING SUPERINTENDENT KNOWLEDGE IN
A REGIONAL INSTRUCTIONAL ROUNDS NETWORK

by

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FROM NETWORKED LEARNING TO OPERATIONAL PRACTICE: CONSTRUCTING
AND TRANSFERRING SUPERINTENDENT KNOWLEDGE IN
A REGIONAL INSTRUCTIONAL ROUNDS NETWORK

Timothy J. Travis, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2015

Instructional rounds are an emerging network structure with processes and protocols designed to develop superintendents' knowledge and skills in leading large-scale improvement, to enable superintendents to build an infrastructure that supports the work of improvement, to assist superintendents in distributing leadership throughout their district, and to develop a cadre of educational leaders focused on developing their practice (Rallis, Tedder, Lachman, & Elmore, 2006). In a platform-learning model, learning in a superintendents' network can be viewed as occurring both individually and collectively on an external platform outside each individual school district (Schulz & Geithner, 2010). In this phenomenological study, I explored and described the experience of participating in an instructional rounds network from the perspective of district superintendents. Specifically, I examined how individual superintendents experienced their work at the platform level, constructed new meanings and understandings at this level, and transferred those new meanings and understandings into action at the operational level in their local districts.

Data was collected through open-ended, face-to-face interviews with eight

district superintendents participating in a regional instructional rounds network in the Midwest. As a result of my interpretive phenomenological analysis, seven themes emerged describing the collective learning experiences of these superintendents and the ways in which they transferred their new learning into practice: (a) superintendents described their platform experience as collective and collaborative (b) superintendents were reflective in their understanding of instructional rounds implementation (c) superintendents attempted to replicate the instructional rounds process in their local districts (d) focusing on students in classrooms changed superintendents' mental models (e) superintendents experienced an evolution in their personal learning (f) superintendents transferred their learning into new learning in their local context and (g) superintendents changed their communication patterns.

My research confirmed that superintendents found their platform-level work to be a collaborative and congenial work-embedded professional development experience. This study also added to the research on the transfer of superintendents' new meanings and understandings into daily work practice in local districts. Of particular importance is the finding that superintendents reported seeing their organizations "with new eyes" as a result of observing students engaged in learning tasks in other districts compared to students engaged in learning tasks in their own districts.

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Timothy J. Travis

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Modeled on medical rounds, instructional rounds in education are designed to

support district leaders in solving identified problems of practice through observation,

analysis, and the collective wisdom of their peers. The instructional rounds process

consists of four specific steps beginning with the identification of a problem of practice

that an individual district seeks help in solving, followed by classroom observations, an

observation debrief, and suggestions for the next level of work (City, Elmore, Fiarman &

Teitel, 2011). Instructional rounds are one of a growing number of research supported

collaborative learning models gaining momentum in K-12 education as a means to

enhance and accelerate adaptive change (Jackson & Temperley, 2006; City et al., 2011;

Rallis, Tedder, Lachman and Elmore, 2006). There is also growing research linking the

establishment of one form of collaborative learning, learning networks consisting of

teachers and administrators, to improved student learning (Rothman, 2009; Bell et al.

2006; Jackson & Temperley, 2006); thus learning networks have become a common

means by which educators build reflective practice through collaboration.

Building on an activity theoretic learning model, Schulz and Geithner (2010) put

forth a platform model for learning in networks, where representatives of individual

organizations meet regularly apart from their normal work to discuss issues and build

new meanings and understandings on a "reflective platform". Ideally, these new meanings and understandings are then taken back to individual organizations. Learning networks that create a reflective platform for debriefing their own experiences using a new change process may assist school leaders in transferring their learning experience to action in their own schools.

This study seeks to understand the experience of participating in an instructional rounds network from the perspective of district superintendents. Specifically, this study seeks to understand how individual superintendents participating in an instructional rounds network in the Midwest experience their work at the platform level, construct new meanings and understandings at this level, and transfer those new meanings and understandings into action at the operational level in their local districts.

Background

Superintendents as Instructional Leaders

Historically, the role of school superintendent has not been that of instructional leader. Superintendents have largely been viewed as managers of personnel and resources in a school district. Griffiths (cited in Bjork, 1993, p. 252) succinctly characterizes the role of school leaders in the 1960s, stating; "administrators should have nothing to do with instruction." While the Instructionally Effective Schools Research (Murphy & Hallinger, 1986) found that school districts with excellent student achievement have superintendents that are personally involved with curriculum and instruction, instructional leadership as the domain of superintendents was still not embedded in American school culture at the turn of the twenty-first century. As Elmore

(2000, p.7) sums up, "The institutional structure does not promote, or select for, knowledge and skill related to instructional leadership; at best it tolerates some proportion of the population who indulge in it out of personal commitment and taste".

Over the past decade, a growing body of research on the effect of superintendent leadership on student achievement sheds light on the importance for school superintendents to act as instructional leaders. In a meta-analysis of 27 studies involving 2,817 districts and 3.4 million students, Waters and Marzano (2006) found that district level leadership makes a statistically significant difference in student performance when superintendents successfully carry out five key district-level leadership responsibilities. These responsibilities were found to be collaborative goal setting, non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, board alignment with and support of district goals, monitoring achievement and instruction goals, and use of resources to support the goals for instruction and achievement. In contrast to studies linking superintendents to improved student performance, in a study of 2.3 million students in 282 districts in North Carolina and Florida, Chingos, Whitehurst and Lindquist (2014) found that although statistically significant, only 0.3% of student performance can be directly attributed to the district superintendent compared to 4.0% attributed to the teacher, 3.0% attributed to the school and 1.7% attributed to the district.

The Promise of Networked Learning Communities

Recently, networking between schools has become a vehicle for professional learning and large-scale school improvement. According to Jackson and Temperley

(2006), Networked Learning Communities (NLC's) support re-structuring and re-culturing school systems through the dissemination of good teaching practice, capacity building, and enhancing professional development. Two of the main purposes of the NLC Programme were to investigate the contribution of school-to-school networks in raising student achievement and to identify effective leadership practices for school-to-school learning.

Citing evidence from England's Networked Learning Communities Programme, consisting of 137 networks and 1,500 schools, Jackson and Temperley (2006) claim that NLC's have both the potential to take professional learning communities to scale and to effect changes in teaching practices resulting in improvement in student achievement. Students in schools participating in an NLC were found to have made greater improvements in overall scores across grade levels on the United Kingdom's Key Stage Four Assessment between 2004 and 2005 than students in non-participating schools.

Bell et al. (2006) conducted a systematic research review in an attempt to answer two research questions: "What is the impact on pupils of networks that include at least three schools? And what additional benefits are there for practitioners, organizations and the communities they serve?" (p. 9). Nineteen international studies were included in the review with 16 from the United States, two from the United Kingdom and one from Australia. Criteria were developed to categorize the impact of a network on students as high, medium, or low. High impact studies used triangulated data and clearly identifiable changes in knowledge, skills or attitudes, while low impact

studies relied on perception data and inferred modest changes in knowledge, skills, or attitudes.

Fourteen of the studies investigated pupil impact with six studies finding a network's impact on pupils to be high, three studies showed medium impact, and five reported low or no impact. Examples of the impact of networks on students included improvement in students' motivation for reading and writing, improved social skills and group leadership skills, and moderate gains in math and science achievement. Using similar criteria, six studies showed high impact on teachers while five more found medium impact, with just three showing low or no impact. Examples of effects of networks on teachers included greater understanding of the learning process, improved knowledge and skill in teaching integrated reading, language and the arts, and increased teacher confidence and more positive attitudes. Implications for research cited by Bell et al. (2006) included investigating the processes of developing a successful network and considering how networks can support and enhance professional development for teachers.

Instructional Rounds

According to Elmore (2007, p.4), "The school leadership literature stresses the importance of instructional leadership, but academics and practitioners never have satisfactorily developed a model of practice that says explicitly what the leadership of instruction is." City et al. (2011) have developed a set of protocols and processes called instructional rounds, designed to provide a structure for district level instructional leadership. Modeled on medical rounds, instructional rounds in education are designed

to support district leaders in solving identified problems of practice through observation, analysis, and the collective wisdom of their peers. The purpose of an instructional rounds network is to support district superintendents in strengthening the instructional core of the schools within their districts through the instructional rounds process. Cohen and Ball (1999) state that the essential elements of instruction, or the technical core of schooling, can be found in the interactions between teachers and students around educational materials. City et al. (2011) define the instructional core as "teachers and students working together in the presence of content". The instructional rounds process consists of four specific steps beginning with the identification of a problem of practice that an individual district seeks help in solving, followed by classroom observations, an observation debrief, and suggestions for the next level of work.

While there is limited research evidence in the literature linking the establishment of an instructional rounds network with improved student achievement, there is evidence to suggest that district leadership can and does have a positive impact on improving student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006). In addition, all of the districts in the original Connecticut Superintendents' Network report improvements in student achievement. For example, the proportion of fourth graders in Farmington who were proficient on the state writing test rose from 77% in 2006 to 88% in 2007, and in Plainville the proportion of sixth graders scoring proficient on the mathematics test rose from 49% to 60% over the same period (Rothman, 2009).

Origins and Spread of Instructional Rounds Networks

Rallis, Tedder, Lachman and Elmore (2006) have chronicled the development of the Connecticut Superintendents' Network established in October of 2001 in collaboration with the Connecticut Center for School Change. The Network was formed when Andrew Lachman, the new director of the Connecticut Center for School Change, invited eight superintendents and Harvard professor Richard Elmore to join him in a study group as a means of alternative professional development for superintendents.

During the first school year, Elmore proposed seven concrete leverage points to focus network discussions. The selected leverage points were resources, knowledge/skill/expertise, accountability, assessment, curriculum, capacity building and professional development, and structure. To connect the discourse taking place at the "platform" level to teaching and learning at the "operational" level, Elmore proposed that the Networks' work be anchored in the common experience of classroom observations in one of the schools in the Network. The first classroom visit took place in April 2002. "As a result of the visit, all the Network members agreed on the value of data gathered directly in classrooms for informing our thinking about selected instructional problems" (Rallis et al., 2006, p.539).

Years two and three saw the Network grow by four more member superintendents, the development of formal operating norms, more structured protocols for observing student work, and continued growth as a community of practice. In spite of the group's progress in learning to work together, and new understandings about what was happening in the classroom, the superintendents were

left with doubts as to whether their efforts had fundamentally changed practice in their districts (Rallis et al., 2006).

The promise of Instructional Rounds Networks has spurred the spread of the concept to states across the country, including Massachusetts, Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky, California, Washington, New Jersey, and Iowa. According to the Iowa Leadership Academy (n.d.), every superintendent in Iowa has the opportunity to join a superintendents' network sponsored by their Area Education Agency. During the 2009-10 school year, approximately one-third of Iowa superintendents participated as members of their Area Education Agency network. Networks can also be found in Australia and Canada.

Platform Learning Model

A platform-learning model (Schulz & Geithner, 2010) is useful in building the conceptual framework for this study. In this model, key members of individual organizations meet on a "reflective platform" away from their own organizations, to exchange ideas and collaborate to solve problems across organizational boundaries. Shared learning at the platform level is then transferred back to the operational level in the individual organizations. Activities at the platform level are highly standardized to provide a structure for creating an intellectually safe learning environment. This type of standardization can be seen in the specific norms, protocols, and procedures that characterize both medical rounds and instructional rounds.

Schulz and Geithner (2010) lay out the core enterprises of the learning network at the platform level as exchange of experiences and existing concepts, further

development of existing concepts, collective development of new concepts, and

evaluation of network operation. Work at the operational level in participating

organizations is characterized by evaluation of established operational work practices,

transfer and implementation of network ideas, and organizational development.

In their study of 13 inter-organizational school networks, Schulz and Geithner

(2010) found that the transfer and implementation that characterize moving from the

platform level to the operational level were the most critical points of the learning

networks. Others (Roegman & Riehl, 2012; Elmore, 2007; Moore, 2009; Heifetz &

Linsky, 2002) echo the difficulty of transferring superintendent learning into tangible

improvements in teaching and learning across a school district.

Activity Theory

An evolving activity theoretical model undergirds the platform-learning model of

Schulz and Geithner (2010). Activity theory has its origins with Vygotsky, who

emphasized the socially and historically derived nature of practice, or, day-to-day

activities (Schulz & Geithner, 2010b). Activity theory posits that every activity must

have an object, or meaning, motive and purpose of the activity system. Engestrom and

Kerusuo (2007) liken the object of the activity to raw material that is acted upon by the

participants in an activity system. The current third generation of activity theory, or

expansive learning, focuses on networks or activity systems as the unit of analysis rather

than on the learning of an individual, or within a single activity system (Engestrom &

Sannino, 2010). According to Schulz and Geithner (2010b, p. 136) "It is a central insight

of the expansive learning model that collective (organizational) change and learning can

only take place if individuals expand their assumptions and understandings beyond their existing level."

Engestrom and Kerosuo (2007, p.336) explain the essence of third generation activity theory in this manner: "Activity theoretical studies put an emphasis on the object, i.e. on what is done and learned together in inter-organizational networks, instead of studying only connections and collaboration of networks". This theoretical view is germane to my study as I seek to understand the experience of superintendents constructing new meanings and understandings in an instructional rounds network and the manner in which these new learnings are transferred into operational practice in their individual districts.

Problem Statement

    Practical Problem Statement

American educators in the twenty-first century face challenges unknown to previous generations of educators. In a report entitled *The Future of the US Workforce*: *The limited career prospects for high school graduates without additional education,* Achieve (2012) sums up the driving forces fueling these challenges: "Simply put, increasingly sophisticated technology, changes in the structure of the economy, and the growing global marketplace have put a premium on educated and skilled workers. The reality is that high school graduates without additional education and training face mostly dim and dead-end career prospects. Those prospects are far dimmer for those who fail to finish high school" (p. 5). In Michigan, these demands have manifested themselves in new, more rigorous standards for earning a high school diploma, including

two credits of a language other than English, at least three credits of science including chemistry or physics, and four credits of mathematics including Algebra II at a minimum (Michigan Department of Education, 2006). These new requirements essentially mean that all high school students in Michigan are expected to complete a college preparatory curriculum.

These new demands have created a sense of urgency for school leaders to think differently and implement large-scale school reform initiatives to prepare students to meet these demands. A key question facing school leaders is "How can school districts create the requisite conditions necessary for all students to learn at relatively high levels?" This question also leads to a deeper examination of the role that teachers, principals and district level administrators, including superintendents, play in building the capacity for all students to meet more rigorous learning standards.

Despite the current debate and conflicting research on the role superintendents play in raising student achievement, the broader question of how districts develop learning capacity keeps, at least part of the focus on what the district leader can contribute. In response to this essential question, a new network approach called instructional rounds is emerging as a way for superintendents and other educators to work together to improve instruction, thereby improving student achievement. Instructional rounds "combines three common elements of improvement: classroom observation, an improvement strategy, and a network of educators" (City, 2011, p. 36). The intent of the instructional rounds model is to engage teachers, administrators, and superintendents in a shared examination of current classroom practice to discern

potential responses to problems of practice and results.

Research Problem Statement

Improving the learning of each student in each classroom, in every school across a school district, is a complicated and monumental challenge. Synthesizing the research on the impact of teacher quality on student learning, McKinsey and Company (2007) make the case that students of effective teachers are likely to progress at three times the rate as students with low-performing teachers. In their meta-analysis on the impact of leadership practices on learning, Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008) found that principals promoting and participating in professional learning with teachers produced the highest effect size on student learning. It is clear that teachers and building principals are of key importance in impacting student learning, but what is the role of school superintendents in impacting the learning of students in a district?

The empirical evidence connecting behaviors of school superintendents to improved student performance is limited, and the findings mixed; however, there is emerging evidence for ways in which a superintendent might leverage his or her time and resources to impact learning at the district level (Rothman, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Bell et al. 2006, Jackson & Temperley, 2006). The Instructional Rounds model provides a venue for superintendents to become more engaged in the process of addressing problems of practice in collaboration with other teachers and principals, but this is a relatively new role for superintendents. Superintendent learning networks can provide an external platform for superintendents to learn new processes and practices together; however, studies are needed to understand if and how these experiences

translate to changes in the district. According to Schulz and Geithner (2010, p. 69),

"Although the awareness of the requirement of change within the school system has

been high, little is known about how sustainable intervention and innovation can be

brought about within schools through collective exchange and learning beyond

organizational borders".

Schulz and Geithner (2010) found that while much network research has been

done at the platform level, studies of implementation of daily work practices at the

operational level are rare, and the transfer of ideas and concepts from platform work

into daily work is often neglected in network research. As a result, there is a need to

study both what happens with superintendents at the platform learning level when they

participate in external learning networks and what aspects of platform learning

superintendents transfer and translate to their leadership work at the operational level

back in their district after a platform learning experience.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study will be to examine how

district superintendents make sense of participating in a regional superintendents'

instructional rounds network in the Midwest, to discover what new meanings and

understandings superintendents might take away from this experience, and to learn in

what ways superintendents may transfer their learning to their everyday work in their

home districts.   Participation in an instructional rounds network will generally be

defined as actively engaging in the accepted norms and protocols of the instructional

rounds process as developed by City et al. (2011).

Research Questions

Therefore, this study will address the following research questions:

1. How do superintendents describe their experience participating in the instructional rounds network at the platform level?

2. What new meanings or understandings did superintendents take away from this platform level experience?

3.   In what ways did superintendents transfer these new meanings and understandings to their operational practice in their local districts?

4. What influences what and how superintendents transfer these new meanings and understandings to their operational practice in their local districts?

Significance

The data and analysis from the study I am proposing will have practical importance for superintendents and other educational practitioners such as building principals, curriculum directors and teacher leaders involved in school improvement efforts, as it will provide insight into the platform level experience of superintendents learning to construct new meanings and understandings about the instructional core in general. In understanding how superintendents translated their new learning to their work at the operational level in their home districts, this study seeks to add more clarity to the potential for superintendents to make greater influence on teaching and learning practice. This study will be of practical value to superintendents involved in existing instructional rounds networks and to superintendents considering forming a network, as

it will provide insights from superintendents in the field that will be valuable in building and sustaining successful instructional rounds networks.

Methods Overview

Research Design

Marshall and Rossman (2011, p.20) contend, "There is an essence to an experience that is shared with others who have also had that experience". This phenomenological study will attempt to discover the essence of the platform level experience of superintendents engaged in a local school improvement process supported by participation in a regional instructional rounds network. It will also attempt to understand what new meanings and understandings were constructed as a result of this network experience, and to explore the ways in which superintendents transfer their new learning back to the operational level in their local districts. Understanding the experiences of superintendents working together in an instructional rounds network is important to practitioners because it will shed light on what might be learned from participation in such a network, how what is learned is transferred into the practice of superintendents in local districts and schools, and ways in which the network experience itself might be improved. Ultimately, this study is important as it may provide insight into ways that superintendents may leverage their time and talents to improve student learning at scale.

Creswell (2013) visualizes data collection for qualitative studies as a circle constructed of seven interrelated research activities. These activities include locating the site, gaining access and making rapport, purposefully sampling, collecting data,

recording information, resolving field issues, and storing data. An interpretive

phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach will be used to conduct the data analysis.

According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009, p. 1), IPA is a "recently developed and

rapidly growing approach to qualitative inquiry". The specifics of these activities for this

study will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Conceptual Framework

The platform-learning model (Schulz & Geithner, 2010) is central to the

conceptual framework for this study. Learning in inter-organizational networks, such as

instructional rounds networks, can be viewed from both a platform level and an

operational level. In an instructional rounds network, superintendents meet outside

their local districts to build new understandings about what City et al. (2011) call the

instructional core. The instructional core is defined as teachers and students working

together in the presence of content. At the platform level, superintendents follow

specific processes and protocols developed by City et al. (2011). The instructional

rounds process includes a district level problem of practice, classroom observations,

observation debrief, and suggestions for the next level of work. This study seeks to

understand how superintendents experience their work on the platform level and to

discover what new meanings and understandings concerning the instructional core they

develop.

Of high interest to this study is the manner in which superintendents' platform

level experience and new learning is transferred back to their local districts. This is

crucial to impacting teaching and learning at the operational level in their local districts.

Superintendents' work at the operational level can then be shared at the platform level

as the network continues to meet together monthly to conduct further instructional

rounds visits. As the instructional rounds network cycle continues over a period of

several years, superintendents build a common understanding of the instructional core

and strategies for impacting teaching and learning in their local districts.

This study could shed additional light on the manner in which superintendents

address their own "knowing-doing" gap by describing the way superintendents in this

study make meaning of their learning experience in an instructional rounds network and

use that meaning to shape changes in their own actions as they lead their district

through adaptive change.

Third generation activity theory is helpful in framing this study. According to

Engestrom and Kerosuo (2007), third generation activity theory focuses on

interconnected activity systems (such as school districts in an instructional rounds

network), as the unit of analysis rather than on individuals or single activity systems.

Third generation activity theorists are interested in what is done and learned together

by network participants in addition to studying network structures themselves.
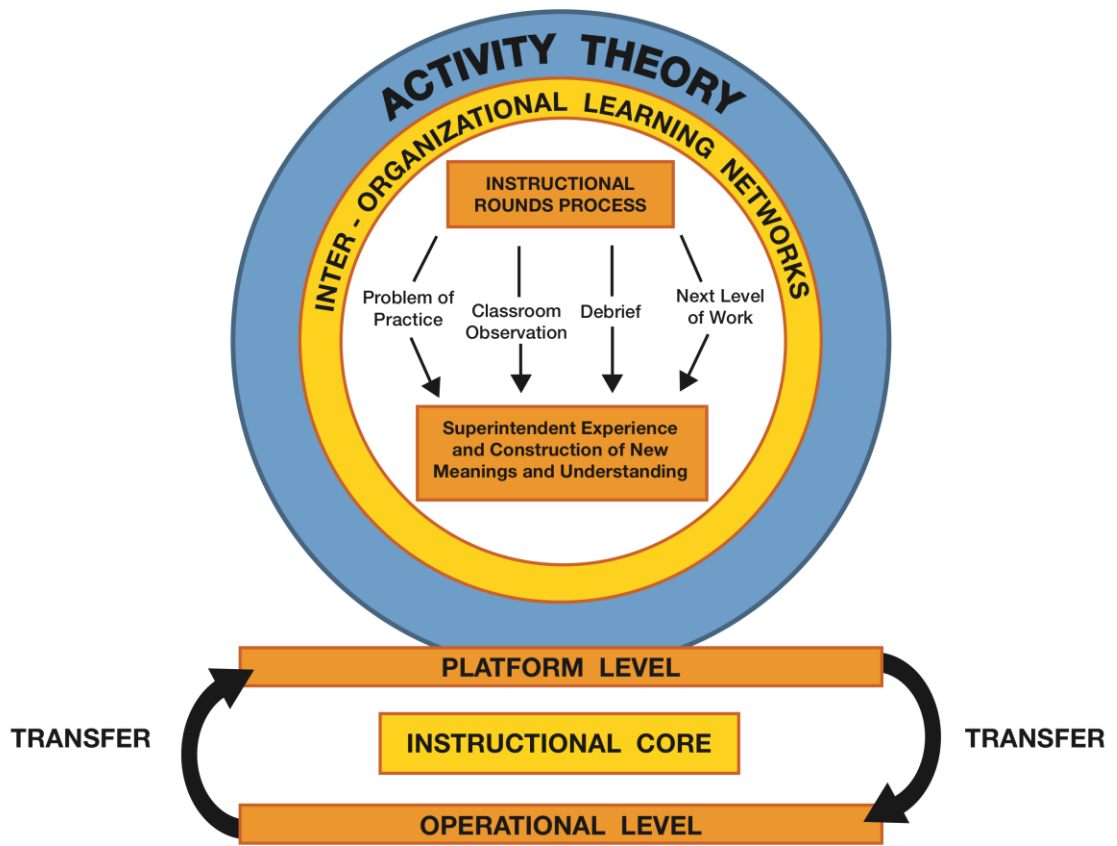
Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Definitions

The concept of an instructional rounds network requires several key terms to be defined. A regional instructional rounds network is defined as a cohort of superintendents working together regularly in a structured way on issues of instructional practice. This type of network structure can also be viewed as a network of role-alike peers, which is an important lens for viewing the work of district superintendents since they have no role-alike peers in their own districts to collaborate with. The work of an instructional rounds network is embedded in individual problems

of practice that each superintendent brings to the cohort. According to City (2011, p. 38), "A problem of practice is something the school cares about, feels stuck on, and wants to understand more deeply."

An instructional rounds visit consists of classroom observations of the instructional core in an individual school, followed by an observation debrief and suggestions for the next level of work. The instructional core is the object of activity in improving teaching and learning in schools. The instructional core of schooling can be found in the interactions of teachers, students and educational materials (Cohen & Ball, 1999). City et al. (2011) define the instructional core as "teachers and students working together in the presence of content". An observation debrief is a process designed to identify patterns in teaching and learning across classroom observations in a school based on a description and analysis of what was observed in the classroom. These patterns are then used to predict what students in the school will be able to do in the future and to develop suggestions for the next level of work. The next level of work can be defined as the steps that a local school district might engage in to begin to solve their problem of practice based on observations, analysis, and the collective wisdom of the superintendents in the network.

Likewise, the platform-learning model requires a definition of both the platform level and the operational level. According to Schulz and Geithner (2010, p. 74), the collaborative work of superintendents meeting as cohorts in a learning network occurs at the platform level and is characterized by an "exchange of experiences and existing concepts in schools, further development of existing concepts, collective development

of new concepts and evaluation of network cooperation". Work at the operational level in local districts is characterized by "evaluation of established operational work practice in the schools, transfer and implementation of network ideas, and school development" (Schulz and Geithner, 2010, p.74).

Delimitations

This interpretive phenomenological study aims to discover the essence of superintendents' participation in a specific regional instructional rounds network in the Midwest. The findings from this study may be transferable to other settings, but may be limited to the extent that other regional instructional rounds networks are similar to the network studied. For example, school districts in the network studied are primarily suburban. Urban superintendents may not experience participation in an instructional rounds network in a similar fashion. All of the superintendents in this study are white males. A network of superintendents composed of a more diverse mix of gender and race may also experience instructional rounds in a different manner. Superintendents in the network studied had significant training in the instructional rounds process including reading *Instructional Rounds in Education* (City et al., 2011), and attending training at Harvard University; superintendents in other networks may not have had such training.

Summary

An increasingly changing world, fueled by technological advances leading to increased global economic competition, has placed more pressure on public schools in the United States to educate all students to higher levels. This pressure is currently

being intensified by business, industry, and state and national legislatures that increasingly attempt to mandate school reform through legislative action. As a result, school leaders have been increasingly held accountable for the performance of their students. As Elmore (2007, p. 21) points out, "Accountability pressure has drawn administrators more deeply into issues of instruction, and many practitioners say they are ill-equipped to organize and manage around the improvement of instruction".

Instructional rounds are a relatively new network approach to building the capacity of district leaders to systemically improve teaching and learning in their schools. Superintendents meet monthly to build a common practice of instruction through conducting a rounds visit to a network school engaged in solving a problem of practice. In the platform-learning model, (Schulz & Geithner, 2010) superintendent learning in an instructional rounds network can be characterized as occurring on two levels. On the platform level, superintendents collaborate to build new meanings and understandings through structured processes and protocols for conducting classroom observations, observation debriefs, and providing suggestions for next steps in solving the problem of practice. Of key importance to this study is the manner in which superintendents transfer their platform level learning into operational practice in their home districts. As pointed out by many (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002;Helsing, Howell, Kegan, & Lahey, 2008; Sparks, 2009; Fullan, 1999), this is a complex, emotional, and daunting task for district leaders, which requires a self-awareness of their own "knowing-doing" gap, an understanding of adaptive change, and the stamina to see implementation through.

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study will be to examine how district superintendents make sense of participating in a regional superintendents' instructional rounds network in the Midwest, to discover what new meanings and understandings regarding the instructional core superintendents might take away from this experience, and learn in what ways superintendents may transfer their learning to their everyday work in their home districts. Open-ended face-to-face interviews will be conducted with participating superintendents and transcripts of the interviews will be coded and analyzed for common themes.

A review of literature relevant to this study includes the following sections: the changing role of the superintendent, the "knowing-doing" gap and adaptive change, activity theory, networked learning, a platform-learning model, and instructional rounds in education.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background

Instructional rounds in education (City et al., 2011), is an emerging network approach for supporting superintendents in driving adaptive change in their districts. This study seeks to understand how superintendents participating in an instructional rounds network in the Midwest construct new meanings and understandings regarding teaching and learning while working at the network level, and transfer these new meanings and understandings into action in their local districts. This literature review presents topics that provide a foundation for this study.

First, the role of superintendent as a lead learner and change agent will be examined, along with research showing that while difficult to measure, superintendent leadership is significant to student learning, mainly through influence on others and as leaders of change in a district (Waters & Marzano, 2006; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Chingos, Whitehurst & Lindquist, 2014). There is often a gap between knowing what to do to orchestrate change in an organization and actually taking action on this knowledge. This concept has been coined the "knowing-doing" gap by Pfeffer and Sutton (2000). Transferring knowledge into action requires that members of the organization change thought patterns, values, beliefs, and habits.

Leaving behind old ways of being and doing is extremely difficult. As Sparks (2009, p.50)

points out, "Change is sufficiently demanding that people find it difficult to change even

when their financial welfare or their lives depend on it". To successfully lead initiatives

that require adaptive change, Heifetz and Linsky (2002) advise school leaders to lead

with their hearts as well as their heads. The tough work of second-order change is

accomplished through building relationships and trust, through the sharing of vision,

values, and mental models, and by crafting theories of action aligned with the context of

the organization. One practical strategy for accomplishing adaptive change is the

establishment of "kernel" routines (Resnick & Spillane, 2006) to develop new school

practices, which also transform the culture of the school through learning the work by

doing the work.

Second, a platform learning model (Schulz & Geithner, 2010) based upon third

generation activity theory, or expansive learning, will be explored as a major construct

in the conceptual framework for this study. The platform-learning model views learning

in networks at two levels. Network participants construct new meanings and

understandings working at the platform level and may, or may not transfer these new

meanings and understanding back to the operational level in their own organizations.

Third, the research on the effects of inter-organizational learning networks, such

as the Networked Learning Communities Programme in England, School Leaders

Network, and League of Professional Schools, on student performance will be reviewed.

Job-alike peer networks are another network structure of particular interest in this

study. Two examples of such networks are professional learning communities (PLC's) and leadership practice communities (LPC's).

Finally, the instructional rounds process, as developed by (City et al., 2011), will be summarized, the evolution of instructional rounds networks across the United States and other parts of the world, and the effects of instructional rounds networks on student learning, will be examined as significant background information for this study.

The Changing Role of the Superintendent

According to an old adage, to be successful, superintendents must pay attention to the four B's: budgets, balls, bands, and busses. This time honored view of the superintendent's role still rings true for the modern day superintendent, as school finances continue to play a major part in the work of school superintendents. Co-curricular athletics and activities are still extremely popular and often political mainstays of American education, and transportation to and from school and activities still represents an important expenditure of taxpayer dollars. Despite four decades of cries for public schools to improve educational outcomes for America's students, superintendents at the turn of the twenty-first century still needed not overly concern themselves directly with what Cohen and Ball, (1999), Elmore (1996), and City et al. (2011) term the instructional core of education, namely "teachers and students working in the presence of content".

Since the turn of the century, a growing body of research has identified a new set of basic leadership practices. In a review of the effects of leadership on student learning, Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) claim that three

sets of practices make up the basic core of successful leadership practices. These three

practices include setting directions, developing people and redesigning the organization.

Setting directions concerns creating and effectively communicating common mission,

vision, values and goals throughout a district. Examples of key leadership practices that

develop people in a district include providing intellectual stimulation, individual support,

and models of best practice. Among practices that promote organizational revitalization

are strengthening district and school cultures, building collaborative processes, and

modifying organizational structures.

Does District Level Leadership Matter?

Capturing the extent to which district level leadership, and the leadership of

superintendents in particular, makes a difference in student learning is a complex and

complicated proposition. Attempts to quantify the direct effects of superintendent

leadership on student performance show marginal effects at best.

In a study of 2.3 million students in 282 districts in North Carolina and Florida,

Chingos, Whitehurst, and Lindquist (2014) found that although statistically significant,

only 0.3% of student performance can be directly attributed to the district

superintendent as compared to 4.0% attributed to the teacher, 3.0% attributed to the

school and 1.7% attributed to the district. Claiming that there is almost no quantitative

research that measures the impact of superintendents on student performance, Chingos

et al. (2014) also found that the typical superintendent has been on the job for three to

four years; however, student achievement was not found to improve with

superintendent longevity. Further findings suggest hiring a superintendent is not

associated with higher student achievement, and individual superintendents who have

exceptional impact on student achievement are extremely rare. In contrast, Leithwood

et al. (2004) maintain that there are no documented instances of poorly performing

schools being turned around without the intervention of talented leaders.

Citing evidence from approximately four dozen studies between 1980 and 1998,

Leithwood et al. (2004) agree that the direct and indirect effects of leadership on

student outcomes is small but significant, representing between three and five percent

of the variation in student learning between schools. They point out, however, that this

represents nearly a quarter of the variation explained by all school-level factors, which is

second only to classroom instruction, which accounts for about one-third of the total

variation explained by school level factors.

In their meta-analysis consisting of 27 studies conducted between 1970 and

2005, representing 2,714 school districts, Waters and Marzano (2006) found results

both in agreement and contrary to Chingos et al. (2014) and Leithwood et al. (2004).

Similar to Chingos et al. (2014) and Leithwood et al. (2004), Waters and Marzano (2006)

found a significant relationship (r=. 24) between district level leadership and student

achievement. In addition, specific district level leadership responsibilities found to have

a statistically significant correlation with student achievement were: The goal setting

process, non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, board alignment with

and support for district goals, monitoring the goals for achievement and instruction, and

use of resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction. In contrast to the

findings of Chingos et al. (2014), Waters and Marzano (2006) found a positive

relationship between the longevity of a superintendent and student academic

achievement.

A complicating factor in measuring direct effects of superintendent leadership

on student performance is the fact that district level leaders influence student outcomes

through their influence on other people and through changes to their organizations

(Leithwood et al., 2004). Direct effects are more difficult to measure the farther the

leader is from the classroom. In explaining the lack of direct evidence linking

superintendent leadership to student learning, Leithwood et al. (2004, p. 13) suggest: "It

is only when research designs start with a more sophisticated view of the chain of

"variables" linking leadership practices to student learning that the effects become

evident".

Superintendents as Lead Learners and Agents of Change

While direct effects are difficult to measure, it is clear that district level

leadership matters, and there is growing evidence suggesting which responsibilities of a

district superintendent have the greatest impact on student achievement. Three broad

categories of responsibilities have been identified by Leithwood et al. (2004), and

further defined by Waters and Marzano (2006), which require superintendents to be

current in their knowledge of the instructional core. First, setting the direction of the

district through goal setting and monitoring progress toward achieving academic and

instructional goals is an essential leadership responsibility for improving student

performance. Second, developing the people in the organization, especially building

principals (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; MacIver & Farley 2003; Myers &

Goehner, 2014; Hallinger, 2011; Schmoker, 2006) and providing professional development for principals and teachers linked to research based best practices (MacIver & Farley, 2003) are key determinants of improved student performance. Third, the reorganization of resources, communication structures, and development of structures for data-driven decision making to become fully aligned with the improvement of teaching and learning are vital components of a superintendent's leadership repertoire.

The responsibilities outlined above require superintendents to function as lead learners in their districts. In a review of literature of instructional practices of the superintendency, Schiavino-Narvaez (2012) concluded, "First and foremost, the instructional leadership practice of superintendents involves superintendents modeling being learners" (p. 14). Superintendent learning can include research on instructional practices, analysis of data to develop problems of practice, and constructing theories of action to drive district improvement efforts. Superintendents must be well versed in school improvement processes and in the building of human capacity in their districts. Myers and Goehner (2014, p. 3) summarize the magnifying effect that superintendents can have on student achievement acting through building principals who influence the effectiveness of teachers, stating: "Teachers will grow professionally only in relation to the quality of instructional leadership of their principals, and principals' instructional leadership will be no better than the support they receive from their superintendent".

A Profession in Search of a Practice

As the importance for superintendents to function as instructional leaders in their districts becomes increasingly clear, exactly what the practice of instructional leadership is remains less clear (Leithwood et al., 2004). According to Elmore (2007, p.21), "The school leadership literature stresses the importance of instructional leadership, but academics and practitioners never have satisfactorily developed a model of practice that says explicitly what the leadership of instruction is". Instructional rounds networks have attempted to build a model for the professional practice of superintendents through protocols, structures and processes that are centered on solving authentic problems of practice in local districts. Ideally, as a result of participation in an instructional rounds network, superintendents gain knowledge of the instructional core at the network level and transfer their learning back to their districts.

Loose Coupling and the Instructional Core

Traditionally, the work of the superintendent has been disconnected from what takes place in the classroom (Cohen & March, 1974; Hannaway & Sproull, 1978). Elmore (2000) describes the incredibly static scenario of school board members, superintendents, central office administrators and principals primarily performing the administrative tasks of organizing, budgeting, managing and dealing with external disruptions while teachers working in isolated classrooms, under uncertain conditions manage the instructional core. The term "loose -coupling" has been applied to superintendents' and other administrators' lack of direct involvement in the technical core of schooling. According to Elmore (2000, p. 7), loose-coupling results in school

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systems because "…direct involvement in instruction is among the least frequent activities performed by administrators of any kind at any level, and those who do engage in instructional leadership activities on a consistent basis are a relatively small proportion of the total administrative force".

Instructional rounds address loose-coupling by connecting superintendents to the instructional core through processes and procedures based on direct observation of the interactions between teachers, students and content. Cohen and Ball (1999) contend that capacity for improved learning resides in these interactions and is dependent on all three elements. Changing just one element such as curriculum in isolation is unlikely to improve instruction. The instructional rounds protocols developed by City et al. (2011) are structured to allow superintendents to build new knowledge and understandings through observation of "interactions among teachers and students around educational material" (Cohen & Ball, 1999, p. 2).

Ultimately, "Improvement is about turning ideas into actions that produce intended results" (Sparks, 2009, p. 54). Acting on new knowledge and understandings is a fundamental challenge for school leaders, which requires "next action thinking" to bridge the "knowing-doing" gap.

The Knowing-doing Gap

While being the lead learner is a necessary condition for bringing about systemic change to improve teaching and learning across a school district, it is not a sufficient condition. As Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) point out in their research on the implementation of best practices in a variety of organizations, it is one thing to know

what should be done, and another to actually implement new practices and work routines in an organization. Based on case study analysis of firms in multiple industries, Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) found that knowledge of how to improve performance is not easily transferred within or across firms. This has come to be known as the "knowing-doing" gap.

What is it that makes transferring successful new concepts and work practices so difficult, and what can leaders do to improve implementation of these new concepts and practices? To understand the "knowing-doing" gap, it is important to understand the nature of change. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) distinguish between two types of problems that result in different change processes in an organization. Technical problems may be easy or difficult to solve, but are solvable using current knowledge; adaptive challenges are more complex and require knowledge beyond what is currently known. Technical problems require what is known as first-order change, and can be solved by adjusting the existing structure without new learning or changes to the culture of the organization. Adaptive challenges require second-order change, which is characterized by new learning, a shift in the culture of the organization, and an irreversible transformation to new ways of being and doing. Systemic changes across a school district require second-order change initiatives to solve adaptive problems.

At the crux of the knowing-doing gap is the fact that adaptive change is incredibly difficult. As Sparks (2009, p.48) notes, "Individuals and organizations have an amazing capacity to maintain their current beliefs and practices in the face of massive, well-intentioned efforts to change them". Adaptive change is accompanied by a painful

period of adjustment, stress, conflict and fear that often thwarts attempts to transform

an organization (Hiefetz & Linsky, 2002; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000; Fullan, 1999; Moore,

2009).

Leading adaptive change is not for the weak of heart. Heifetz and Linsky (2002)

make the point that, "Adaptive change is painful; leading it can be dangerous" (p.28).

The emotional demands of adaptive change create leadership challenges that as many

as two-thirds of the adult population in the United States have not developed the

capacity to successfully deal with (Kegan in Helsing et al., 2008). Because most

situations are a blend of technical and adaptive challenges, many leaders simply focus

on the technical problems to avoid the pain, anxiety and conflict that accompany the

adaptive challenges (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

To overcome the emotion-laden challenges of adaptive change, Heifetz and

Linsky (2002) claim that people must change their hearts and minds as well as their

behavior. Sparks (2009) suggests leaders create relationships with others by speaking

from the heart about their values, purposes, ideas, and goals in order to develop new

conceptual frames and establish new habits. According to Fullan (1999), the quality of

the relationships among organizational members and the building of shared meaning

and trust through the sharing of emotions, feelings and mental models are the keys to

long-term success.

Because each school district is unique, the social and organizational factors that

must be taken into account when orchestrating adaptive change vary from district to

district. This explains why it is so difficult to transfer successful practices from one

district or even school to another. Resnick, Spillane, Goldman, and Rangel (2010) refer

to these social and organizational factors as "context" and contend that the study of

context should be a much more central focus of research and implementation. Others

such as Fullan (1999); Heifetz (in Newcomb, 2004); Sparks, (2009); and Sherer and

Spillane (2011) argue that attention should be paid to the conditions and processes that

undergird successful reform implementation rather than focusing on the products of

others' reform efforts. Each strategy for making adaptive change must be structured to

the specific context of individual school buildings (Sherer & Spillane, 2011). Sparks

(2009) summarizes the importance of context in accomplishing adaptive change and

advocates for the creation of collaborative cultures to support the continuous

improvement of practice:

> When it comes to all teachers in a school using research to continuously improve
> teaching and learning, context trumps both content and process—a school's culture and
> structures either enable or disable the application of new knowledge and skills. Put
> another way, the school context and the professional learning processes used in schools
> have more influence on day-to-day practice that research and professional literature.
> Consequently, it is essential that administrators and teacher leaders create cultures,
> structures, and processes that require teamwork and the continuous improvement of
> practice (p.50).

Routines as Structures for Change

Over the past decade it has become increasingly clear that changes in teaching

pedagogy leading to improved student performance occur through transparent and

collaborative analysis of daily work practice (Resnick et al., 2010; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000; Sherer & Spillane, 2011; Heifetz, in Newcomb, 2004). Professional learning must be embedded in everyday practice through activity or action. Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) found that knowledge that is actually implemented is much more likely to be acquired from learning by doing as opposed to learning by reading, listening or thinking. By focusing on activity, what actually happens in classrooms, school leaders can create the collaborative cultures necessary for supporting continuous improvement while fostering systemic learning about what works and does not work in their specific context.

Organizational routines are the backbone of daily work practice in organizations ranging from manufacturing, retail, finance, government, and education. In schools, organizational routines include hiring teachers, conducting teacher evaluations, school improvement planning, and Response to Intervention programs. When purposefully chosen, well designed, and implemented with fidelity, new organizational routines can transform the norms and culture of a school (Sherer & Spillane, 2011; Resnick et al., 2010). Resnick and Spillane (2006) refer to a routine capable of transforming school practice as a "kernel routine". Kernel routines generate new school practices such as instructional planning, studying student work, designing lessons, analyzing data, and teacher observation of peers, that build social and leadership capacity that change the culture of a school (Resnick et al., 2010).

Resnick et al. (2010) outline the six criteria of a kernel routine. Kernel routines first must be centered on the instructional core: teaching and learning. Second, they are embedded in both the written and taught curriculum. Third, they must build a common

understanding about teaching and learning among district and school staff members.

Kernel routines must also build trust and communication among school staff members

and provide mechanisms for the transfer of new knowledge into the school's

community of practice. Finally, kernel routines must be able to adapt over time without

losing their core elements.

In their longitudinal case study of a large, urban elementary school in Chicago,

Sherer and Spillane (2011) examined the role of an assessment routine tied to language

arts in both stabilizing and changing teaching practice. Sherer and Spillane (2011) found

that the assessment routine, in conjunction with other new organizational routines, set

an instructional vision for the school, established expectations for classroom practice

and collaboration, and built curricular coherence. In addition, the routines stabilized

both teacher and principal work practice in the face of high employee turnover.

In their analysis of hundreds of organizations, Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) found

that knowing comes from doing and showing others how, and that action counts more

than concepts and plans. The next section examines the nature of activity in and across

organizations.

Activity Theory

According to activity theorists, human activity can be viewed as an activity

system described by the interaction between acting subjects and their motives, i.e. the

object of activity (Engestrom & Kerosuo, 2007; Schulz & Geithner, 2010). The concept

that there can be no activity without object is a basic tenet of activity theory

attributable to Russian scholar Leont'ev. Leont'ev built on the work of Vygotsky, the

founder of cultural-historical psychology in the 1920s and 30s (Center for Research on

Activity Development and Theory, n.d.). As Engestrom and Kerosuo (2007, p. 336) point

out, "Activity theoretical studies put an emphasis on the object, i.e. what is done and

learned together in inter-organizational networks, instead of studying only connections

and collaborations of networks". Activity theory provides a useful lens for this study, as

the purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study will be to discover what new

meanings and understandings regarding the instructional core superintendents took

away from their experience in an instructional rounds network, and to learn in what

ways superintendents transferred their learning to their everyday work in their home

districts. To establish a theoretical foundation for this study, third generation activity

theory, or expansive learning, and a platform-learning model will be examined.

Expansive Learning

Activity theory has evolved from Vygotsky's concept of individual action to

Leont'ev's focus on collective activity systems, to the third generation of activity theory,

which focuses on relationships between multiple activity systems. The expansion of

activity theory to include networks of activity systems as the unit of analysis has

occurred in response to a shift in the world of work and organizations toward

partnerships, alliances and collaborative relationships (Engestrom & Kerosuo, 2007).

Expansive learning can be seen as a cycle of individual learning in conjunction with

collective learning among participants from multiple activity systems, which ultimately

alters the object of the collective activity.

The key feature of expansive learning is the transformation of the object of the collective activity in addition to individual and collective learning among participants. Engestrom and Kerusuo (2007) describe expansive learning:

> The theory builds upon the idea of learning as a longitudinal process in which participants of an activity system take specific learning actions to analyze the inner contradictions of their activity, then design and implement a new model for action and development (p. 336).

The intended result of expansive learning is a fundamental change of all components of the activity system. Applied to networks of schools, the result of expansive learning is not only new knowledge and understanding for school leaders, but a transformation in teaching and student learning as well.

Platform Learning Model

According to Schulz and Geithner (2010), activity in a learning network can be construed at two levels. Expansive learning occurs on the reflection platform where participants from individual organizations may learn at multiple levels, ranging from the simple exchange of knowledge and ideas to the re-conceptualization and transformation of the object of activity. The second level of the learning network concerns the application of platform learning in the operational practice of each individual organization. The exchange of existing concepts and experiences, further development of existing concepts, collective development of new concepts, and evaluation of network cooperation can describe activity on the platform level. At the operational

level, activity centers on the evaluation of established work practice, transfer and implementation of network ideas, and organizational development.

In their study of 13 networks, representing 62 schools in Germany's Network of Innovative Schools, Schulz and Geithner (2010) classified learning networks into four fields based on their range of implementation of concepts from the platform level to the operational level in member schools, and the level of development of complex change and system development at the platform level. At the operational level, networks were placed on a continuum from merely information sharing of new ideas to high implementation of new ideas back in local districts. Platform learning was viewed from networks that merely exchange ideas to those that engage in the development of new and complex ideas about teaching and learning. Of the thirteen networks studied, the majority (six) were classified as Field A (low development, partial implementation), four were classified as Field C (high development, partial implementation), two were classified as Field D (high development, high implementation), while only one network was classified as Field B (low development, low implementation).

The low percentage of networks identified as Field D point out the difficulties learning networks may encounter in moving member schools toward the development of expansive learning at the platform level and implementation of new ideas and concepts into operational practice. Schulz and Geithner (2010) found that while 90% of network participants found their network to be beneficial, only 59% rated the implementation of network ideas in their schools as good or very good. In addition, Schulz and Geithner (2010) found that time constraints and lack of communication from

representatives at the platform level to colleagues in local districts to be limiting factors

in the diffusion of network ideas into organizational practice. It was also observed that

the individual learning of network participants did not necessarily transfer to learning

within individual organizations. In suggesting opportunities for further research, Schulz

and Geithner (2010) note that while most network research has been conducted at the

platform level, the transfer of ideas and concepts from the platform level into daily work

practice at the operational level is often neglected.

The Issue of Transfer

The transfer of new understandings and ideas constructed at the network level

to application at the organizational level is of key importance to participants in a

learning network (Roegman & Riehl, 2012; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002; Schulz

& Geithner, 2010). Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002, p. 153) state, "There is

increasing need to cross boundaries because today's complex problems frequently

require solutions that are not confined to any one practice, or even to a single

organization". They also cite research on intra-organizational knowledge sharing which

showed that a new best practice, such as a new manufacturing method, took three

years to transfer from one part of the organization to another. This was due to

communication difficulties and weak relationships between management and

employees. Elmore (2007, p.24) echoes the difficulty of transfer in learning networks

stating, "It is one thing to create a healthy and productive professional community

among school leaders. It is quite another to have the work of the community move out

into the systems and schools that the participants manage".

Learning Networks

Learning networks come in a variety of shapes and sizes and might be known in educational circles as Networked Learning Communities, professional learning communities, communities of practice, leadership practice communities, and instructional rounds networks. Network participants may be district superintendents, curriculum directors, instructional coaches, building principals, or teachers. Networks may be inter-organizational or intra- organizational. Classified by Castells (2001) as the organizational form of the information age, networks in education merit further study. While this study focuses specifically on what might be learned from superintendents participating in an instructional rounds network, the literature on other forms of learning networks provides background for this study.

Network Descriptions

Various network descriptions help to define the nature of learning networks. Communities of practice have been described by Wenger et al. (2002, p.4) as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis". Livingston (2007, p. 26) contends "networks may be thought of as clearly purposeful, complexly interrelated, highly intentional clusters of individuals or organizations…which fosters growth and learning, contributes to our identity and, in the end, furthers productive actions and results". In describing the work of the School Leaders Network, Cone (2010, p.38) claims, "The focus of the loosely organized meetings is for leaders to

learn the practice of leadership through collaborative dialogue, problem solving,

reflection, and sharing of best practices".

Dufour and Eaker (1998) and Hord (1997) describe professional learning

communities (PLC's) as teams of teachers bonded by common mission, vision, and goals,

engaged in collective inquiry for the improvement of instructional practice and

improved student learning. Similar to PLC's, Wenger and Snyder (2000) describe

communities of practice as networks of professionals brought together by common

expertise and purpose to develop member's capacities to build and exchange

knowledge, to transfer best practices, and to solve ' problems of practice'. Wagner,

Kegan, Lahey, Lemons, Garnier, Helsing, Howell, and Rasmussen (2006) define

leadership practice communities as "leaders committed to helping one another solve

problems of practice related to the district's teaching and learning challenges together"

(p. 17).

The Promise of Learning Networks

One of the goals of an inter-organizational learning network is to foster shared

learning by network participants that informs practice back in each individual

organization. In a study of 60 networks, Parker (in Lieberman & Grolnick, 1997) found

that members in all networks shared both information and a common purpose, were

committed to the group, and were led by an effective facilitator. According to

Lieberman and Grolnick (1997) little evidence prior to 1997 existed regarding how

networks formed, functioned, or sustained themselves. While this personal growth may

be of importance to individual school leaders, what evidence exists that participation in

an inter-organizational learning network produces improved academic performance for students in participant organizations?

Bell et al. (2005) conducted a review of nineteen international studies with 16 from the United States, two from the United Kingdom, and one from Australia. Criteria were developed to categorize the impact of a network on students as high, medium, or low. High impact studies used triangulated data and clearly identifiable changes in knowledge, skills, or attitudes, while low impact studies relied on perception data and inferred modest changes in knowledge, skills, or attitudes.

Fourteen of the studies investigated pupil impact with six studies finding a network's impact on pupils to be high, three studies showed medium impact, and five reported low or no impact. Examples of the impact of networks on students included improvement in students' motivation for reading and writing, improved social skills and group leadership skills, and moderate gains in math and science achievement. Using similar criteria, six studies showed high impact on teachers while five more found medium impact, with just three showing low or no impact. Examples of effects of networks on teachers included greater understanding of the learning process, improved knowledge and skill in teaching integrated reading, language and the arts, and increased teacher confidence and more positive attitudes.

Networked Learning Communities Programme

The Networked Learning Communities (NLC) Programme in England was specifically designed to inform policy and system learning about network design and implementation issues, network size and type, facilitation and leadership, formation

processes, and system support (Jackson & Temperley, 2006). Between 2002 and 2006, the network consisted of 1,500 schools spread throughout 137 networks. According to Jackson and Temperly (2006, p.4), the network "was charged with generating evidence about how and under what conditions networks can make a contribution to raising student achievement, about the leadership practices that prove to hold most potential for school-to-school learning, and about the new relationships emerging between networks as a unit of engagement and their Local Authority partners".

Students in schools participating in an NLC were found to have made greater improvements in overall scores across grade levels on the United Kingdom's Key Stage Four Assessment between 2004 and 2005 than students in non-participating schools. The percentage of students earning five or more A to C grades on the Key Stage Four Assessment was also greater for students attending a NLC school than for those not attending a NLC school. These results led Jackson and Temperly (2006, p. 22) to conclude: "What both grounded theory and research from the NLC Programme tell us emphatically is that by aligning networked learning processes for adults and pupils, and having leadership that promotes and supports that learning, there is evidence that networks succeed in their twin objectives of fostering learning community and raising pupil achievement".

School Leaders Network

The School Leaders Network (SLN) was started in Massachusetts in 2006, as a nonprofit network for K-12 principals in high needs urban schools. The network has since grown to networks serving more than 400 principals in six urban locations across

the country: New York, Washington D.C., San Antonio, Los Angeles, Florida's Hillsborough County, and Honolulu. With the guidance of a facilitator, principals explore school-based problems; brainstorm solutions based on leadership research, and offer advice on implementation (Neale & Cone, 2013).

While the impact of School Leaders Networks on student achievement have not been reported in peer reviewed research journals, external reviews conducted as quality control measures yielded the following results: regionally, students in schools led by principals participating in the SLN showed gains in student achievement an average of five percentage points higher in English and eight percentage points higher in math than students in schools led by non-participating principals (Intrator & Scribner, 2008). According to SLN analysis of publicly reported student test scores in New York City and Los Angeles, K-8 SLN schools outperformed the New York City schools' average ELA and math scores by 13%, outperformed 59% of non-SLN schools in four-year graduation rate, and SLN high schools received 10% more A or B school grades on the 2011 New York City Progress Report, while K-8 SLN schools received 13% more A or B grades than non-NLC schools (School Leaders Network, n.d.). In Los Angeles, the graduation rate for NLC schools in the 2010-11 school year was 85% compared to the average graduation rate of 77% in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Students testing as below average in English Language Arts decreased by 28% in SLN schools compared to only a four percent decrease in non-SLN schools, and the average SLN school increased performance by over 10 points over the previous year on the California Standard Exam (School Leaders Network, n.d.).

League of Professional Schools

Founded in 1989 by Dr. Carl Glickman, a professor at the University of Georgia, the League of Professional Schools is an inter-organizational school reform network grounded in a democratic governance model of school leadership. Network schools stress shared leadership between the building principal and teacher leaders. Faculty members from the University of Georgia support the network. Over 150 Georgia schools have participated in the network and over 40 University of Georgia faculty members have been actively involved in League activities (Veugelers & O'Hair, 2005). Member schools communicate and learn from one another with technical assistance and onsite guidance from League staff. In addition, each school creates individual yearly goals, action plans, and performs action research to assess results.

An independent analysis of the effectiveness of the League performed in 1997 by Harkreader and Henry found that in general third and fifth grade students in League schools outperformed third and fifth grade students in comparable non-League schools on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. To further assess the impact of the League on student performance, schools were designated as being at a high, medium or low implementation level of League principles. Third grade students attending high implementation schools significantly outperformed students in non-League schools in social studies and science, and fifth grade students attending high implementation schools outperformed students in non-League schools in social studies, science and reading. In addition, 43% of high implementation schools' third grade students scored

above the national average on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in math compared to only

29% in non-League schools.

Professional Learning Communities

DuFour and Eaker, (1998) and Hord (1997) have identified attributes of a

professional learning community in the school setting. Among these attributes, Hord

(1997) identifies collective learning among staff and application of the learning to

improve professional practice, classroom visits and peer review of teachers' practice to

provide feedback and assistance in improving professional practice, and physical

conditions and human capacities that support such an operation as hallmarks of a

professional learning community. Dufour and Eaker (1998) put forth shared mission,

vision and values, collective inquiry, collaborative teams, action orientation and

experimentation, and continuous improvement as characteristics of a professional

learning community and claim that "The most promising strategy for sustained,

substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to

function as professional learning communities"(p.xi).

There is growing evidence to support the effectiveness of professional learning

communities in promoting improved student performance. Hughes and Kritsonis (2007)

found that of 64 Texas high schools with a population of over 1,000 students, identified

as having a high degree of implementation of professional learning community

concepts, 98.4% improved their language arts scores on the Texas Assessment of

Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) from 2004-2006, and 85.9% improved their math scores

over the same time period. The study did not compare the change in student TAKS

scores for students in schools identified has having a high degree of implementation of professional learning community concepts with the TAKS scores of students in schools not reporting a high degree of professional learning community concepts, however.

In a mixed methods study conducted in three public schools in Reykjavik, Iceland, Sigurðardóttir (2010) found a strong relationship between a school's level of effectiveness as measured on national mathematics and reading tests and their level as a professional learning community. In the second phase of the study, interventions to build the capacity of a low performing school to function as a professional learning community resulted in moderately improved reading scores and greatly improved mathematics scores even though the teachers in the school did not perceive this as happening.

Others such as Leithwood, Patten and Jantzi (2010) found that the establishment of professional learning communities had no significant effect on student learning as measured by grade three and grade six reading and mathematics achievement on the province of Ontario's annual assessments. The author's of this study speculate that professional learning communities may create conditions for improvements in the technical core of schooling through processes such as the development of school wide professional development, by monitoring and providing feedback on the teaching and learning process, and through the development of shared goals. Each of these practices has been shown to influence academic press in a school, or consistently high teacher expectations for student effort and work quality, that was found to have an effect size of .23 related to combined student math and language achievement.

Leadership Practice Communities

Founded in 2000 at the Harvard School of Education, with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, the Change Leadership Group has worked with school and district leaders all over the United Sates to develop and field test concepts and practical practices and protocols for the development of both personal and organizational leadership capacities for transforming schools. A role-alike network structure central to the work of the Change Leadership Group is the leadership practice community. In leadership practice communities, school and district leaders from different districts are committed to working together to help one another solve problems of practice related to teaching and learning. While PLC's are becoming increasingly common as a network structure for school improvement, Wagner et al. (2006) contend that LPC's continue to be very rare.

Based upon the documentation of strategies used in school districts working with the Change Leadership Group to dramatically raise achievement, Wagner et al. (2006, p. 27) have identified seven disciplines that comprise an interdependent systems approach for strengthening instruction:

1. Urgency for instructional improvement using real data

2. Shared vision of good teaching

3. Meetings about the work

4. A shared vision of student results

5. Effective supervision

6. Professional development

7. Diagnostic data with accountable collaboration

Wagner et al. (2006) point out that qualitative data obtained by observations of students in classrooms, and through conversations with students, often is more effective in creating a sense of urgency for change than quantitative data such as scores on state assessments. Frequent conversations among teachers and administrators around data collected through classroom observations are valuable in creating both a shared vision of good teaching and a common vision of what students should know and be able to do.

Supervision that is frequent and focused on instruction, conducted by administrators who know what good instruction looks like, is critical to improving instruction. However, this type of supervision is still rare (Wagner et al., 2006). In addition to effective supervision, professional development that is local, collaborative, and job-embedded is important for improving teaching practice. Professional development should be focused on just a few school improvement initiatives informed by data. Finally, diagnostic data, based on interim assessments administered several times across the school year, should be used to inform the work of grade level or department teams in identifying focus areas for improvement. It is critical that school systems create the time necessary for teachers and administrators to engage in this work.

In addition to these seven disciplines, Wagner et al. (2006) identify four arenas of systemic change for district leaders to consider. These four arenas; competencies, conditions, culture and context, provide district leaders with key systems to consider

when undertaking the challenge of adaptive change. Competencies are defined as the

repertoire of skills and knowledge teachers and administrators have that influences

student learning. Conditions refer to the external structures surrounding student

learning such as the tangible arrangements of space, time and resources. The invisible,

but powerful mindsets and beliefs about students and learning, teachers and teaching,

instructional leadership and the relationships within a school and with the surrounding

community make up the culture of a school. Understanding where students come from,

and the demands of the world for which they must be prepared provides an important

context for learning. Wagner et al. (2006, p. 104) define context as "the skill demands

all students must meet to succeed as providers, learners and citizens and the particular

aspirations, needs and concerns of the families and community the school or district

serves".

Wagner et al. (2006) also point to the critical importance of personal growth and

change going hand in hand in accomplishing the adaptive challenge of school

reinvention stating, "The work of organizational change inevitably runs smack into the

work of personal change no matter what direction one turns" (p. 221). Wagner et al.

(2006) point out that individuals have immunities to personal change that can actually

create obstacles that get in the way of their own plans. Overcoming these immunities

to change requires reflection and recognition of one's own behaviors and actions.

The Dark Side of Inter-organizational Networks

While there is growing empirical evidence to suggest that a school's participation

in a learning network can and does lead to improved student academic performance,

others such as Lima (2010) contend that "…networks have become popular mainly because of faith and fads, rather than solid evidence on their benefits or rigorous analyses of their characteristics, substance and form" (p. 2). Lima argues that the potential negative effects of networks are one of the least pursued themes in network research, and provides these potential drawbacks to participation in a learning network: loss of proprietary information, frustration due to network management complexities, competition between member schools, power imbalances, loss of autonomy in member schools, clashing school cultures, and work overload for administrators and teachers involved in network initiatives. Barringer and Harrison (2000) further point out that the majority of inter-organizational relationships fail.

Instructional Rounds Networks

Founded in 2001,The Connecticut Superintendents' Network was the first instructional rounds network in the country. The network was created with the following goals in mind: to develop superintendents' knowledge and skills to lead large-scale improvement, to enable superintendents to build an infrastructure that supports the work of improvement, to assist superintendents in distributing leadership throughout their district, and to develop a cadre of educational leaders focused on developing their practice (Rallis, Tedder, Lachman, & Elmore, 2006). The Network was formed when Andrew Lachman, the new director of the Connecticut Center for School Change, invited eight superintendents and Harvard professor Richard Elmore to join him in a study group as a means of alternative professional development for superintendents.

The Evolution of Instructional Rounds

Over the past decade, instructional rounds networks have spread to states across the country, including Massachusetts, Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky, California, Washington, New Jersey, and Iowa. Extensive statewide networks have been developed in Iowa where up to one-third of superintendents have participated in their Area Education Agency Network. Instructional rounds networks have also spread to other countries, including Australia and Canada.

Originally developed as an alternative form of professional development for superintendents, the need for building level administrators, teachers, and even students, has been recognized over time. As superintendents have developed their professional practice, schools have begun using instructional rounds at the building or department level (Burns, 2011; Roegman & Riehl, 2012). In Farmington, one of the schools in the original Connecticut Superintendents' network, a district level instructional network was formed with central office staff and the district's seven principals and assistant principals. Soon the network was expanded to include teachers, with each school running its own network (Gillard, 2014). Students were added to the network at the high school, prompting assistant superintendent Wynne to remark, "Today, we are seeing ownership of school improvement from students to (the) central office" (Gillard, 2014, p. 24).

In a study of five matched pairs of superintendents and principals participating in a Superintendents in the Classroom (SITC) Network, Severson (2013) found that superintendents and principals developed new views of instructional best practices,

formed new working relationships with teachers, developed a new appreciation for working with their peers, and adapted the SITC training's best practices into their administrative teams' working processes.

As the original instructional rounds model continues to spread, the call for teacher involvement in the process at the district and building level has grown. Grace (2014) sums up the rationale for teacher involvement in learning networks, "If a system wants to impact teacher practice, then teachers should be included in identifying the next level of work and planning next steps. Teachers are the educators tasked with executing the plan that is designed" (p. 101). Moving forward, Roegman and Riehl (2012) point out, "The term 'instructional rounds' is now being used by others to refer to forms of classroom visits and observations that are different from the model described by Elmore and colleagues (e.g. Marzano, 2011); soon, instructional rounds may become a generic term used to denote all kinds of instructional visits" (p. 924).

Impact of Instructional Rounds on Student Achievement

While there is limited research evidence in the literature linking the establishment of an instructional rounds network with improved student achievement, all of the districts in the original Connecticut Superintendents' Network report improvements in student achievement. For example, the proportion of fourth graders in Farmington who were proficient on the state writing test rose from 77% in 2006 to 88% in 2007, and in Plainville the proportion of sixth graders scoring proficient on the mathematics test rose from 49% to 60% over the same period (Rothman, 2009).

Instructional rounds networks are viewed by many (Tietel, 2010a; Elmore, 2007; Marzano, 2011; Wlodarczyk Hickey, 2011) as a promising strategy for supporting superintendents in becoming instructional leaders and improving teaching at scale, leading to improved student learning. As Marzano (2011, p. 80) emphatically states, "Instructional rounds are one of the most valuable tools that a school or district can use to enhance teachers' pedagogical skills and develop a culture of collaboration".

The Seven Principles of the Instructional Core

According to City et al. (2011) there are only three ways to improve student learning at scale: improve teacher knowledge and skill, increase the level of complexity of the content students are asked to learn, and change the role of the student in the educational process. This first principle of the instructional core provides guidance for district superintendents as they plan for systemic change. Based on the work of Cohen and Ball (1999), City et al. (2011) have developed six additional principles of the instructional core that guide the instructional rounds process. The seven principles of the instructional core are:

1. Increases in student learning occur only as a consequence of improvements in the level of content, teachers' knowledge and skill, and student engagement.

2. If you change any single element of the instructional core, you have to change the other two.

3. If you can't see it in the core, it's not there.

4. Task predicts performance.

5.   The real accountability system is in the tasks that students are asked to do.

6.   We learn the work by doing the work, not by telling other people to do the work, not by having done the work at some time in the past, and not by hiring experts who can act as proxies for our knowledge about how to do the work.

7.   Description before analysis, analysis before prediction, prediction before evaluation (2011, p. 23).

These seven principles provide the framework around which the protocols and processes of the instructional rounds process revolve.

The Nuts and Bolts of Instructional Rounds

Modeled on medical rounds, City et al. (2011) have developed a set of protocols and processes called instructional rounds, designed to provide a structure for district level instructional leadership. Superintendents meet monthly as an inter-organizational network to engage in deep thoughtful conversations about instructional leadership, instruction, and learning. The instructional rounds process consists of five specific steps beginning with the identification of a problem of practice that an individual district seeks help in solving, the construction of a theory of action, followed by classroom observations, an observation debrief, and suggestions for the next level of work. Each step of the process will be examined in greater detail.

Problem of practice. The first step in the instructional rounds process is for a host school to develop a problem of practice. According to City et al. (2011), a rich

problem of practice focuses on the instructional core, is directly observable, is actionable, connects to a broader strategy of improvement, and is high leverage. The problem of practice grounds the network in the real work of member schools and distinguishes instructional rounds processes from other less focused strategies using classroom visits or walkthroughs (Rallis et al., 2006).

Problems of practice that are organic, rather than contrived, best fuel the rounds process. Problems of practice can be developed by district level administrators alone, or in conjunction with building principals. Increasingly, teachers and teacher leaders have been involved in the development of the problem of practice. In a study of teachers from 12 schools in five districts, (Grace, 2014) found that teachers believed that a focus on a meaningful and powerful problem of practice would lead to improved teaching and learning in their schools. However, teacher input into the development of the problem of practice was nearly non-existent, leading teachers to feel that the problem of practice was imposed upon them.

Theory of action. After identifying a rich problem of practice in a district or a building, school improvement leaders and administrators develop a theory of action to connect specific actions to improvements in the instructional core. City et al. (2011, p.45) state, "The job of a good theory of action is that it provides a *through-line* to the instructional core—what are the vital activities that need to happen to improve teaching and learning? A good theory of action (City et al., 2011) begins with a statement of causal relationship, is empirically falsifiable, and is open ended.

The term theory of action comes from the work of Argyris and Schon (1974).

Argyris (1976) differentiates between espoused theories of action, or what people say

they do, and theories in use, what people actually do. An individual's theories in use are

governed by their values and egocentric motives. According to Argyris, (1976) theories

in use are the basis for an individual's behavior and are difficult to change. Applied to

problem solving, single-loop learning, which can be seen as an attempt to solve a

problem, but ignores the real cause of the problem, promotes the status quo related to

an individual's theory in use. Double-loop learning on the other hand, provides a

feedback loop that questions procedures, assumptions, and values that may be the root

cause of the problem.

According to City et al. (2011), repeatedly revisiting an organization's theory of

action with colleagues is what matters most for school leaders' learning. This speaks to

the norm of developing open-ended theories of action, which create a culture of

collective double-loop learning at both a personal and network level. Instructional

rounds are constructed to be a safe environment for double-loop learning where

participants can share not only their successes but also their most frustrating failures,

and can provide and accept frank and honest feedback.

Classroom observations. During a rounds visit, superintendents visit classrooms

in groups of four to six to observe evidence regarding the host school's problem of

practice. Observers are coached to focus on the students, not the teacher.

Observations of what students are saying, doing, and samples of student work are often

recorded on blank notepads with no specific observation tools. Discussion of what was

observed in each classroom is put on hold until the observation debrief later in the day, and evaluation of what was observed is held in check through group norms. Observing evidence related to the problem of practice during a classroom observation is a difficult and unfamiliar task for many superintendents, requiring coaching and practice at the network level.

Observation debrief. After a morning of classroom observations, superintendents reconvene to debrief the evidence collected. According to City et al. (2011), the purpose of the debrief is to consider the collected evidence and to move from what was observed to a prediction of what students will learn as a result of what was observed. In this part of the process, network members build a common understanding of the instructional core and develop their practice as instructional leaders. Description, analysis, and prediction comprise the stages of the observation debrief.

First, in the description stage, participants sift through the collected evidence to select several pieces of evidence that are relevant to the problem of practice. These pieces of evidence are then presented to others in a small group discussion and organized into themes or categories that are meaningful to the group.

In the analysis stage, small groups work to make sense of the data together. This is often done by organizing the data into themes or identifying patterns. Often, a visual display of the data is created by each group and shared with other groups for further discussion and analysis as a whole. The analysis stage is important in building common vocabulary, developing a common sense of the instructional core, and growing

participants practice as instructional leaders. As Burns (2011, p. 59) states, "The

effectiveness of the process lies in the interactions among the participants as they work

through the process, develop a common language for the profession, build a culture of

trust, and develop a focus on the interaction at the instructional core level to improve

our collaborative practice".

Likewise, the prediction stage also promotes important platform level learning.

In prediction, groups attempt to answer this guiding question, "If you were a student in

this school, and you did everything you were expected to do, what would you know and

be able to do?" (City et al., 2011, p.121). The prediction stage connects the fine-grained

descriptions of what students are asked to do from the classroom observations to

student learning. Making this connection reveals important information about which

teaching techniques and tasks lead to or do not lead to student learning, and informs

which school improvement strategies might be suggested for a school's next level of

work.

Next level of work. Suggestions for a host school's or a district's next level of

work employ the power of the collective wisdom of the group to assist host schools in

attacking their problem of practice. Network superintendents generate a list of

suggestions based on the problem of practice, the data observed, the context of the

school, and past school improvement efforts. In addition, suggestions that apply in the

host school may also apply in others, thereby multiplying the effects of platform

interactions in the network. A potential problem lies in the possibility that

superintendents in a region may think alike, leaving the collective wisdom of the group

void of insightful or innovative solutions to complex problems of practice.

What Happens Next?

According to City et al. (2011), the two-fold purpose of an instructional rounds

visit is to support the learning of the network at the platform level, as well as to provide

feedback and suggestions for the host school that may be put into operational practice

in classrooms. The critical and difficult step of transferring new knowledge and

understanding created by superintendents at the platform level back into their districts

is left to the discretion of individual networks. Most networks require host schools to

commit to timelines such as in the first month, three months, or six months following a

visit, for reporting steps taken toward solving their problem of practice. While

concerned about issues of time, some network superintendents have agreed to engage

in revisits by several superintendents to host districts to assist in processing a district

leader's implementation strategies for school change. Combined with the concept of a

"strategic through-line", or a chain connecting the actions of a superintendent to central

office personnel and building level administrators, to teachers and support staff, to the

learning of students, the revisits provide a support system for superintendents to talk

honestly about what they know or don't know about improving instruction in their

district, and problems they face in implementation (Tietel, 2010b). Tietel in Schiavino-

Narvaez (2009) states, "Although there has been work done within instructional rounds

networks to strengthen the follow-up work that happens after network meetings,

network facilitators recognize there is still need to further develop this follow-up work in ways that will lead to even deeper changes in practice" (p. 4).

Summary

Technological advances in communications and manufacturing have propelled massive changes in the structure of the global economy, creating a demand for skilled and educated workers around the world (Achieve, 2012). In America, these workforce demands have created a sense of urgency from business and industry leaders and politicians to quickly improve educational outcomes for American high school students. The systemic changes required in retooling American schools to essentially provide a college-prep education for all students are complex and difficult. These adaptive changes require district level leaders that are not only skilled in the technical requirements of their position, such as facility planning, budgeting, and hiring, they require leaders who are skilled in understanding and orchestrating change, and who can serve as lead learners of best practices in teaching and learning in their district.

Although difficult to measure, superintendents can play a significant role in improving student outcomes in a school system. In their meta-analysis consisting of 27 studies conducted between 1970 and 2005, representing 2,714 school districts, Waters and Marzano (2006) found a significant relationship (r=. 24) between district level leadership and student achievement. Citing evidence from approximately four dozen studies between 1980 and 1998, Leithwood et al. (2004) agree that the direct and indirect effects of leadership on student outcomes is small but significant, representing between three and five percent of the variation in student learning between schools. In

contrast, Chingos et al. (2014), in a study of 2.3 million students in 282 districts in North Carolina and Florida, claim that there is almost no quantitative research that measures the impact of superintendents on student performance, finding that although statistically significant, only 0.3% of student performance can be directly attributed to the district superintendent.

Superintendents drive changes leading to improved student performance through other people, most importantly principals (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; MacIver & Farley 2003; Myers & Goehner, 2014; Hallinger, 2011; Schmoker, 2006). In addition to developing building principals, specific leadership practices found to be significant in driving change to improve student performance are: setting and monitoring goals for instruction and achievement, reorganizing resources and communication structures to support school improvement efforts, data driven decision making (Leithwood et al. 2004; Waters & Marzano, 2006), developing a theory of action to drive district improvement (Schiavino-Narvaez, 2012), and the establishment of new organizational routines in schools (Sherer and Spillane, 2011; Resnick et al., 2010).

As the research on what superintendents must do to implement the necessary adaptive changes in their districts becomes more clear, there is a gap in understanding how to put these strategies into everyday work practice. Addressing this "knowing-doing" gap is of critical importance to district superintendents if they are to successfully improve student learning in their districts. This study seeks to understand how superintendents participating in an instructional rounds network in the Midwest might bridge the 'knowing-doing' gap through inter-organizational learning with other

superintendents. Specifically, the purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study will be to examine how district superintendents make sense of participating in a regional superintendents' instructional rounds network in the Midwest, to discover what new meanings and understandings superintendents might take away from this experience, and to learn in what ways superintendents may transfer their learning to their everyday work in their home districts.

A basic understanding of activity theory and specifically third generation activity theory, or expansive learning, forms the foundation for this study. Expansive learning can be seen as a cycle of individual learning in conjunction with collective learning among participants from multiple activity systems, which ultimately alters the object of the collective activity (Engestrom & Kerosuo, 2007). Schulz and Geithner (2010) conceive of a platform model of expansive learning where participants in an inter-organizational network learn through interactions with peers on an external learning platform and transfer their learning into operational practice back in their individual organizations. In education, inter-organizational learning networks such as the Networked Learning Communities Programme in England and the School Leaders Network and League of Professional Schools in the United States have shown promising gains in student achievement (Bell et al., 2006 Jackson & Temperley, 2006; Intrator & Scribner, 2008). Central to this study, Instructional rounds networks as developed by City et al. (2011) have also shown promise as a structure for developing superintendent knowledge and skill leading to improved student academic performance (Tietel, 2010a; Elmore, 2007; Marzano, 2011; Wlodarczyk Hickey, 2011; Rothman, 2009).

According to Elmore (2007, p.21), "The school leadership literature stresses the importance of instructional leadership, but academics and practitioners never have satisfactorily developed a model of practice that says explicitly what the leadership of instruction is". This study will add to the leadership literature through an interpretive analysis examining superintendents' development of their instructional leadership capacity through participation in a regional instructional rounds network. In addition to understanding how superintendents describe their participation at the platform level of the network, and teasing out what new meanings and understandings superintendents gained through participation at the platform level, this study will add to the literature on how superintendents closed the 'learning-doing' gap in their practice through understanding the factors influencing what and how these new meanings and understandings are transferred into operational practice in superintendents' home districts. Schulz and Geithner (2010) found that while much network research has been done at the platform level, studies of implementation of daily work practices at the operational level are rare, and the transfer of ideas and concepts from platform work into daily work is often neglected in network research.

This study will have practical importance for superintendents and other school leaders such as principals, instructional coaches, and teacher leaders engaged in instructional rounds networks or other types of learning networks, as it will provide insight into the platform level experience of superintendents learning to construct new meanings and understandings about the instructional core in general. In understanding how superintendents translated their new learning to their work at the operational level

in their home districts, this study seeks to add more clarity to the potential for

superintendents to make greater influence on teaching and learning practice. This study

will be of practical value to superintendents involved in existing instructional rounds

networks and to superintendents considering forming a network, as it will provide

insights from superintendents in the field that will be valuable in building and sustaining

successful instructional rounds networks to support superintendents in leading adaptive

change in their districts.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Overview of Methods and Rationale

The methodology chapter begins with a restatement of the purpose and

research questions that drive this interpretive phenomenological study. A brief

discussion of phenomenology provides the background for a more detailed description

of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA).

The bulk of the chapter lays out the details of the methods employed in

conducting the study, including the study setting and participants, recruitment and

consent procedures, data collection methods, and data analysis approach and

procedures. Delimitations bounding the study and potential limitations of the study are

also discussed. The chapter concludes with disclosure concerning my role as the

researcher.

Purpose

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to examine how

district superintendents made sense of participating in a regional superintendents'

instructional rounds network in the Midwest, to discover what new meanings and

understandings superintendents might take away from this experience, and to learn in

what ways superintendents may have transferred their learning to their everyday work in their home districts. Participation in an instructional rounds network was generally defined as actively engaging in the accepted norms and protocols of the instructional rounds process as developed by City et al. (2011).

Research Questions

Therefore, this study addressed the following research questions:

1.   How did superintendents describe their experience participating in the instructional rounds network at the platform level?

2.   What new meanings or understandings did superintendents take away from this platform level experience?

3.   In what ways did superintendents transfer these new meanings and understandings to their operational practice in their local districts?

4.   What influences what and how superintendents transferred these new meanings and understandings to their operational practice in their local districts?

Phenomenology

A phenomenological approach was used to explore the "individual lived experience" of superintendents participating in a regional instructional rounds network. Phenomenological approaches have their epistemological foundation in constructivism, or the belief that social reality is constructed by those who participate in it (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). According to McDuffie (1996, para. 1), "…phenomenology reveals the basic

structure of experience, a structure that accounts for our basic abilities to know and act upon the world". Early phenomenological analysis of formal education sought to investigate teaching and learning through a rich description of teachers and students in an institutional setting (McDuffie, 1996). Similar to this descriptive phenomenology in its basic theoretical underpinnings, interpretive phenomenology has emerged over the past two decades as a fast growing approach to qualitative inquiry that emphasizes how human beings make sense of their experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This interpretive stance is particularly germane to this study and will be explored in greater detail.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is built upon three main theoretical constructs: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Smith et al, 2009). Finlay (in Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012) outlines a general phenomenological methodology:

Phenomenological research characteristically starts with concrete descriptions of lived situations, often first-person accounts, set down in everyday language and avoiding abstract intellectual generalizations. The researcher proceeds by reflectively analyzing these descriptions, perhaps idiographically first, then by offering a synthesized account, for example, identifying general themes about the essence of the phenomenon (p. 21).

IPA researchers modify this general methodology with focused attention on the researcher making sense of the participant, making sense of some phenomena of

interest. The focus of this study was on the researcher making sense of superintendents making sense of their participation in an instructional rounds network and in what they had learned and transferred to their individual school districts.

Hermeneutics, or the theory of interpretation, plays a central role in IPA. Attention is given to both interpretations of participants' experiences by participants themselves and by the researcher. This attention to the fore-structure that the researcher brings to his understanding of a phenomenon molds the manner in which IPA researchers reflect on and bracket their experiences. Rather than setting aside, or bracketing their experiences from the participants experiences, IPA researchers view bracketing as a cyclical process with researchers' preconceptions becoming clearer as they engage with text (Smith et al., 2009).

Finally, IPA differs from other types of phenomenology in its focus on individual lived experience. This idiographic perspective is particularly concerned with analysis of the particular. Smith et al. (2009) describe the idiographic nature of IPA: "…IPA is committed to understanding how particular experiential phenomena (an event, process or relationship) have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context" (p. 29). By beginning with a detailed examination of each case, and working carefully across cases for similarities and differences, patterns may emerge that may be theoretically transferrable to similar persons in similar contexts.

Study Setting, Site, Participants, and Recruitment

Setting

Superintendents participating in a regional instructional rounds network describe the setting for this study. In such networks, participants co-construct new understandings of school leadership, teaching, learning and adaptive change through engagement in the processes and protocols developed by City et al. (2011). Instructional rounds processes consist of monthly visits to member schools in an attempt to assist host schools in solving a problem of practice through classroom visits, observation debriefs, and suggestions for the next level of work.

Site

The primary site for this study was a regional superintendents' network in the Midwest, comprised of thirteen district superintendents engaged in the instructional rounds process. Of the thirteen superintendents, eleven lead a public K-12 school district, one is the leader of a K-12 public school academy, and one is the head of a K-12 nonpublic school. The setting for the majority of the districts can be described as suburban or rural, with one district being characterized as urban. Overall, the thirteen school districts serve a total of approximately 48,762 students, with the largest district enrollment being 7,244 students and the smallest 856 students.

Participants

The superintendents in this network made up the pool of potential participants in this study. These superintendents represent a typical regional network of

superintendents serving school populations with similar demographics. My proximity to the schools represented in the network and my role as a participant observer made this both a convenient and potentially rich participant pool. Smith et al. (2009) point out that IPA researchers usually try to find a homogeneous sample of potential participants with a shared experience. In addition to providing relatively easy access to participants and a convenient location for research, Marshall and Rossman (2011) contend that closeness to the people and phenomenon under study can increase the quality of qualitative data. Conversely, familiarity with research participants can increase the possibility of researcher bias, ethical and political dilemmas, and the risk of gaining potentially damaging knowledge.

Access

Entry to the primary site was obtained through personal contact with the network leader, who is an assistant superintendent for the local intermediate school district. I also presented my proposal to the superintendents in the network to determine their interest in participating in my study. Verbal permission to conduct the study was obtained from both the network leader and the superintendents in the network with no objections.

Recruitment

After obtaining permission to proceed with the study from the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB), individual permission was obtained from each participant through direct recruitment. Twelve of the thirteen superintendents

participating in the network were contacted by email to secure their participation in the study. The introductory email was followed up with a personal letter explaining the study, potential risks of participation, and the participant consent document approved by the HSIRB, which is included in Appendix B. Potential participants were also notified that I would be following up with a phone call to answer questions regarding participation and outlining next steps for participation. Signed consent forms were collected before continuing with the study.

One superintendent was not contacted because he failed to meet the exclusionary criteria of participation in the regional superintendents' network for at least two years. Eight participants from the instructional rounds network were secured for participation in the study and appointments to conduct open-ended interviews with each participant were arranged by a phone call with either the participant or their administrative assistant. Participation by eight of the 12 potential participants provided a robust sample that was able to give a representative voice to the shared experience of working and learning together in a regional superintendents' instructional rounds network.

Data Collection

Data Types and Sources

Data was collected from interviews and artifacts participants wished to share as an aid to telling their story during the interview. The primary method of data collection for this interpretive phenomenology, as suggested by Creswell (2013), was in-depth, open-ended, face-to-face interviews with each of the participants. Interviews lasting

approximately 45-60 minutes were conducted with participants in their offices as this location provided easy access to any artifacts the participants wished to share to illustrate how learning at the platform level has been transferred to the operational level. As the primary investigator, I personally conducted each interview.

Superintendents were asked if they wished to share any artifacts such as school improvement plans, professional development plans, meeting agendas, and instructional rounds visit planning documents to illustrate what and how their new understandings built on the platform level have been transferred into operational practice. While participants were able to verbalize the type of artifacts that may be available, only two of the participants produced any artifacts to help illustrate how their new learning had been transferred into operational practice. In both cases, participants shared agendas for internal instructional rounds visits in their home districts. These artifacts, along with participants' verbal descriptions of artifacts combined with reflective notes chronicled in a research diary were two methods employed for contextualizing the interview material as suggested by Smith et al. (2009).

Data Collection Procedures

An interview guide consisting of several open-ended questions and possible prompts for probing was designed for asking questions and recording cursory field notes during the face-to-face interviews. The interview guide was pilot tested with the primary site facilitator to estimate the length of the interviews, refine the interview questions, and practice the interview protocol.

Eight interviews were conducted over a one-month period to collect data for this study. Interviews lasting approximately 45-60 minutes each, were recorded using an I-pad with an external microphone. Recorded interview data was immediately listened to following the recording to insure an audible recording and to quickly become more familiar with each participant's narrative. Recorded data was played back for transcription and then stored on an encrypted external hard drive. During the transcription process, I played back the recorded interviews from the I-pad through an external speaker while a transcriptionist typed up the transcription of each interview using a word processing program. This process provided a second opportunity to immerse myself in the data and to conduct preliminary memoing for each participant.

As suggested by Smith et al. (2009), the first interview was transcribed and used to review both the interview schedule and interview strategies. Several minor adjustments in the wording of the interview protocol were made after the first two interviews to make the meaning of several interview questions clearer to the participants. Adding line numbers, page numbers, and printing a hard copy for analysis prepared transcripts for analysis. Right and left margins were taped onto the transcript to create more space for noting and emergent themes.

Data Analysis Processes and Procedures

Data Analysis Approach

The research approach for this study was interpretive phenomenological analysis. Smith et al. (2009) defines IPA as a "…qualitative approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences" (p. 1). A

hallmark of IPA research is a detailed analysis of the particular case. IPA researchers are

interested in learning about how each participant experiences a phenomenon of

interest. Generally, IPA studies rely on a few cases from a relatively homogeneous

sample, as was the case in my study. While the focus of IPA research is a detailed

account of individual lived experience, careful examination across several cases may

uncover patterns of meaning constructed by individuals reflecting on a common

experience.

A second hallmark of IPA research is its hermeneutic, or interpretive nature. IPA

is an appropriate approach for this study, as I examined how superintendents make

sense of participating in a regional superintendents network from two levels: a platform

experience conducting instructional rounds and meeting together outside their

individual districts to construct new meanings and understandings, and at the

operational level in their home districts as they transfer these new meanings and

understandings into everyday practice. An interpretive stance is appropriate for this

study, as I necessarily interpreted superintendents' interpretations of their experiences

working and learning together in an instructional rounds network through my own lived

experiences in education and as a participant observer in the network over the course of

two school years.

Data Analysis Procedures

A constant comparative data analysis as is generally employed in grounded

theory research provided the basic data analysis structure for this study. Creswell

(2008) describes constant comparison as an "…inductive (from specific to broad) data

analysis procedure in grounded theory research of generating and connecting categories by comparing incidents in the data to other incidents, incidents to categories and categories to other categories"(p. 443). Similarly, Smith et al. (2009) recommend analyzing the first case in detail before moving on to the second case, analyzing the second case in detail before moving on to the third, and so on. Following the analysis of each individual case the analysis shifts toward looking for patterns across cases.

The six steps of IPA outlined by Smith et al. (2009) that were followed in analyzing the data for this study include reading and re-reading the transcript, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns across cases.

The analysis began with a first reading of the transcript from the first case along with the audio recording of the interview to fully immerse myself in the data and to focus attention on the participant's world. Initial memoing of the interview experience itself and the transcript were recorded in a research diary while re-reading the transcript several more times. A record of analysis activities was also maintained in a research log.

This first step flowed naturally into the second step of initial noting, where text that seemed important was highlighted and descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments were made in the right margin. Descriptive comments were recorded in blue, linguistic comments in red and conceptual comments in green. This initial noting of conceptual, linguistic, and descriptive comments provided insights into how superintendents think, speak, and act, respectively.

Smith et al. (2009) describe step three, the task of developing emergent themes:

In looking for emergent themes, the task of managing the data changes as the analyst simultaneously attempts to reduce the volume of detail (the transcript and the initial notes) whilst maintaining complexity, in terms of mapping the interrelationships, connections and patterns between exploratory notes. This involves an analytic shift to working primarily with the initial notes rather than the transcript itself (p. 91). Themes in the form of short phrases were developed and recorded along the left-hand side of the transcript. The mean number of themes generated per case was 79 with the mean number of unique themes per case being 59.

In step four, connections of emergent themes were developed into new clusters of like themes called super-ordinate themes (Smith et al., 2009). This was done by typing the emergent themes in chronological order on a separate document, printing the themes and cutting the themes into small pieces of paper. The themes were then grouped and regrouped until they were arranged in eight to ten super-ordinate themes. This visual representation of themes and super-ordinate themes was then captured in a photograph using a cell phone and printed as a record of each participant's analysis. A chart organizing emergent themes under super-ordinate theme headings was then created to organize the data within each interview. Finally, in vivo codes (text excerpts) illustrating each emerging theme were matched with the theme indicating the line numbers in the transcript where the text could be found.

Following careful analysis of the first case, data was collected and analyzed for the second case. During this process I was cognizant of the ideas emerging from the

first case while allowing new themes to emerge from the second case. This process was continued until data from all participants was collected and analyzed. Following transcription and analysis of all eight cases, superintendents participating in the study were emailed a copy of their written transcript to review for accuracy and to assure that the printed text captured their intended meaning. Two participants made minor grammatical changes to their transcript.

The final stage in the process involved identifying patterns across cases. Smith et al. (2009) state, "Good IPA studies tell the reader something important about the particular individual participants as well as something important about the themes they share" (p. 181). To demonstrate individual voice and develop common themes, a master table of themes for the group was created, listing themes under super-ordinate themes and displaying in vivo codes (lines of text) from each participant that show how they illustrate the theme. These master theme tables were color coded, cut into pieces and rearranged on a large board to create a visual matrix of each participant in relation to the common themes across cases. This visual matrix was then used to further condense the data into the final seven themes emerging from the data analysis. In addition, a table identifying the recurrence of super- ordinate themes for each participant and across participants was created to enhance validity of the findings.

Trustworthiness

Validity, or trustworthiness, in qualitative research seeks to determine whether the findings of a study are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the reader (Creswell, 2009). In their seminal work entitled *Naturalistic*

Inquiry, Lincoln and Guba (1985) put forth four criteria for establishing the trustworthiness of qualitative research. These criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Strategies for meeting these criteria will now be discussed.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the degree of confidence in the "truth" of the findings, or that the study measures what is actually intended. The following strategies were employed to ensure credibility:

1. Familiarity with the culture of the Superintendents' network—I was as a participant observer in the network over a period of two school years before conducting this study to improve my understanding of the culture of the network and to establish a relationship of trust between participants and myself.

2. Triangulation of data— Shenton (2004, p. 65-66) suggests, "Opportunities should also be seized to examine any documents referred to by informants during the actual interviews or focus groups where these can shed more light on the behaviour of the people in question". Participants had the opportunity to share documents during their interviews to illustrate the transfer of new learnings from the platform level to the operational level. While limited documentation was actually shared, each participant gave a verbal account of such documents.

3. Member checking—Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 314) contend that member checking is the "most crucial technique for establishing credibility". Participants had the opportunity to serve as a check throughout the data collection and analysis. Participants were asked to read the transcripts of their interviews to ensure that their words match what they intended. Participants also had the opportunity to react to the seven themes emerging during the data analysis.

4. Iterative questioning—Probes were used along with iterative questioning to clarify participant responses and uncover deliberate falsehoods.

Transferability

Transferability speaks to the extent that the findings of a study are applicable in other contexts. A complete description of the context of this study was created to allow readers to draw conclusions regarding the transferability of the findings to other contexts. The following factors were addressed in the description of this study: the aggregate demographic information of the schools participating in the network under study, the number of participants, the data collection methods, the number and length of the data collection sessions, and the time period over which the data was collected.

Dependability

Qualitative research that is dependable is consistent and repeatable. To establish dependability, the processes of data collection and analysis were reported in

detail and timeline of data collection and analysis activities was recorded in a research

journal.

Confirmability

Objectivity or neutrality of the researcher is essential to confirmability. In

establishing confirmability, I disclosed my role as the researcher and my connections to

the network under study. I will also kept records creating an audit trail described by

Smith et al. (2009) consisting of initial notes on the research questions, the research

proposal, the interview schedule, interview protocols, digital recordings, annotated

transcripts, tables of themes, photos of the organization of emergent themes, draft

reports, and the final report. In addition, memoing was employed as a strategy for

clarifying my assumptions and subjective preconceptions, to make my thinking visible

during the research process, and to chronicle my decision making in conducting this

study. Birks, Chapman and Francis (2008, p. 69) describe the use of memos in qualitative

research:

Through the use of memos, the researcher is able to immerse themselves in the

data, explore the meanings that this data holds, maintain continuity and sustain

momentum in the conduct of research. As a chronicle of the research journey, memos

remain as an indelible, yet flexible, record for personal retention or dissemination to

others.

The Researcher

Prior to conducting this study, I participated in this network's monthly instructional rounds visits during the 2013-14 and 2014-15 school years. As a participant observer, I was able to build rapport and strengthen working relationships with each superintendent, gain a better understanding of the workings of the network, and deepen my understanding of the instructional rounds process. I also had the opportunity to meet with the network leader on several occasions to discuss the instructional rounds process, the workings of the network, and my research interests. As a service to the network, and to satisfy my required field experience, I conducted follow up interviews of building administrators to learn about their experiences as the leader of a school hosting an instructional rounds visit. In addition, I have hosted an instructional rounds visit, served on committees with several of the superintendents in the network, and have also served on several committees with the network facilitator.

Extended participation in network activities provided insights into the personalities of individual superintendents and the inner workings of the network. This familiarity allowed me to lead a conversation with each participant during the open-ended interviews. I am also aware that this familiarity may have opened up the possibility of researcher bias.

Delimitations and Limitations

This interpretive phenomenological study aimed to discover the essence of superintendents' participation in a specific regional instructional rounds network in the Midwest. The findings from this study may be transferable to other settings, but may be

limited to the extent that other regional instructional rounds networks are similar to the network studied. For example, school districts in the network studied are primarily suburban. Urban superintendents may not experience participation in an instructional rounds network in a similar fashion. All of the superintendents in this study are white males. A network of superintendents composed of a more diverse mix of gender and race may also experience instructional rounds in a different manner. Superintendents in the network studied had significant training in the instructional rounds process including reading *Instructional Rounds in Education* (City et al., 2011), and attending training at Harvard University. Superintendents in other networks may not have had such training.

Summary

This interpretive phenomenological study sought to examine how district superintendents made sense of participating in a regional superintendents' instructional rounds network in the Midwest, to discover what new meanings and understandings superintendents might take away from this experience, and to learn in what ways superintendents may transfer their learning to their everyday work in their home districts. The site selected for this study was comprised of thirteen superintendents participating in a regional instructional rounds network in the Midwest. Serving approximately 48,762 students, the majority of the districts represented in the network can be classified as suburban or rural, and range in size from 856 to 7,244 students.

Access to the network was gained through contact with the network leader. An email was sent to potential participants soliciting their participation in the study, with

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follow up phone calls to answer questions concerning the details of the study. Letters

explaining the study and the potential risks to participants and to obtain written consent

for participation in the study, were sent to potential participates who indicated an

interest in participating in the study Open-ended interviews were the primary source of

data collection for the study along with an opportunity for participants to share artifacts

such as school improvement plans, meeting minutes, and instructional rounds visit

planning documents during the interview in order to illustrate how their learning at the

platform level has been transferred to operational practice. Interviews were digitally

recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The six steps of IPA research outlined by Smith et

al. (2009) that were followed in analyzing the data for this study included; reading and

re-reading the transcript, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for

connections across emergent themes, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns

across cases. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were

addressed through strategies such as prolonged engagement with participants,

triangulation of data, member checking, iterative questioning, memoing, and an audit

trail.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Overview

Chapter four begins with a restatement of the purpose of this interpretive

phenomenological study and the research questions. Next, a demographic description

of each of the eight superintendents who participated in the study is created to give the

reader a feeling for the participants' relative ages, experience as educators, experience

specifically as superintendents, teaching background, and the size of their districts. Data

for this study was collected using open-ended interviews, and the analysis and

generation of themes from my interpretive phenomenological analysis as described by

Smith et al. (2009) comprises the majority of the chapter. The chapter concludes with a

discussion of my findings relative to the research questions.

Brief Overview of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to examine how

district superintendents made sense of participating in a regional superintendents'

instructional rounds network in the Midwest, to discover what new meanings and

understandings superintendents took away from this experience, and to learn in what

ways superintendents may have transferred their learning to their everyday work in

their home districts. Participation in an instructional rounds network was defined as

actively engaging in the accepted norms and protocols of the instructional rounds

process as developed by City et al. (2011).

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. How did superintendents describe their experience participating in the

   instructional rounds network at the platform level?

2. What new meanings or understandings did superintendents take away from

   this platform level experience?

3. In what ways did superintendents transfer these new meanings and

   understandings to their operational practice in their local districts?

4. What influenced what and how superintendents transferred these new

   meanings and understandings to their operational practice in their local

   districts?

Description of Unit of Analysis

Participants

Access to the regional superintendents' network was obtained through several

meetings with an assistant superintendent at the intermediate school district who also

served as one of the network facilitators. Prior to receiving permission to conduct the

study, I was given permission to participate in the instructional rounds visits of the

network for a period of two school years. This participation in the network provided me

with an opportunity to experience the instructional rounds process firsthand and to

build rapport with the superintendents.

Purposeful criterion-based sampling was used to select participants for this study. As suggested by Smith et al. (2009), participants were recruited from a single pool of superintendents participating in the same instructional rounds network providing a homogenous sample with a common shared experience. An invitation to participate, including the purpose of the study, time commitment, potential risks, and potential benefits of participation along with the consent document approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB), were both emailed and physically mailed to the thirteen potential network participants. Follow up phone calls were made to secure verbal consent to participate and to schedule a time for an open-ended interview. Written consent to participate was obtained from each participant prior to conducting the interview.

Eight of the thirteen district superintendents involved in the instructional rounds network participated in the study. All of the participants were white males between the ages of 40 and 61 with a mean age of 49.9 and an average career in education of 28 years. Of the eight participants, four were in their first and only superintendent position, three were in their second superintendent position, and one has served as the superintendent for three different districts. Overall this was a seasoned group of district leaders, with the mean number of years of experience as a superintendent being 9.1 years, and the mean number of years in their current position at 6.25 years. Three of the participants were certified as elementary teachers, five as secondary teachers, and one was certified to teach in both elementary and secondary schools. The

superintendents in the study lead medium to large districts with enrollments ranging

from 2,600 students to 6,455 students.

Demographic data for each participant can be seen in Table 1. Each participant

was given a code letter from A to H, and the corresponding district was coded with the

same letter. For example, the head of District A is Superintendent A. A brief

demographic description of each participant follows.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Data

Superintendent	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Age	40	46	42	45	55	61	50	60
Total Years in Education	15	23	24	24	32	40	28	38
Number of Superintendent Positions	2	1	3	2	2	1	1	1
Total Years as a Superintendent	8	7	13	9	12.5	12	4	7
Years in Current Position	4.5	7	6	7	2.5	12	4	7
Teaching Certifications	K-5	K-5 K-8 Reading/Math	9-12 Math	9-12 English	9-12 Science	9-12 History	K-5 6-12 English	9-12 History
District Enrollment	2700	3880	6455	2495	5950	4850	2600	2650

Superintendent A. At 40 years of age, Superintendent A was the youngest of the

participants with fifteen total years in education. He has eight total years of experience

as a superintendent in two districts with four and half years at his current position. He

began his career in education as an elementary school teacher. District A is a rural

district of 2700 students.

Superintendent B. Superintendent B is 46 years old and leads the only urban

district represented in the study. His total tenure of seven years as a superintendent

has all been in the same district. He began his 23-year career in education as an

elementary teacher certified K-8 in reading and math. District B serves 3,880 students.

Superintendent C. With a student enrollment of 6,455, Superintendent C leads

the largest district in the study. District C is a suburban district. Superintendent C is 42

years old, began his career in education as a high school mathematics teacher, has 24

total years in education, has 13 total years of experience spread over three

superintendencies, and has been in his current position for 6 years.

Superintendent D. Superintendent D began his career as a high school English

teacher, has 24 years of experience in education, with nine of those years as a

superintendent in two districts. He has been in his current position for 7 years, and

leads a suburban district of 2,495 students, which is the smallest in the study.

Superintendent E. Superintendent E is the newest member of the network

assuming leadership of District E just 2.5 years ago. At age 55, he is a 32-year veteran

educator who began his career as a high school science teacher. He has a total of 12.5

years experience as a superintendent in two districts. District E has a student population

of 5,950 and is classified as suburban.

Superintendent F. With 12 years experience as the superintendent of District F,

Superintendent F is the most senior member in the intermediate school district.

Superintendent F is 61 years old, has a total of 40 years experience in education with

twelve of those years as the superintendent of District F. Superintendent F began his educational career as a high school history teacher. District F is a suburban district with a student population of 4,850 students.

Superintendent G. Superintendent G has four years of experience in his first superintendency and has the least superintendent experience of the participants in the study. He is the only superintendent with teaching certifications as both an elementary teacher and a 6-12 English teacher. Superintendent G is 50 years old and has 28 years of experience as an educator. District G is a rural district with a student population of 2,600 students.

Superintendent H. Superintendent H is a first time superintendent of seven years, with 38 years experience as an educator. He serves a suburban district of 2,650 students. Superintendent H began his career in education as a high school history teacher.

Data Analysis Process and Results

Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected via face-to-face open-ended interviews with each participant. All of the interviews were conducted in the participants' office and took between 45 and 60 minutes to complete. Interviews were recorded using an IPad with an external microphone. Participants were also asked if they had any artifacts such as meeting minutes, agendas, school improvement plans, or instructional rounds visit agendas that they wished to share. All of the interviews were completed within one month of the start of data collection.

Interviews were transcribed with the assistance of a transcriptionist using word processing software. I controlled the playback of each recording during transcription and wrote initial memos to immerse myself in the data. To triangulate the data, each participant was sent a typed copy of their interview as en email attachment to check for both accuracy and meaning. All participants responded that the transcription of their interview captured what they had intended and two participants made minor grammatical corrections.

Analysis of Interviews

A constant comparative data analysis as described by Creswell (2008) provided the basic data analysis method for this study. The analysis was more specifically conducted in six stages outlined by Smith et al. (2009). The six stages consisted of reading and re-reading the transcript, initial noting or coding, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, moving to the next case and looking for patterns across cases. As a result of my emergent analysis, seven final super-ordinate themes were identified along with 23 sub-themes.

Audio recordings of each participant's interview were listened to immediately following the interview to check for sound quality and to immediately relive the interview so as to begin the process of immersing myself in the data. The transcription of the first case was read while re-listening to the audio, and then re-read several more times while highlighting passages of text that resonated with me. A journal of data collection and analysis activities was kept as was a research diary containing memos from the analysis of each participant.

In the second stage, initial noting or coding was accomplished through the process of recording descriptive comments in blue ink, linguistic comments in red, and conceptual comments in green in the right hand margin of the transcript. This provided a visual display of initial codes providing insight into how superintendents act, speak and think respectively.

The initial codes were reduced to emergent themes and recorded on the left hand margin of the transcript. In this third phase of the analysis, as suggested by Smith et al. (2009), an attempt was made to reduce the volume of detail from the transcript and initial notes, while maintaining complexity in terms of connections and patterns in the data. The mean number of emergent themes generated per case during this phase was 79, with a mean of 59 unique themes per case.

In stage four, each emergent theme was printed and cut into a small strip of paper. Themes were grouped and regrouped into larger categories called super-ordinate themes. The number of super-ordinate themes generated by case varied between 10 and 13. Super-ordinate themes and subthemes were charted and in vivo codes illustrating each subtheme were added to the chart.

Following careful analysis of the first case, data was collected for the second case. As suggested by Smith et al. (2009), I was cognizant of the themes emerging from the first case while allowing new themes to emerge from the second case. This process was repeated until data for all eight cases was collected and analyzed. Memoing during this phase allowed me to create self-awareness of the way in which my prior experiences in education and in participating in instructional rounds visits within the

network colored my interpretation of superintendents' interpretations of their experiences in the instructional rounds network. Smith et al. (2009) cite this double hermeneutic as a distinguishing characteristic of IPA research.

In the final stage of the process, a color-coded visual display board of the super-ordinate themes and subthemes for each case was created laying out similar themes side by side. This visual display was used to inductively reduce the data to the seven major themes identified in my analysis.

Emergent Themes

As can be seen in Table 2, the seven major themes identified through this interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) were:

1. Superintendents described their platform experience as collective, collaborative, and collegial.

2. Superintendents were reflective in their understanding of instructional rounds implementation.

3. Superintendents attempted to replicate the instructional rounds process in their local districts.

4. Focusing on students in classrooms changed superintendents' mental models.

5. Superintendents experienced an evolution in their personal learning.

6. Superintendents transferred their learning into new learning in their local context.

7. Superintendents changed their communication patterns.

Table 2

Thematic Distribution Among Participants

Superintendent Theme	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1. Superintendents described their platform experience as collective and collaborative.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
2. Superintendents were reflective in their understanding of instructional rounds implementation.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
3. Superintendents attempted to replicate the instructional rounds process in their local districts.	X	X	X			X	X	X
4. Focusing on students in classrooms changed superintendents' mental models.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
5, Superintendents experienced an evolution in their personal learning.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
6. Superintendents transferred their learning into new learning in their local context.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
7. Superintendents changed their communication patterns.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Theme 1: Superintendents Described Their Platform Learning Experience as Collective, Collaborative, and Collegial

From the data it is clear that each superintendent described his experience in the

instructional rounds network as an opportunity for collegiality and collaboration for

both learning together and in solving individual problems of practice. It is also clear that

superintendents felt that they were in this work together as a collective group or team.

Table 3 shows the distribution of this theme across participants and identifies five

subthemes, namely, (a) Band of brothers, (b) Affirmation/validation, (c) Collaboration

vs. competition, (d) Power of diverse perspectives, and (e) Land of nice.

Table 3

Theme 1 Distribution Among Participants

Superintendent	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1. Superintendents described their platform experience as collective, collaborative and collegial.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
a. Band of brothers	X	X			X	X	X	
b. Affirmation/validation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
c. Collaboration vs. competition	X	X			X	X		
d. Power of diverse perspectives	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
e. Land of nice	X	X	X	X	X			

Superintendent A confirms this finding with this statement concerning the

collegiality he experienced in the network:

I think its professional learning, it's professional support, its collegiality at the highest level that I've seen in the educational system amongst what are the CEO's of their districts.

Band of Brothers

While all eight superintendents described their participation with other superintendents in the network as collaborative or collegial, five of the eight superintendents described a more powerful sense of coming together as a team of superintendents carrying out the work of improving instruction regionally. Superintendent D describes how this team started to come together:

I think it's brought many of us, all of us, really, closer together to some extent professionally, sort of galvanized us, because you know we may not agree sometimes on certain issues of equity of funding, or particular initiatives that exist, county-wide or state-wide, there may be some disagreement, but we all agree that instructional efficacy is one of our primary, well, not one of, it's just about our primary purpose, and this was something that could therefore, bring us together in that dialogue so it gave us something that we really strongly agreed about across the board and gave us an opportunity to learn about each other in terms of our instructional leadership.

For some, this strong sense of group identity came to be identified as a brotherhood. Superintendent F illustrates this surprising finding:

I'm the most senior superintendent in the county right now with twelve years, so I've seen superintendents come and go, and when we started the instructional rounds process, there were a lot of relatively new superintendents in the county that I didn't

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know, who didn't know me. So I think that kind of built a kind of camaraderie, a brotherhood, that you know, could be around something other than school funding, or you know, legislation that we were all up in arms about, but it gave us something of significance that we got into education for, which was teaching and learning.

In addition, it seems that the superintendents in the network believed that this brotherhood, or team of district leaders was unique among their peers in other counties. Superintendent A sums up this view:

I would say that there aren't a lot of counties that have superintendents that would look at themselves as a team or would talk about themselves as a team, you know or working together.

Competition vs. Collaboration

State funding for the districts in this study is tied to student enrollment though a per pupil foundation allowance. State law has allowed students to choose a school within a district, within an intermediate school district, or within a contiguous intermediate school district for nearly 20 years, and competition for students between neighboring districts can be heated. An interesting finding is the fact that half of the superintendents in this study acknowledged this competition, but understood the value of sustaining the collaborative efforts of the network to improve education not only in their district but also in the region. Participant F explains this competitive dilemma:

We're in a very, very competitive climate with education where everybody, now with   the dollars following students, are vying for the students that are out there in order to make their budgets work and make their, retain the programming that they

have for the children in their districts. At the same time, it's required in education to be

very collaborative. We need to be sharing our ideas and working on behalf of all

children in our state and in our region, so it's created this real dichotomy of

competitiveness vs. collaborativeness and you've got to be able to maintain

partnerships and friendships when you're vying for the same students, especially with

schools of choice at this point in time.

This finding is echoed by both Superintendent E:

I think it's amazing how schools overcome the natural tendencies that's created

to be negative, you know competitive. We just overlook it and who cares? That's not

what we're here about. We didn't go into education for that. So I think it's a great

way—it breaks down all those boundaries, because we get to know each other.

and Superintendent A:

I think that it's really important that a group of superintendents who are set up

by a system to compete have gotten together to not compete around what we really

care about which is students' success.

Power of Diverse Perspectives

Superintendent C's statement exemplifies the power of capitalizing on the

unique strengths, talents and perspectives that superintendents bring to the network:

The one thing that I think stands out to me is the unique strengths and talents

that everyone brings to the table, and I say unique because 12 superintendents, their 12

different leadership styles, their 12 different backgrounds and experiences, and it's

really trying to support each other, learn from each other and kind of identify those

strengths that people have. I think it's what makes the group unique and I think it really makes the instructional rounds process so rich is that we bring different perspectives to the table.

This finding was voiced by seven of the eight participants and is echoed by Superintendent G:

I think the advantage of working with different colleagues on each visitation, certainly there is a lot to learn—a lot of very sharp people that you're able to work with and understand different perspectives, understand the different focus that's going on across districts and within districts.

and by Superintendent D:

During instructional rounds, you really begin to see superintendents who have a keen interest and a rich background in terms of instructional know-how, experience, leadership, and how that translates, or can translate into practice. So that's been rich.

Affirmation/Validation

All eight superintendents described an affirming or validating aspect to their participation in the rounds network. In their minds, this affirmation or validation was also experienced by building principals hosting a visit and by classroom teachers. This comment by Superintendent H substantiates this finding:

Well, just speaking from my own district, I think people, once they've gone through that   process, really feel validated in the work that they're doing.

This comment from Superintendent A also confirms this finding:

It validates how big a job this is for teachers, for administrators, for

superintendents.

Superintendent F provides a rich description of the affirmation he experienced through

his participation in the instructional rounds network:

Seeing what's happening in other classrooms and other districts has affirmed

that we're doing some great things in our district. So, you know, I think one thing is it

gives you an affirmation that you're doing what you should be doing on behalf of kids,

just as others are doing.

Land of Nice

While the superintendents described their network experience as collaborative

and collegial, five of the eight reported struggling with providing direct and honest

feedback to each other or to host schools. City et al. (2011) refer to this phenomenon

as living in the Land of Nice. Superintendent B confirms this finding giving this account:

I think we started in the beginning, with, because we all pretty much knew each

other, we lived in the Land of Nice for a long time and we weren't able to really truly, I

think, either A, be honest about our feedback to each other or B, we really don't know

instruction well. And I think there's probably a combination thereof, because we began

leaving every district giving the same exact recommendations.

Superintendent C corroborates this finding in responding to the question, "Do

you ever feel uncomfortable giving feedback on what you've seen in the classroom?"

To your question, is there ever a time where it's not comfortable or you're

talking about   some deficiencies or challenges? I think we're getting better at that, but

yeah, there's   still that, still in the Land of Nice, yeah.

Superintendent D describes how he views feedback from a clinical perspective to

move away from the Land of Nice, and the importance of giving and receiving honest

feedback:

And that's different - when you take the personal away from it and you treat it in

a more clinical perspective, I think it enhances your capacity to provide direct and

honest and accurate feedback without feeling like you need to baby someone. And I

think there have been a few instances where that was really important, because you

know, when they visited here and other districts, sometimes you don't want to hear

what they have to say - it can be hard to hear because you think you've got some issues

all resolved and the reality is you don't. And the evidence is inarguable, because we

base our evidence on what we observe, it's very factual - it's very objective, so you can't

dispute it. So, the personal piece - you know, I think when you take the personal and set

it aside, so to speak, it allows you to accelerate your learning - it really does.

Honest feedback can be difficult for superintendents or building administrators

to hear, but the political ramifications to owning a "problem" of practice can be

unsettling not only for teachers and administrators, but for school board members,

community members and parents as well. Two district superintendents shared their

experiences with dealing with the fallout caused by opening up instructional practices

for critique through the instructional rounds process. In the first case, a superintendent describes how his district works around the stigma of having a "problem" of practice:

In fact, we changed problem of practice to area of focus, because we want to get away   from that stigma that it's a problem, right. Right? Even though it may be, right, but we don't call it that sometimes, so I say that because we struggle with that internally as well about really trying to improve - if we're going to improve then we have to find an area in which we need to improve upon, and then specific strategies in order to make that happen.

Another superintendent describes the negative connotation instructional rounds has come to have for his district following feedback from the first instructional rounds visit the new network engaged in:

We have to be so careful because the, and it's just so unfortunate, because it's such a powerful process, but the term rounds, we can't use, so what we'll do, it's just "I visited another building and here's what we saw". What we would like to try to do is run something similar - teachers visiting other classrooms within the building - we just can't call it rounds.

To date, this district is still recovering from the initial visit and is unable to host another instructional rounds visit.

Theme 2: Superintendents Were Reflective in Their Understanding of Instructional Rounds Implementation.

Overall, each superintendent reflected on aspects of the implementation of the instructional rounds process over the three years the network has been in existence. In

particular, superintendents identified four subthemes of importance listed in Table 4. The four subthemes related to the network's instructional rounds processes are: (a) Training in the instructional rounds process, (b) Follow-up after instructional rounds visits, (c) Commitment to the instructional rounds network, and (d) Inhibitors to the implementation of instructional rounds.

Training in the Instructional Rounds Process

The retirement of two network superintendents just prior to conducting the interviews for this study brought up the topic of induction of new members into the rounds network early in the data collection process. One of the superintendents to be replaced also happened to be the superintendent of the intermediate school district. Seven of the eight superintendents participating in the study discussed training in the instructional rounds process for new members or refresher training for all of the members. Superintendent G illustrates this finding:

So in order to get people to that level, I think it would be important to get people to Harvard to be trained would be my thought. I think there's no substitute for that and I feel that we've had at least one come in, who's jumped in even though they haven't really been trained and I think it just, it loses a little bit to that person, that individual person t not be involved in the training in the front end. So I think the best thing to do is to get them to Harvard to go through the rounds training.

Superintendent D speaks about the importance of continued training in the model:

I think at a certain point in time it would be a good idea for the group that's continuing this work to again get some training, whether it's local or further away, because if you're going to do it and do it effectively, over time, you've got to sharpen the saw. Experience matters though. If we went through the training again, our level of comprehension of the process is so different now that we would learn—learn a lot that we didn't, that we don't know now. So training helps.

Follow-up After a Rounds Visit

An important finding voiced by six of the eight superintendents was the lack of meaningful follow-up with the host district after hosting an instructional rounds visit. Superintendents stated that they were eager to hear what their colleagues had done with suggestions for the next level of work or to learn of any changes that occurred in the host district following the visit. Superintendent B illustrates this finding:

I think we need to start reflecting on how well did we adhere to the problem of practice, how well did we adhere to the theory of action. I think we need to go back to having the district that hosted the month before report back out. What did they do? Sometimes you never hear again. Was that feedback that we gave even helpful? In that moment, people will say "yes", but really what happened when you took it back to the school improvement team, to the teachers? What was the response to that? You don't know.

Table 4

Theme 2 Distribution Among Participants

Superintendent	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
2. Superintendents were reflective in their understanding of instructional rounds implementation.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
a. Training in IR process	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
b. Follow-up after a rounds visit	X	X		X	X	X		X
c. Commitment to IR process	X	X	X			X	X	X
d. Implementation inhibitors	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Superintendent H relates how the issue of follow-up has been ongoing in the

network with no apparent resolution:

I think we have to do a little better job in terms of the follow up. We've talked

about it, we've discussed it, but I don't know, I think it's more of a surface thing than a

real follow-through, because it goes to you know, what has the impact been for that

particular building? Did they use some or all of the suggestions? How did they do that?

And how did that result in any change in action, behavior, policy, or just general work?

Superintendent D points to time constraints as a factor in failing to follow-up

after rounds visits:

We've had some level of reporting out after the fact. Probably something that

we could refine but at the same time there's a time issue there. Do we have time as a

group to review the follow-up? No, we don't.

In suggesting that one of the facilitators could leverage his position in the ISD to

follow-up after rounds visits and facilitate connections between districts,

Superintendent A had this to say:

I've been disappointed in that he hasn't been able to see the intentional

connections and help foster collaboration and connections from round to round to

round to round. I see themes and I'm going to make those connections, but we have a

really powerful tool in there in that we have someone who isn't a part of those districts

and then also facilitates and creates and packages professional learning for our county.

I've been waiting to see him make those connections and those light bulbs to go on, and

I don't think, and maybe he hasn't been pushed to do that, and maybe he doesn't feel

comfortable doing that. I don't know why.

Commitment to the Instructional Rounds Process

While finding number one describes the collaborative and collegial environment

superintendents reported experiencing at the platform level while engaging in

instructional rounds, working in the network was not without its challenges. One of the

biggest challenges reported by superintendents was the lack of attendance of

superintendents on instructional rounds visitation days. In some cases less than half of

the superintendents in the network were in attendance, and in other cases the visit to a

host school was cancelled due to lack of attendance. Combined with new leadership in

the intermediate school district, this caused some in the network to question the continued existence of the network itself. The sixth principle of the instructional core is: "You learn the work by doing the work"(City et al., 2011). As six of the eight superintendents discuss, you can't do the work if you are not present for the work. Superintendent B shares his thoughts on the topic in confirmation of this finding:

I think now we've started to wane, where we've had to actually cancel a couple this past year. I'm not sure we have the same commitment that we had a year and a half ago.

Superintendent D speaks about missing a rounds visit from a personal learning perspective:

We rarely, if ever, have had a rounds visit where we didn't have somebody that was absent, myself included. You miss opportunities to share and interact and to learn when you're not there.

Superintendent B expresses his frustration with hosting a visit that was poorly attended:

Don't schedule something else on that day because everyone has value, everyone has something to bring to the table and when, the first time that the ISD network came into District B, over half of the superintendents were not present. And we did not get the kind of feedback that we could get, and I felt I felt gypped in the process because we need some help, we need some ideas, and I felt badly because then I think other people did too.

Superintendents were also apprehensive about the future of the network with a change in leadership at the intermediate school district level. Unsure of their new

leader's commitment to the rounds process, Superintendent F expressed the group's underlying commitment to the network:

So we'll see, we'll see if we can maintain that momentum and have enough people that still buy into it that will be around to say, "no, this is what we do, and I know John, you're new to the ISD, but this is what we do, so get on board" (laughs). So it will be interesting as we move forward.

Inhibitors to the Instructional Rounds Process

When asked, "What enhanced or detracted from the quality of your instructional rounds experience?" all eight superintendents were able to speak to inhibitors of the instructional rounds process. Among the inhibitors discussed were the teacher's union, teacher contracts, legislation, and principal turnover, but by far the biggest inhibitors expressed were time and money.

Superintendent C speaks to the issue of time:

And to be honest with you, our biggest challenge, and I would even suggest the biggest challenge of any instructional rounds process is time.

Superintendent D echoes the confirmation of this theme:

Time is the biggest thing that detracts from it. It's a big commitment to make. You have to be willing to give up a day per month—that's not always possible.

Superintendent H describes how the cost of training and substitute teachers has inhibited the implementation of instructional rounds in his district:

You know, when it first started, we did do a training for our department and grade level chairs so that we could run an instructional rounds in a building. One of my

building principals has also taken it on himself to run instructional rounds in his building. The problem we're facing right now is just the cost involved in doing it - that's what's hit us the most.

Overall, superintendents communicated that little or no new resources were available to support the instructional rounds process locally, however, several superintendents shared how they had modified systems or reallocated resources to overcome the inhibitors they described. Superintendent C illustrates how superintendents shifted resources to support the spread of instructional rounds in their district:

And so for us it's really, from an allocation of resources, what we're finding now is schools are spending more of their dollars on substitute costs to try to do their own instructional rounds, we, from a district level perspective, have tried to support buildings that want to move in that direction and so it isn't a huge shift, because we simply don't have a huge pot of money for professional development, but it has shifted on where we go with those resources.

Thinking out of the box, Superintendent B was successful in changing language in the teachers' contract to create time for the implementation of local instructional rounds while containing the cost for substitute teachers:

We actually negotiated instructional rounds time in our teacher contract at the high school level, so we have, we wanted to do it at the high school specifically from like a noon to seven kind of piece. So instead of having to have subs all day which can be an

expense, we would do the rounds in the afternoon with subs, half-day subs, and then

we would do all the processing outside of the day.

Theme 3: Superintendents Attempted to Replicate the Instructional Rounds Process in Their Local Districts.

This third finding demonstrates the most straight-forward transfer of the new

knowledge that superintendents' gained through their participation in the instructional

rounds network; the replication of the instructional rounds process in their local

districts. As can be seen in Table 5, six of the eight superintendents had either started

an instructional rounds process in their district, had at least one school engage in the

process, or planned to engage in the process in the future.

Table 5

Theme 3 Distribution Among Participants

Superintendent	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
3. Superintendents attempted to replicate the instructional rounds process in their local districts.	X	X	X			X	X	X

District B has implemented a local instructional rounds process for the longest

time in the network and has also developed the most sophisticated and systemic

district-wide process. Superintendent B describes how district-wide instructional

rounds have become the process for school improvement with an over-arching problem

of practice tied to individual school level problems of practice:

So, we've started our own network. We've been doing it now for three years. I enjoy being in the role of facilitator for it. Number one, it demonstrates my commitment to the process, and secondly, it gives me a chance to be the instructional leader. I need to make sure that I adhere to the process and dig deep to it, at some times I like to be in a group because I think if you're overseeing the process, you don't always get right in there at the ground level. So the transfer of that's been important. We're developing a common problem of practice across the district, which I think is helpful too, so you can be looking at what does that look like across the district, for example, ours is going to be on racial equity because we have so many different perspectives and backgrounds of students here. How are we ensuring that every student has an equal opportunity for access to the guaranteed and viable curriculum, underneath that are the different strategies.

Superintendent F relates how his district modified the rounds process to implement Learning Labs for all non-tenured teachers and veteran teachers who wish to participate:

We are actually having teachers and administrators going in and observing what's happening in the classroom, a little different format than instructional rounds, it's not quite as laborious as instructional rounds, but it's very, very beneficial. Realizing an opportunity to spread instructional practices that have produced good results in the most impoverished elementary school in the district, Superintendent E verbalizes his thoughts on replicating the instructional rounds process in his district:

For example, our most difficult demographic building, much higher

demographics than anybody would imagine we are, has the highest second grade

reading scores (in the district). Well, that's an incredible accomplishment. I think we

would like to do a rounds type visit there to see what those goals are and then try to

rebuild on that across the district.

Theme 4: Focusing on Students in Classrooms Changed Superintendent's Mental Models

The finding that by focusing on what students were doing in the classroom

rather than solely on what the teacher was doing, superintendents saw things through

"new eyes" which in turn changed their mental models of instruction, the current reality

of teaching and learning in their own district, and made them more attuned to the

instructional core. All eight superintendents reported that they "saw" things differently

somehow by focusing their attention on what students were doing or were asked to do

in their classrooms. Several superintendents related how powerful this "seeing with

new eyes" was for them as educational leaders.

As the most veteran superintendent of the group, Superintendent F describes

how focusing on students was different than his experience from the past thirty years as

an administrator:

I think it's worth repeating. When you focus on what students are doing and

what they're actually learning vs. on the sage on the stage, and the teacher's

performance, I think it changes fundamentally how you view what's going on in that

classroom. So for me as a thirty year veteran administrator who, you know, evaluated

teachers for thirty years, I was always going in and I was watching whether students

were sleeping, and how many students were being called on, and all those things you've

learned from some of the other models of teacher instruction, student learning, but I

had never really gone in and said you know, I'm trying not to pay attention to the

teacher and put all my focus on the students. And that, to me, was kind of an eye-

opening experience that you could learn a lot from what the students were being asked

to do and what they were doing and what they could repeat back to you and what was

actually going on in terms of an instructional evaluation model.

Superintendent B echoes this finding in a succinct fashion:

Evaluation is so focused on "what is a teacher doing?" and what is so powerful

about this is, "what is a student doing?"

Seeing things in a new light, as a result of examining the work students are being

asked to do is a first step in making change in a district. Superintendent H shares this

frustrating illumination:

Like I said before, the key is looking at what students are doing. Really hitting on

that. I think that's been the biggest thing, because when I walk around the buildings,

my own buildings, that's the thing I'm looking at all the time. What are the students

doing? And it's what's most frustrating for me in walking around the buildings. How do

we build a common mental model about the fact that we need to be challenging the

students? The students need to be doing the work.

More insight into the manner in which superintendents mental models changed

as a result of focusing on students in classrooms can been seen in the subthemes listed

in Table 6: (a) reality check, (b) district comparisons, (c) focus on the core, and (d) appreciate the positive.

Reality Check

Seven of the eight superintendents reported having a clearer picture of the current state of teaching and learning in their own district after hosting a rounds visit. This finding is substantiated by Superintendent A's description of the learning gap in his district:

I understand that in our district we do a really good job with the kids who want to learn, and who have higher levels of aptitude. We have a big gap. We have a large disconnect, and because a majority of our kids are compliant and they're genuinely good kids who want to please the adults - you can walk in most of my classrooms and it will look like everything's going really well. But we aren't differentiating, we aren't individualizing for students with diverse needs. It's helped; I've been able to validate that now.

Superintendent D also describes how getting into classrooms shed light on the need for improvement even in his very high achieving district:

But you start to see things, subtle things, that you might have missed and what it's done for me, what it means for me, is that we have a lot of room to grow and improve.

Table 6

Theme 4 Distribution Among Participants

Superintendent	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
4. Focusing on students in classrooms changed superintendents' mental models.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
a. Reality check	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
b. District comparisons				X		X	X	X
c. Focus on core	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
d. Appreciate the Positive		X		X	X	X	X	

Comparisons to Other Districts

Just as getting into classrooms in their districts helped superintendents get a clearer picture of their current reality, getting into classrooms in other districts caused superintendents to compare what students were doing in other districts to their own. Half of the superintendents participating in this study mentioned drawing comparisons between other districts and theirs. This also changed superintendents' mental models and served as a catalyst for change in their home districts.

While learning from classroom visits in his own district, Superintendent D also learned from classroom visits to neighboring districts:

You know, I see so many good things happening in this county when I go into school buildings, and some of those things we're doing as well, some things we're doing better, and often times we're not doing them as well as other districts are and we learn

from that. So I can bring that information back to my district. And I learn a lot doing

instructional rounds about different methodologies that are being utilized throughout

the county as well as in our district.

Likewise, Superintendent H describes his learning through district comparisons:

> Well, what I like about it the most is the chance to get into other classrooms in
>
> other districts kind of as a comparison to kind of view what's working there or not
>
> working there and conversely how that's working or not working in our own district.
>
> That's probably the biggest benefit.

Focus on the Core

Superintendents also described a sometimes-transformational shift in attention

to the instructional core as a result of observing students in classrooms. This focus on

teaching and learning created new mental models around improving instruction in local

districts. When asked in what ways he had transferred his new meanings,

understandings and learnings from the network into his current practice as an

educational leader, Superintendent C described the importance of this shift in focus:

> I would say an intense focus on instruction. It's almost embarrassing to say that
>
> besides reading to a class or making an occasional pop-in visit, as a superintendent I'm
>
> always in buildings, but I was never always in classrooms. And so now its not just being
>
> in classrooms, but it's the intentionality behind it. It's trying to add value to the system
>
> and improve the system and working collaboratively with other leaders and teachers, so
>
> for me it's really transformed my focus, and that's huge.

Superintendent G shared a similar meaning regarding his participation in the rounds network:

I think it builds my own capacity in understanding teaching, learning, working with identifying some of the components of instruction and the work that's going on across the county. So it's been both capacity-building for myself personally, it's been great to work with other superintendents, and then I think most importantly it focuses on what our work is, or should be, which is teaching and learning in the classroom, and that's what I think has been the biggest aha moment for me to continue to move forward as far as our district is concerned.

Appreciate the Positive

A somewhat unanticipated finding is the way in which superintendents voiced an appreciation for quality teaching, for the tough job of teachers, for the manner in which districts cope with economic diversity, and for the examples of high functioning buildings lead by excellent building principals. The experience of getting into a variety of classrooms in their peers' schools colored their outlook on their own districts and on the teaching profession in general. This appreciation was shared by five of the superintendents in a number of ways:

Superintendent E on the socio-economic differences between districts:

You see the demographic differences in different schools. That's hit me harder than I thought it probably would, and the challenges that some schools have, and how the teachers are still awesome teachers, and they're doing what they can do.

Sometimes people will think, "Boy oh boy, do we have a tough situation". You say, "No we don't, we have an incredible situation here."

Superintendent D on appreciation and empathy for teachers:

The work of teaching is incredibly complex. What we ask teachers to do on a consistent basis year over year is darn near impossible for most people. We have to respect that and we have to support their needs. Instructional rounds has made me much more empathetic than I was toward the needs of my staff.

Superintendent C on his new appreciation for elementary teachers:

And as a secondary math person by heart, you know, seeing our elementary folks in action, not just around reading but in organization and how they manage, -- that's been a growth for me that I've really enjoyed.

Theme 5: Superintendents Experienced an Evolution in Their Personal Learning

All eight superintendents described their participation in the instructional rounds network as a powerful personal learning experience. Superintendent A relates how the network fostered this professional learning:

It's been the first time as a superintendent, I've been able to learn and professionally develop myself in an ongoing embedded way over a period of time.

Superintendent G shares his thoughts on deepening his understanding of teaching and learning:

I think it builds my own capacity in understanding teaching, learning, working with identifying some of the components of instruction and the work that's going on across the country.

Table 7

Theme 5 Distribution Among Participants

Superintendent	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
5. Superintendents experienced an evolution in their personal learning.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
a. Specific strategies		X	X	X		X	X	X
b. Idea fair	X	X		X	X			X
c. Moral purpose		X	X	X	X	X	X	
d. Changed understanding of core							X	

In addition to building their capacity around teaching and learning,

Superintendent C illustrates how superintendents also evolved as leaders:

And so it's really, it's you know, it may sound hokey, …but this process has really

changed me, I think, as a leader.

Four subthemes emerged as findings that detail the areas in which

superintendents reported personal growth. These four subthemes are: (a) specific

strategies, (b) idea fair, (c) moral purpose and (d) Changed understanding of the core.

Specific Strategies

Six of the eight superintendents shared examples of learning more about specific

instructional strategies as a result of their observations in the instructional rounds

network.   Superintendent H confirms this finding:

Well, one of the pieces that I took back from instructional rounds was the depth of knowledge work in District X. Going into that elementary building and seeing what they were doing really pushed me to say in our district "We're going to spend the next several years focusing on that kind of experience and how do we really address that in terms of the questioning in the classroom".

Similarly, Superintendent D illustrates this finding:

I have a better understanding of elementary education, which is not a strength of mine, because we spend a fair amount of time in elementary buildings and the complexity of instruction at the elementary level, generally speaking, because of the lack of independence of the learners, it exceeds what's going on at the secondary levels and that's a learning opportunity for me to understand better and hopefully to transfer into what we do here.

Idea Fair

In addition to learning about specific instructional strategies, superintendents described borrowing or modifying ideas from other districts. Superintendent D describes the network as an "idea fair":

It's an idea fair. I mean, it really is. We get lots of ideas. You know, the best, highest form of flattery is to steal their good ideas and we've done quite a bit of that throughout the county.

Beyond generating new ideas, Superintendent A characterizes how his peers helped him frame his own ideas in new ways:

It's helped me grow as a leader, the way that when we talk about what we're

seeing inside of classrooms and when we talk about the practices that we see, the

ability for me to hear the way that they frame ideas has helped me frame my ideas in

new ways.

Moral Purpose

A completely unexpected finding is the strong commitment to support learning

for all students in the county. This moral purpose was voiced by six of the

superintendents, and seemed to create a common driving force for personal learning in

order to accomplish systemic change. Superintendent F explains this common purpose:

So instructional rounds provided for us an opportunity as superintendents to

come to gather around the table, to work together on a common project, you know, a

common mission that wasn't competitive. It was very collaborative - it was on behalf of

bettering the education for all students in Ottawa County.

Superintendent A further supports this finding:

To get into classrooms intentionally and see it in different buildings across the

county really kind of highlights the diversity of the needs and if we're gonna really get to

the point where we say all kids, what we do has to look, is going to have to look

fundamentally different to get there.

Changed Understanding of the Core

Although superintendents described their participation in the instructional

rounds network as a powerful personal learning experience, only one superintendent

replied in the affirmative when asked "How has your understanding of the instructional

core, teaching and learning, has that changed at all?" In addition, three superintendents

reported no change in their understanding of the instructional core. This is a perplexing

finding. Superintendent G on how his understanding of the core has changed:

Yes, I think it's dramatically changed. I think especially when I look at my

experiences, my exposure to the elementary grade levels. I have more of a secondary

background so understanding kids learning to read and the process involved and the

focus areas that teachers involved with has really helped me grow to understand.

Superintendent E and Superintendent A succinctly claim that their understanding

of the core is unchanged as a result of their participation in the network.

Superintendent E:

I don't think it really has a whole lot. I think it validated what we do. It's just

there's different ways to do it.

Superintendent A:

You know, I don't know that it's changed.

**Theme 6: Superintendents Transferred Their Learning into New Learning in Their Local
Context**

In addition to transferring their new learning of the instructional rounds process

through attempts at replication of the process in their local districts as examined in

Finding 3, superintendents reported transferring their new learning in other ways as

well. As can be seen in Table 8, superintendents discussed the ways in which they

transferred their new learning to (a) their local school improvement process, (b) the development of leadership capacity and (c) local learning.

Local School Improvement Process

Five of the superintendents discussed ways in which their new learning was manifested in school improvement planning district-wide and in individual schools. Superintendent B confirms this finding:

Your strategies aren't measured so well and I think instructional rounds allow you to get feedback on those strategies of your school improvement plan. And so you're able to then engage in building level conversation differently, and district level conversation. And I think for us to establish almost two problems of practice, here's our district POP that I mentioned in terms of racial equity and then here's the specific instructional strategy that the building's going to do. I think that will help us push forward a little bit better.

Table 8

Theme 6 Distribution Among Participants

Superintendent	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
6. Superintendents transferred their learning into new learning in their local context.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
a. Local school improvement process		X	X	X			X	X
b. Developing leadership capacity	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
c. Local learning	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	

Similarly, Superintendent D describes how feedback from a rounds visit to one of the district's elementary schools was used in school improvement planning for both of the district's elementary schools:

So we had the ISD come out and present, we also began to incorporate depth of knowledge into our school improvement planning at the K-4 level, knowing that it was a, it was a really frankly, one of those issues that we could and should address successfully. So it's where we went first.

Developing Leadership Capacity

All but one superintendent related how participation in the network impacted the development of leadership capacity for district level administrators and especially building principals. Superintendents transferred new meanings and understandings related to the observation of the instructional core to their building principals. This finding is illustrated by Superintendent F's response to the question "And in what ways did learning with your peers in the network facilitate your thinking about teaching and learning in your own district?"

So we were able to bring a lot of that back to our district and help our principals understand, first and foremost, what they should be looking at when they go into classrooms in terms of instructional strategies and how students are engaged and the learning and we, we then spread it out to the teachers as well.

Superintendent A echoes this transfer of perspective regarding observation of the instructional core by his building administrators:

The biggest one is the conversations with my administrative team around focusing on the task and really being getting into classrooms, making sure that we know what the instruction looks like, collecting evidence about what's happening there. It's helped us; it's helped us look at how do we get better at leading teachers and supporting teachers and growth in their content. It's really put a focus on what's most important for us as administrators, and I keep going back to with the team. " What's happening? What were the students doing?" Don't just go in and sit at the back of the room and watch. Talk to kids. Get in there and have those conversations. And so that's been that's been good.

Superintendent B talks about the potential for building the leadership capacity of building principals across the intermediate school district by reaching out to highly effective principals identified through participation in hosting an instructional rounds visit:

I think we need to do a better job of learning from these building principals—what they're doing and "How do we increase the capacity of the rest of the principals across the ISD?" Superintendents can leverage that.

Local Learning

Seven of the superintendents provided examples of learning across their districts as a result of their own new understandings. Book studies, professional development opportunities, revised teacher induction processes and response to intervention programs, teacher networks and principal networks, were all listed as examples of local learning. Superintendent B provides an overall description in support of this finding:

So I see there's some transfer that's beginning to occur across the buildings.

They're really learning from each other.

Superintendent H describes the upcoming focus for administrative learning in

District H:

This year we're going to spend some time with our instructional team on the

twelve touchstones of good teaching and again, it's just to try to get that common

mental model about what is good teaching, what should we see in the classroom, and

then "How do we support people to get to that where every child is having a good

experience?"

Superintendent A describes how he connected teachers from his district with

teachers he had observed during a rounds visit:

I've been able to intentionally connect teachers in my district with teachers that

I've seen in other districts who are working on the same things and so it's helped me

grow professional learning networks of my staff and exposed them to teachers that I

mean it's amazing how many phenomenal teachers we have in this county and that that

we just don't know, they just don't connect to each other.

Theme 7: Superintendents Changed Their Communication Patterns

One of the most robust findings of my study is the finding that superintendents

reported a change in their communication patterns with one another and with their

administrative teams. In some instances, these new communication patterns took form

in new partnerships working toward the implementation of new processes or programs.

These new communication patterns seemed to center on a more focused dialogue

about the instructional core in districts as a result of superintendents' changed mental

models as discussed in finding four.

Superintendent C illustrates this finding stating:

So I think that has really focused us administrators on what matters most -

teaching and learning in the classroom. And that has been completely different on what

I'm familiar with, now this would be, you know, over thirteen years as superintendent.

It's really been more about meetings in the past, and budgets - and all that's important,

but now we're focused on instruction.

As can be seen in Table 9, three subthemes emerged from the data as well; (a)

Communication between peers, (b) Communication with administrative teams, and (c)

Partnerships between districts.

Table 9

Theme 7 Distribution Among Participants

Superintendent	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
7. Superintendents changed their communication patterns.	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
a. Communication between peers.	X			X	X	X	X	X
b. Communication with administrative team.	X			X	X	X	X	X
c. Partnerships between districts.		X			X	X		X

Communication Between Peers

Six of the superintendents voiced this shift in dialogue toward conversations about teaching and learning both within the structure of the rounds visits as illustrated by superintendent H:

Well, I think the great part about it is the chance to dialogue about what you've learned because that happens so rarely in professional learning for educators and in communications between superintendents beyond the instructional rounds visit as elaborated by Superintendent A and Superintendent E:

Superintendent A:

It's opened doors. It's really facilitated a lot more conversations. Yeah, it's again, it's we tend to be singular leaders in our own buildings, in our own districts and we try to do all things and make it all work and we've got great resources around us that it's okay for us to lean on each other or to ask "Hey, I'm working on this, have you had that, have you worked on this, have you seen a problem like this before?" It's made that much easier to do, and more frequent. You know, we pick up the phone or send e-mails probably a lot more now than we did prior to the rounds process.

Superintendent E: It's been great to get to know who's similar to us. "Who do I call?" And I pick up the phone pretty regularly to say "Hey, what do you know about this?"

Communication with Administrative Teams

Conversations between superintendents and their administrative teams were reported to have shifted focus toward issues of instruction. This finding was shared by six of the eight superintendents. Superintendent F describes this phenomenon:

And I think what happens is, what's happened with me is, it may not happen at the, at the superintendent meetings per se, but it does happen with superintendents when they go back into districts and start having conversations with their central office staff or their building principals, and so I think the spider web you know, that has started through instructional rounds has really worked its way and you'll see fingerprints probably around every district as a result of instructional rounds.

Superintendent D describes how his training and instructional rounds vocabulary have worked into his conversations with his building principals:

In terms of interactions in work with principals - to some extent I think the training has a way of translating into how you talk about instruction so when I talk with my principals about teaching and learning issues, whether it's performance evaluation for staff, or whether it's just looking at issues with regard to our curriculum, we use a lot of that same terminology to try to make sure we have a common approach to analyzing problems.

Superintendent E collected artifacts from rounds visits to share with his administrative team:

I can't tell you how many pictures I've taken in other buildings of kids doing things and what's on walls in classrooms, and some technique that they might have had

or even some of the notes that were taken or the way a teacher had things presented on the board, and then shared those here.

Partnerships Between Districts

Four of the superintendents mentioned building new partnerships with neighboring districts to collaborate on the implementation of new initiatives. Superintendent F provides an example of this finding:

So we've been able to collaborate with District C on several different things. We now have just adopted a new teacher evaluation model, we're using Marzano and we are teaming with District E and with District A to bring the Marzano model. We're able to partner now with two other districts, which is going to make it much better for us because we'll have principals that will be able to come alongside, like we only have one high school in District F. Well, so do District E - so---no, District E has two high schools, but all four of those high school principals will be able to come alongside and support each other and then they'll have a network of their own in the new teacher evaluation model. So that collaboration, networking, you know, has, I think, been an outpouring of the instructional rounds process that we started way back when.

Discussion of Findings and How They Address the Research Questions

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis was three fold:

1. To examine how district superintendents made sense of participating in a regional superintendents' instructional rounds network in the Midwest.

2. To discover what new meanings and understandings superintendents took away from this experience.

3. To learn in what ways superintendents may have transferred their learning to their everyday work in their home districts.

Seven super-ordinate findings supported by 23 subthemes emerged from the data reduction and analysis conducted in this study. This section will address the purpose of the study and the research questions in light of these key findings and subthemes.

Research Question One

Findings one and two shed light on research question one: "How did superintendents describe their experience participating in the instructional rounds network at the platform level?"

Finding one showed that superintendents described their work environment at the platform level as both collective and collaborative. The collective nature of the instructional rounds network provided a support structure for superintendents to function as a cohort of learners. Superintendents felt affirmed in their work in their local districts as a result of seeing common problems of practice in neighboring districts or in sharing common solutions to these problems. Superintendents also reported that they valued learning from the diverse knowledge, experience and perspectives of their peers.

A majority of the superintendents described another level of collectiveness that I termed "Band of Brothers". Superintendents related a sense of belonging to a unique

team of educational leaders brought together by the common purpose of improving

instruction not only in their individual districts but also across the entire region. This

sense of purpose seemed to be a point of pride for superintendents. In addition, half of

the superintendents mentioned the importance of working together collaboratively in

the face of the competitive environment created by schools of choice legislation in the

state. These superintendents felt that it was important to put aside competition for

scarce resources in favor of collaborating to improve educational outcomes for all

students in the county.

Despite this sense of belonging to a brotherhood, superintendents reported a

continuing struggle to provide and accept critical feedback from their peers. City et al.

(2011) refer to this phenomenon as "Living in the Land of Nice". Similarly, two

superintendents described the difficulty their districts had coming to grips with

feedback from an instructional rounds visit. In one instance a district has been unable

to host another rounds visit, and in the other "problem of practice" has been changed

to "area of focus" to avoid the negative stigma of having a "problem".

Superintendents were cognizant of their own implementation of the

instructional rounds process. This finding is helpful in describing how superintendents

experienced their participation in the network. Three sub-themes are useful in

demonstrating the ways in which superintendents viewed their own implementation of

the instructional rounds process: training, follow-up, and commitment to the process.

The original members of the network participated in a multi-day instructional

rounds training held at Harvard University. Superintendents clearly valued this training

and voiced the importance of such training for any new superintendents joining the network. At the time of this study, the network has welcomed two new district superintendents and a new intermediate school district superintendent. Superintendents were adamant that new members be trained and expressed a desire for all superintendents to receive additional training in the instructional rounds process in order to take their practice to a new level.

Six of the eight superintendents voiced concern over a lack of meaningful follow-up with the host district after conducting an instructional rounds visit. Superintendents were eager to know if their feedback was useful, what next steps a host school implemented, and what changes in resources, processes or programs the host school had undertaken. This follow-up was also viewed as a way to hold host districts accountable for using the feedback from the rounds visit in a meaningful way.

Despite professing the value of their participation in the network as a powerful, job embedded, professional development tool, superintendents faced the challenge of falling attendance on instructional rounds visits during the past school year. This apparent lack of commitment to the instructional rounds process caused some to question the very existence of the network. Superintendents voiced frustration with poor attendance and reiterated the importance of having all superintendents attend instructional rounds visits.

Research Question Two

Research question two was aimed at understanding what superintendents learned from their participation in the instructional rounds network. Findings four and

five are useful in answering this question. Finding four relates the importance of superintendents "seeing with new eyes" as they shift their focus from observing teachers to observing students while conducting instructional rounds visits. This shift in focus caused superintendents to change their mental models of the current reality of teaching and learning in their own districts, and in comparison to other districts. It also caused superintendents to increase their focus on the instructional core in their districts and to appreciate the many positive aspects of the educational systems around the county. As expressed in finding five, superintendents also reported an evolution in their personal learning through the sharing of ideas, new learning regarding specific instructional strategies, and the expression of being motivated by a higher moral imperative; improved learning for all of the counties' students.

According to the superintendents in this study, the key understanding they took away from their platform level experience working together in the network is the transformational effect shifting their focus to the observation of students in the classroom had on their mental model of teaching and learning in their district. Superintendents reported that observations of students in their district and across districts provided them with a clearer picture of what their students were asked to do, were able to do, and what they might do in the future as a result of instructional changes. In some cases, superintendents expressed an urgency for improving student performance in relation to the observed performance of students in other districts.

A more specific focus on the instructional core was also reported by seven of the eight superintendents. Described by some superintendents as an intense or

transformational focus, seeing the instructional core through the observation of student work in the classroom seemed to change the way that superintendents viewed many aspects of their role as instructional leaders. These changes will be discussed in answering the third research question. Interestingly, superintendents did not feel that their understanding of the instructional core had changed. In fact, only one of the eight superintendents stated that their understanding of the instructional core had been impacted by their participation in the network.

An unexpected finding is the appreciation superintendents expressed for teachers, the complexities of teaching, and the unique demographic challenges faced by certain districts. One superintendent reported feeling more empathetic toward the needs of teachers as a result of his participation in the network. Several superintendents also mentioned classroom teachers and principals that stood out as exemplars during rounds visits and remarked that these pockets of excellence should be recruited in spreading their expertise throughout the county.

All of the eight superintendents viewed their participation in the network as a powerful tool for their personal learning. Superintendents noted that they often took ideas from other districts, or modified their own ideas based on their participation in the instructional rounds network. Six of the superintendents also listed becoming more knowledgeable about specific instructional strategies such as Reader's and Writer's Workshop, increasing depth of knowledge in student tasks, and questioning strategies. Also surprising is the common moral purpose, which seemed to motivate superintendents to improve their knowledge of instruction and to lead positive changes

in instruction in their school districts. This common purpose, expressed by six of the superintendents was to improve the learning of all students in the county, not just students in their individual districts.

Research Question Three

Research question three asks "In what ways did superintendents transfer these new meanings and understandings to their operational practice in their local districts?" Findings three, six and seven provide answers to this question.

Finding three shows that the most straightforward transfer of superintendents' new meanings and understandings was to attempt to replicate the instructional rounds process in their local districts. The replication of the instructional rounds process locally was mentioned by six of the superintendents. Districts reported a wide range of implementation of a local instructional rounds process, varying from planning to conduct internal rounds in the future, having some buildings conducting internal rounds, variations of instructional rounds, to district wide implementation of internal rounds over a period of three years. In the most advanced district in implementing internal rounds, a district-wide problem of practice was identified that was layered over each individual building's problem of practice.

As described in finding six, superintendent learning was transferred into operational practice at the local level in three ways; through local learning opportunities, through influence on school improvement processes, and through increased administrative leadership capacity especially for building principals. An influence on local learning in their districts was reported by seven of the

superintendents. This local learning took form in book studies that spread between

buildings, targeted professional development opportunities, changes to programs and

processes, and the creation of new teacher and principal networks. A majority of

superintendents reported tying their new learning to the school improvement process in

their districts as well. Changes in school improvement goals, redistribution of resources,

and timely professional development on specific instructional strategies in response to

feedback from an instructional rounds visit were some of the ways that instructional

rounds impacted school improvement initiatives. Finally, seven superintendents felt

that their new focus on the instructional core was translated into increased leadership

capacity of their administrative team. As seen in finding seven, superintendents

described more frequent, targeted dialogue with building principals regarding quality

teaching and learning with a focus on observing students in classrooms.

Superintendents also reported transferring instructional rounds vocabulary and

principles of the instructional core into their conversations with principals.

Research Question Four

The first three research questions examine how superintendents described their

experience participating in an instructional rounds network, what superintendents

reported learning through their participation, and what superintendents said they

transferred into their operational practice in their districts. Research question four seeks

to understand the influencers of what and how superintendents' new meanings and

understandings were transferred into practice.

Superintendents spoke generally about inhibitors to transferring their new learning into their districts and specifically to inhibitors to the establishment of a local instructional rounds network in their districts. For several of the districts, a change in building leadership was seen as a key inhibitor to implementing change in the district. One district related how they had to put their school improvement plans on hold while they replaced three of the district's four building principals. Several superintendents also blamed recent legislation regarding teacher evaluations and changes in state testing as roadblocks to implementation of new initiatives. In addition, several superintendents spoke to the effect union contracts had on limiting school reform.

However, time and money were by far the most mentioned obstacles to the effective functioning of the regional instructional rounds network and to the establishment of a local instructional rounds process. Superintendents nearly universally listed time as a conundrum inhibiting the instructional rounds process. Superintendents mentioned the difficulty of carving out time to participate in instructional rounds one day per month while also feeling that 18 months to two years was too long for districts to wait between visits. Districts attempting to start a local rounds process struggled with finding the money to pay for substitute teachers to free up teachers to participate.

None of the superintendents mentioned having the ability to add resources to the establishment of an internal rounds process, however, several superintendents mentioned a redistribution of funds either district wide or at the building level to support the implementation of a local rounds process.

Chapter Summary

Data collected via open-ended, face-to-face interviews with eight district superintendents participating in a regional instructional rounds network was analyzed using a constant comparative analysis as described by Creswell (2008). Specifically, the six steps for conducting an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) suggested by Smith et al. (2009) were followed to reduce the data to seven key findings. These findings were: (a) superintendents described their platform experience as collective and collaborative (b) superintendents were reflective in their understanding of instructional rounds implementation (c) superintendents attempted to replicate the instructional rounds process in their local districts (d) focusing on students in classrooms changed superintendents' mental models (e) superintendents experienced an evolution in their personal learning (f) superintendents transferred their learning into new learning in their local context and (g) superintendents changed their communication patterns.

The results chapter concluded with a discussion of these seven key findings in relation to the four research questions posed in this study.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

An increasingly changing world, fueled by technological advances leading to increased global economic competition, has placed more pressure on public schools in the United States to educate all students to higher levels. Recent research has pointed to the impact of highly effective teachers on student learning (McKinsey & Company, 2007) and the importance of principals' leadership practices on learning (Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). The empirical evidence connecting behaviors of school superintendents to improved student performance is limited, and the findings mixed; however, there is emerging evidence for ways in which a superintendent might leverage his or her time and resources to impact learning at the district level (Rothman, 2009; Waters& Marzano, 2006; Bell et al. 2006, Jackson & Temperley, 2006)

Instructional rounds are a relatively new network approach to building the capacity of district leaders to systemically improve teaching and learning in their schools. In this study I examined how eight superintendents participating in a regional instructional rounds network experienced working and learning together in an effort to improve teaching and learning in their districts and across the county. I also examined what new meanings and understandings these district leaders transferred from this

collaborative experience into practice in their local districts. Schulz and Geithner (2010)

have developed a platform-learning model based on third generation activity theory

(Engestrom & Kerosuo,2007; Engestrom & Sannino,2010) that is useful in

conceptualizing the transfer of knowledge in networked learning organizations.

 In the platform-learning model, participants collaborate to build new personal

meanings and understandings together at the platform level, and then may or may not

transfer what they have learned into operational practice in their own organization. As

pointed out by many (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Helsing, Howell, Kegan, & Lahey, 2008;

Sparks, 2009; Fullan, 1999), applying new knowledge to change an organization such as

a school district is a complex, emotional, and often daunting task for district leaders.

Therefore, the purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to

examine how district superintendents made sense of participating in a regional

superintendents' instructional rounds network in the Midwest, to discover what new

meanings and understandings superintendents took away from this experience, and to

learn in what ways superintendents transferred their learning to their everyday work in

their home districts.

Summary of Major Findings

As a result of being allowed as a participant-observer in the instructional rounds

visits of the network for two school years prior to conducting my research, I was able to

improve my knowledge and understanding of the instructional rounds process, gain new

knowledge concerning the instructional core, and build a positive rapport with the

district superintendents. Open-ended, face-to-face interviews were conducted with

eight of the thirteen superintendents participating in the network. The collected data

was analyzed using the process of interpretive phenomenological analysis as described

by Smith et al. (2009) to generate seven major findings. A summary of these findings

follows.

Findings on the Learning Platform

When analyzing the data from superintendent interviews, four key findings

surfaced which characterize superintendents' experiences working and learning

together. First, superintendents described their platform experience as collective,

collaborative and collegial. Collective, in that the superintendents viewed their

participation in the work of conducting instructional rounds and the learning that

occurred as a result of this participation, as a group effort. In fact, several

superintendents voiced pride in their membership in what they felt was a "unique group

of superintendents engaged in work that was rare in their state". In addition,

superintendents reported finding value in each member's unique perspectives,

knowledge and experience. Despite a state funding formula that creates competition

for students between districts, superintendents felt that their participation in the

network created a bond that fostered collaboration between districts over competition

for students. For some of the superintendents, this bond transcended collegiality, and

was even described by several as a "brotherhood". Despite the closeness of the group,

and perhaps because of it, superintendents related that, at times, they still struggled

with providing frank feedback to their peers.

Second, superintendents were reflective in their understanding of their implementation of the instructional rounds process. All of the original members of the network traveled to Harvard to be trained in the rounds process. Superintendents highly valued this training as both a learning experience and as a bonding experience with their peers. Training in the rounds process was suggested as a required activity for all new members, and continued training in the process was seen as necessary to further superintendents' proficiency in conducting instructional rounds visits within the network. Spotty attendance on rounds' visit days over the past school year was a concern for a majority of superintendents. While superintendents said they valued their participation in the network, there was growing frustration within the group due to this perceived lack of commitment to the instructional rounds process. Another practical area of concern for superintendents was the lack of consistent follow-up with each host school after a visit. Superintendents felt that host schools were left to implement suggestions for the next level of work with no support or follow-up from the network. In addition, superintendents were eager to learn of host schools' progress and if they had implemented any of their suggestions. Superintendents listed a variety of inhibitors to the work of the network and to the implementation of change initiatives in their local districts. These included the teacher's union, teacher contracts, legislation, and principal turnover, but by far the biggest inhibitors expressed were time and money.

Third, superintendents experienced an evolution in their personal learning as a result of their platform learning experience in the network. Superintendents reported new learning about specific instructional strategies such as *Reader's Workshop* or

teaching to different levels of depth of knowledge. Superintendents also reported

sharing new ideas with their peers and borrowing ideas from host schools both from

specific problems of practice and from peripheral observations during rounds visits.

Surprisingly, while expressing an increased focus on the instructional core (finding four),

only one of the eight superintendents specifically stated that his understanding of the

instructional core had changed significantly, while three superintendents specifically

reported that they felt their understanding of the instructional core had not changed.

Another surprising finding is the strong sense of moral purpose superintendents

expressed as a factor driving their individual learning. Six of the superintendents shared

the view that their learning was motivated not only by their desire to improve

instruction in their own districts, but to improve instruction across the county in order

to improve learning for all students.

Finally, by focusing on what students were doing in the classroom rather than

solely on what the teacher was doing, superintendents saw things through "new eyes"

which in turn changed their mental models of instruction, the current reality of teaching

and learning in their own district, and made them more attuned to the instructional

core. This is a powerful finding for demonstrating how this mental shift created at the

platform level influenced superintendents' thoughts and actions back in their districts.

Findings Related to Transfer Into Operational Practice

The finding that superintendents changed their communication patterns with

their peers, with their administrative teams, and have begun to form partnerships

between districts, demonstrates one important way in which superintendents'

collaborative experiences working together at the platform level began to transform the

network itself and were transferred into operational practice in their local districts. As a

result of their participation in network activities, superintendents reported dialogue

with both their peers and with their administrative teams were more often about

instruction than in the past. Superintendents also shared that in addition to discourse

on instruction during rounds visits, monthly superintendents' meetings contained more

conversation around instruction. Several superintendents also reported increased

communication between superintendents outside network activities or monthly

superintendent meetings. These superintendents described an increased probability

that they would contact one of their peers for assistance with a local instructional issue

as a result of the relationships formed through participation in the network. In fact,

several superintendents described how these deeper relationships had led to

partnerships with other districts to implement new processes such as teacher induction

programs, teacher evaluation, and instructional strategies for teachers.

The most direct transfer of superintendent learning from the platform to

operational practice was the finding that superintendents attempted to replicate the

instructional rounds process in their local districts. Six of the eight superintendents had

plans to begin a local instructional rounds process, had at least one building engaging in

local rounds or were conducting district-wide instructional rounds.

I also found that superintendents transferred their learning on the platform into

new learning in their local context through connections to their local school

improvement process, by developing leadership capacity in the members of their

administrative team, and in encouraging local learning across their districts. Feedback

from hosting a rounds visit, observations from conducting rounds visits, and new

learning about specific instructional strategies were all catalysts impacting school

improvement processes. Superintendents transferred new meanings and

understandings related to the observation of the instructional core, knowledge of

specific instructional strategies, and thoughts on teacher evaluation to their

administrative teams, especially their building principals. Local learning was encouraged

and supported through book studies, targeted professional development opportunities,

revised processes and programs, and the creation of new networks of teachers and

principals.

Relationship of Results to Existing Studies

The findings from this study confirm, extend, and in several cases contradict,

research from existing studies. Each finding will be discussed in light of the relevant

research.

Finding One: Superintendents Described Their Platform Experience as Collective, Collaborative and Collegial

According to Engestrom and Kerosuo (2007), a shift toward partnerships,

alliances and collaborative relationships between networks of organizations have

become the norm in the world of work. Castells (2001) refers to networks as the

organizational form of the information age. Others such as Orr (2006), Hord (1997),

DuFour and Eaker (1998), Cone (2010), Wenger et al. (2002), and Wagner et al. (2006)

attest to the power and potential of collective learning and collaborative efforts to

improve instruction by groups of district or school leaders. Engestrom and Kerosuo (2007) have defined expansive learning as a cycle of individual learning in conjunction with collective learning among members of an inter-organizational network, which results in a transformation of the object of the collective activity. My finding that each superintendent described their experience working together in their instructional rounds network as a collective and collaborative enterprise demonstrates that the superintendents may have set up the requisite conditions for expansive learning to occur. This is an important finding as it suggests that if superintendents can work collectively and collaboratively within their inter-organizational network, the object of their activity: teaching and learning, may be able to be transformed in the process.

Interactions between superintendents participating in the network were also described as collegial. This confirms the assertion by Burns' (2011) and City et al. (2011) that the effectiveness of the instructional rounds process is dependent on building a culture of trust through the interactions of participants as they work through the process.

A further finding I termed "Band of Brothers" sheds new light on the power of the instructional rounds process to forge deep professional relationships between participants. A majority of superintendents voiced a feeling that they have become a sort of unique brotherhood brought together around a common vision of improving teaching and learning in the region.

City et al. (2011) cite the possibility that superintendents in a region may think alike, thus limiting insightful or innovative solutions to complex problems of practice. In

agreement with Severson's findings (2013), my study found that this was not the case in this particular region. Seven of the eight superintendents testified to the power of the diverse perspectives, experience and knowledge of their network peers.

The subtheme finding, that half of the superintendents felt that their collaborations with other superintendents in the network overcame any competition between districts, contradicts claims by Lima (2010) that learning networks create competition between member districts. This finding gives a glimpse of the collaborative power that may exist in instructional rounds networks even in the face of a state funding formula and school choice legislation that promotes competition for students between neighboring districts. In fact, I found that four superintendents mentioned establishing partnerships with neighboring districts to collaborate on the implementation of new initiatives as a result of strengthened relationships formed through participation in the instructional rounds network.

In spite of the collaborative and collegial atmosphere superintendents described in their network experience, five superintendents reported still struggling with providing direct and honest feedback to their peers or to host schools. This finding confirms the strong educational culture of being uncomfortable with critiquing a peer, which City et al. (2011) call being in "The Land of Nice". Furthermore, two districts provided examples of the complexities of being able to own a "problem of practice". In one case, feedback from an early instructional rounds visit caused such great anxiety in the district that the district no longer uses the term "instructional rounds" to describe their participation in the network. In another case "problem of practice" has been changed to

"area of focus" in the district's local instructional rounds practice, to avoid the stigma of

having a "problem".

Finding Two: Superintendents Were Reflective in Their Understanding of Instructional Rounds Implementation

In describing their platform level experience working together in the

instructional rounds network, superintendents were aware of the challenges to their

implementation of the instructional rounds process. Superintendents identified four

subthemes related to instructional rounds implementation: (a) Training in the

instructional rounds process, (b) Follow-up after instructional rounds visits, (c)

Commitment to the instructional rounds network, and (d) Inhibitors to the

implementation of instructional rounds.

Superintendents valued their initial instructional rounds training at Harvard, and

seven of the superintendents felt that training in the process was essential for new

members or was important to the continued improvement of practice for all members.

This finding is of practical importance for current instructional rounds networks or for

those considering forming a network.

Superintendents also identified two important aspects of their instructional

rounds process that they found particularly problematic. The first was the lack of an

effective process for conducting follow-up activities with host schools following a visit.

Superintendents expressed a desire to hear if their feedback had been useful, how their

suggestions for the next level of work had been implemented, and what changes in

action or policy had been made as a result of the instructional rounds process. This

finding is consistent with the findings of City et al. (2011), and Tietel (2010a) who found

that without clear expectations for follow-up work, the transfer of new learnings and

understandings leading to improvements in the host school or district were haphazard

and unsupported by the network. This finding is of utmost importance in addressing the

weak link in the instructional rounds process from a network perspective. Too often

host schools and districts are left with little or no support from the network in

overcoming their "knowing-doing" gap (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000) to put into practice the

recommendations for the next level of work.

Despite my findings that superintendents found their participation in the

network to be a source of embedded personal and collective learning, a second concern

raised by superintendents concerned the group's commitment to participating in the

instructional rounds visits. Over time, attendance on visitation days had dropped to a

point where several visits to host schools had to be rescheduled or cancelled leaving

superintendents frustrated and questioning the very existence of the network.

Superintendents were also able to identify inhibitors to the implementation of

instructional rounds at both a local level and at a network level. These inhibitors

provided important details in understanding both the issues of follow-up and

commitment to the process, as well as other forces working against the implementation

of instructional rounds.

Among the inhibitors discussed were the teacher's union, teacher contracts,

legislation, and principal turnover, but by far the biggest inhibitors expressed were time

and money. Confirming the findings of Schulz and Geithner (2010), superintendents in

my study listed time constraints as the biggest limiting factor in conducting instructional

rounds. In fact, superintendents opted to reduce the number of rounds visits during a

school year from six to four in the interest of lessening the demands on their time.

Superintendents reported no increase in spending on the implementation of

instructional rounds in their districts, but did provide examples of a shift in resources

toward implementation of local instructional rounds.

Finding Three: Superintendents Attempted to Replicate the Instructional Rounds Process in Their Local Districts

The most straight-forward transfer of superintendents' new learning acquired

through their participation in the network were attempts to replicate the instructional

rounds process in their local districts. The level of implementation ranged from

planning to conduct local rounds or implementing a rounds process in one or two

buildings, to full implementation of instructional rounds district-wide. City et al. (2011)

have found that it is common for participants in superintendent networks to attempt to

replicate the rounds process in their own districts. Others such as Burns (2011),

Roegman and Riehl (2012), Gillard (2014), and Grace (2014), point to the growing

evolution of instructional rounds to include central office personnel, principals, and

teachers at all stages of the process.

In my study, District B stands out as an example of the transfer of

superintendent learning at the platform level to district-wide implementation of

instructional rounds with multiple school level problems of practice connected by an

over-arching problem of practice

around racial equity. District B has been engaged in a district-wide instructional rounds process for the past three years and has embedded the process into district and school level school improvement planning. Sherer and Spillane (2011) and Resnick et al. (2010) assert that new organizational routines such as those implemented by District B can transform the norms and culture of a school.

Resnick and Spillane (2006) refer to a routine capable of transforming school practice as a "kernel routine'. In their study of a large, urban elementary school in Chicago, Sherer and Spillane (2011) found that kernel routines set an instructional vision for the school, established expectations for classroom practice and collaboration, and built curricular coherence. My finding that superintendents attempted to create local instructional rounds processes in their districts is important because the rounds process can be the introductory organizational routine that makes other kernel routines possible across schools in the district.

Finding Four: Focusing on Students in Classrooms Changed Superintendents' Mental Models

Traditionally, the work of the superintendent has been disconnected from the classroom (Cohen & March, 1974; Hannaway & Sproull, 1978; Elmore, 2000). Elmore (2007) explains that this loose-coupling between superintendents and the instructional core exists as a result of the very minimal time superintendents spend directly involved in instruction. Based on the work of Cohen and Ball (1999), the central activity in the instructional rounds process developed by City et al. (2011) is the observation of the interactions between teachers, students, and content.

The data from my study revealed that all eight superintendents "saw" things differently somehow by focusing their attention on what students were doing or asked to do in the classroom. Four subthemes emerged that provided detail for understanding how superintendents' mental models changed as a result of observing students in classrooms. The first two subthemes, "reality check" and "district comparisons", describe how superintendents' eyes were opened to the current reality of teaching and learning in their own district and in comparison to neighboring districts through first hand observation. These findings add to the research in significant ways, as I believe the observation of students in classrooms created a sense of urgency among the superintendents for instructional improvement using real data, the first discipline cited by Wagner et al. (2006) for strengthening instruction. In addition, the research has become increasingly clear that changes in teaching pedagogy leading to improved student performance occur through transparent and collaborative analysis of daily work practice (Resnick et al., 2010; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2010; Sherer & Spillane, 2011; Heifetz, in Newcomb, 2004). Superintendents described the powerful effect observing students in classrooms had on their mental picture of student learning in their districts. Observing students in other districts magnified this effect. The motivating power of these first hand comparisons in creating an impetus for change in local districts may be an overlooked phenomenon in the literature.

Superintendents also described a shift in their focus toward attending to the instructional core as a result of observing students in the classroom. The time

superintendents spend in classrooms attending to the core is an important factor in

reducing the loose-coupling described by Elmore (2007).

Superintendents voiced an appreciation for teachers, quality teaching, the

complexity of the teaching profession, and the challenges of poverty. They also voiced

appreciation for being able to learn from exemplary classrooms and exemplary buildings

led by skilled building principals. I termed this unexpected finding "appreciate the

positive." This finding adds to the literature as it provides evidence that

superintendents' hearts as well as their minds may be changed as a result of observing

students in classrooms. As Fullan (1999) and Heifetz and Linsky (2002) point out, the

sharing of emotions, feelings, and mental models play a key role in overcoming the

challenges of adaptive change.

Finding Five: Superintendents Experienced an Evolution in Their Personal Learning

One of the intended outcomes of a superintendent's participation in an

instructional rounds network is the acquisition of new knowledge and skills (City et al.,

2011; Rallis, Tedder, Lachman, & Elmore, 2006). Results of this study confirm that

superintendents did indeed report experiencing powerful personal learning as a result

of participating in their rounds network. Specifically, superintendents reported a better

understanding of specific instructional strategies or concepts and the procurement of

new ideas from their peers. Overall, this provides further documentation of

instructional rounds as a process for building a professional learning community

(Wenger et al., 2002; Wagner et al., 2006; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997) and for

rounds to serve as a tool for superintendents to model being lead learners in their

districts (Schiavino-Narvaez, 2012).

In a study of 60 networks, Parker (in Lieberman & Grolnick, 1997) found that

members in all networks shared a common purpose. My finding that superintendents in

the network were driven by a moral commitment to improve the learning of all students

in the county was completely unexpected. This moral imperative to educate all students

in a region adds an important dimension to the literature on the power of shared vision

and purpose in a network.

Another perplexing finding emerging from the data in my study is that despite

finding that seven of the eight superintendents reported an increased focus on the

instructional core in their districts, only one superintendent specifically reported that his

understanding of the instructional core had changed, while three superintendents

specifically stated that their understanding of the instructional core had not changed.

This finding disputes Severson's (2013) finding that in a similar study all of the

participants reported a transformation of their views on instructional best practices.

**Finding Six: Superintendents Transferred Their Learning into New Learning in
Their Local Context**

In their study of thirteen learning networks, Schulz and Geithner (2010) found

that individual learning of participants at the platform level did not necessarily transfer

to learning within individual organizations. My findings dispute this research, as all of

the participants in this study reported transferring their learning into their local context.

Three subthemes of this finding illustrate how superintendents transferred their

learning into school and district improvement plans, the development of leadership

capacity, and in other forms of local learning.

Five superintendents reported that their participation in the network impacted

district or building level school improvement plans. Seven superintendents provided

examples of learning across their districts as a result of their own new understandings.

Specific examples shared were book studies, professional development opportunities,

revised teacher induction processes and response to intervention programs, and the

creation of new teacher and principal networks. These findings add to the research as

they provide concrete examples of ways in which superintendent learning at the

platform level was transferred into operational practice.

Superintendents reported that they used their new meanings and

understandings to develop leadership capacity in their administrative teams, especially

in their building principals. This is a significant finding given the research that

superintendents' impact on student learning is achieved through their influence on, and

development of, others (Waters & Marzano, 2006; Leithwood, Seashore Louis,

Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Chingos, Whitehurst & Lindquist, 2014).

Finding Seven: Superintendents Changed Their Communication Patterns

Results of my study also bring to light new communication patterns developed

by superintendents at both the platform level and in operational practice.

Superintendents reported engaging in more dialogue about instruction with their peers

and with their administrative teams. This shift in conversation confirms Severson's

(2013) findings that the rounds process caused conversations to be more focused on instruction and student learning in a similar network.

An interesting finding that adds to the literature is the way in which communication between superintendents expanded beyond monthly meetings or instructional rounds visits. Superintendents reported that their participation in the network facilitated more conversations with their peers about problems of practice through phone calls or emails than prior to the formation of the network. In several districts, these increased communications led to the formation of partnerships to collaborate on the implementation of new initiatives, such as a teacher evaluation model.

Revised Conceptual Framework

These findings allow details to be added to my conceptual framework. As can be seen in Figure Two, each finding has been placed within the framework either on the platform level, the operational level, or as a key transfer mechanism. At the platform level, superintendents described their network experience as collective, collaborative, and congenial; reported an evolution in their personal learning, changed their communication patterns with their peers, and displayed an understanding of their implementation of instructional rounds concepts and processes. At the operational level, superintendents attempted to replicate the instructional rounds process in their districts, transferred their new learning to their local context, and changed communication patterns with their administrative team.
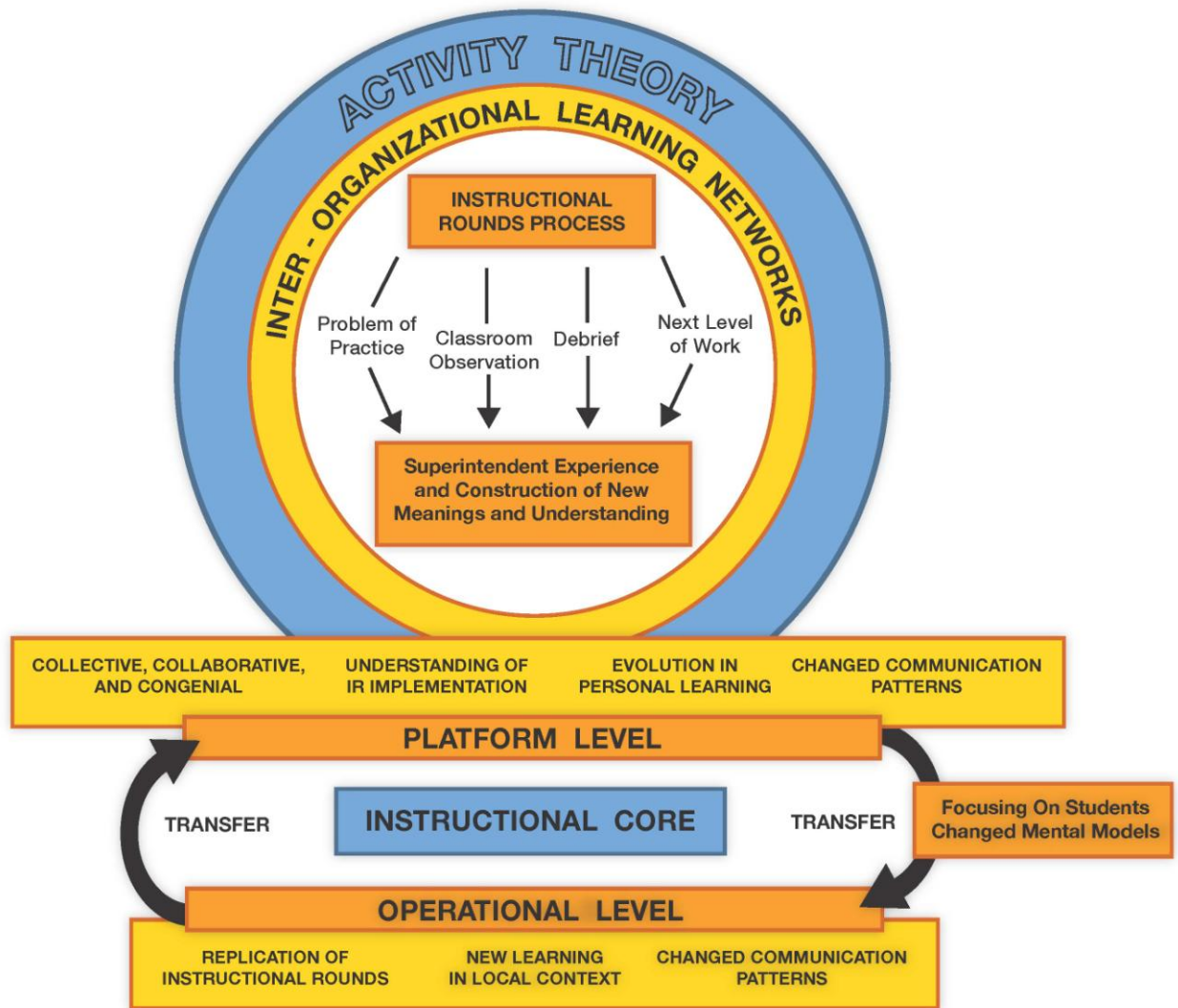
Figure 2. Revised conceptual framework.

Superintendents reported seeing their organizations through "new eyes" as a result of focused observations of students interacting with academic content. Careful reflection on the student learning tasks, the nature of student interactions with teachers and peers, and students' ability to engage in higher order thinking, changed superintendents' perceptions of the current reality of teaching and learning in their districts. Comparisons to teaching and learning in neighboring districts magnified this

change in superintendents' mental models. This shift in thinking was a catalyst for the

transfer of superintendents' new meanings and understandings into their districts.

Figure Three provides an additional level of detail as subthemes have been

added under each finding. Additionally, subthemes related to the instructional core
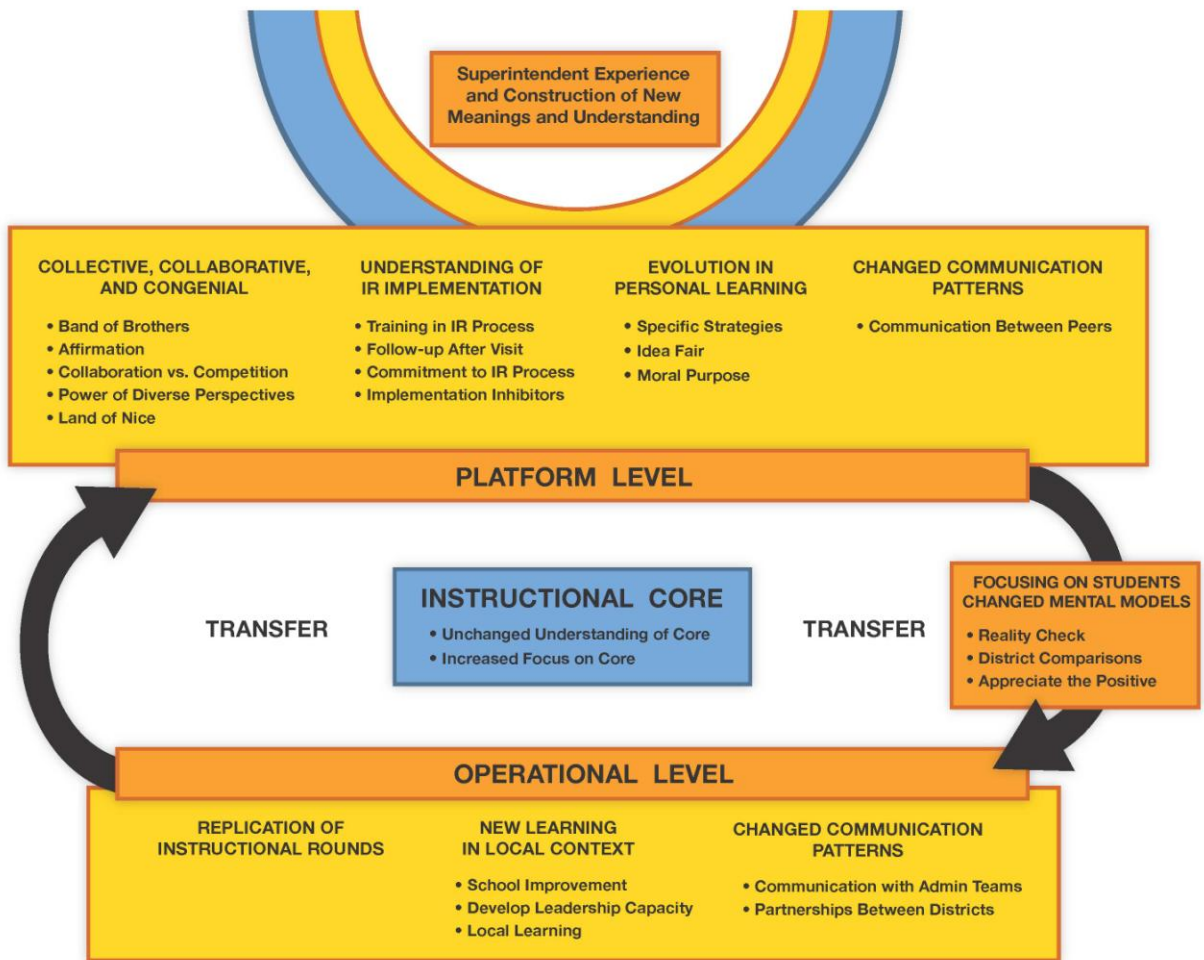
have been added to

Figure 3. Revised conceptual framework detail.

Illustrate the confounding findings that superintendents reported that their participation in the instructional rounds network left their understanding of the instructional core unchanged, however, superintendents reported increasing their focus on the core in their districts as a result of participating in rounds.

Limitations

This study confirmed, added to, and disputed the literature on what and how superintendents learned through participation in a regional instructional rounds network, and what and how their new meanings and understandings were transferred into their daily work practice in their districts. However, there is still much to be learned about the impact of instructional rounds on the personal learning of superintendents, the transfer of superintendent learning into operational practice, the instructional rounds process itself, and, ultimately, the impact of the rounds process on improved student learning. In addition, my research is certainly not without limitations.

As this is a qualitative study, some limitations are inherent in my research design. First, while the results of my interpretive phenomenological analysis may not be generalizable as in quantitative studies, they may be transferrable to other settings (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Even though data was collected from eight of the twelve superintendents meeting the inclusionary criteria for participation in this study, the small sample size and the demographic characteristics of both the superintendents and the districts they lead may limit the transferability of the findings. Data for this study was collected through open-ended, face-to-face interviews and artifacts that superintendents wished to share. My research is also limited by the fact that few

artifacts were made available and responses to interview questions may contain

individual bias. As the sole researcher, my experiences in education may color my

interpretations of the superintendents' interpretations of their experiences participating

in the instructional rounds network as well.

Implications for Policy and Practice

I believe my research has several important implications for practice. First, my

research adds to the literature on the need for more specific and robust follow-up

activities to support host schools, and to inform the work of the network. Second,

superintendents valued their training in the instructional rounds process, and voiced an

interest in continued training in the process. Third, a resolution to the issue of creating

the time necessary to implement all aspects of the rounds process with fidelity is of

critical importance. Although research on the direct effects of instructional rounds

networks on student achievement are virtually non-existent at this time, the impact of

the instructional rounds network as a professional development structure for

superintendents merits an investment of time, talent, and financial resources to expand

this opportunity to other regions.

The finding that observations of students in classrooms caused superintendents

to see their organizations through "new eyes", combined with the finding that

superintendents attempted to replicate the instructional rounds process in their

districts, has policy implications for school improvement requirements and teacher

evaluation. Mandated school improvement plans require the collection of process data,

student achievement data, demographic data, and perception data. Results of this

study suggest that a significant source of real-time data is missing from current school improvement processes. Internal instructional rounds processes may provide rich data to inform school improvement efforts in an ongoing manner.

In spite of recent legislative interest and changes to teacher evaluation policy, teacher evaluation practices based on several formal observations focused on teacher activity in the classroom continue to prove insufficient in significantly improving teaching practice. District superintendents and building principals must assume a relatively new role as instructional leaders and developers of teaching capacity. The capacity of school leaders to impact teaching practices depends on the creation of new teacher evaluation policies that provide for more coaching than evaluating. School leaders need training and support in truly understanding the complexities of teaching and learning, embedded professional development structures such as instructional rounds to learn the work by doing the work, and additional resources such as cognitive coaches, teacher leaders, and time to engage in the practice of improving instruction.

Implications for Further Research

The experiences of superintendents participating in regional instructional rounds networks provide a rich landscape for future studies. The superintendents participating in the network under study are veteran educators with considerable experience as superintendents in the region. Would a cohort of less experienced superintendents report experiencing the same strong professional bonds, sense of purpose, and collaborative platform experiences reported in this study? Similar studies should be done with cohorts of superintendents with varying levels of experience, to learn how

experience as a superintendent may impact collegial learning at the platform level. In

addition, similar studies should be conducted with cohorts of superintendents in a

variety of contexts to learn how other factors such as district demographics, location, or

superintendent demographics may affect the establishment of successful instructional

rounds networks. Additionally, this study could be extended over a longer period of time

to gather data on the experiences of superintendents as a network matures. As

superintendents were the only sources of data in this study, the voices of principals and

teachers could also be added. These voices could provide a deeper, richer description of

the way in which district leaders' new meanings and understanding are transferred into

operational practice in different school buildings within a district.

Superintendents cited dwindling attendance at rounds visits, lack of meaningful

follow-up for host schools, and limited time and resources, as concerns jeopardizing the

sustainability of the network. Very little was mentioned about the leadership of the

network in general and specifically how the network attempted to resolve these

implementation issues. Studies of the experiences and impact of network facilitators

could shed light on a currently overlooked facet of the instructional rounds process. In

addition, studies of the leadership dynamics within an instructional rounds network

could provide fascinating insights into the overall functioning and sustainability of

regional instructional rounds networks.

Overall, superintendents in this network reported minimal changes to their

understanding of the instructional core. Survey research across a number of

instructional rounds networks, could provide much needed details about

superintendents' perceived changes in their understanding of the instructional core as a result of their participation in an instructional rounds network.

Participants in the network shared some common experiences such as training in the rounds process at Harvard. They also voiced a common moral purpose for their participation in the network. An interesting study would be to chronicle the activities of a network over time to discover what types of activities, conversations, or shared experiences add value to the workings of a network, in addition to the implementation of the instructional rounds process itself.

Further studies are also needed to add depth to the findings of this study. For example, case studies of successful follow-up work done in other networks may add much needed practical strategies for addressing this identified area of weakness in the rounds process. Likewise, further studies are needed exploring how superintendents attempted to establish instructional rounds in their districts, and how superintendents used their new learning to develop leadership capacity in their organizations, especially in their building principals.

Quantitative studies such as those conducted by Schulz and Geithner (2010) to measure the degree of implementation of new meanings and understandings transferred into operational practice are also needed, as are quantitative studies on the effect of superintendents' instructional rounds networks on student learning.

Summary Conclusions

Advances in technology and global economic forces have created a demand for educated and skilled workers around the globe. In the new Knowledge Economy,

education and training beyond high school are necessary for access to most career paths. This new reality has placed pressure on American educators to prepare all students to be career and college ready upon graduation from high school. These new demands have created a sense of urgency for school leaders to engage in school reform initiatives that build the capacity within their districts to educate all students to higher levels.

While the research linking the direct effects of the superintendent to increased student learning is limited and mixed, there is research that suggests that superintendent leadership is significant to student learning mainly through influence on others and as agents of change. Instructional rounds networks are a relatively new professional development structure for supporting superintendents in becoming instructional leaders and in improving teaching and learning in their districts.

In a platform-learning model, learning in a superintendents' network can be viewed as occurring both individually and collectively on an external platform outside each individual school district. While much research has been done at the platform level, studies are needed to understand how concepts and ideas are transferred from the platform level into daily work at the operational level in individual school districts. This study added to the research on how superintendents experience working and learning together in an instructional rounds network at the platform level, and how superintendents transferred their new learning back into their districts.

My research confirmed that superintendents found their participation in a regional instructional rounds network to be a collaborative and congenial work-

embedded professional development experience. Several findings from my research also have practical implications for practice; namely, the importance of continued training in the instructional rounds process for participants in a network, and the need for specific strategies and commitments to engage in follow-up work with host schools following an instructional rounds visit.

This study also added to the research on the transfer of superintendents' new meanings and understandings into daily work practice in local districts. Superintendents attempted to replicate the rounds process in their local districts, used their new knowledge and skills to develop leadership capacity in their building principals, applied their new learning to school improvement planning, and changed their communication patterns with both their peers and their administrative teams.

An unanticipated finding that observations of students engaged in classroom learning activities changed superintendents' mental models in relation to the current reality of student learning in their own districts and in comparison to students in neighboring districts adds new insight on the ways participation in an instructional rounds network may create a sense of urgency for improving instruction.

Finally, two unexpected findings add new and encouraging knowledge to the literature. It seems that participation in the network impacted superintendents' hearts as well as their minds. Superintendents reported being galvanized into a team of district leaders by a common moral commitment to improving the education of all students in the region. They also reported a new appreciation for teachers, quality teaching, and

the complexity of the teaching profession, skilled building principals, and the challenges of poverty.

As a building principal who has experienced tremendous personal growth as an educator through participation in a learning network, and as a participant observer in the network under study, I believe in the potential of instructional rounds networks as potent professional development opportunities for school leaders. Time will tell whether this learning translates into increased learning for students in the districts they serve.

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Appendix A

Interview Instrument

Interview Protocol

Superintendent Interview

Date: _____

Code Name of Interview Participant: _____

Start Time: _____ End Time: _____ Total Time: _____

Introduction:

Thank you for taking your time to meet with me. I am working with Western Michigan University to complete my research study and dissertation. The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study will be to examine how district superintendents make sense of participating in a regional superintendents' instructional rounds network in the Midwest, to discover what new meanings and understandings superintendents might take away from this experience, and to learn in what ways superintendents may transfer their learning to their everyday work in their home districts.

So that I do not miss any of your comments, I would like to record our discussion. I am asking for your permission to do this, as it will make my research work much easier. I should point out that your contribution will be anonymous and confidential, and that any published research will contain changed names. This interview should take around 60 minutes. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Background Information:

1. Please tell me about your path to the superintendency?
   - Probe 1: How long have you been a superintendent?
   - Probe 2. How long have you been in your current position?

2. What does it mean when you say you "participate in an instructional rounds network"?

Superintendents' platform experience:

3. Please describe your experience working together with your peers in the instructional rounds network.

   - Probe 1: How would you describe the ways in which you engaged with other superintendent participants?
   - Probe 2: What enhanced or detracted from the quality of your experience?
   - Probe 3: In what ways did learning with your peers in the network facilitate your thinking about teaching and learning in your own district?

Probe 4: How was learning in the network similar or different from with other superintendents?

4. What new meanings and understandings have you gained from participating in the instructional rounds network?

   Probe 1: How has your understanding of the "instructional core" or teaching and learning changed?
   Probe 2: How has your personal picture of the current reality of teaching and learning in your district changed?
   Probe 3: How has your view of your own organization changed?
   Probe 4: What other important understandings did you gain from the experience?

Transfer of new meanings and understandings into operational practice:

5. In what ways have you transferred your new meanings and understandings into your work as an educational leader in your district?

   Probe 1: What changes in district practices, systems, processes or resulting from your participation in the network?
   Probe 2: What changes in your personal work routines have you made as a result of your participation in the network?
   Probe 3: How has your learning as a member of the network influenced your vision or goals for your district?
   Probe 4: Do you have any artifacts you would like to share to illustrate how you have put your new thinking and knowledge into practice? Could you send me any artifacts knowledge into practice?

6. What has influenced how you have translated your new understandings and experiences as a member of the network to changes in your personal practice and/or changes in district practices, systems, processes, or resources?

   Probe 1: How do you perceive change happens in your district?
   Probe 2: How do you use your network peers as resources in making change in your district?

7. As you reflect on your entire instructional rounds network experience, what meaning does it have for you?

Probes for iterative questioning:

Probe 1: Could you give me an example?
Probe 2: What do you mean by that?
Probe 3: What does that look like?

Probe 4: Could you expand on that thought?

Closing

Thank you for taking your valuable time to answer these questions. Your comments and answers will be invaluable for my research study. I will contact you in the near future for verification of this interview transcription and also near the end of this study for your comments on emerging themes from this study.

Appendix B

Informed Consent Forms

Western Michigan University
Department of Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology

Principal Investigator:	Dr. Patricia Reeves, Ed.D
Student Investigator:	Timothy J. Travis
Title of Study:	From Networked Learning to Operational Practice: Constructing and Transferring Superintendent Knowledge in a Regional Instructional Rounds Network

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled " *From Networked Learning to Operational Practice: Constructing and Transferring Superintendent Knowledge in a Regional Instructional Rounds Network.*" This project will serve as Timothy Travis' dissertation for the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Education. This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over all of the time commitments, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely and please ask any questions if you need more clarification.

What are we trying to find out in this study?

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study will be to examine how district superintendents make sense of participating in a regional superintendents' instructional rounds network in the Midwest, to discover what new meanings and understandings superintendents might take away from this experience, and to learn in what ways superintendents may transfer their learning to their everyday work in their home districts.

This study may be of practical value to superintendents involved in existing instructional rounds networks and to superintendents considering forming a network, as it may provide insights from superintendents in the field that may be valuable in building and sustaining successful instructional rounds networks.

Who can participate in this study?

You must be a school superintendent who has participated in a regional instructional rounds network in the Midwest for at least two years.

Where will this study take place?

The primary site for this study is a regional superintendents' network in the Midwest, comprised of fourteen district superintendents engaged in the instructional rounds process. Interviews lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes will be scheduled with you in a quiet room at an agreed upon location. Most likely this location will be your office, as this location will provide easy access to any artifacts you may wish to share to illustrate how network learning has been transferred into operational practice. As the primary investigator, I will personally conduct each interview.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?

The initial open-ended interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes. Following the recording and transcription of the initial interview, you will have the opportunity to read the transcripts of your interview to ensure that your words match what you intended. You will also have the opportunity to react to the themes emerging during the data analysis. These activities may take up to an additional 60 minutes. The total time required of you for interviews and member checking is approximately 120 to 150 minutes.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a one on one open-ended interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. You will also be asked to review the transcript of your interview to ensure that your words match what you intended. You will also be given the opportunity to react to emerging themes in a second interview. These additional activities may take up to an additional 60 minutes.

What information is being measured during the study?

This section will describe the measurements that I am going to take during your participation in the study. Data will be collected through recorded open-ended interviews. You may wish to refer to documents such as school improvement plans, professional development plans, meeting agendas etc. to illustrate your answers to interview questions.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?

Potential risks associated with participation in this study are breaches in confidentiality, threats to privacy, and due to small sample size and proximity of the recruitment pool to the researcher, potential for individuals to be identified upon dissemination of the study.

To protect you from breaches in confidentiality and threats to privacy, digital audio recordings of interviews will be stored on an encrypted hard drive, which will be locked in a file cabinet in a locked office. Paper copies of transcripts will also be stored in a locked file cabinet in a locked office.

Study codes will be randomly assigned to you and no other identifying information will be collected. The list of study codes will be kept in a separate location from interview recordings and transcripts and will be destroyed upon completion of the study. In addition, pseudonyms will be used in reporting the findings of the study.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?

The data and analysis from the study I am proposing may have practical importance for superintendents and other educational practitioners such as building principals, curriculum directors and teacher leaders involved in school improvement efforts. In understanding how superintendents translate their new learning to their work in their home districts, this study seeks

to add more clarity to the potential for superintendents to make greater influence on teaching and learning practice. This study may be of practical value to superintendents involved in existing instructional rounds networks and to superintendents considering forming a network as it may provide insights from superintendents in the field that may be valuable in building and sustaining successful instructional rounds networks.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?
There are no costs to you associated with participation in this study.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?
There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?
The results of this study will be published by ProQuest in the form of a dissertation. Results may also be disseminated in research journals, books, or in conference presentations. To protect you from breaches in confidentiality and threats to privacy, digital audio recordings of interviews will be stored on an encrypted hard drive, which will be locked in a file cabinet in a locked office. Paper copies of transcripts will also be stored in a locked file cabinet in a locked office.

Study codes will be randomly assigned to you and no other identifying information will be collected. The list of study codes will be kept in a separate location from interview recordings and transcripts and will be destroyed upon completion of the study. In addition, pseudonyms will be used in reporting the findings of the study.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?

You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience NO consequences either academically or personally if you choose to withdraw from this study.

The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the student investigator, Timothy Travis at 616-901-3268 or ttravis@saugatuckps.com. In addition, you may contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Patricia Reeves at 269-387-3527 or patricia.reeves@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

_____

Please Print Your Name

_____   _____

Participant's signature   Date

Appendix C

HSIRB Approval Letter

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Date: May 28, 2015

To: Patricia Reeves, Principal Investigator
        Tim Travis, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Daryle Gardner-Bonneau, Ph.D., Vice Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 15-04-36

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "From Networked Learning to Operational Practice: Constructing and Transferring Superintendent Knowledge in a Regional Instructional Rounds Network" has been **approved** under the **expedited** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may **only** be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., *you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under "Number of subjects you want to complete the study")*." Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: **May 27, 2016**