A Phenomenological Exploration of Superintendents' and Principals' Experiences in a Shared Professional Development Process

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF SUPERINTENDENTS’ AND PRINCIPALS’ EXPERIENCES IN A SHARED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Educational Leadership, Research and Technology Western Michigan University December 2013

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF SUPERINTENDENTS’ AND PRINCIPALS’ EXPERIENCES IN A SHARED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

John R. Severson, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2013

For this qualitative study, I explored and described how superintendents and principals interpreted and experienced a sustained professional development process focusing on instruction and student learning, a form of Elmore’s Superintendents in the Classroom (SITC) Network. Specifically, I examined how the addition of principals in the SITC learning model experience changed the superintendents’ and principals’ knowledge and beliefs as well as their behavior in three areas: their individual experiences, the working relationship between superintendent and principal, and the way they now think about and encourage student learning.

For this phenomenological study, superintendents and principals were selected and individually interviewed from five districts. The data gathered were deductively and inductively analyzed. Deductively, a literature-based framework was created using the concepts of (a) shared vision (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004), (b) distributed leadership practices (Burns, 1978; Gordon, 2002; Kellogg, 2006; Walters & Marzano, 2006), and (c) professional learning communities (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Muhammed, 2009; Sergiovanni, 2004). While literature reveals that superintendents have had success in the SITC program (Choy, 2003; City,
Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2010; Elmore, 2000, 2004; Rallis, Tedder, Lachman, & Elmore, 2006), this study analyzed the inclusion of principals in the process as well.

Through the data analysis process, I developed six themes: (a) leaders developed new views of instructional best practices, (b) new working relationships developed between the leaders and their teachers, (c) leaders adapted the SITC learning model’s PLC processes, (d) leaders developed new appreciation for the value of working with their peers and colleagues, (d) the SITC training changed how the paired leaders work together, and (e) leaders adapted the SITC training’s best practices onto their administrative teams’ working processes.

My study affirmed, added to, and disputed other research. In particular, I found the importance of principals joining a sustained shared professional development process with their superintendents as it changed them individually, changed how they worked together, and changed the relationship of the leaders as well as the functionality of the administrative team.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I reflect over the journey that I have traveled the last few years, there are so many individuals who have provided encouragement, suggestions, guidance, and motivation to complete this program. With their support, I have fulfilled one of my most sought-after educational goals, and I thank them all.

To my colleagues, who allowed me to interview them, I thank you. To our CISD instructional staff members, you are all incredible. Mary, Joe, and Tammy, your work with all of the CISD administrators and teachers has made many positive changes in our field. To my professors and all of the support staff at Western Michigan University, I have the utmost respect and thanks for all of you who have provided me with the very best educational foundation in reaching this goal.

To my committee chairs, thank you for your direction and support. I appreciate Dr. Terance Lunger for frequently checking on me and pushing me to continue on this path. To Dr. Dennis McCrumb, my mentor for many years, I thank you for your direction and support as well as your confidence in me for entering into the doctoral program at WMU. To my chair, Dr. Sue Poppink, I appreciate all of the times you challenged me to think differently, to process this work with just enough guidance, and to be a wonderful, knowledgeable expert that helped me achieve this amazing goal. Your guidance throughout this process was meaningful, and I truly recognize the skill and expertise you possess in supporting me in my quest.
Acknowledgments—Continued

To my mother and father who expected the very best, thank you for believing in me. Most importantly, to my wife Elaine and boys Matthew and Mitchell, I appreciate your support and flexibility during this process. I recognize that many times I was tied up in my work, yet I believe I did my very best to keep the quality of our time together. Elaine, you gave me the time to work, the support when things didn’t go well, and the love to believe in me. All of you are the foundation of my life and I could not have made this journey alone without all of you!

John R. Severson
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................ ii
LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................................................. ix
LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................................................................... x

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................. 1
   Background .................................................................................................................... 1
   Problem Statement ....................................................................................................... 4
   Purpose .......................................................................................................................... 8
   Conceptual Framework ................................................................................................. 9
      Shared Vision ............................................................................................................. 11
      Distributive Leadership ............................................................................................. 12
      Professional Learning Culture ................................................................................... 12
   Methods Overview ....................................................................................................... 15
   Summary ....................................................................................................................... 16

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ................................................................................. 18
   Background ................................................................................................................... 18
   Elmore’s Superintendent Network .............................................................................. 19
      The Foundations of Elmore’s Network Model ........................................................... 20
   Research Regarding Elmore’s Model .......................................................................... 24
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Reform Shared Vision and the Network</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Instructional Core</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elmore’s SITC Learning Model and Distributive Leadership</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Regarding Elmore’s Establishment of a Community of Practice</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of Calhoun Intermediate School District SITC Model</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Regarding Superintendent and Principal Relationships</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders Creating a Shared Vision</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributive Leadership</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Learning Culture</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendents’ Knowledge and Beliefs about Student Learning</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necessary Beliefs and Skills for the Superintendent</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals’ Knowledge and Beliefs Regarding Student Achievement</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature About Superintendent and Principal Relationships</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the Superintendent’s Perspective</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the Principal’s Perspective</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How the Study Extends the Literature</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. METHODS</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of Methods and Rationale</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampling Approach</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table of Contents—Continued

CHAPTER

Pilot Interview Questions................................................................. 116
Data Collection .................................................................................. 117
Data Analysis ....................................................................................... 120
Creswell’s Six-Step Process ................................................................. 121
Inductive Analysis .............................................................................. 124
Validating Findings – Review .............................................................. 124
My Role as the Researcher ................................................................. 125
Delimitations of Study ....................................................................... 128

IV. RESULTS .......................................................................................... 129

Overview ............................................................................................. 129
Description of Unit of Analysis ............................................................ 130
Subjects ............................................................................................... 130
District One ......................................................................................... 131
District Two ......................................................................................... 132
District Three ...................................................................................... 132
District Four ......................................................................................... 132
District Five ......................................................................................... 133
Data Analysis ....................................................................................... 133
Data Collection Procedures ............................................................... 133
Analysis of Interviews ....................................................................... 134
CHAPTER

Emergent Themes ..................................................................................................................................... 137

Theme 1: Leaders Developed New Views of Instructional Best Practices .................................................. 137

Theme 2: New Working Relationships Developed Between the Leaders and Their Teachers ................................. 143

Theme 3: Leaders Adapted the SITC Learning Model’s PLC Processes ...................................................... 148

Theme 4: Leaders Shared Personal Reflections on the Value of Working with Their Peers and Colleagues .................... 155

Theme 5: The SITC Training Changed How the Paired Leaders Work Together .................................................. 158

Theme 6: Leaders Adapted the SITC Training’s Best Practices onto Their Administrative Team Working Processes ........................................ 169

Summary ............................................................................................................................................... 176

V. SUMMARY, INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH ................................................. 177

Summary ............................................................................................................................................... 178

Interpretation of Findings .................................................................................................................... 181

Key Findings Related to Research Questions: A Revision of the Conceptual Chart ...................................................... 181

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research ............................................................................. 196

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................... 198

REFERENCES .......................................................................................................................................... 200
Table of Contents—Continued

APPENDICES

A. Interview Instrument................................................................. 209
B. Informed Consent......................................................................... 213
C. Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Letter of Approval......... 218
LIST OF TABLES

1. Demographic and Thematic Distribution Among Participants.......................... 138
2. Theme 1 Distribution Among Participants .......................................................... 139
3. Theme 2 Distribution Among Participants ......................................................... 144
4. Theme 3 Distribution Among Participants .......................................................... 150
5. Theme 4 Distribution Among Participants .......................................................... 156
6. Theme 5 Distribution Among Participants .......................................................... 160
7. Theme 6: Leaders Adapted the SITC Training’s Best Practices onto Their Administrative Team Working Processes ............................................. 170
8. Comparison of Research ................................................................................... 184
LIST OF FIGURES

1. Conceptual framework for Severson’s (2013) study ........................................ 10
2. Revised conceptual framework for Severson’s (2013) study ................................. 183
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

The position of the superintendent is an extremely challenging, multifaceted position, yet the most significant aspect of the position may be the role of academic leader. As the complexity of tasks and responsibilities associated with school leadership at both the district and building levels continues to grow, scholars have increasingly examined the importance of effective relationships between superintendents and their principals (Neuman & Pelchat, 2001).

In complex and demanding circumstances, developing strong working relationships that are focused on student achievement can be extremely challenging and a major problem for some superintendents and principals. Waters and Marzano (2006) stated, “When a superintendent also encourages strong school-level leadership and encourages principals and others to assume responsibility for school success, he or she has fulfilled another responsibility; to establish a relationship with schools” (p. 13). The authors further suggested that in cases of poor or ineffective superintendent-principal relationships, schools had a negative correlation with student achievement of –.16. While sound structures and processes may exist, positive and effective working interactions must also be in place for team effectiveness.

Because of the complexity of the superintendent and principal roles, new systems that build sound relationships and distribute work effectively are needed (Fullan, Bertani,
& Quinn, 2004). Such systems may require leaders to be experts in certain aspects of
work, yet complement one another through collaboration, communication, and
coordinated decision-making processes. Waters and Marzano (2006) isolated factors
associated with the effect of superintendent leadership on student achievement. In their
meta-analyses of 27 studies involving 2,817 districts and achievement scores of 3.4
million students, they found that (a) district-level leadership, (b) effective superintendent
focus on goals, (c) superintendent tenure, and (d) defined autonomy in goal processes
correlated with improving student achievement. Waters and Marzano defined autonomy
as “non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction, yet provide school leadership teams
[superintendent to principals] with the responsibility and authority for determining how
to meet those goals” (p. 4). One of the most important findings in the research to date is
that when superintendents are involved in monitoring instructional goals, there is a .24
positive correlation in improving overall academic achievement (Neuman & Pelchat,
2001; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Additional research findings further suggest that
superintendents must stay involved with teaching and learning while, at the same time,
working to distribute and share leadership responsibilities (Fullan et al., 2004).

In the fall of 2006, I began meeting with a group of 12 superintendents who have
received training in a professional development learning model called Superintendents in
the Classroom (SITC). The SITC learning model is a unique professional development
process in which superintendents study achievement data specific to math instruction,
observe teacher instruction, share observations, study best practices, and discuss their
roles as academic leaders. The process used by this group of educators has mirrored
Elmore’s Network, which is the creation of prolonged job-embedded professional development experiences associated with school improvement. For the purposes of this study, the “SITC learning model” refers to the work of the Calhoun Intermediate School District (CISD), and the “Network” refers to Elmore’s original professional learning model.

All of the superintendents and principals in this study have experienced the SITC learning model, which includes curriculum coaches representing the local intermediate school district (ISD), superintendents, principals, district curriculum directors, and individual lead math teachers from each of the participating districts. While the ISD coaches lead this group through the educational process, all participants work in an environment that supports sharing, questioning for clarity, respect for individual ideas and comments, and, most importantly, confidentiality. The group meets every three months at the host district, and the process entails a number of tasks and features that allow the group to grow and interact effectively and efficiently.

Before each meeting, all members read research on math instructional methods and processes. At the meeting, the participants (a) review key mathematical research focusing on instructional best practices; (b) discuss the host school’s math data, specifically academic achievement scores on tests, and overall math grade point averages; (c) conduct pre-observation discussions on best practices in mathematical instruction; (d) participate in small group observations in classrooms (no more than five per classroom); (e) debrief on observations, with special discussion relating to observed effective practices based on research; and (f) discuss our roles as academic leaders in
supporting and creating the necessary changes to improve math instruction and learning in our districts.

While the SITC learning model has been in existence since 2006 at the CISD, the project has expanded since 2010 to include high school principals, a significant difference from the original model. Since that time, the goal of the training format has been to provide superintendents and principals with new and reinforced skills allowing them to concentrate their efforts on improving instruction in their home districts.

My experience in the SITC process carries over into my work with my own building principals. Because this professional development opportunity has influenced and changed my interactions with my principals, I questioned whether the other participants were experiencing the same results, and whether the professional development process was changing their beliefs linked to leadership and student learning.

Recognizing that the many state budget cuts associated with our positions have added more demands, I also wanted to know whether the experience and time involved in the professional development was worth it. If so, the model may prove valuable to leaders investigating processes that create positive systemic changes in their instructional leadership.

**Problem Statement**

While many studies suggest ways superintendents can interact with their schools through the principal, those methods do not always align with the superintendents’ focus on raising student achievement. Although there is research regarding the individual roles superintendents and principals play in influencing academic achievement in students,
limited information is available regarding the necessary interactions between these leaders that focus on common goals and encourage student learning. Most concerning are the findings of Waters and Marzano (2006), who suggested that poor interactions between the leaders have a negative correlation with student achievement. Further investigations relating to processes that may improve leadership interactions are needed. As Gordon (2002) suggested, school improvement is supported by organizations committed to sharing leadership; yet to determine if such work is taking place, researchers may need to study the culture of the organization, as it pertains to superintendent and principal relationships.

Research is lacking in regard to the impact superintendents make through their interactions with others, especially building leaders (Fullan et al., 2004). Kellogg (2006) found, from a number of empirical studies, a void in research regarding overall data specific to superintendent and principal interactions. Waters and Marzano’s 2006 study of superintendents suggested a positive correlation between the superintendent’s instructional knowledge and increased academic results. They stated, “Assume that the superintendent improves his or her leadership abilities by one standard deviation. Given the correlation between district leadership and student achievement of .24, we would predict that average student achievement in the district would increase by 9.5 percentile points” (p. 10); yet, their research lacked findings directly related to the needed relationship between the superintendent and building principals.

It is important that leaders communicate the instructional vision and develop and manage a school culture conducive to building norms of trust and collaboration (Bennis
& Nanus, 1985; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). While Elmore’s original Network focused primarily on superintendents, the CISD learning model is different because of the inclusion of principals. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether the CISD learning model, combining superintendents and principals in such a professional development program, changes the leaders’ individual beliefs and/or their working relationships.

In regard to the Network and the professional development experienced by a core of superintendents, Elmore (2004, 2007), Lashway (2002), and Rallis, Tedder, Lachman, and Elmore (2006) questioned whether there was any substantial evidence that the superintendents’ learned behavior would allow them to change their working relationships with their principals and/or how they use these skills in their own districts. Lashway (2002) and Elmore (2004) also believed that a major limitation to the original Network is that it focuses primarily on the superintendency and that there is no reason why that position should be the point of entry. While the research in the Network model has shown some promise, there are concerns that superintendents may not have an overall improvement strategy for their own districts and that they may not acquire the necessary skills from the Network to understand the required norms, the necessary discipline focused on the instructional core, and the overall knowledge required to conceptually and collaboratively select the right problems to be analyzed—hence the importance of interactions with their building principals. Another concern is whether the Network model can be replicated with other groups. The intent of the CISD learning model is to focus on providing the professional development as a means of changing the knowledge
and beliefs of the leaders, and this study intends to analyze whether the leaders’ new experiences change the existing norms and interactions of the leaders.

Cudeiro-Nelsen (2002) stated, “Effective educational improvement then requires that leaders not only develop skills to manage change, but also be flexible to learning and discovering new ways of reaching the desired outcomes” (p. 6). Elmore’s original Network focused primarily on superintendents. Therefore, this study, with the inclusion of principals in the CISD’s model is important for several reasons. First, the inclusion of principals may reveal how the leaders collaborated to improve their working relationship to better focus on improving instruction. Secondly, the impact of such findings may prove beneficial to those districts that want to develop similar professional development activities between the superintendent and principal that develop a shared vision, distribute leadership, and establish a professional learning community focused on student achievement. If so, the results from this study may prove valuable to other school districts that strive to impact the effectiveness of their leadership teams. In addition, professional development activities of many school districts are influenced by rising expenses, budget cuts, and greater academic expectations from both state and federal reforms. Thus, future professional development selected by leaders will not only need to be cost-efficient, but will also teach methods that allow leaders to improve their skills, thus enhancing performance. For professional development to be anything less is a poor use of time and resources for leaders, especially if acquiring new skills fails to produce positive results.
Therefore, research suggests that superintendent and principal relationships that focus on creating a powerful shared vision (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Fullan et al., 2004), distributing leadership (Burns, 1978; Kellogg, 2006), and establishing a professional learning culture (Fullan et al., 2004; Sergiovanni, 2004; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004; Walters & Marzano, 2006) must develop the needed structures and systems to improve learning. Furthermore, some research findings support the fact that individual superintendents, who guide school districts to improved academic results for students, also employ a number of strategies through distributed and transformational leadership (Kellogg, 2006; McBride, 2001; Rallis et al., 2006), and that a superintendent’s individual instructional knowledge positively correlates with increasing academic results (Waters & Marzano, 2006). However, researchers have not yet investigated the SITC learning model, comprised of superintendents and principals and led by a team of county instructional leaders, as to whether such a model changes the knowledge and beliefs of the individual leaders, their working relationship, and thus improves collaboration that encourages student learning, nor have they investigated it using a phenomenological approach.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore and describe how superintendents and principals interpret and experience a sustained professional development process focusing on instruction and student learning, a form of the Superintendents in the Classroom (SITC) program. Specifically, this study will examine how participation in the SITC learning experience changed the superintendents’ and
principals’ knowledge and beliefs as well as their behavior in three areas: their individual experiences, the working relationship between superintendent and principal, and the way they now think about and encourage student learning. This study will focus primarily on three questions related to these interactions and the SITC learning model:

1. How do principals and superintendents describe their changes in knowledge and beliefs, as well as behaviors, within their individual working experiences?
2. How do principals and superintendents describe their changes in knowledge and beliefs, as well as behaviors, around their working relationship with the superintendent/principal with whom they work?
3. How do principals and superintendents describe their changes in knowledge and beliefs, as well as behaviors, around how they think about and encourage student learning?

**Conceptual Framework**

To study these research questions, I will use a conceptual framework that includes research in the areas of shared vision, distributive leadership, and professional learning cultures. In my conceptual diagram (Figure 1), the first three boxes relate to the SITC learning model’s influence on the individual principal’s and superintendent’s knowledge and beliefs as related to their vision, leadership style, and understanding of professional learning cultures. Next, the arrow depicts the changes that take place as the leaders undergo the professional development experience. After this change of knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors (indicated in the box below the change arrow), I intend to study how the process has changed the knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors regarding the best
Figure 1. Conceptual framework for Severson’s (2013) study.
practices of establishing a shared vision, distributive leadership practices, and a professional learning culture (the bottom three boxes) with the individual leaders, their working relationships, and how they think about and encourage student learning by using the professional learning culture processes.

**Shared Vision**

Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004) discussed the importance of communicating the instructional vision to all stakeholders and the development of managing a school culture conducive to building norms of trust and collaboration. Effective interactions develop sound relationships between the superintendent and principals and help shape a culture focused on agreed upon academic goals. The design of common goals may be further enhanced by using transformational leadership. In this study, transformational leadership practices relate to a new leadership model, as Bennis and Nanus (1985) described, “The new leader who commits people to action, who converts followers into leaders, and who may convert leaders into agents of change” (p. 3).

Researchers have discussed the importance of reinforcing the vision and including others in the process, yet once goals are developed, all leaders and followers need to be committed to their success (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Senge, 1990). Further, the importance of establishing a common vision and purpose, the formation of positive relationships focused on instructional goals, the importance of ongoing effective professional development experiences, and the flexibility to embrace change are some of the necessary components for superintendents to improve their instructional skills and
their interactions with their principals (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997). The findings in this study may reveal the activities needed to establish such a shared vision.

**Distributive Leadership**

If superintendents and principals can experience professional development that changes their beliefs and enhances their interactions focusing on improving academic achievement, student achievement may improve. Such research may assist school districts in the selection of effective professional development opportunities that improve the leadership skills of superintendents and principals around the area of instruction.

Working collaboratively and building strong relationships supported by distributed and transformative leadership practices may increase the degree of enrollment, commitment, and compliance to district goals. An examination of the nature of the superintendent and principal working relationship and the leadership interactions taking place before and after participation in the SITC program may reveal new practices that improve the selection of leadership strategies to improve student learning. Cudeiro-Nelsen (2002) stated, “Effective educational improvement then requires that leaders not only develop skills to manage change, but also be flexible to learning and discovering new ways of reaching the desired outcomes” (p. 6).

**Professional Learning Culture**

In regard to professional learning cultures, this study may reveal the process of how superintendents and principals develop new skills and strategies to improve the school culture as it relates to instruction. If superintendents and principals can experience professional development that changes many of their beliefs and enhances their
interactions on improving academic achievement, the working relationships may improve as well.

The SITC learning model may be one such experience to help participants change their interactions to be more focused on issues relating to student learning. The results could narrow and/or focus the selection of activities to improve the culture, thus assisting superintendents and principals in increasing collaboration and focusing their interactions and energies on improving student learning and forming a new professional learning culture to increase collaboration, rather than on behaviors that further hinder staff members from working together.

Throughout Elmore’s work and a number of analyses regarding the effects of the SITC learning model, educational theories are associated with the model and effective school leadership. To explore the phenomenon of experiencing the process, my conceptual framework displays how superintendent and principal vision, leadership, and beliefs regarding student learning will change. Therefore, I want to explore whether the model creates changes in superintendents’ and principals’ knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors and how they encourage student learning. My theoretical lens is (a) creating a shared vision (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Fullan et al., 2004); (b) examining leadership style (Burns, 1978; Gordon, 2002; Kellogg, 2006; Walters & Marzano, 2006); and (c) observing how leaders encourage student learning, as structured in professional learning cultures (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Muhammed, 2009; Sergiovanni, 2004). By using this theoretical lens, I will study the changes of the individual leaders, the changes
in their working relationship, and how the leaders changed their thinking about student learning after they experienced the program.

While the majority of the research on effective leadership practices for improved student outcomes has focused on the principal, an emerging and growing body of research has affirmed the importance of the superintendent’s instructional leadership as part of the process (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Furthermore, City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel (2010) discussed the concept that there is a discourse surrounding present day reforms. They stated, “Just the suggestion that teaching and school leadership require a deep knowledge of instructional practice and grounding in professional protocols for bringing knowledge into practice is likely to incite raised eyebrows on the part of many critics of American education” (p. 12). Yet as difficult as change for schools and our society may be, with the growing demand for increased learning, leadership between superintendents and principals will be an important aspect of the work if we are to improve student learning.

As City (2010) stated, “Language is culture. Culture is language” (p. 10). What the Network process does is require educators to work together using unfamiliar behaviors and language associated with classroom observations. The actual change resulting from the practice was observed by Elmore; he defined a level of discomfort associated with the learning of new practices to the point where participants “learn that the language they use has an important impact on the culture they are creating” (p. 11). Recognizing this, I believe that each superintendent and principal has his or her own knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors regarding teaching and learning, yet by going through
the SITC embedded professional development process, these leaders learn new practices that change many of their own personal foundations, as well as their working relationships and overall beliefs about learning.

**Methods Overview**

“The being of phenomenology involves specific activities to bring oneself into a place where a deep involvement with a phenomenon can occur” (Simpson, 2008, p. 52). For my research design, I used a qualitative methods approach, specifically the phenomenological process. I selected this strategy because, as the researcher, I recognized the importance of listening to the views and experiences of my participants, gathering data from general questions, and advocating for change in bettering the lives of our students and staff (Creswell, 2008).

In this phenomenological research, my participants described their lived experiences with the SITC learning model. Moustakas (as cited in Creswell, 2003, p. 15) stated that “understanding the lived experiences” marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method, and the procedure involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning. This process sought to reveal the meanings my superintendents and principals experience. The true aim is “the fulfillment of our human nature: to become more fully who we are” (van Manen, 1990, p.12). As the researcher, I believe that the phenomenological approach allowed me to understand my participants’ stories and collect data that reflects their experience with the program.
Summary

Capturing the experiences of superintendents and principals who participate in the SITC project may be valuable to superintendents and principals in examining their own working interactions while they track changes in student results. Stronger interactions between superintendents and principals that are focused on instruction may increase the capacity of both leaders to positively impact the achievement of their students. There is also the possibility that the SITC experience may not make a difference. In fact, the results of such an experience may cause conflict between the leaders. Yet with state and federal mandates only increasing, school leaders need to continue looking at best practices while improving their ability to function collaboratively. When superintendents and principals are both actively involved in what is happening in classrooms, their communications and interactions with each other may change, their communication may improve, and, ultimately, schools may achieve better academic results.

As we enter the next phases of new state and federal mandates, school administrators will increasingly face new challenges requiring structures to collectively design new goals. The commitments and expectations from the public will actually start to reshape the culture of schools. Organizations start to change when new beliefs, values, and commitments displace the old ways of thinking (DuFour et al., 2008; Muhammad, 2009).

Much of the research on superintendents and principals examines these individual positions separately, yet I contend that addressing the current and future challenges in
education requires powerful leadership that focuses on the right interactions and tasks to improve education. This view has been supported as well:

The potential for influence through leadership is usually immense. The essence of leadership in any polity is the recognition of real need, the uncovering and exploiting of contradictions among values and between values and practice, the realigning of values, the reorganization of institutions where necessary, and the governance of change. (Burns, 1978, p. 43)

While the research is strong on these individual positions of leadership, I believe there is much to gain in further studying the interactions and relationships between these leaders. The research questions that I have selected align with exploring the changes in the knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors of the superintendents and principals after they have experienced a sustained professional experience, using a theoretical lens to draw inferences.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Background

Today’s superintendents are accountable for a myriad of tasks and responsibilities. While the development of their skills can be enhanced, the issue of what constitutes effective professional development and its results needs to be further studied. While researching Elmore’s Network, I found a number of key themes associated with the professional development that supports the individual and paired leadership of both the superintendent and their principals. While observing the strategies of developing these new skills, I would also contend that the interactions between superintendents and principals need to be effective to solve the many complex problems leaders are facing today.

Much research discusses the success of large-scale systemic improvement. In regard to the SITC learning model and superintendent leadership, there are some strong findings on the importance and the ability of the superintendent to (a) create a powerful shared vision (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Fullan et al., 2004), (b) distribute leadership with his or her principals and staff members (Burns, 1978; Kellogg, 2006), and (c) establish a professional learning culture to set instructional goals (Fullan et al., 2004; Sergiovanni, 2004; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004; Walters & Marzano, 2006). These authors discussed the concept of changing current paradigms and how it is becoming increasingly more difficult to address educational problems in the school setting. They also found that over
time some achievement gains in school districts plateau, and that new processes and approaches will be needed if schools are to advance students academically.

While the majority of the research on effective leadership practices for improved student outcomes has focused on the principal, an emerging and growing body of research has affirmed the importance of the superintendent’s leadership (Waters & Marzano, 2006). While principals and superintendents interact on a number of issues and tasks, I desired to explore whether the sustained professional development experience, SITC (treatment variable), would change the superintendents’ and principals’ knowledge and beliefs, their beliefs in their individual and working relationships, as well as changes that take place in how they think and encourage student learning. The conceptual ideas that formed my lens included shared vision, distributive leadership processes, and those beliefs and behaviors that are known to improve student achievement, particularly as defined by DuFour’s Professional Learning Communities.

**Elmore’s Superintendent Network**

In 1999, Elmore embarked on the idea that a new structure was needed to focus primarily on superintendents and how they could better address the instructional issues in their own districts if they would acquire the necessary skills to be instructional leaders. The initial rational to this work was in reference to how teachers in schools work primarily in isolation, which he referred to as “loose-coupling.” This theory regarding current practices influenced Elmore’s belief to enact a process that would promote a culture of instructional leadership by superintendents, hence nullifying the isolationism that exists in classrooms. Therefore, the SITC learning model allows for superintendents
to break current practices, where historically teacher instruction and the decisions regarding processes was solely up to the teacher without little or no involvement from superintendents or principals (Archer, 2005; Elmore, 2000; Lashway, 2002; Rallis et al., 2006).

Part of the professional development of leaders needs to involve changing the practice, or in what Elmore called the historical paradigm. In such a paradigm, Elmore contended that superintendents and other administrators many times were excluded from the practice. His thoughts were that these leaders must be integrated into process, and that the purpose of leadership is to improve practice and performance with the superintendents being included in the continuous process (Elmore, 2000). Such leadership by superintendents exemplifies the values and behaviors that they want others to adopt to promote large-scale instructional improvement. Therefore, effective superintendents would demonstrate distributive leadership qualities because, with their new skills, they could facilitate and develop the culture to motivate educators by engaging in learning new practices in a climate that was safe, innovative, and creative (Elmore, 2000).

The Foundations of Elmore’s Network Model

In the fall of 2001, the Connecticut Superintendents Network was designed for the purpose of establishing a community of learners, superintendents, to focus on instructional improvement in a sustained professional development process. For the program, the primary work centers on developing the skills of the superintendents so that they can improve the instructional issues in their own districts. The Connecticut Center
for School Change, a school reform organization led by Andrew Lachman, executive
director of the Center, and Jean Tedder, its education program officer, facilitated and
organized the Network. Other members of the Network—Richard Elmore, Harvard
University; David Nee, Connecticut Center for Change; and Sharon Rallis, University of
Massachusetts—all believed that that learning is both situated and social, and that a new
model was needed to assist superintendents in considering new strategies to handle
complex instructional problems; thus, they supported Elmore’s structure of connecting
theory and research to practice. The primary intent of the professional development
experience was to focus the work of the participants to be grounded in a theory of action.
The process entails the professional development of leaders, where they examine real
problems through multiple sessions. The process also gives structure to the belief that
such learning promotes the concept of a community of practice, with a professional group
“engaged in the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise for the purpose of learning and
building capacity” (Elmore, 2000, p. 3). In the process, practitioners, professors, and
change agents commit to working together to test ideas and theories, review each other’s
work, offer alternative views, and give both the emotional and intellectual support to help
move their districts forward.

Prior to the superintendents’ first visit, the host district provides all
superintendents with their problem statement and supportive data, which are specific to
the conditions of their respective schools. During the actual visit, superintendents move
from classroom to classroom in groups of three or four. After the classroom
observations, the superintendents debrief via agreed-upon protocols and norms of their
The superintendents then discuss their observations relative to the original problem, yet they do not evaluate or discuss solutions until all conversations are completed and reviewed. After all superintendents have shared their observations, they then suggest ideas for the improvement to address the problem. At the end of the debriefing, the host district’s principal and superintendent interact with the group of superintendents regarding the observations and possible ideas to support improved instruction, yet the principals in this original process do not participate with the group in any of the professional development activities or in the classroom observations. They participate only in the debriefing.

After a month or two, the superintendents once again meet for a day, separate from their districts, to explore the strategies selected for addressing the problems of the host district. The discussions include research relating to best practices, the review of data and observations, and the leadership from instructional coaches. At the end of the group’s time together, they present a plan of action for the school, and two of the superintendents agree to also follow-up with a visit to discuss the plan and how they can support the work of the host district. What is unique about this Elmore’s Network of superintendents is their commitment to sustain their own professional development and the work that focuses on improving not only the districts they visit, but also their own. Once this process of supporting the host district is complete, the researched district prepares to form a similar structure of practice for the improvement of teaching and learning in their schools.
Under the guidance of Dr. Richard Elmore, the model’s framework uses practices similar to those of medical practitioners, in which practitioners work in a “disciplined way to develop a common body of evidence they use for diagnostic purposes and then work through a set of solutions” (Elmore, 2007, p. 21). By collaborative processes, superintendents create a professional learning community structured on modeling professional accountability, specifically setting high expectations that observations, analysis, and advice would be of high quality and grounded in research. Elmore’s practices also focus on improving the instructional skills of superintendents, and to be a participant, each superintendent commits to host visits, attend all meetings (averaging one per month), and work to develop a culture focusing on both individual and district improvement.

The Network’s goals are: (a) to develop superintendents’ knowledge and skills to lead large-scale improvement; (b) to assist superintendents in developing distributed leadership throughout their districts—that is, building a cadre of knowledgeably and skilled leaders who assume responsibility for developing their own practice around the pursuit of improvement; and (c) to enable superintendents to build an infrastructure that supports the work of improvement—evaluation, professional growth, networks, and opportunities for collaboration. (Rallis et al., 2006, p. 538)
Research Regarding Elmore’s Model

School Reform Shared Vision and the Network

While the view of the SITC model and distributive leadership principles are the primary focus of the practice, leaders, regardless of their roles, need to work collaboratively and to purposely not shield their institutions from the outside (Elmore, 2000). The needed reforms, in such a model, promote a view of teaching as a body of skill and knowledge that can be learned over time. Archer (2005) also suggested the idea that having a school policy that presents higher expectations regarding the delivery and instruction for student learning at higher levels is the base for such a change. He and Elmore (2000) also viewed policies and practices as the opportunity to present clear expectations about the delivery of curriculum and the results that are needed if we expect students to learn at higher levels, yet the importance of clearly establishing a shared instructional vision for teaching and learning is key.

City et al. (2010) discussed the importance of getting staff members to “scale with powerful teaching and learning for all students requires having and sharing a vision of what that should look like” (p. 173). Such changes demand new large-scale improvement practices that are highly targeted for teachers and principals in the fundamentals of instruction. Furthermore, there must be high expectations regarding the quality in the practice of teaching, and a how schools need to establish a climate where the norms of how the adults work together focus on a collective responsibility to improve student learning. Elmore (2000) suggested that the work of the leaders needs to be
centered on instructional improvement focused on building leadership and that everything else is secondary.

**The Instructional Core**

To further understand the Network process, one must understand the building blocks associated with the practice. One area, the instructional core, which is comprised of the teacher and the student in the presence of content, is structurally framed by relationship among the teacher, the student, and the content. City et al. (2010) discussed how the work of the Network is to teach leaders to understand how important it is to have a strong and effective instructional core, because it provides the basic framework for improving learning for the student. The Network also teaches leaders how to intervene in the instructional process when changes need to take place to improve the understanding, quality, and level of instruction for academic achievement.

**Seven principles of the instructional core.** During the CISD training, leaders were exposed to the seven principles of the instructional core, and the focus of the work was related to describing the problems that were observed in classroom teaching. City et al. (2010) discussed the concept of a disruptive technology, where curriculum and a set of pedagogical practices are changing how people think and act, and they also talked about and the importance of understanding the seven principles of the instructional framework where the relationship among teaching, the content, and the student can be observed. The first principle, increasing student learning, occurs only when improvements are made in the level of content, teachers’ knowledge, and student engagement. It strictly implies
that to improve student achievement, leaders must focus on all three of these areas (City et al., 2010). The authors stated,

Administrators’ influence on the quality and effectiveness of classroom instruction is determined not by the leadership practices they manifest, but by the way those practices influence the knowledge and skill of teachers, the level of work in classrooms, and level of active learning by students. (p. 25)

Therefore, leaders need to create the conditions where such practice and discussion takes place in the school environment.

The second principle, if you change any part of the instructional core, you must change the other two as well, is very specific to the work of leaders and teachers. In more cases than not, leaders are working on the instructional core, yet not monitoring all three areas of this work. As an example, Elmore’s work focuses on all of these areas and specifically asks questions relating to teacher knowledge, the content, the role of the student in the instructional process, and the overall effect of the relationship among the teacher, the student, and content (City, 2010). The focus of Elmore’s Network is to focus on three areas, while much of our current culture in education is aligned to focus primarily on the teacher.

The third principle was related to the importance of the instructional core and how teachers need to make sure that they are teaching an aligned curriculum. The work of the Network is to observe the three areas and structure questions relating to gaps in the core. As an example, when superintendents visit classrooms, they look for how the instructional core helps to predict how students are learning. Many classroom visits
focus on the work of the teacher, yet City et al. (2012) suggests that we need to ask more difficult questions as we view classrooms and question teaching that promotes student learning.

As part of the instructional core, the fourth principle relates to whether the tasks that students are assigned actually predict performance. Many times, educators focus on the belief that student learning is primarily associated with the curriculum and the teacher. City et al. (2010) suggest that performance relates to the tasks that students are actually doing in the classroom. “When we put teachers and students in situations where the task is vague and unspecified, but the expectations for performance are specific and high, we are expecting them to do the right thing without knowing the right thing to do” (City et al., 2010, p. 31).

In the fifth principle, the structure of the medical rounds of the Network process focuses on how accountability is related to the connection of “doing the right thing and knowing the right thing to do” (City et al., 2010, p. 31). The work focuses on the observations and the analysis relating to teaching practice, and on questioning our practice by actually being participants of the process itself. Furthermore, the belief regarding the instructional core assumes that both student and teacher actually know their responsibilities and how to perform them. The reality is that these are unfounded assumptions and the Network allows people to engage in discussion about the culture and the practice of teaching for learning.

“We learn by doing the work, not by telling, not by what we have done in the past, not by hiring experts who can act as proxies for our knowledge about how to do the
work—we learn by doing the work” (City et al., 2010, p. 33). This sixth principle clearly relates to the medical rounds model aligning the work of professionals in multiple interactions focused on studying instruction and student learning. The culture of the group is to induct leaders into the practice, to develop new norms of thinking, and to allow for group discussions and evaluation of the practice itself. There are no shortcuts to improvement, and leaders will need to build this capacity of knowledge if we are to make significant changes, because “people have to engage in sustained description and analysis of instructional practice before they can acquire either the expertise or the authority to judge it, much less to evaluate other people doing it” (City et al., 2010, p. 33).

The final and seventh principle relates to analysis of the instructional core, specifically the importance of having description before analysis, analysis before prediction, and prediction before evaluation. In a common instructional culture relating to instruction, it is important that people learn to describe, analyze, and predict instruction, and each area is key in the analysis. Description and definition of terms are important in developing a common language relating to instruction. As leaders analyze, they must understand what they are describing, and the common descriptions and language must be built as the practices of the Network are formulated with the participants. After participants understand the foundations relating to the seventh principle, the Network uses frameworks for evaluating teaching as in high-, medium-, or low-level practice.

Lastly, and most importantly, the model requires a disciplined focus on the instructional core at every stage. The definition of an instructional problem, which needs
to be clearly located in a specific school context, and has a relationship to the overall district improvement strategy, is completed in a repetitive process. As Elmore (2004) discussed, leaders have a difficult time stating the problem the first time through.

Problems have to be focused, sharpened, and refined, and that process requires some combination of offsite-specific knowledge and more general conceptual knowledge about what kinds of problems are most likely to provide a solid basis for discussion and action. Therefore, the process of observation and analysis on-site requires extraordinary discipline, and in the case of the Network and the CISD models, curriculum experts assist in creating the environment to question what evidence is relevant to what is believed to be the problem. The Network also develops these skills by teaching leaders to sift through the evidence. The process of analysis and prescription off-site requires a degree of specificity, candor, and directness that few in the field of education have mastered. Confidentiality helps, but it only sets the conditions within which people have to figure out how to talk to each other in very different ways.

What is important in the research regarding the instructional core is that leaders must also understand the ground level, meaning what is happening in the classroom, if they are going to look at changing school improvement goals. The Network looks at improving the skills of leaders to understand the changes needed in school improvement initiatives. City et al. (2010) contend that schools are weak in performance due to their poor instructional culture, and that large-scale improvement must be driven by leaders who are trained to observe, analyze, and affect the pedagogical methods of their instructors. Therefore, the purpose of the medical rounds approach is to professionally
train educators to understand what the actual practice of effective instruction looks like and how to get results district-wide. If leaders have new understandings, they may share ideas that are common and may thus form a shared vision on what good instruction looks like.

I have seen many examples where classroom instruction is similar by subject and/or grade level. By participating in the SITC process, I observed the continuity of information as being inconsistent between classrooms and teachers. By participating in the Network model, leaders learn a common culture of practice of what represents good instruction, yet the model used does not allow shortcuts, because the belief is that leaders need special embedded training to be able to acquire the skills to be an expert to judge it when it is observed (City et al., 2010). Furthermore, the Network works with leaders to transform their cultures by understanding that improvement strategies must be focused on building a strong instructional culture, with leaders also working together to address the instructional core and build a common language of instructional practice, of building within and across schools the connective tissue by which the culture is propagated, of making the resources within the school and the system support the work of people around the development of practice, and of focusing greater attention on the knowledge and skill requirements of doing the work. (City et al., 2010, p. 37)

Hence, a professional community focused on the right things is generated by the process of the rounds. Therefore, establishing a foundation of understandings may support leaders in communicating the instructional vision and develop and manage a school
culture conducive to building norms of trust and collaboration (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Spillane et al., 2004).

**Theories of action.** City et al. (2010) stated, “If we collectively participate in a community of practice grounded in on-site classroom observations and focused on large-scale instructional improvement, then participating superintendents will become more effective instructional leaders as demonstrated by changes in their practice” (p. x). In the Network process, the focus is on providing the opportunity to have leaders work together to set a vision on the very best instructional practices; furthermore, such work focuses on helping people change their own beliefs and practices. The challenge is that educators have deep-rooted beliefs that are connected with their individual identities. As the struggle becomes apparent, the Network establishes processes to displace the old ideas with a compelling alternate vision.

A theory of action comes from the work of Chris Argyris and Donald Schon in their research regarding individual and organizational learning (Smith, 2007). Their work centers on the belief that a theory of action relates to describing people’s implicit or explicit models of how they intend to act, and theories in use describe how people actually act. Each contends that there are learning processes that reduce the gap between these theories. In their descriptions, single-loop learning is very basic, in that learners receive feedback on their actions, and then adapt their behavior to the feedback. The authors also believe that successful organizations utilize a double-loop process, in which an additional stage of reflection is added to the process, and where, as learners, we try to improve how we learn from our actions. In the Network process, trainers lead
participants in practices that help them construct explicit theories of action and assess these theories against the true realities that are observed in their districts (City et al., 2010). This is done only due to the fact that the Network builds a collegial foundation for participants to learn and develop their own theories of action and realize how their work relates to their observations of students and teachers in the classroom.

The foundation of the theory of action principles lies with the if-then statements regarding how the practice of the individual at the system or school level leads to the increases in learning and performance of students. This, therefore, causes changes in the practices of superintendents, who need to move from central office duties to conversations with principals and teachers about classroom practices and how these may relate to problems of student performance (Elmore, 2007). The theory of action behind the Network process allows for the development of a systematic knowledge about the practices that relate to large-scale improvement in schools. Educators need opportunities to test their own theories against the reality of what is actually happening in the classroom. It is therefore believed that the prevailing culture needs to change, and the Network allows people to move from their current reality so as to affect instruction in their schools (Elmore, 2004). It also provides the opportunity to make a vision and approach concrete, especially when the complexities of the positions distract leadership from focusing on the instructional core, and when the leader needs a “narrative to lead people through the daily tasks that compete with the instructional core” (City et al., 2010, p. 40). What the Network creates is this opportunity for leaders to study and work
together to set a new vision on instructional best practices, and then work to make it become a reality.

In the Network process, participants learn to understand the theory of action and its three main requirements. First, the focus is on the role of the superintendent and what constitutes a positive result in the classrooms. City et al. (2010) contended that as leaders we have very weak theories of action, and that by most standards, our discussions about our beliefs are weak and abstract. In the Network rounds process, as well as the SITC model, leaders were asked to produce their theories of action. In a collegial process that has established norms and methods, superintendents work to define their theory of action so as to connect action and relationships significant to performance. Furthermore, City et al. (2010) discussed how the Network provides new skills, where good theories of action allow for accountability in the relationships in the organization so as to improve results. “Theories of action can also serve as glue for accountability relationship, particularly when the theories are made public” (City et al., 2010, p. 46)

Secondly, a theory of action “must be empirically falsifiable: that is, I must be able to disqualify all or parts of the theory as a useful guide to action that is based on evidence of what occurs as a consequence of my actions” (City et al., 2010, p. 41). In the Network process, leaders learn to define their theories of action and to break down areas that may need correction. The work clearly is centered on studying whether a superintendent’s hypothesis works, or can be proven, and whether it aligns with an instructional vision that moves students forward. Why is this important to the process? Elmore (2000, 2004, 2007) and City et al. (2010) contended that there is no model of a
theory of action that can just be passed from district to district. It must be something that is worked out by discussing, observing, testing our ideas, and modifying them after experiencing the results.

The third aspect of the theories of action is that they must be open-ended and must be revised as the theory is implemented and studied (City et al., 2010). In the Network model, leaders learn that open-endedness is a necessity in the process of formulating an individual’s theory of action. The reason is that the practice of the group is to include the process of double-loop learning. In such a process participants recognize that their theories may become effective, yet they may continue to have problems. Thus, the openness of this work allows others to collectively share their ideas of a person’s individual theory. In the same sense, the process allows leaders to learn if their lofty visions match the actual practices of their districts. City et al. discussed how the Network models the environment that Argyris and Schon believed in, as it relates to how participants practice and describe a number of iterations, where they reflect on the causal relationships between what they do and what actually happens in the classroom. This double-loop learning means that there are some initial concerns by participants, yet the Network has an atmosphere where participants share best practices, where norms of confidentiality are formed, and where people feel safe to share their ideas (Elmore, 2007).

The process of reflection is difficult and time-consuming, yet it is the foundation for improving organizational learning by being iterative in the functionality of the process. As superintendents describe their visions regarding instruction, they need the tools to understand the deficiencies in their districts, and the process allows for
accountability in the relationships of the organization. If the exposed issues are addressed in a safe manner, true gains may be made in school districts. Leaders therefore have the opportunity to describe the “steps and contingencies that have to be mastered in order for a broad vision or strategy to result in concrete action that influences student learning” (City et al., 2010, p. 44)

Leaders learn about quality through the Network model. To instill such high quality regarding instructional best practices, leaders must not only understand the needed skills to improve instruction, they must also develop and invest in highly targeted professional development for teachers and principals. Such work must focus on the importance of the SITC learning model, specifically in understanding the qualities of good instruction, normative climates for staff to be responsible for their own learning, collaboration between staff members, and how the SITC learning model promotes a larger-scale process for school reform to take place (Elmore, 2000). Others who have reviewed the process recognize the great possibilities of the structure and further comment on the needed players and their roles in the development of school reform. Researchers, central office, principals, teachers, and policymakers must each respect their roles in the process to develop and cultivate the necessary professional learning culture for such improvement (Elmore, 2000; Lashway, 2002).

In Lashway’s (2002) findings regarding the SITC learning model, he believed that Elmore’s process identified the needed players for school reform and clearly provided examples of their responsibilities in the process. Researchers, superintendents, principals, teachers, and policymakers all have a role in the process, yet the key is to
understand the importance of a common view of systemic change in how each role leads
to a different kind of expertise. Leaders must also respect and cultivate those areas that
promote best practices. Such collaboration refines the need for strategic thinking that
challenges districts to form a professional learning culture void of structures that isolate
by promoting systems that validate a body of knowledge that can be learned and
improved upon over time with defining roles and responsibilities (Archer, 2005; Elmore,
2000, 2007; Lashway, 2002; Rallis et al., 2006).

The SITC learning model allows superintendents to transfer their newly learned
behavior, primarily new and effective instructional strategies, to meet their own
instructional goals in their own districts (Choy, 2003). Through the original leadership of
Elmore, superintendents developed many new skills to enable them to process new
information and have the ability to refine their own strategic thinking about the
instructional challenges in their own district (Archer, 2005). The key to the development
of this work was to involve the superintendents in developing their own culture of
expectations regarding skills, knowledge, and communication processes, as well as the
processes of holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the work of the
group (Elmore, 2000). Such a model reinforces the idea that no one person is responsible
for the overall performance of an organization, and that this culture must be established if
success is to happen in the classroom. This idea of theory of action behind the SITC
learning model relates to the development of systematic knowledge about the needed
practices to increase and instill large-scale improvement (Elmore, 2004, 2007).

Primarily, the theory lends to changing the practices of superintendents by moving them
away from central office duties and turning them toward direct correspondence with colleagues about their classroom practices and how they relate to the problems of the district. By developing a clearly articulated belief system of how instruction and learning need look, a shared vision is defined by using the thinking that occurs both within and outside the district for improving the instructional core (City et al., 2010).

**Elmore’s SITC Learning Model and Distributive Leadership**

In Lashway’s (2002) review of Elmore’s SITC model, he found that the practice had allowed superintendents the opportunity to distribute leadership. He suggested that the program permitted leaders to work interdependently with their co-workers, and that their recognition of their designated roles ensured that they did not function in isolation. The efforts of all staff members are inter-reliant, and they frequently span boundaries associated with their positions. Furthermore, Lashway believed that Elmore’s Network allowed for collaboration to exist among these levels, hence the opportunity to distribute leadership. The belief is that only a few principals and superintendents have the in-depth training for the role (to distribute leadership), especially in a standards-based environment. Because of the structure of the learning model, superintendents develop new knowledge and skills to lead such large-scale improvement, which may allow them to distribute leadership throughout their districts. Therefore, the Network establishes a new working environment based on the pursuit of improvement that supports the opportunities for collaboration (Rallis et al., 2006).

Clearly, one of the greatest challenges to promote distributive leadership practices is the establishment of a shared vision for all stakeholders within the school community.
These systems require leaders to be experts in certain aspects of work, yet Bennis and Nanus (1985) stated, “The effective leader must assemble for the organization a vision of a desired future state. While this task may be shared and developed with other key members of the organization, it remains the core responsibility and cannot be delegated” (p. 141). The most important aspect of such a belief is that the superintendent must have the skills to understand what the vision should be in his or her district. By having new instructional skills and strategies, superintendents are more likely to refine their strategic thinking about the instructional challenges in their own districts and to develop and distribute knowledge within the school system. The Network then assists superintendents in developing the necessary skills to set the direction for their own staff and community (Choy, 2003; Elmore, 2000; Lashway, 2002).

To establish a shared vision, leaders must not only have the skills to address the instructional issues in their districts, they also need to recognize the current issues regarding staff members who primarily work in isolation. Elmore (2000, 2004) discussed the idea of loose-coupling, where the current practice of teachers has been to buffer their work from outside interference and not allow superintendents and other administrators to be part of the instructional process. One of the Network’s original intents was to remove this historical paradigm of isolationism and improve collaboration (Archer, 2005). Elmore (2000) believed that teachers many times function in exclusion of administrators, superintendents, and policymakers. They intentionally buffer themselves from leadership; hence, the achievement of academic goals for students is further from reach and the primary prevailing culture of administration and teaching in schools (Elmore
The SITC learning model, on the other hand, allows for the needed discussion to break away from this isolation.

The vision of the leadership means that all players understand the common goal, for which everyone is accountable, and all the policies, practices, and resources are structured to work toward the vision (Lashway, 2002). The expectation is that the practice of superintendents in the learning model will increasingly focus on the relationship between the range of decisions they make and improving instruction in their own districts. Without the practice, the current structures will continue to support teachers working in isolation. Researchers have recognized that isolation is the enemy of improvement and that collaboration focused on large-scale improvement is necessary (Elmore, 2000; Archer, 2005; Lashway, 2002). Thus, Network structures address the problems of teachers and schools working in isolation, of the lack of support for superintendents who need to learn how to collaborate with other superintendents, and of the superintendents in transferring their new leadership skills to address the needs of their own districts (Elmore, 2000).

The challenge to create the necessary foundations for distributing leadership is extremely great, in that many school systems function under a policy leadership where administrative and policy leaders “are joined in a codependent, largely dysfunctional relationship, and as in most such relationships, the bond is strengthened by its pathology” (Elmore, 2004, p. 20). Furthermore, to transform these dysfunctional relationships, Elmore contended that leaders need to learn new ideas and to find ways to attach positive meaning to these new learnings. To provide this opportunity, leaders must create a new
model to distribute leadership that consists of two main tasks: (a) describing the ground rules that leaders of various kinds would have to follow to engage in large-scale improvement, and (b) describing how leaders in various roles and positions would share responsibility in a system of large-scale improvement (Elmore, 2004). To meet these two main tasks, the Network designed by Elmore functions on five principles to distribute leadership in large-scale improvements.

Elmore’s (2004) research has shown that, first, the purpose of leadership is the improvement of instructional practice and performance, regardless of the role of the leaders. This specifically references the existing structures of loose-coupling systems, where leadership isolates and protects workers, rather than the needed focus of improving the practice and performance at the center of the organization. If the focus is on the leadership in teaching and learning, then all other skills needed are put in place to center the organization on clear expectations for instruction. Secondly, such work requires continuous learning. Some districts struggle with this philosophy, yet leaders must create the environment where the value of learning for all is expected, and where the work of the practitioner is under review by colleagues and/or groups who can practice and reflect. Such practice actually supports teachers working together and not in isolation (Rallis et al., 2006). Third, learning requires excellent modeling, and leaders must promote the values and behaviors expected of their staff members. By experiencing the SITC learning model, leaders are able to display the same type of learning from others, and they should expect staff to scrutinize their work as well. Fourth, the expectation of roles and activities of leadership must flow from the expertise required to improve learning,
not from the formal order of the institution. This principle is structured in the belief that learning grows out of the difference in expertise, rather than position of authority. Lastly, there must be a process where reciprocity takes place, in that, “If the formal authority of my role requires that I hold you accountable for some action or outcome, then I have an equal and complementary responsibility to assure that you have the capacity to do what I am asking you to do” (Elmore, 1997). By modeling the expected behavior, leaders of practice are accountable for developing new knowledge and skills required to meet the demands of large-scale improvement, and distributed leadership causes the nature of staff relationships to be focused on accountability in a manner in which reciprocity is the practice of the organization.

**Research Regarding Elmore’s Establishment of a Community of Practice**

Throughout Elmore’s work, he clearly discussed the importance of how the SITC learning model was a new structure, because it centered on the professional development of superintendents in learning how to address the instructional issues and challenges they faced in their districts (Elmore, 2000). In the process, superintendents practice by setting the problem; engaging in observation; creating a body of evidence from which judgments are drawn; and insisting, when recommendations are given, that the evidence be grounded in research. The Network focuses on an explicit problem relating to the instructional practices, and the problem selected assists districts in connecting to the overall strategy needed for instructional improvement. In the process, the group concentrates its efforts on what is to be observed and analyzed, and the training provides the group with the necessary skills to judge the relevance of comments and suggestions.
that the leaders provide. This is a strong incentive for the host superintendent to take action as a consequence of the visit and subsequent reflection (Rallis et al., 2006), and furthermore, the reflection of the group truly allows for the district to study a problem in-depth.

In regard to the Network processes, Elmore (2000) raised concerns regarding how most teachers work in isolation, and that historically the teachers’ instruction and decision-making processes were solely up to them. Furthermore, he recognized the importance of leaders being involved in changing the paradigm, yet leaders must have the knowledge and understanding to lead by exemplifying the values and behaviors they model with their staff members. Therefore, the challenge aligns itself with recognizing that by defining autonomy, or setting parameters, leaders are more likely to stay connected and purposeful in the improvement of instruction in their own districts. By defining autonomy versus isolation, professionals gain their social authority by agreeing to have their work and practice aligned with research, and by promoting a view of teaching as a body of skill and knowledge that can be learned collaboratively over time, rather than a mysterious process that varies with each teacher (Archer, 2005; Elmore, 2000; Lashway, 2002; Rallis et al., 2006). The model from the beginning extends the idea that to develop this professional practice, superintendents connect with their peers, work on common problems, take control of their learning over time, and function themselves in collaboratively modeling practices for instructors (Elmore, 2007). Elmore (2004) further suggested that teachers have chosen to act as if education is a field without a practice, and that they need to change and create processes similar to the Network model.
The creation of a professional learning culture with a new group, in this case, the superintendents, was a difficult task. Elmore’s practices and purposeful framework of using the medical rounds process created the opportunity for the superintendents to develop and support each other in a trusting environment (Elmore, 2004, 2007; Rallis et al., 2006). Although the experience extends over a period of time, groups began to learn and form agreed-upon protocols, norms, and practices across settings and visits. This new common language allows for new group dynamics and insights to take place.

Over time, the SITC learning model allows for the facilitators and other instructional leaders to assist superintendents in how to process and share their views on data and classroom instruction. The primary work is to phase out ineffective ideas and expand their own individual capacities to build on one another’s contributions. Because of the blend of practitioners, professors, and change agents, superintendents become committed to a process in which members go into schools to observe teaching and learning directly and then support one another in solving problems that they have identified through what they have seen in practice. As Rallis et al.’s (2006) research has shown, peers speak to peers first, with group members themselves having a new opportunity to talk and learn from each other about educational research and instructional practice. Furthermore, this new professional learning culture is promoted only through the facilitator’s development of strong norms in using clear evidence from observed instructional practices, as well as supporting research and theory, thus allowing the group to be fundamentally disciplined when discussing their ideas or strategies regarding instructional problems (Rallis et al., 2006).
What is clear in the research is that Elmore’s 1999 theories address the historical paradigms of isolationism by designing systems and approaches that involve leaders in supporting and assisting teachers. By supporting leaders in professional development, such as the SITC learning model, Elmore believed that superintendents could assist and address the issues facing their districts. To accomplish such a task, the professional development structure itself must establish the ground rules and processes for breaking the paradigm of current instructional practices. This work can take place only in an environment of trust and with the continuous development of its leaders. Such practices of professional development must be embedded in the environment, with superintendents being lead facilitators, modeling and exemplifying the values and behaviors they wish to model for their own staff members (Elmore, 2000). Because it is important to establish a safe environment in such a practice, new structures that develop a climate to allow leaders and teachers to closely scrutinize the learning environment can be formed. The SITC learning model allows superintendents to discuss, as Elmore stated, “the unexamined wallpaper” and receive the necessary training to get into classrooms and understand what is truly going on with instruction in their schools (Choy, 2003).

Choy’s (2003) review of Elmore’s SITC model found that such a professional development experience supports the formation of a professional learning culture, especially where new collegial relationships influence the sharing of new ideas in an environment where leaders function under trust and learn together. These methods bring new and collaborative relationships in a very different group setting, with the work of the group allowing them to refine their strategic thinking about the instructional strategies of
their districts (Archer, 2005; Rallis et al., 2006). With such a structure, Elmore (2004) suggested that the practice of setting a problem, engaging in direct observation, creating a body of evidence from which judgments must be drawn, and insisting that all recommendations are grounded in research and practice, has focused the group’s attention on creating a common culture around the instructional core, not on the teachers.

Elmore (2004) further believed that the SITC learning model addresses the fact that cultures do not change by mandate; they change by the specific displacement of existing norms, values, structures, and processes by others. He also contended that the process of cultural change is structured in modeling the new values and behaviors and in the expectations that such new knowledge will displace the existing practice of isolation and instead focus the energies of the school community on the improvement of instruction and student learning. The function of establishing norms of confidentiality extends the opportunity for superintendents, in this environment, to use candor, openness, and truth in conversing with their peers without worrying about damaging relationships (Elmore, 2007). By doing so, leaders discuss observations without focusing on the teachers, and they converse only about the observations regarding the instruction. By focusing on the evidence, leaders separate the person from the practice, thus modeling a professional learning culture focused on teacher and leader improvement (Archer, 2005; Choy, 2003).

By establishing a new community of practice, the SITC learning model allows superintendents to gain new and effective strategies and insights regarding their instructional goals. The collegiality and collaboration of being open and honest, the
forming of strict norms of confidentiality, have allowed superintendents to learn and work together and to discuss the “unexamined wallpaper.” This allows leaders to embrace the new knowledge, self-reflect, and evaluate their own work in a safe environment, with the opportunity to refine their thinking about the instructional challenges they face in their own districts (Archer, 2005; Choy, 2003). As Elmore (2000) believed from the beginning, the model requires the continuous participation and learning of leaders, who are led by exemplifying the values and behavior they want others to adopt, and who are willing to recognize the valuable opportunity they have to talk and learn with respected colleagues. The new community has established a process to focus on a problem, utilize new processes and language to analyze instructional issues, and gain collective understandings of how to address the instructional challenges of their own districts (Rallis et al., 2006).

**Other findings in the research.** In 2006, Rallis, Tedder, Lachman, and Elmore observed a group of 12 superintendents and educational practitioners who participated in the SITC model and formed a network of such learners. The researchers’ focus was to primarily study the professional learning community, distributive leadership practices, and any new acquired skills of the group. The narrative of these discussions was gathered over a three-year span, and the authors’ review entailed an analysis of their observations and the impact of the Network’s collaborative professional development practices on the group and their districts. Three specific arenas were viewed and studied. The first was the initial group review of a specific learning problem related to one identified district. The second observation reviewed group discussion relating to classroom visitations.
Finally, the third observation focused on analyzing instructional issues raised by these initial observations. For the study, the researcher’s narrative of these discussions spanned a three-year period. The authors documented the sessions to provide an analysis of their observations and to assess the impact of the Network’s collaborative professional development practices on the group of superintendents and their districts.

After nearly three years of research, the authors found a number of key elements that suggested the model’s effectiveness for improving working relationships and instructional best practices. First, the collegial work allowed members (superintendents) to focus on an agreed problem, and then the classroom observations that were structured in agreed protocols and norms allow the superintendents to honestly reflect and discuss their observations. The researchers also found that superintendents were more supportive of each other, especially relating to the group’s work on defining similar goals for instructional improvement (Rallis et al., 2006). The common thread of the group was the establishment of a new community, a culture where leaders work together on a similar goal (instructional improvement) by sharing routines, language, and processes, and who engage in joint enterprise of regular discourse. The researchers found that the collegial work of the group members on instructional improvement required focusing on an explicit and well-defined problem. The authors also found that the group developed a common language for defining and analyzing problems, and that the superintendents’ new repertoire of new skills allowed them to take these new strategies back to their districts.
These findings suggest that the SITC learning model may build a professional learning community of educators, especially when one thinks of common language, norms, and the type of engagement experienced by the group. Secondly, the process of the SITC also involves the purpose of building leadership and capacity, and how distributive practices are used to move people forward on common instructional goals. The group members were more supportive of each other, especially as it related to the group defining and agreeing on similar goals for instructional improvement. Toward the end of the study, the authors found that superintendents were much more purposeful in their conversations. These conversations were based on evidence, not just on perceptions.

Lastly, Elmore’s original SITC model has allowed a number of superintendents to acquire a new repertoire of skills to take back to their own districts, with new evaluation processes to document the detailed findings and results of the effects of implementing new strategies. While the reviewers of the SITC learning model have common findings on how superintendents have developed their own skills, there has been some concern regarding the transference of the reforms back in their own home districts (Choy, 2003; Elmore, 2000, 2004; Rallis et al., 2006). There is also void in the research as to whether the model in the Network will transfer into the practices of others. Elmore (2007) stated, “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 they participants manage” (p. 23). Furthermore, other researchers seem to agree by raising the concern that the transference of such work onto
the principals of their districts is unclear (Elmore, 2004; Lashway, 2002; Rallis et al., 2006).

**History of Calhoun Intermediate School District SITC Model**

Triggered in 2006 by the Calhoun Intermediate School District (CISD) and local districts’ participation in Promoting Rigorous Outcomes in Math and Science Education (PROM/SE), a National Science Foundation program with Michigan State University, a small group of educators embarked on a professional development project based on the work of Richard Elmore and the Connecticut Superintendent’s Network. The rationale for this journey was to improve each superintendent’s knowledge and skills in the area of mathematics instruction, thereby allowing them to lead others in promoting new structural changes that increase student achievement. While the program primarily centered on mathematics and the superintendent, the processes mirrored Elmore’s Network (SITC) by (a) focusing on instructional problems related to student learning; (b) using research in discussions, classroom visits, and debriefings; (c) establishing a yearly schedule comprised of monthly meetings; and (c) using facilitators as guides, with superintendents primarily leading discussion. As the program developed in the first year, superintendents worked to expand their common understandings of good mathematics teaching and learning, developed skills and knowledge to lead large-scale improvements in the teaching and learning of mathematics in their own districts, and enabled superintendents to build and sometimes rebuild their district’s infrastructure by focusing the work of leadership on improvement. As Fullan (2008) stated, “If people are not learning in the specific context in which the work is being done, they are inevitably
learning superficially” (p. 89). By leaders being involved in the experience, there may be a great opportunity to understand, and be part of, the process of improving our schools.

In this first year, the group, under the leadership of Dr. Mary Bouck (MSU professor, PROM/SE grant facilitator, and former superintendent), Mary Gehrig (Assistant Superintendent of Instruction for CISD), and Joe Liberato (lead mathematics coordinator for CISD), trained seven superintendents to prepare for following the Network model. During this first year, the superintendents visited two schools for a total of nine meetings and debriefings by the group members. Extensive norm building, research analysis, practice discussions by reviewing current student curriculum, and analysis of observations were the group’s primary focus. As evident by the success and support of the program, the superintendents requested that the SITC group continue into the next year. During the most critical portion of this program, the very early stages of the experience, the group centered their activities and purposes on solidifying norms in the belief that a true professional learning community (PLC) would become the foundation of how the group interacted. The group made a commitment to attend all sessions, to be engaged in the work, to listen and support others, to be candid, and to maintain confidentiality.

The key to any strong professional learning culture is one where a professional learning community as educators commits to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the
assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-
embedded learning for educators. (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 14)

This was the foundation of the group, with the primary intentionality to focus on the
learning for their students and staff, to become learning leaders, to be grounded in
research in the area of mathematics instruction, to purposely lead to improve their home
districts, and to learn from one another while holding each member accountable (CISD,
Mary Gehrig). The goal of the SITC structure is for each superintendent and principal to
develop or enhance their understanding of the use of data and the necessary elements for
instruction to improve student learning. By focusing on how the superintendents’ and
principals’ experience the training, and the new knowledge they gain, the research may
be able to describe the changes needed to support new collaborative structures between
the leaders that improve teaching and learning.

When the group members officially met, the following processes took place:
(a) review of key mathematical research focusing on instructional best practices;
(b) organized discussions on the host’s math data, specifically academic achievement
scores on tests and failure rates; (c) pre-observation discussions on best practice in
mathematical instruction; (d) small group observations (no more than five per
classroom); (e) group debriefing on observations, with special discussion referencing
observations relating to whether effective practices based on research are evident; and
(f) group discussions regarding the members’ roles as academic leaders in supporting and
creating the necessary changes to improve math instruction and learning in each district.
Since 2006, this framework, though with new additional people invited to participate, has
been followed and supported by the group memberships. Clearly, the establishments of norms and a confidential learning environment have allowed members to grow and express their ideas, thoughts, and strategies to improve their own school districts.

Furthermore, it was because these methods were grounded in research, the culture and work focused on what was observed, not on people. This foundation is clearly evident in Elmore’s (2000) discussions regarding the premise that distributive leadership is about developing and distributing knowledge, yet it is critical that school districts establish the right environment to engage teachers in learning new practices in a climate that is safe, innovative, and creative.

In the 2007-2008 school year, the group continued with seven superintendents, and three schools were placed on the year’s agenda to visit and review. In this second year, the team really increased its purpose and reflection. Because the first year of the project established the opportunity for superintendents to learn and expand their knowledge, visitations, reflection sessions, and action planning greatly improved. For this year, three schools were visited, and follow-up reflection sessions and action planning were conducted by the group. The process as a whole was supported by all superintendents, as observed by the end-of-the-year meeting that had all superintendents making a commitment to support and continue with the program and Elmore’s original processes. What was most interesting was the group’s alignment to the professional learning community foundations, especially with the support of the members to continue working together to improve mathematics achievement in the county high schools.
During the 2008-2009 school year, the group’s dynamics developed such that a visit and debriefing of one of the county high schools resulted in a group of leaders immersed in investigating the mathematical instruction issues of the district, with the conversations aligned to research and debriefings focused on strategies for improving student achievement for the students. These discussions were very robust, focused, and purposeful in an environment that was trustworthy, and while the discussions were honest and direct, the participants aligned the discussions on observations and data, not on individuals. This further aligns with Elmore’s (2000) belief that the SITC learning model needs to center on the professional development of the superintendents and that the work is to engage in evidence that is grounded in research, not on people. This was instilled only by the groundwork that had been put in place by the instructional leaders who first developed the environment to learn in, and then taught the group how to observe and draw conclusions based on evidence.

Once again, the process continued with visitations and debriefings taking place at different schools, yet the host district provided an initial report of the problem and the leadership issues and challenges facing the district to improve instruction. While the previous year witnessed some of this work, this was the first year in which more ownership was placed on the host district and the leadership of the superintendents to study data, improve classroom observation, debrief, review all information, and then work on strategies to improve the infrastructure of the high school. Leaders were able to embrace the new knowledge, self-reflect, and evaluate, with the opportunity for the host district superintendent to refine their processes and strategies to face the challenges in
their own district (Archer, 2005; Choy 2003). From Elmore’s (2000) initial thoughts regarding the process, the new community clearly grew by learning in a sustained and safe professional development environment.

As the year ended and the superintendents reflected, their findings aligned with the belief that we all faced very common challenges and issues within our high school mathematics programs, and that while the district names may change, the infrastructure and processes that exist clearly aligned to our visitations, review of county data, and our research findings (as suggested by Mary Gehrig). Therefore, the goal of the program was then transformed to recognize that our challenge was to promote distributive leadership practices with our stakeholders, and that our first target required the addition of high school principals to the project. The program goal for the following year was to develop a plan for improving mathematics instruction in each of our high schools, with the structure to (a) develop an understanding of quality mathematics instructions, (b) develop an understanding of quality mathematics tasks, and (c) incorporate the principal’s participation so as to assist the work of addressing larger systemic issues in our own districts.

In the first session of the 2009-2010 school year, the initial focus was to work with building principals, without their superintendent, in an initial morning session centered on program history, the successes of the program, the purpose and direction for the SITC learning model, and the emphasis and communication of group norms. In the afternoon, superintendents joined the principals and together shared a common professional development activity. Once the norms and training had been set, the group
worked together to study and review data from the host school district, which was to be visited in the following month. During this modified year, superintendents and principals attended two professional development activity sessions, two visitations and debriefings, and a final reflection session with action plan development processes.

In the 2009-2010 school year, the work of the SITC learning model centered on the development of the learning community comprised of superintendents and principals, as well as curriculum directors and lead math instructors. In practice, the paradigm of isolation was being addressed by having administrators working on key knowledge, studying research, and understanding new ideas together for the purpose of becoming innovative leaders, ready and able to exemplify the values, beliefs, and behaviors needed to develop such practices with their own staff members (Elmore, 2007). The final outcome for the 2009-2010 school year provided two key element changes: (a) the drafting of a mathematics improvement plan for each district, and (b) the expansion of the group to include a larger team approach for measuring the effectiveness of the strategies in the plans. Part of this concluding work brought the goal of adding two more members to the group, and while the original intent was to focus on the superintendent and mathematics instruction, the original group of superintendent believed that a larger group needed to be involved for us to have an influence on changing the infrastructure and processes of school improvement, as Elmore (2000) intended. As part of the focus, the group also decided to include processes and training to improve the leaders’ knowledge regarding the understanding of quality in mathematics instruction and tasks,
develop an understanding of mathematical discourse, and develop strategies in improving instruction and overall mathematic plans.

In 2010-2011, the new players were added to the original group of superintendents. Now each high school’s curriculum director and lead math instructor joined their superintendent and principal in participating in the SITC learning model. While the ISD coaches continued to guide group members through the educational process, all participants worked in an environment modeling Elmore’s Network. The focus was to create a shared vision on good math instruction, to distribute leadership practices amongst the team members, and to develop a professional learning culture. The CISD leadership group collaborative processes and support allowed members to develop a group culture of supportive sharing, quality participation in discussions, questioning for clarity, respect for individual ideas and comments, and, most importantly, confidentiality. This modeled the Network, as reflected by Choy’s (2003) reviews, and further supported Elmore’s (2000) discussions of leaders creating a common culture of expectations regarding skills and knowledge, and holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the group’s work.

During the school year, the group met every two to three months at a hosting district. The process they followed, as it was intended, entails a number of tasks, such as the reading of research, home district classroom visits, and district analysis of data. The process further mirrors Elmore’s work, as reflected by the use of norms and listening strategies that allow for the opportunity for participants to develop new skills and displace the old paradigms. The expectation was that all would participate and support
the development of their peer. This allowed the group to grow and interact effectively and efficiently when they met. Most importantly, members discussed ways to help the district they were visiting. Stating the problem and viewing opportunities to improve is standard practice. This methodology, during the process, aligned with Elmore’s, in that the socialization of the practitioners was to reinforce, improve, and review existing patterns of practice and allow new knowledge to result from the practice of their work (Elmore, 2004).

Because the instructional leaders are familiar with Elmore’s research and are specialists who function as mentors and advisors, they work rigorously to meet the original intent of the Network’s processes, and they fully work to support the growth of the leadership of the county educators. The participants in the CISD model studied school improvement issues relating only to mathematics, while Elmore’s Network included other disciplines. The primary reason for this related to data that were studied via the work of Prom/se grant’s focus on mathematics and science, and the support from Prom/se to assist in minor costs associated with the project. I also believe that the CISD’s excellent curriculum experts demonstrated the skills and the professional qualities to support and press members into moving past paradigms that many times slow progress. The superintendents in the county also were very supportive of these CISD leaders and believed that they would best allow us to move forward.

The CISD process required that before meetings all members would read research on math instructional methods and best practices. At the very first official meeting, all members also made a commitment to attend all meetings and to keep conversations
focused on improving existing systems and supporting neighboring districts. The key in the process was for members to be confidential, which the original process lends to the success of a group by developing norms that focus on the problem and not the people (teachers) (Elmore, 2000).

While the original Network included only CISD instructional staff and superintendents, the new model, with the inclusion of high school principals, was different. During the last two years, the change in new members was supported by the superintendents, and the purpose was very strategic. While the CISD project has been in existence for over five years, the last two years of the group work has provided a different angle to the original Network (Elmore, 2000). Therefore, the purpose of studying the interactions between the superintendents and principals who participated may be very valuable in understanding if a shared vision, distributive leadership processes, and/or professional learning cultures are formed. The results of such data may also assist schools in utilizing professional development processes that improve instruction and learning for all of those involved.

Research Regarding Superintendent and Principal Relationships

Superintendents can have a positive impact on student achievement, but they exercise that impact by the way they focus the attention on other key players in the school community. Waters and Marzano (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of studies that analyzed how superintendents’ work correlates to positive gains in student achievement. Among their findings, the authors noted the positive effects of superintendents who monitor their district’s progress toward achievement and instructional goals. While this
finding provides broad guidance to superintendents, the studies did not yield one operational model for how superintendents specifically function or interact with their principals in order to carry out the monitoring process. Furthermore, research on specific models for improving superintendents’ engagement with and attention to instructional improvement, such as SITC experience, is just beginning to emerge in the literature. First, there is the question of how or if participating in a program like SITC can assist superintendents and principals in changing their interactions that focus on student achievement. Additionally, it could be important to understand if there is transference of behavior, specifically whether the participation and the experience of the program on superintendents and principals can transfer to improving or enhancing interactions among these leaders. Of particular interest would be how participating in professional development that places superintendents and principals in classrooms on a regular basis serves to enrich the interactions of the two focused on improving academic achievement.

Programs like SITC are built on the assumption that superintendents who increase their knowledge of best instructional practice and their ability to use data to assess the current status of classroom instruction may also increase their ability to support principals and teachers in improving teaching and learning in their classrooms (Rallis et al., 2006). Through the SITC learning model, leaders may enhance and improve their relationships with the school community through a common shared focus on teaching and learning and through shared understanding of what good instruction looks like. Moreover, conversations with members of the school community, based on both data that illustrate the current state of student achievement and observations of the actual teaching and
learning processes in the schools, may help superintendents and principals to strategically use those relationships to foster a culture of change and improvement.

While research has isolated some correlations between raising student achievement and the superintendent’s work, these findings also suggest that the impact district leaders make happens primarily through their interactions with others, especially building leaders (Fullan, 2006). Research findings regarding the ways superintendents impact their schools point to strong and effective relationships within and across the school community, yet principals may play even more of a critical role. The link between the work of principals and student achievement is so well established in the research (Kelley, Thorton, & Daugherty, 2005) that it can be assumed that a major focal point for superintendents should be their relationship with principals (Spanneut & Ford, 2008).

The expectations of the community, the school board, and federal and state mandates will demand the very best work from both of these positions, and their ability to function from a complementary and mutually supportive focus and practice could be critical for either to positively impact the quality of instruction and achievement for the schools they serve. Finding new processes may assist these leaders in being more effective as they continue to face increasing challenges. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, it is important to highlight a few areas where superintendent and principal work may need to closely align, and should therefore be a focus of how they interact.
Leaders Creating a Shared Vision

Bennis and Nanus (1985) stated, “The effective leader must assemble for the organization a vision of a desired future state. While this task may be shared and developed with other key members of the organization, it remains the core responsibility and cannot be delegated” (p. 141). There has been much research regarding the implementation of systemic reforms that last. Fullan et al. (2004) studied a number of districts in Canada, England, and the United States and found much evidence supporting a number of events needed to implement strategies to build school capacity and improve student achievement. Most importantly, their research found it extremely important for schools and school districts to communicate and implement a common vision and purpose for their work.

Superintendents can have positive impact on student achievement, but they exercise that impact by the way they focus the attention of other key players in the school community, including principals. When superintendents have strong interactions that build working relationships focused on instruction, student achievement improves (Neuman & Pelchat, 2001; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Furthermore, Manasse (1986) stated, “Some studies indicate that it is the presence of this personal vision on the part of a leader, shared with members of the organization, that may differentiate true leaders from mere managers” (p. 151).

Burns (1978) clearly described how a leader must be “engaged ultimately in lifting the morals of the follower; in elevating the follower from a lower state to a higher state . . . [and] help develop others to become moral leaders in the cause of achieving a
collective purpose” (p. 4). Therefore, our communication must aim at the heart of the relationship between superintendents and principals to build on interaction that develops a shared vision (Kotter, 2008). DuFour et al. (2008) referenced research that has suggested that the longer the strategic plan, the greater the chance for its failure. With the discussions of isolationism of teachers from administrators, the SITC process may allow leaders to improve their interactions with their followers by gaining a collective purpose and direction. As the SITC work included new members, further study needs to determine if there is the development of a shared vision and a narrowing of goals, and whether relationships grow more focused on instruction with principals and district staff members.

Throughout Elmore’s initial work, there is much discussion regarding the exclusion of superintendents and other administrators, which influences or creates obstacles for reaching academic goals. The obstacles, from the standpoint of isolation, further cause a lack of communication regarding setting a shared vision for a district because the stakeholders lack conversations regarding direction for instruction. What we do know from Elmore’s work is that a number of opportunities are defined where leaders are learning together and focusing on instructional issues, yet we do not know if the process allows them to create these values and behaviors on a larger scale. If Elmore’s (2000) theories regarding isolation are correct, then one must realize the importance of creating a shared vision, and determine whether his model or the modified CISD one allows for superintendents to collaboratively develop a shared vision with their closest ally, the building principal.
Within the model of the SITC learning model, leaders interact and discuss with the support of mentorship by instructional coaches who are knowledgeable in both change processes and instruction. The question clearly becomes, will such a process allow the leaders to focus their work on a common shared vision structured on specific objectives and strategies? Purposefully, the leader’s vision needs to connect with others and be shared by other leaders willing to become involved in the realization of the mental picture of a future state. “It is rare to see a clearly defined vision articulated by a leader at the top of the hierarchy and then installed by followers” (Murphy, 1988, p. 656). One could contend that the inclusion of principals in the SITC model allows for such articulation to take place, yet does the vision become alive and is it shared by the administrative team after the experience? Because the original model focuses on the superintendent, there is concern that such programming will transfer onto the principals, thus limiting the effects of establishing a shared vision (Lashway, 2002).

**Distributive Leadership**

Research supports the effectiveness of leadership approaches built around strong positive relationships within and across the school community (Sergiovanni, 2004). At both the district and building levels, research also supports utilizing distributive and transformative leadership practices, focused on academic best practice and implemented with the purpose of building leadership capacity (Kellogg, 2006). In addition to shifting roles for district- and school-level leaders, cultivating leadership at the teacher level has been found to enhance the delivery of instruction and student results (DuFour, 2004; Sergiovanni, 2004).
When superintendents and principals focus on distributing leadership to the classroom level, there is a shift in the level of ownership of student results. When teachers share leadership functions, they can also share leadership prerogatives. Walter and Marzano (2006) stated, “Any discrepancies between expected teacher behavior in classrooms as articulated by agreed-upon instructional models and observed teacher behavior are taken as a call for corrective action” (p. 13). Such calls to action by teachers, themselves, can shift the role of principal and superintendent to that of providing support, encouragement, and safety as teachers work together to employ their best strategies until they get the desired student results (DuFour, 2003; Fullan et al., 2004; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

Kellogg (2006) suggested that the concept of distributive leadership requires the identification and training of school leaders for such purposes. Distributive leadership is the sharing of leadership between two or more individuals. This type of leadership has many names, such as shared, dispersed, relational, roving, collective, group-centered, broad-based, participatory, fluid, inclusive, and supportive leadership. In schools today, as the workload of administrators is constantly increasing, shared leadership practices are becoming widespread. Sharing leadership tasks and building on goals is important, yet distributing work without proper skills and knowledge may not always be efficient or productive. Therefore, a transformational leadership model, focused on the conversion of followers into leaders and further leaders who become agents of change, may be the necessary model to improve student achievement (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). Throughout this paper, distributive and transformative leadership concepts will be linked. While
distributive leadership entails the sharing of responsibilities, transformative leadership involves the creation of a compelling shared vision for change.

Both distributed and transformational leadership may require principals and superintendents to make fundamental shifts in their thinking and in their behavior. Both types of change can be enhanced through effective professional development experiences (Kellogg, 2006). Through productive learning, leaders may enhance and improve both their own understandings and strategies and the way they use their working relationships to support each other as they work to incorporate new thinking and practice into their work. Over time, some districts may plateau, requiring or demanding stronger approaches. Autonomy is important, yet poor-performing schools need purposeful interventions, and since change is becoming more sophisticated, the selection of leadership approaches will need to be carefully decided before making important decisions (Fullan, 2004; Yukl, 1989). For the SITC learning model, it remains to be seen whether distributive leadership practices exist between the superintendents and principals, even when principals join the original group of practitioners.

As superintendents acquire new learning and experiences focused on instructional practice, they may be able to guide the transformation of principals’ leadership, increase their focus on instruction, and enhance their ability to build leadership capacity within their buildings. Superintendents may also find that they can improve their own understandings and practice by building relationships with principals where there is reciprocity of feedback, shared learning, and strategic thinking. The mindset for shared (distributed) and transformational leadership may be an important complement to a
superintendent’s involvement in sustained, long-term professional development pertaining to instruction and student achievement. Such a mindset might increase the likelihood that a superintendent can use such a professional development experience as a means for engaging the rest of the school community (and especially principals) in a shared commitment to achieve better results for students through best teaching and learning practice.

Waters and Marzano (2006) have studied the positive effects of superintendents who monitor their district’s progress toward achievement and instructional goals, yet there is still a void in the literature on whether a specific model can improve or enhance superintendents’ work in this area. What is clear in the research is that superintendents who guide school districts to improved results for students also employ distributed and transformational leadership practices (Kellogg, 2006; McBride, 2001). Part of being a transformational leader is also being a learning leader (Rallis et al., 2006). Superintendents who increase their knowledge and best practice in the area of instruction may also increase their ability to support principals and teachers in improving teaching and learning in their classrooms. Waters and Marzano stated the following question: “Consequently, do the actions of a superintendent, specifically their learned behavior, support them as an instructional leader who can select accurate professional development and support if corrective action is needed?” (p. 13). Will the superintendents and principals who commit to a long-term, sustained professional development experience like SITC be better prepared to engage in conversations more authentically about issues of teaching and learning? This ability to engage authentically about instructional practice
may also change the nature of the relationships and interactions superintendents have with principals and teacher leaders, with a greater focus on issues related to teaching and learning.

The power held by a superintendent specifically relates to “the motives and resources of power holders (superintendents); the motives and resources of power recipients (principals); and the relationships among all these” (Burns, 1978, p. 13). In the SITC structure, this power is defined as the relationship focused on the collective motivation (or purpose) to improve teaching and learning, and the utilization of each other’s personal experiences and knowledge. Such a shared purpose between leaders is the foundation of leadership itself. Burns stated, “I define leadership as leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and motivations—the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations—of both leaders and followers” (p. 19). This study assumes that strong relationships with school-level leaders utilizing distributive and transformational leadership practices and focused on academic best practices (the shared purpose) will positively change the roles of each leader and enhance the delivery of instruction among district staff members. The work of the SITC defines the shared purpose itself. Rallis et al. (2006) studied how professional development, structured around effective instructional strategies for superintendents, enabled superintendents to build a personal skill base to support their districts. This study seeks to further determine whether such specific training will transform the interactions between the superintendent and their principals, and, if so, to describe what differences or changes transpire.
Members of the SITC learning model experience actively participate as a social group of superintendents and principals who experienced common social interactions focused on instructional best practice, observation training, data review, and school improvement through learning and discussions that take place over a significant amount of time. The SITC group establishes commonly agreed-upon norms and expectations, while reading pertinent research articles, studying classroom observations, discussing best practices, practicing data reviews, and receiving guided training from an instructional specialist in the area of mathematics.

During our time together, our group developed and enhanced our knowledge of instructional practices and observation skills, as witnessed by our robust discussions. As participants progressed through the program, review sessions illustrated superintendents’ increased knowledge on best instructional practices. Their conversations became more focused and the behaviors exhibited by the group became more common and consistent with a leadership focus on student achievement. In studying a similar professional development experience for superintendents, Rallis et al. (2006) found similar changes among participants. They stated, “Over time, comments became increasingly detailed and focused. Descriptions of what members saw in class became richer and finer-grained, and judgments were increasingly grounded in specific observed data” (Rallis et al., 2006, p. 543). Most strikingly, in the beginning years of the SITC experience, the cohort described that they felt their new learned behavior was being transferred, to some degree, onto their principals. These thoughts were shared during the reflection segments of the meetings, and at the end of the second year of SITC, the group of superintendents
decided to expand the membership of the group and include high school principals the following year. Since their addition, this researcher wanted to explore whether there was a difference in how superintendents and principals interacted, and, if so, identify the differences. This reported transference between superintendents and principals may be a critical piece to study, along with any associated shift in the working relationship between superintendents and principals as a result of their experiences in the long-term sustained professional development experiences focusing on instruction and student achievement.

Although Elmore’s (2000) research on the SITC model centered on the idea that the processes may allow for distributive leadership principles to take place, especially when recognizing that current systems in schools promote isolating teachers from outside interference, he questioned whether the model allows superintendents to develop the necessary skills to transfer to their working relationships with principals and teachers (Elmore, 2004). Lashway (2002) also suggested that, whereas the program allows for leadership to be distributed across the school community, there was concern not only whether the practices of the superintendents will transfer onto the principals, but also whether the superintendents have the knowledge and skills to provide an overall improvement strategy that receives enough support from others to invest in developing goals and/or strategies.

Throughout the literature on leadership, distributive models discuss the importance of sharing leadership between two or more individuals. The sharing of leadership tasks and building on goals is very important, yet utilizing distributive
leadership without the proper skills and knowledge may not always be efficient or productive (Kellogg, 2006, McBride 2001). If the skill set is strong, the transformational leader can focus the conversion of these followers into leaders and further assist them in becoming agents of change (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). The reliance of building strong positive relationships is extremely important for leaders to be successful (Sergiovanni, 2004). The key to distributive leadership concepts in this study, therefore, focuses on the leadership functions that become shared leadership prerogatives and how the superintendent and principals shift their interactions to encourage teachers to employ the very best strategies to improve teaching for learning (DuFour, 2003; Fullan et al., 2004; Shannon & Bysma, 2004). In such cases both distributive and transformative leadership may require superintendents and principals to make fundamental shifts in their thinking and in their behavior. Both types of change may be enhanced through effective professional development experiences (Kellogg, 2006), yet will such development instill these learned concepts to be transmitted to the interactions between the superintendents and principals? Part of being a transformational leader is also being a learning leader (Rallis et al., 2006). Superintendent and principal professional development, structured in effective instructional strategies, that is, the SITC learning model, may enable superintendents and principals to build a personal skill base to support their districts.

**Professional Learning Culture**

Although our educational system has somewhat improved from the sorting and selecting factory model of the 19th and early 20th centuries, educators still need to recognize that there is much work to be accomplished before we can really move
forward. In these earlier systems, educational management’s main purpose was to find one best process to identify how problems and tasks would be handled, primarily from a centralized, hierarchical top-down management system (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Bush, 2003; DuFour et al., 2008). Because so many ideas and concepts were new to these leaders, many of them truly believed that their methods made the very best sense. DuFour et al. (2008) stated, “Unfortunately, students were simply the passive raw material transported along the educational assembly line” (p. 33). Such systems were incredibly bureaucratic with the leaders establishing the goals for the system. DuFour et al. provided a number of examples of such reforms, with many of them being defined as bureaucratic. Bush (2003) stated, “Bureaucratic models emphasize impersonal relationships between staff, and with clients . . . Good schools depend in part on the quality of personal relationships between teachers and pupils, and this aspect of bureaucracy has little influence in many schools (p. 44).

The professional development of school employees is the center of all educational reform strategies (Sparks & Hirsch, 1997). This being said, both principals and superintendents leading the charge for professional learning must also be willing to acquire new knowledge and skills if the organization is to improve. An organization’s professional development plan is a key strategy for achieving progress in changing student outcomes. For principals and superintendents alike, leading from the front means that they can reflect on their own practice, learn behaviors, and seek professional development toward corrective action where their current practice is not aligned with what they need to do to raise student achievement. In regard to the actions of
superintendents, the question becomes, can they create a climate for professional learning for themselves and others, and can they help principals create that same climate at the school level?

When reviewing the literature on individual professional learning culture concepts, there is much discussion regarding professional development that leads to all students achieving at high levels. Within this discussion, there is a paradigm shift that indicates it is essential for educators to become actively involved in new learning. Lieberman (1995) stated:

People learn best through active involvement and through thinking about and becoming articulate about what they have learned. Processes, practices, and politics built on this view of learning are at the heart of a more expanded view of teacher development that encourages teachers to involve themselves as learners—much the same way as they wish their students would. (p. 592)

The point to consider here is the importance of all stakeholders becoming aware of new and broader concepts of professional development. Having the ability to discuss, review, practice, create new problem-solving groups, and create a culture of inquiry maximizes the results of professional development (Lieberman, 1995). This, too, has implications for both the superintendent’s work to build a strong culture for professional learning and for the way the superintendent engages principals to share that work.

The term professional holds power. It brings expertise and knowledge of position to the forefront. In regard to learning, the focus is on ongoing action and the establishment of structures that promote improving. Sustaining a culture of ongoing
learning is within the community of learners, or those that share common interests with each group member. As Sergiovanni stated (as cited in DuFour et al., 2008), “Communities spring from common understandings that provide members with a sense of identity, belonging, and involvement that results in a web of meaningful relationships with moral overtones” (p. 20). In such a community, all stakeholders strive to create an environment where students learn at high levels, where collaboration continually exists, and where teachers monitor student learning and respond with the appropriate interventions for those that are experiencing difficulty.

Following DuFour and Eaker’s (1998) earlier research, DuFour et al. (2008) found new concepts to support the use of PLCs to address the many new reforms and demands from local, state, and federal entities. One of the most critical observations of DuFour et al. related to how schools view their improvement initiatives as ongoing processes to achieve an organization’s purpose, priorities, and goals. Educators who once primarily viewed school improvement as a process of adopting or implementing goals, now “subject every practice, program, policy, and procedure to ongoing review and constant evaluation according to very different assumptions than those that guided the school in the past” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 21).

To perform such work is to change the structure of thinking within the culture. “Every one of us develops patterns of thought or mental models that represent complex webs of our ideas and assumptions about the world in which we live” (Senge, as cited in DuFour et al., 2008). While several educators see the need to improve, they oftentimes filter new ideas and processes through their own mental models, and are therefore unable
to grasp the change needed to improve student achievement. In the SITC learning model, leaders provide new structures that reduce teacher isolation (Elmore, 2000; Lashway, 2002; Rallis et al., 2006), yet Elmore (2007) himself suggested that the transference of moving the practice into the field may be spotty or uneven. Such work is of a transformational nature and requires relentless support from district leaders, hence the question of whether the CISD model allows for such a culture to form.

In one study of superintendents, the results suggested that it is imperative that the professional development be structured and sustained over time. Rallis et al. (2006) studied how professional development for superintendents, structured around effective instructional strategies, enabled superintendents to build a personal skill base to support their districts. Expanding the superintendent’s knowledge base about effective instruction and the experience of participating in a long-term, sustained professional development experience where they are active participants may also assist superintendents in working with principals and supporting their efforts to shape professional development at a school level to support significant change and improvement. DuFour et al. (2008) focused on practical recommendations for educators to transform “their schools into PLCs so their students learn at higher levels and their profession becomes more rewarding, satisfying, and fulfilling” (p. 3). In their work, these researchers examined organizational development, change, and leadership processes related to how leaders can incorporate the PLC concept in their organization. The authors also included research from a number of school districts across North America, as well as embedded reflections from a myriad of educational theorists who
themselves have studied leadership and organizational structures. Most importantly, their work reflected on their previous 1998 findings regarding PLCs. Through their conclusions, the PLC structure can emerge from research to implementation with the purpose of supporting new systems that may allow schools to overcome many obstacles that are inherent in school improvement initiatives. Although DuFour et al. explored many of their original core concepts researched in 1998, they also structured new findings for the purpose of connecting research to practice, and provided new insights to improve cultures dealing with school reform and overall school improvement goals.

DuFour et al.’s (2008) research also has focused on the importance of leaders creating the foundation of the PLC through effectively articulating the mission, vision, values, and goals of the organization. Many of today’s school improvement processes are narrations and reviews of documents that truly do not promote sustained change. Therefore, educators need to ask the following question: What would it look like if we really meant what we said, and what specific action can we expect to see in light of our priorities? In regard to students, educators will need to provide more frequent, common formative assessments focused on measuring whether students are acquiring the skills of each course, grade level, or subject area. DuFour at al. stated, “These common assessments are one of the most powerful strategies available to a school that hopes to become an effective PLC” (p. 26).

Recognizing the challenges of many learners, DuFour et al. (2008) encouraged leaders to design new systems that support interventions that ensure students receive additional time and support when they are performing poorly in their core courses.
Collaboration on such programming allows a school community to focus on redirecting the school’s culture to purposeful goals and initiatives. Throughout the process, staff members share a common view and purpose on the overall direction of the district. The principal’s leadership and the central office play a critical role in supporting the culture to collaborate on programming to meet these needs.

As Noel Tichy (as cited in DuFour et al., 2008) stated, “The ability to create and tell a vibrant story is one of the most powerful teaching tools available to leaders and essential prerequisite to becoming a first-class winning leader” (p. 29). “They communicate priorities and clarify what is significant, valued, and appreciated” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 29). This framework is also supported by other authors, such as Bolman and Deal (2008), who emphasized the symbolic framework that clearly portrays how stories can be used to promote what the school believes in and explain why certain initiatives are important as a school community establishes a shared vision.

The research supporting the PLC structure is incredibly abundant. Included in these findings are a number of professional organizations that are in support of using this structure as a method to change our current reality, especially knowing that nearly half of new teachers who leave the profession do so within their first five years of teaching (DuFour et al., 2008). So many of our newest teachers work in isolation, yet leaders place them in such a culture where professional development and support from their colleagues is lacking. Schmoker (as cited in DuFour et al., 2008), stated:

Such a tipping point—from reform to true collaboration—could represent the most dramatic shift in the history of educational practice . . . We will know we
have succeeded when the absence of a strong PLC in a school is an embarrassment. (p. 72)

External efforts to improve schools mostly focus on structural changes. These changes primarily influence policies, procedures, rules, and even relationships (Bush, 2003; DuFour et al., 2008). Historically, policymakers supported such changes because they were immediate and visible. The challenge for schools is to recognize that they need to foster collaboration, be student-centered, view teaching as a craft, and regard school improvement as a continuous process. Most importantly, “It is impossible for a school or district to develop the capacity to function as a professional learning community without undergoing profound cultural shifts” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 91). Such shifts are extremely difficult for a school to go through. The transformation from an industrial model to a PLC involves incredible planning.

The fundamental purpose of a school is to help all students learn at high levels. “The challenge facing educational leaders is to become skillful in the improvement process—a challenge they can only meet if they can sustain a collective focus on a few issues that matter over an extended period of time” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 92). Burns (1978) further supported this importance of communicating the purpose of the organization to all stakeholders. This work has been further supported by many authors who believe in transformational processes in which the leader uses power, purpose, motive, values, and relationships to build collegial or human resource leadership frames (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Bush, 2003; DuFour et al., 2008). The key for all stakeholders is to design structures that are simultaneously loose and tight. The expectations of day-to-
day operations are structured, yet there is great latitude in innovation, empowerment, and autonomy. To do such work, leaders need to begin by focusing on changing people’s behavior. To advance to a transformational model of leadership, conflict will be a necessary ingredient, yet the structures and processes to work through changes are necessary. Most importantly, the great organizations embrace the “genius of and/or the ability to embrace the important elements of district practice and champion both school-based and individual autonomy” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 107); such models, Elmore (2000) contended, will promote collaborative processes rather than isolationism. The transformation of the existing practices that protect and isolate teachers is important for schools to improve learning, yet we do not know whether the work of the CISD to promote Elmore’s Network will transform school districts.

In developing the PLC, staff members must pursue a shared purpose for all students’ learning. Within this work, they must engage in “collaborative activity to achieve that purpose, and take collective responsibility for student learning” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 113). The written mission statement supports the purpose, yet the presence of such a statement does not suggest that a school is functioning as a PLC. The transformational work is to raise both the leaders and followers to greater levels of motivation. In essence, “transforming leadership ultimately becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both” (Burns, 1978, p. 20).

The mission statement provides the first test in the alignment of what a school needs to accomplish in order to achieve its purpose, yet the real work is how the school
community aligns the school’s practices and policies to change the culture. Educators need to be challenged to act in new ways. DuFour et al. (2008) stated:

To help all students learn the knowledge, skills, and dispositions most essential to their success—is the biggest of the big ideas that drive the work of PLCs. When educators embrace that idea and act upon it, all the other elements of PLCs begin to fall into place. (p. 118)

PLCs will not succeed if there is a failure to communicate the purpose clearly and consistently to members of the organization, hence the need for the establishment of a shared vision.

The second test of the organization to address is developing a shared vision. A common mistake is for organizations to believe that the terms *mission* and *vision* are interchangeable. The key difference between the two is that the mission addresses the question why an organization exists by clarifying its essential purpose, whereas the vision attempts to describe a realistic and attractive future for the organization (DuFour et al., 2008). In essence, what must we become to fulfill our purpose, and what future do we hope to create for our school? The formation of a vision for a PLC is very difficult to accomplish. DuFour et al. (2008) stated, “A vision will have little impact until it is understood, accepted, and connects with the personal visions of those within the school or district” (p. 121). To accomplish such a task involves building consensus among all stakeholders regarding common causes, interests, goals, aspirations, and direction. As Choy (2003) suggested, the Network allowed the foundations of a PLC to establish
because their learning environment was focused, safe, confidential, and present of collegiate structures.

Bush’s (2003) descriptions of collegiate organizations and the importance of staff member involvement in vision development processes further supported DuFour et al.’s (2008) concept about using PLCs to create a shared vision. Through such a process, reaching consensus can be time-consuming, yet it encourages a number of perspectives, ideas, and research to be used to resolve differences and to find common ground. Reaching consensus does not mean everyone perfectly agrees with an opinion or direction. When everyone has expressed his or her ideas, and the will of the group is clearly evident to all, even to those that show displeasure, then the organization has reached consensus and everyone needs to support the decision. If it is not evident that consensus has been reached, then more research, site visits to other schools, or further studies need to be performed. Most importantly, a shared vision is a valuable outcome of the change process. Together, stakeholders clarify a direction at the beginning of an improvement initiative. Through this process an actual shared vision emerges over time resulting from the PLC’s actions, reflections, and work together. The leader’s role is to promote and nurture the culture through this transitional process. The Network frames the discussions to be grounded in research, and not focused on individuals, thus structuring the work to be continuous and centered on values and behaviors that superintendents can use to transfer onto their own schools (Elmore, 2000).

Once the mission and the initial beginnings of a shared vision statement exist, the organization needs to focus on the building blocks of the PLC. This is a critical stage of
the process. Once the mission of why a school exists and the vision of what an organization wishes to become are formalized, the values or commitments need to be agreed upon to fulfill the purpose of making a desired future a reality. Such a process entails if-then statements that focus on what the organization must do to create quality programming. DuFour et al. (2008) presented an excellent example:

If we are to be a school that ensures high levels of learning for all students, then we must monitor each student’s learning on a very timely basis using a variety of assessment strategies and create systems to ensure they receive additional time and support as soon as they experience difficulty in their learning. (p. 148)

This statement clearly strikes to the heart of a PLC. Although the mission of why a school exists may be defined, and the vision of what we hope to become is promoted, neither will be achieved until the school culture makes a commitment of how they are going to get there. Bolman and Deal (2008) stated, “The values that count are those an organization lives, regardless of what it articulates in mission statements or formal documents” (p. 255). Such commitments focus on stakeholder agreement. The leader’s task is to direct the organization’s energies to make strong commitments a reality; thus, the proposed large-scale improvement must be targeted for staff members in understanding the fundamentals of strong instruction, quality practices, and normative cultures that promote sustained, continuous improvement for both adults and students (Elmore, 2000).

These commitments provide the structure for the group to design new goals, and as the Network teaches superintendents to learn new ways of communicating the vision,
there is a greater opportunity for them to reshape the culture of their own schools. The organization starts to change because the beliefs, values, and commitments start to displace the old ways of thinking (DuFour et al., 2008). At this point, leaders clearly need to recognize how individual building goals will need to be addressed if the PLC is to continue to develop. DuFour et al. (2008) suggested the importance of selecting a limited number of commitments. Such commitments must focus inward and be written for the student’s best interest. These goals need to be strategic/specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound (SMART). A very important key in the goal writing is to focus on the outcomes of the learner. Goals can be measurable, attainable, and time-bound, yet they may not focus on the achievements (results of student learning). In Elmore’s (2000) work, he discussed the concern of how many current structures do not create the conditions for high quality instruction in every classroom, and how new models that distribute leadership will allow leaders to work on instructional goals that present clear expectations about the range of acceptable quality and delivery of curriculum.

For teachers, the greatest challenge is to focus more on the outcomes of the student (i.e., learning) than the teaching. Teachers do not always concentrate their energies on doing the right things. Many work extremely hard in isolation and they usually have limited success. Leaders need to establish the right environments where teachers can collaborate to focus on the right things. In such a process, teachers concentrate the knowledge and skills they want students to learn. They will also need to work with other teachers to develop strategies that measure student learning, provide
support to those that fall behind, and enrich those that are already proficient. To accomplish such a process, teachers cannot work in isolation. The PLC allows teachers to explore these questions together, especially as they will need to identify strategies and assessments that improve student learning. The team must do more than review data. They must collectively review both summative and formative assessments (DuFour et al., 2008). In such a process, the superintendent needs to establish the right environment for teachers to take such risks.

Much of the research reviewing best practices in improving student achievement in schools supports the use of formative assessments (DuFour et al., 2008). This process allows teachers to assess continually by using a number of strategies to check for students’ understanding. This ongoing process will assist teachers in clarifying the criteria for success, where students understand what the goals are for the new learning. Classroom discussions, questions, and feedback allow the students to become more active in the process. Such a learning community also promotes student learning communities, where group norms, respect, and overall contributions are to help all students learn together. Teachers design common assessments that are shared with their colleagues. The PLC structure is formed by teachers that identify the essential learning, develop common formative assessments, analyze current levels of achievement, set achievable goals, and then create lessons and strategies to improve the results (DuFour et al., 2008). Their work is incredibly challenging. It transforms a culture that works primarily in isolation to one that learns and shares as a community, and the superintendent must lead this challenge.
The role of central office leadership. Recognizing the importance of establishing a shared vision, leadership styles, and the professional learning culture, the leader must establish how others in the organization will proceed. Power, purpose, motives, values, commitments, collective purpose, dispersing leadership, visions, consensus, and moral purpose are the major tenets of a professional learning culture that promote positive working environments (DuFour et al., 2008), yet the role of the superintendent is to set the parameters for how leadership functions in a school district (DuFour, 2003).

It is also important for leadership teams to review their school data and their current school improvement systems. As with any school district, leaders also need to understand the adult learner, and how professional learning communities (PLCs) are used to promote a structure for success. A clear purpose supported by data and priorities defined with discernible parameters is needed (DuFour, 2004). Furthermore, the superintendent needs to also provide each school and department with the autonomy to chart their own course for achieving the objectives. The ideas and methods to formulate such parameters are best practiced in a professional learning culture that practices constructing consensus, collaborative teams, periodic reviews, collective effort, defining a learning community, and team engagement (DuFour, 2004; Platt, Tripp, Fraser, Warnock, & Curtis, 2008; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

Autonomy is important, yet poor performing schools need purposeful interventions, and since change is becoming more sophisticated, the leadership approaches will need to be carefully selected before making important decisions (Fullan
et al., 2004; Yukl, 1989). What is clear in the research is that superintendents who guide school districts to improved results for students also employ distributed and transformational leadership practices (Kellogg, 2006; McBride, 2001). The SITC model lends itself to allowing the conditions for purposeful selection of strategies to improve schools, and by having the principals as part of this work, I believe that the transference of skills may be greater than the original findings of Elmore and other authors.

The challenge for district superintendents in this process entails identifying common themes and recommendations for their leaders. Waters and Marzano (2006) suggested that superintendents have a significant impact on student achievement when they focus their efforts on collaborative goal-setting sessions involving multiple constituencies that identify non-negotiable goals with a broad but common framework for classroom instruction. In the CISD SITC learning process, there is great inclusion of the principals in discussions regarding math instruction, yet there is some question on whether the work allows the two leaders to establish goals in a collaborative manner. As such, we do not really know if superintendents are interacting in ways that build structures to guide instructional improvement in their own districts.

Top-down leadership decisions have not always worked. Many school improvement initiatives with great success resulted from leadership that built widespread consensus for a concept or initiative before proceeding (DuFour et al., 2008; Waters & Marzano, 2006). The question is, how does professional autonomy extend to the freedom to disregard what is widely considered to be best practice in one’s field? Leaders should not ignore such questions and should not allow teachers to ignore “even the most widely
recognized best practices of the profession” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 342). The strong leaders define autonomy as being very strict on specifying achievement goals while allowing school leadership teams the autonomy and authority for determining how to meet those goals. Effective superintendents recognize how to perform in the tight and loose cultures (Elmore, 2000). They remain tight on those conditions that show evidence of successful practices, yet they provide autonomy to select strategies to meet non-negotiable goals. The processes of leadership in creating tight and loose conditions stem from leaders who understand change processes and who also can communicate a compelling rationale for staff members to move forward. If a leader focuses staff members on sound rational thinking strategies and research, while providing rewards, reflection, and stories, the stakeholders will become part of the process (DuFour et al., 2008).

**Final thoughts on the PLC and SITC.** Understanding the changes necessary to develop the PLC culture can be very challenging, because it pertains to how leaders influence people to change behavior. Most importantly, school leaders must recognize that changing behavior primarily aligns itself with two essential questions: (a) Is it worth it (to the person)? and (b) Can I do it? By targeting personal, social, and structural theories, leaders can influence change in their followers. This process, as DuFour et al. (2008) stated, entails “truly understanding psychological, social psychology, and organizational theory for each of the two questions to establish six sources of influence” (p. 349). These six areas are personal motivation, the support of the personal ability of others, the capacity to harness the power of peer pressure, the knack to find strength in
numbers, the design of rewards and the demand for accountability, and the capability to alter the environment to support change. Because superintendents have shown some early success in collaborating with other like leaders and transferring their new learned behavior to meet their own district goals (Archer, 2005; Choy, 2003; Elmore 2000, 2004; Lashway, 2002), there is still some question regarding how the model may allow for the behavior to change how superintendents and principals interact. As principals start to connect with these new ideas, superintendents must establish opportunities for their followers to practice the new skills. They must also provide meaningful and supportive feedback as soon as possible. During this process, the leader must recognize those who can influence their peers. The power of peer influence, used correctly, is an extremely valuable strategy in gaining momentum with the implementation of new changes. Strong peer groups that focus on supporting the purpose can help to build social capital. This investment in and empowerment of one’s followers promote the human resource type of leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2008), and we really do not know how or whether the SITC learning model promotes such influence or whether it builds social capital.

As leaders utilize the strength of their peers, they develop great numbers of followers to build social capital. Ideas, materials, and the ability for people to work together create a new synergy in the organization. Instructional coaches, mentors, and trainers become part of the process to reduce teacher isolation. Isolation primarily destroys the capability to improve, and while Lashway (2002) suggested that the Elmore’s Network allows for an organization to break away from their isolationistic tendencies, it remains to be found whether superintendents will increasingly focus on the
relationship strategies needed to make the necessary decisions to improve instruction. In regard to principals and superintendents, the issue becomes whether a shared professional development experience can create the needed changes between the two leaders to focus initiatives on improving their schools.

The PLC structure will create change. A leader’s role is to sustain those processes that improve learning. He or she must also nurture structures that allow for collaboration and must provide data and resources that are timely, accurate, and relevant to the task. Leaders must recognize that, with all good intentions, they will need to use their power to persuade. DuFour et al. (2008) stated:

Persuasion, consensus building, and all the other parts of influence do not always do the job. Sometimes it simply comes down to using the power of one’s position to get people to act. A common failing of leaders . . . is the failure to be emphatically assertive when necessary. (p. 356)

Above all, we are persuaded by our own personal experiences. New experiences that bring new results can lead to new attitudes and overall improvement of an individual’s mental pictures of how to solve problems (Bolman & Deal, 2008). As a result of going through the change, district leaders must communicate priorities consistently with one voice. Goals need to be limited, allowing a manageable number of initiatives, with leaders speaking in voice to true clarity and congruence between all divisions (buildings). Without such cohesiveness, district leaders will compete (politically) to push their agendas. Such drain of power and focus may create cynicism, and clearly the superintendents must have the skills to support large-scale changes to the infrastructure.
The cultural foundations of the SITC model allows for agreed-upon protocols, norms, language, data collection, and discussions to be established within the network (Rallis et al., 2006), yet will the behavior truly transfer to the buildings and the individual principals for such change to take place?

The true structure of the PLC must be led at all levels. As leaders, each level of the district must address issues that impact learning. DuFour et al. (2008) stated:

District leaders who hope to build the capacity of schools to function as PLCs should focus the entire organization’s energies on that challenging task, coordinate all central office services to support it, declare a moratorium on new initiatives for several years, and allow staff in each school to determine the training and resources it requires to move forward with the initiative. (p. 364)

These new initiatives require leaders to build capacity and raise achievement by embedding professional development opportunities that focus on allowing teachers to interact, reflect, and learn from each other. This opportunity to learn on a regular basis, focused on specific initiatives, aligned with district reforms, can be sustained only in a collaborative environment (DuFour et al., 2008). “Leadership is thus a subtle process of mutual influence fusing thought, feeling, and action” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 345).

Within the Elmore Network, superintendents operate in a new community of high trust and confidentiality. They also embrace new instructional ideas and effective strategies to improve instruction. While their learning environment is collegial, it remains to be seen whether other models, such as the CISD model, will allow superintendents to develop a like professional culture with their own principals.
Superintendent’s Knowledge and Beliefs about Student Learning

Superintendent leadership in instruction does matter. In Marzano and Waters (2006) review of 2,714 school districts, achievement scores associated with 3.4 million students, and 4,434 ratings of superintendent leadership, a number of key results were found to support and improve district leadership and student achievement. In their findings, effective leadership of a superintendent and student achievement computed a correlation of .24. In their meta-analysis of their work, they also studied the relationship of what types of leadership actions affected student achievement. They found that goal-setting, specifically the selection of non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction with board alignment, monitoring practices for achievement and instruction, and the use of specific resources were found to increase the superintendent’s effect on leadership as it pertained to achievement. These key areas had a statistically significant ($p < .05$) correlation with increasing average student achievement. Relating to these actions was research supporting the importance of superintendents’ knowledge in effectively communicating a powerful instructional vision to establish instructional goals, and the importance of correctly selecting strategies and resources to improve student learning (Elmore, 2004; Fullan et al., 2004; McBride, 2001). Furthermore, it is also important that superintendents and their principals develop shared beliefs about learning including the setting of high expectations that focus on results (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

In the research, it is very clear that collaborative goal setting among superintendents, principals, and district staff members must exist to ensure that goals are enacted upon (Waters & Marzano, 2006). In goal setting, effective superintendents
involve and collaborative with many stakeholders in the process to establish non-negotiable instructional goals focused on student achievement and instruction. In Waters and Marzano (2006) findings relating to successful schools, they found that when such collaboration is set on learning achievement targets for all students, student achievement increases. The foundation for such a process is led by superintendents who use systems that assure that only proven strategies that align with research best practices are chosen by the stakeholders (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Research in high-poverty and racially diverse schools that perform well or better than affluent schools demonstrated the principle of allowing a considerable variation of instructional delivery among classrooms; an emphasis on higher-level thinking skills, such as analysis, reflection, and understanding; and an overall balance of recognizing what effective instruction and leadership look like to allow for increased student learning (Elmore, 2004). Students in these schools were exposed to clear and articulate district vision set on high expectations on student learning. The curriculum and instruction was challenging, as well as the support for professional development. Furthermore, those organizations that are over-managed and under-led eventually lose any sense of spirit or purpose, yet the importance of the superintendent having the knowledge of what good instruction looks like is important in those schools that increase performance (Elmore, 1997; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Several researchers suggest that the work of the superintendent in improving student learning is best accomplished by incorporating a wide range of actions that principals feel influence their instructional leadership (DuFour, 2003; Fullan et al., 2004;
Kellogg, 2006; McBride, 2001; Waters & Marzano, 2006). When collaborative goals are set, a common district-wide vision focused on student needs may become prominent. When superintendents guide their principals in values and beliefs that promote high expectations for learning for all students, and target a variety of professional development processes that increase student learning, achievement levels may increase (Cudeiro-Nelsen, 2002). Large systematic improvement depends on the ability of superintendents to communicate a powerful vision and have a strong collective moral purpose (Burns, 1978; Sparks & Hirsch, 1997; Spillane et al., 2004). These effective leaders build strong teams and systems that can implement change by building capacity within the organization (McBride, 2001). The superintendent must guide his or her principals in values and beliefs that promote high expectations for all students, and the targeting of a variety of process that increase student learning (Cudeiro-Nelsen, 2002; Kellogg, 2006; Lieberman, 1995).

Instructional leadership is expanded to encompass the superintendent, principals, teacher leaders, and other administrators at district and school levels. The ethical and moral nature of effective leadership is demonstrated when leaders move beyond talking about the belief that students can learn to taking concrete action to change instruction so students do learn. (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004, p. 2)

As superintendents work with district staff members, they must embody the image and leadership associated with monitoring achievement and providing constant feedback on instructional goals (Archer, 2005; City et al., 2010). This can be extremely challenging, in that some schools in larger districts may be farther along in reviewing
data and interpreting the needed change or adjustments to improve results. “Any discrepancies between expected teacher behavior in classrooms as articulated by agreed-upon instructional models and observed teacher behavior in classrooms as articulated by agreed-upon instructional models and observed teacher behavior are taken as a call for corrective action” (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 13). Researchers suggest that it is very important that superintendents set high expectations regarding teacher instructional methods, monitor and articulate accountability and performance, establish a robust curriculum, and articulate strategies that improve instruction if they intend to improve student learning for all students (Elmore, 2006; Hentschke, Nayfack, & Wohlstetter, 2009).

Because of the many constraints influencing school budgets, it is also extremely important that superintendents monitor instructional finances with their principals to make sure that the necessary allocation of funds is primarily on effective teaching methods (Hentschke et al., 2009). Researchers suggest that when school-level professional development is also monitored by superintendent, the opportunity to further align schools with the district goals can take place (Kellogg, 2006; Sparks & Hirsch, 1997). Most notable in this process is the fact that the superintendents must exercise their power to make sure that adequate funds are available for sound professional development that supports teachers and principals in implementing strategies that focus on good instruction for student learning (Rallis et al., 2006; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004; Shuldman, 2004; Waters & Marzano, 2006).
What is interesting in much of the literature is a finding associated with the process of how superintendents define autonomy for their principals. In Waters and Marzano’s (2006) research, building-level autonomy has a positive correlation of .28 with average student achievement, where an increase in building autonomy is associated with an increase in student achievement, yet in most schools, site-based management processes have been found to actually decrease achievement. Therefore, it is important for superintendents to be strong on goals and strategies that will help their district improve learning. It was also found that superintendents that were tight on purpose and big ideas, yet flexible on the day-to-day work and operations, seem to have a much higher success rate in student learning (DuFour, 2003; Fullan et al., 2004; Yukl, 1989).

By instilling a mentoring relationship with building principals and balancing their authority regarding autonomy, superintendents allow individual building principals to chart their own course for achieving learning objectives (DuFour et al., 2008; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). The ideas and methods to establish such a process can be met by using the best practice of PLCs, where leaders construct consensus, form collaborative teams, perform periodic reviews, and engage others in the process (DuFour, 2004; Platt et al., 2008; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). Additionally, when superintendents do not allow for these high expectation models to exist, mediocre instruction influences the results, because the school culture has low expectations for student success (Elmore, 2000; Fullan et al., 2004; Yukl, 1989).

While the research is very clear regarding the framework needed for superintendents to improve student learning, it is also important to understand the
foundations relating to the correct actions these leaders exercise in improving student learning within the context of their school districts. In McBride’s (2001) study regarding these leadership actions, he recognized the specific leadership actions and how the superintendent intentionally implemented effective leadership actions appropriately to improve learning. The superintendents selected in his study were chosen by peers, were recognized for their efforts in school reform, had gained state and national recognition, and had students with high student achievement data. These effective superintendents also worked well within the culture of the school community. They were both attentive to the needs of their constituents while remaining intentional and deliberate in supporting change in a specific setting or context, especially as it relates to working relationships, planning processes, and professional development. The importance of building trust and confidence reoccurs in the literature as a foundation of building the capacity for such superintendents to use their knowledge and support to improve student learning and to leverage staff members to take action (Bass, 1985; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Burns, 1978).

When effective leaders establish working environments that focus on positive academic outcomes, work through problems when they arise, and recognize the collective intelligence of their staff members, true school improvement can take place (Kelley et al., 2005; Kellogg, 2006; McBride, 2001).

**Necessary Beliefs and Skills for the Superintendent**

In most of Elmore’s work, there is a theme about the Network and how the basic elements of superintendents learning in a collegial fashion improve knowledge and change beliefs in how they view student learning (City et al., 2010; Elmore, 2000, 2004).
From his work, the new common language that is formed in the analysis of classroom observations and student learning transforms the knowledge level of the superintendent. The primary development of these new skills allows for beliefs to change regarding best practice, and for new strategies to be developed to improve instruction for student learning (Rallis et al., 2006; Shuldman, 2004).

Researchers also suggest that when superintendents have the right skills, they become more comfortable in having the necessary discussions about communicating and defining the instructional vision for the district, their administrative team, and their teaching staff (Rallis et al., 2006; Shuldman, 2004). When superintendents lack the necessary skills, they can negatively impact their districts because their lack of understanding further leaves gaps within the district, and the curriculum decisions they make may be a poor use of scarce resources (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Additionally, for those who utilize only site-based principles because of their low skills, they have a negative correlation with student achievement of –.16, which may indicate that low skills coupled with site-based decision making is associated with a decrease in student learning (Elmore, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Superintendents who understand the necessary actions to improve instruction, who hold the belief that all students can learn, and who have demonstrated a clear direction and vision for their districts are more apt to build support and to secure funding, goodwill, and buy-in from the staff (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004; Shuldman, 2004). They also found that having the skills to instill a strong vision was a necessary strategic step in influencing participation, in engaging discussion, and in affecting the overall
infrastructure of how decisions are made. While Shannon and Bylsma (2004) focused their work on the integration of new technologies in the classroom, their findings supported the importance of the superintendent knowing how to integrate and model the correct strategies to lead new ideas and initiatives. They also believed that it is important for the superintendent to influence building principals in the implementation of technology goals for their buildings. In one district, the lack of principal leadership in technology programming was corrected when the superintendent enlisted other building leaders to support the principal in learning new skills to promote district initiatives. While the focus of their study pertained to technology, the research shows that the importance of superintendents’ knowledge, skills, and beliefs in student learning is needed if school districts are to improve their students’ academic achievement (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

**Principals’ Knowledge and Beliefs Regarding Student Achievement**

Public school principals face complex responsibilities. They are expected to be building managers, human resource administrators, change agents, disciplinarians, cheerleaders, instructional leaders, and, in some cases, surrogate parents (Elmore, 2000). Under the best of circumstances, these multiple roles are difficult to negotiate, but increasing pressure for school-level accountability for student performance pushes principals into bearing primary responsibility for school improvement. This role of instructional leadership to bring about increased student learning is new to most principals (Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2002; Lambert, 2002; Rosenholtz, 1989). The gap between what principals actually do and what they think they should do is chronically
large. In a study conducted by Michael Graham (1997) involving over 500 elementary, middle, and senior high school principals, more than two-thirds (68%) considered themselves to be general managers, while only one-fourth (25%) perceived themselves as instructional leaders. The average principal reported spending between 10 and 12 hours per day at work, with the majority of this time focused on “administrivia,” defined as routine duties, paperwork, and phone calls. Principals reported spending fewer than five hours per week on curriculum, instruction, and teacher evaluations. Despite these grim statistics, the participants reported “having received excellent or good preparation in instructional leadership.” As pressure for performance accountability increases, there is evidence that principals are trying to respond to it. In a survey of 1,300 principals (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998), 78% of participants reported they use content standards to guide curriculum and instruction. Approximately 40% of the respondents stated they needed support in using technology, professional development linked to the standards, and parent involvement. So the principalship in American schools is poised in an important place.

While principals may recognize, through data, achievement issues in their building, to be effective they must have the critical beliefs associated with recognizing that student learning is the fundamental purpose of school, that all students can achieve at high levels, that collaboration is needed to solve complex problems, that data drive decision making, and that their work must include being life-long learners that focus on achieving goals in collaborative working relationships (DuFour et al., 2008; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; Muhammad, 2009; Schmoker, 1999; Waters & Marzano,
2006). While these beliefs are very important, it is also critical that principals have the knowledge to deliver on these beliefs. In some cases, professional development may need to be designed to support the acquisition of skills to effectively perform processes associated with improving student achievement (Kellogg, 2006; Schmoker, 1999). Some foundations associated with key understandings and knowledge needed for the position are the abilities to recognize the importance of school improvement processes, to relate assessment to improving student outcomes, to recognize good instruction and classroom strategies, to monitor student understanding and progress, to collaborate with others by building consensus, to effectively communicate new ideas, and to establish learning communities within the school building (DuFour, 2004; Dumas, 2010; Muhammad, 2009). Within this struggle is the challenge of motivating those teachers who need more support. “The principal’s efforts to motivate and invigorate estranged teachers and to build relationships among otherwise disengaged teachers can have a profound effect on the overall climate of the school” (Gray & Streshly, 2008, p. 2).

Elmore (1999) suggested that the purpose of leadership is to improve the practice and performance, and that improvement requires continuous learning by both individuals and groups. Leaders must lead by exemplifying the values, beliefs, and behavior they want others to adopt (Burns, 1978). People are more apt to cooperate with one another in achieving their goals when they recognize other people’s expertise and their ability to effectively distribute their knowledge (Elmore, 1999; Lashway, 2002). Researchers also suggest that instructional leadership behaviors must nurture the school culture by developing trustful relationships that allow educators to engage in learning new practices
in a climate of innovativeness and creativity (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Spillane et al., 2004). From this premise, much of the work focuses on having the necessary skills to promote a sound instructional vision where people are engaged in the process, clear about strategies needed to be successful, and, most importantly, supportive of the principal’s vision (Gray & Streshly, 2008).

In a study to investigate the relationship between selected dimensions of principal leadership and measures of school climate focused on student learning, Kelley et al. (2005) researched 31 principals as well as 155 teachers regarding perceptions of their principals’ leadership style and effectiveness. The authors suggested positive relationships were established between teachers’ perceptions of their principals’ Effectiveness scores and all six-climate scores: Communication, Decision-Making, Innovation, Advocacy, Evaluation, and Staff Development. The findings also suggested that school climate is directly linked to teachers’ perceptions of a principal’s effectiveness. The authors also found that principals who had high scores on the leadership effectiveness scale (EFF) had schools that were characterized as having good communications, participatory decision making, and high levels of advocacy for teachers.

**The principal’s role.** While teachers work the closest to students, the principal’s primary responsibility is to form a PLC culture that supports the belief in the importance of establishing high standards of student learning for all students. DuFour et al. (2008) suggested that principals must (a) be clear about each teacher’s primary responsibility, (b) disperse leadership throughout their school, and (c) bring coherence to the complexities of schooling by aligning the culture of the school with its core purpose,
academic achievement. Furthermore, he stated, “Schools do not need instructional leaders; they need learning leaders—leaders fixated on evidence of learning” (p. 321). This shift from management to leadership in the PLC impacts not only long-range planning, but also the day-to-day work of the principal. Such work consists of ensuring that team members have time to collaborate and that training and support is provided.

The principal can also use data to support teachers that may struggle. These data mainly display the teacher’s results by comparing them to others. Leaders use data results to assist teachers in studying other processes and, more importantly, to allow teachers to reflect on improving their methods of instruction (Elmore & Burney, 2000). This type of leadership is far different from reviewing individual teachers without studying and comparing student outcomes across subject, grade, and building level. Such leadership allows a building to continue focusing on student learning, whereas charismatic leadership many times does not focus on the needs of students (DuFour et al., 2008).

A principal’s work can be extremely challenging in the PLC, yet if principals can focus on six essential characteristics, they will have a greater opportunity to lead their schools through effective improvement models. DuFour et al. (2008) stated:

These characteristics are: (a) shared mission, vision, commitments, and goals; (b) collaborative teams focused on learning; (c) collective inquiry into the current reality of the school and best practices; (d) an action orientation; (e) a commitment to continuous improvement with continuous improvement processes
embedded into the routine practices of the school; and (f) a focus on results.

(pp. 326-327)

To accomplish this, principals need to disperse leadership throughout the building, to establish opportunities for teachers to meet, and to direct the teachers’ work toward improving student achievement. Principals also need to learn and support the PLC model. This can be accomplished by creating monitoring systems on student learning and providing quick feedback to teachers with data that improve instructional methods and intervention (DuFour et al., 2008). Leaders who identify with symbols and who recognize how values and vision bring cohesiveness and clarity to the organization may establish direction where confusion once existed (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Yet the challenge for both the superintendent and principals is how to establish a sound relationship between the leaders who set a clear vision and commitment focused on student learning for all students (Neuman & Pelchat, 2001; Sparks & Hirsch, 1997; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

**Literature About Superintendent and Principal Relationships**

Bredeson and Kose’s (2007) research suggests that superintendents are becoming more involved with new external demands for accountability through various curriculum and instruction priorities, budget increases to support these priorities, increased attention to data analysis, and priorities in hiring assistants to support their work. In addition to their findings, between 1994 survey responses and 2003 survey responses, there is substantial evidence that there are higher expectations for superintendents to involve themselves much more in the areas of instructional leadership, curriculum development,
and student learning. The most telling indicator is the prominence of data analysis in the area of student learning outcomes in 2003. In the earlier survey, data analysis was not mentioned as a critical task area for superintendents. The authors stated, “We suspect that like accountability, data analysis may have always been a part of the superintendent’s work, but not with an emphasis on learning outcomes” (pp. 15-16).

Some suggest that schools struggle with the balance between individual autonomy and collaborative work, as this may relate to how the complexity of the roles continues to change, thus influencing how the leaders interact (DuFour, 2003; Lashway, 2002; Neuman & Pelchat, 2001). In Sergiovanni’s (2004) research regarding collaboration, he raised the concern that the divisions among the staff in a school district scatter the collective intelligence that exists in their school. The struggle becomes, how do we address the issue when informal communities of practice and institutionalized collaborative cultures are joined? Do we achieve the desired balance between individual autonomy and collaborative work, and how do superintendents find this balance with their principals? The challenge is that superintendents and principals need to have the right skills and knowledge, and they must also know how to establish the right environment to form relationships that allow for their collective intelligence to make decisions that improve student learning (Rallis et al., 2006; Waters & Marzano, 2006). As they collaborate, the values of trust, support, and efficacy are also a major part of building such collaborative relationship, and the process and skills necessary to form such a culture may be established through training (Druskat & Wolff, 2001). “When collaborative cultures work, each person has a role that defines his or her obligations and
is part of a reciprocal relationship that spells out mutual obligations” (Sergiovanni, 2004, p. 50).

City et al.’s (2010) discussed how Elmore’s Network allows for a system-level strategy of school improvement, and that it forces mutual accountability between leaders by building new skills. These new skills build their intelligence to recognize the issue and problems in their own work. In the practice of the rounds, a strong aspect of the work is to separate the person from the practice, hence allowing people to describe their theory of action with evidence and without harsh judgment that may counter building positive relationships (Elmore, 2004, 2007).

**From the Superintendent’s Perspective**

In Cudeiro-Nelsen’s (2002) research regarding distributive leadership, she utilized Fullan’s 1994 and Peterson’s 1987 leadership models as a useful framework to study such practices and structures with superintendents and principals. Fullan (as cited in Cudeiro-Nelsen, 2002) stated, “Effective educational improvement requires that leaders not only develop skills to manage change but also be flexible to learning and discovering new ways of reaching desired outcomes” (p. 6). Furthermore, researchers suggest that superintendents can influence principals in becoming instructional leaders when they incorporate a wide range of actions that principals feel influence their instructional leadership (Fullan, 2006; Sparks & Hirsch, 1997; Waters & Marzano, 2006). The use of the power of the position is as well important. Superintendents must balance their use of power with the motives, values, commitments, and collective purpose of their schools to
promote a functional relationship that focuses on student learning (DuFour et al., 2008; Muhammad, 2009).

Researchers suggest that the best results relate to the superintendent’s selection of specific actions that have the greatest impact for improving the principal’s skills. By establishing a district-wide vision that focuses on student learning and hiring service-oriented central office staff, superintendents model collaborative work in a proactive leadership style by bringing attention and support to the learning goals of the district and driving the work of the principals in leading their schools (Kellogg, 2006; Murphy et. al 1985; Wimpelberg, 1987). Part of this work is to engage principals in promoting high expectations for all students, which is established both by identifying and articulating the fundamental purpose of the school and by having a few clear practices that will help the district to improve student learning (DuFour, 2003). The engagement of principals in values and belief systems that promote high expectations for all students, and the targeting of a variety of professional development and support processes for both superintendents and their principals allows for a defined autonomy that has carefully defined parameters regarding focus, purpose, and direction to improve student learning (City et al., 2010; Elmore, 2004). The key is for superintendents to use student data to create the urgency of change in their principals to focus on possible solutions to academic challenges (Elmore, 2000; Rallis et al., 2006).

Because of the complexity of the superintendency and the demands on the position, the opportunity for distributive leadership in the organization is an important aspect of improving instructional programs (Fullan, 2006; Kellogg, 2006). The
characteristics of distributed leadership, the conditions associated with those that are successful, and the implication on the roles of the superintendent were discussed as well. As researchers have reviewed different perspectives regarding the role of the superintendent, there have been key findings associated with their relationships with others in improving instructional programs. Spillane (2006) stated:

A distributed perspective is first and foremost about leadership practice. This practice is framed in a very particular way, as a product of joint interactions between leaders, followers, and aspects of their situation such as tools and routines. This distributed view of leadership shifts the focus from school principals . . . and other formal and informal leaders to the web of leaders, followers, and their situations that gives form to leadership practice. (p. 3)

Furthermore, the opportunity for transformational leadership may exist when superintendents lead educational reforms in highly collaborative relationships with their building principals (Kellogg, 2006; McBride, 2001; Rallis et al., 2006). The sharing of leadership tasks and building on goals is important, yet utilizing distributive leadership without the proper skills and knowledge may not always be efficient or productive (Kellogg, 2006; McBride, 2001). Therefore, by communicating a district vision focused on big ideas and leveraging their role in school improvement, superintendents exercise their leadership in allowing for the conditions that are necessary to improve relationships with principals so as to collaboratively focus on student learning (Cudeiro-Nelsen, 2002; DuFour, 2003; Kellogg, 2006).
From the Principal’s Perspective

In Fullan et al.’s (2004) research regarding large-scale change and how and what leaders need to do to be effective, the authors found that successful school districts have the ability for the superintendents to communicate a powerful vision, to have a collective purpose, to be able to design strong teams to implement change, and to have the capacity to build within the organization (DuFour et al., 2008; Muhammad, 2009). The conditions to establish such an environment where distributive leadership practices can take place relate to the superintendent’s skills in communicating the mission in a common framework with guiding principles. And when challenges take place, relationships must change to support the needs of the individual schools that balance between individual autonomy and collaboration (Neuman & Pelchat, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2004).

In some cases, principals may not understand the conditions or processes needed to improve student learning in their school. The role of the superintendent may need to be as a supporter in changing principals from managers to instructional leaders. Researchers suggest that successful districts establish and use structures where superintendents and principals engage in meaningful discussions relating to classroom instruction, and where principals are included in the engagement of values and belief systems that promote high expectations and the sharing of roles and responsibilities (Cudeiro-Nelsen, 2002; Kellogg, 2006; Spanneut & Ford, 2008). The classic struggle relates to the use of power. When leaders use power to control and repress, they hold their followers back from the opportunity to transform their organization to a committed state that instills new cultures and new energy that lead schools to new levels (Bennis &
Nanus, 1985; Burns, 1978). Principals many times feel judged by superintendents in their capacities to work with building teachers, and hence the importance of breaking the isolationism that may exist between the roles of the superintendent and their principals (Elmore, 2000).

When reviewing the principal’s perspective on the working environment, researchers suggest that a common culture formed around student achievement, as by a strong instructional vision, creates the necessary leverage to develop effective teams within the school community (McBride, 2001; Newman & Pelchat, 2001). “By definition, leadership and norms go together. Thus the effectiveness of leadership is measured by its effect on cultural norms” (Sergiovanni, 2004, p. 52). When administrators do not promote student learning for all cultures in their schools, they can easily allow for mediocrity to develop, hence the importance of having the necessary skills to understand the leadership actions to improve student learning (Schmoker, 2006). Furthermore, a lack of leadership skills by superintendents with their principals has been found to actually decrease academic achievement (Elmore, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

To produce healthy learning environments, leaders must have the skills and the ability to establish a collective purpose by establishing a primary focus on student achievement for all students (DuFour et al., 2008; Muhammad, 2009). Lieberman (1995) states, “People learn best through active involvement and through thinking about and becoming articulate about what they have learned” (p. 592). Thus, a culture that learns together by reviewing best practices and by creating new problem-solving groups that
focus on inquiry, allows for the opportunity to maximize the professional development of staff members to develop a culture of learning for all (Elmore, 2004, 2007; Lieberman, 1995).

**How the Study Extends the Literature**

The CISD learning model has great potential, yet by conducting the study, I believe that there is great opportunity to extend the research related to the original Network model. Elmore (2007) recognized that superintendents increased their understanding of the necessary skills needed by teachers to improve learning, yet questioned whether the Network would transfer back into the school system. Hence, there is great potential for finding new ideas and concepts that demonstrate whether the model provides the skills to change or enhance the working relationship of the leaders to focus on student achievement.

As described in my literature review, the addition of the principals in the CISD model allows for finding new answers relating to the Network’s foundations and for determining whether the CISD model can create an actual transference of new skills learned by the leaders that changes their working relationship (Elmore, 2004; Lashway, 2002). Recognizing the void, I believe this study may provide new understandings relating to the model’s ability to transform these leaders’ working relationships. There is also the opportunity to extend the literature in regard to the leaders’ ability to create a shared vision, implement distributive leadership principles, and promote professional learning after their participation in the project. Personally, I recognize the importance of strong professional development in our field, hence the overall possibility to discover
each leader’s perspective regarding the effectiveness of the experience on them personally, and in their working relationships.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

Overview of Methods and Rationale

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss research methodology and procedures used in conducting a study of superintendent and principal interactions. The sections in this chapter discuss qualitative research, specifically my design; sampling approach of sites and participants; data collection and analysis procedures; and my role as the researcher. The overall research goal was to examine how participation in the SITC learning experience changed the superintendents’ and principals’ knowledge and beliefs as well as their behavior in three areas: their individual experiences, the working relationship between the two positions, and the way they now think about and encourage student learning. This study focused primarily on three questions related to these interactions and the SITC learning model:

1. How do principals and superintendents describe their changes in knowledge and beliefs, as well as behaviors within their individual working experiences?
2. How do principals and superintendents describe their changes in knowledge and beliefs, as well as behaviors, around their working relationship with the superintendent and principal?
3. How do principals and superintendents describe their changes in knowledge and beliefs, as well as behaviors, around how they think about and encourage student learning?
**Research Design**

“The being of phenomenology involves specific activities to bring oneself into a place where a deep involvement with a phenomenon can occur” (Simpson, 2008, p. 52). For my research design, I used a qualitative methods approach, specifically the phenomenological process. Phenomenology comes from a Greek word that means “to flare up, to show itself, to appear” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). I selected this strategy because, as the researcher, I regarded the importance of listening to the views and experiences of my participants, gathering data from general questions, and advocating for change in bettering the lives of our students and staff (Creswell, 2008).

The original ideas relating to qualitative research were first developed in the late 1800s. The premise in using such a design relates to the importance of the researcher’s views, the context of the setting for the participants, and the importance of bringing meaning to the views of people in education (Creswell, 2008). One of the principal founders of phenomenology, and possibly the most influential 20\textsuperscript{th} century philosopher of the framework, was Edmund Husserl. While his work was derived from a number of his teachers, Husserl structured the concept of intentionality, the notion that consciousness is always consciousness of something, and that the object of this consciousness is always the intentional object. Consciousness is intentionality and this object is constituted for the consciousness in many different ways, through, for instance, perception, memory, retention and pretention, and signification. “For as long as there is consciousness, there is intentionality. And, when there is no longer intentionality, there is no longer consciousness” (Banchetti-Roino, 2004, p. 77).
Husserl believed that phenomenology is the reflective study of the essence of
consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view, and that it takes the
intuitive experience of the phenomena and attempts to take out the essential features from
the experiences and the essence of what we experienced (Smith, 2007). As Laverty
(2003) stated, “Intentionally directing one’s focus, Husserl proposed one could develop a
description of a particular reality” (p. 3). For my study, this process fits perfectly for
describing how superintendents and principals interpret and experience the SITC
program, and how it changed their knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors, as individuals and
in their working relationships. Furthermore, the phenomenological process allows me, as
the researcher, to study superintendents and principals “in their natural settings,
attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people
bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3).

By using the phenomenological research approach, I studied my participants and
had them describe their lived experiences with the SITC learning model. “Understanding
the ‘lived experiences’ marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method, and
the procedure involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and
prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning” (Moustakas,
1994, as cited in Creswell, 2003, p. 15). This process seeks to reveal the meanings
superintendents and principals in this study experience. The true aim is “the fulfillment
of our human nature: to become more fully who we are” (van Manen, 1990, p. 12). Thus,
the study of empirical material, personal experience, interviews, and observations
allowed me to provide meaning regarding the findings of this study, as well as to seek to
understand if there are any changes in the leaders as individuals and in their relationships after the sustained professional development of the SITC learning experience. As the researcher, I believe that the phenomenological approach allowed me to understand their stories and collect data that reflect their experience with the program.

For this phenomenology, I used the hermeneutic approach to explore this topic. The hermeneutic approach is the reflective interpretation of the text. Such a process allows the researcher to find meaningful understandings of the phenomenon as well as where new pre-understandings are found and the questioning of our fixed presuppositions and the ability to ask or formulate new questions can take place (Moustakas, 1994). This approach is grounded in the belief that the lived experience is itself essential to the interpretation process. Furthermore, I used Moustakas’s (1994) description of Ricoeur’s four criteria for the hermeneutic analysis of the process: (a) a fixation on meaning; (b) dissociation at some point from the mental intention of the subject (author); (c) the necessity to interpret the protocols (texts) as a whole, a gestalt of interconnected meanings; and (d) their universal range to address, i.e., their potential for multiple interpretations.

**Sampling Approach**

For this study, I used a purposeful sample, which, as Creswell (2007) stated, “means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125). Thus, it was imperative that the subjects selected were superintendents and their principals who have participated in the SITC learning model for
at least a year, and who believe that both superintendent and principal play a major role in improving instruction and student learning in their schools. The list of participants meeting this standard was reviewed by CISD instructional trainers of the SITC learning model to assure that the participants match the study’s criteria and that they are quality candidates for the study. Furthermore, the purposeful sample was criterion-based, which means that the “sampling involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (Patton, 2001, p. 238). Once the list was endorsed by CISD trainers, the prospective principals were first contacted by phone to request their participation in the study. Once they agreed, I contacted each of their superintendents as well. Each leader was provided a quick overview of the study. After these initial contacts were made, I emailed each subject to explain the goals of the study and to invite him or her to take part in a personal interview lasting approximately 60 minutes.

For my research, I studied five districts, each represented by a superintendent and a school principal who have fully participated together in the SITC learning model. In these five separate pairings, I was able to tell the story of each superintendent and principal, explaining how they understand and interpret the impact of the experience on their knowledge and beliefs around their individual working relationships, and how they think about and encourage student learning. Since I have been part of the specific training, I believe the hermeneutics framework, specifically using the bounded-in-time aspect of the professional development, allowed me to answer my specific research questions. In such a process “our prejudgments are corrected in view of the text, which leads to new prejudgments. The prejudgments that lead to preunderstandings are
constantly at stake; their surrender could also be called a transformation” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 10). Such a process involves the hermeneutic circle through which understanding can occur.

**Pilot Interview Questions**

The pilot of my interview questions assisted me in selecting the final interview questions, observations methods, collecting strategies, and processes to gather the very best data to address my study’s research questions. I followed the procedure outlined in my methods section, practicing each set of questions in interviews with the Calhoun Intermediate School District superintendent and his assistant superintendent of instruction. As part of this process, I enlisted the feedback of my subgroup to “complete and evaluate the instrument” (Creswell, 2008, p. 402). Such feedback allowed me to pull key information and comments to improve the instrument: clarity, fluency of questions, or questions that did not make sense to the participants. This information also allowed me to pull meaning regarding how the superintendents and principals understand and interpret the impact of the SITC program on their interactions.

In the pilot, I used open-ended questions that allowed my participants to “voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings” (Creswell, 2008, p. 225). These pilot questions became my final interview questions (see Appendix A). I recorded each response in a line-by-line numbered transcript, and participants were provided a copy to review, clarify, and express if corrections need to be made. Furthermore, this process allowed interviewees to clarify or add more to their description. Each participant was asked the same follow-up questions:
1. Does the transcription attached accurately reflect your experience with the SITC learning model?

2. Is there anything you feel I should add or clarify about your experience with the SITC learning model?

3. After reading the transcript, what concept, phrases, and/or philosophical statement stands out about your experience with the SITC learning model?

Such qualitative research allowed my participants to fully provide their personal story, specifically recognizing that their personal statement reflects their experiences, especially as it relates to their personal experience with the SITC learning model.

**Data Collection**

To access each site, I used a consent form (Appendix B) that provided an overview of the study, procedures by which data would be collected, design review that focuses on the confidentiality of the participants, and an overview of possible risks for those that participate (Creswell, 2007). In this process, the principals were the actual starting point to gain access to the site. Only after they felt comfortable and willing to participate in the study did I follow the process with their superintendents. In this case, they were the gatekeepers of the study for their district (Creswell, 2007). I also exhibited a high level of interest and energy when explaining why this research is important. Marshall and Rossman (2006) stated, “The energy that comes from a high level of personal interest (called bias in traditional research) is infectious and quite useful for gaining access” (p. 74). Most importantly, within the relationships established with these superintendents, there was a special focus on ethics and the understanding that the
relationships could change. Therefore, I was open to any questions and/or concerns related to the study. Throughout the study, I took care to fulfill all the requirements of Western Michigan University’s Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) (Appendix C).

During my visit to each district, I was unobtrusive and respected each district’s norms of how they function. Marshall and Rossman (2006) discussed the importance of protecting each person’s social and professional status in the organization. Remaining confidential, social, and respectful must be the overall approach. “The competent research proposal, then, anticipates issues of negotiating entry, reciprocity, role maintenance, and receptivity and, at the same time, adheres to ethical principles” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 82).

I also focused not only on the people, but the settings, events, artifacts, and processes that took place during their interactions. Maxwell (2005) stated, “It is important to line up these parameters with the research questions as well, and to consider whether your choices are doing a representative, time efficient job of answering them” (p. 87). Thus, the use of purposeful sampling of times, settings, and individuals who could provide information related to my research questions allowed me to meet the study’s criteria and respect the norms of each district.

While there are a number of ways to gather data, my phenomenological study primarily used interviews. In a phenomenological study, these data are collected from first-person reports of life experiences related to the SITC learning model (Moustakas, 1994). From my pilot study, I selected the appropriate methods, processes, and sites to
address my research questions. The overall data were collected from the five districts. These districts were purposefully sampled because it is important that the participants and documents contribute the most meaning to my study.

Once the interview schedule was finalized with the subjects, the individual leaders signed the consent form and then I interviewed, individually, first the principal and then the superintendent for each of the five districts. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, and, if needed, a second interview took place for clarification purposes. I conducted the interviews at a mutually agreed upon location. I used recognized techniques for designing my questions, such as the interview work of Rossman and Rallis (1997). The questions were semi-structured and grounded in phenomenological methods. It is important that the data collected describe the “what” of the experience, so there is a precise description of the phenomenology and “how” the participants make meaning of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

During the interview, I used recording devices to guarantee accuracy of the records, permitting me to focus on the leaders and their responses. My questions were open-ended and purposely selected to address the research questions and subquestions of my study. If needed, I used established probes to ensure I had the opportunity to gather information reflective of their experiences. Maxwell (2005) stated:

The development of good interview questions (and observational strategies) requires creativity and insight, rather mechanical conversion of research questions into an interview guide or observation schedule, and depends fundamentally on
how the interview questions and observational strategies will actually work in practice. (p. 92)

Special forms that depict the times of observations and interviews, documentation gathered, the confidentiality of the participants, and possible audiovisual materials were used to structure my work. I also transcribed the interview after each session.

Data Analysis

As a qualitative researcher, I approached the topic through the use of my conceptual framework and the deductive process from literature regarding (a) creating a shared vision (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Fullan et al., 2004); (b) distributive leadership practices (Burns, 1978; Gordon, 2002; Kellogg, 2006; Walters & Marzano, 2006); and (c) how the leaders encourage student learning by using the professional learning cultures structure (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Muhammed, 2009; Sergiovanni, 2004).

Overall, this process assisted me in strategically gathering information from the interviews, analyzing data into categories, reviewing the data to look for generalizations or theories from these themes, and making generalizations to past experiences and literature (Creswell, 2003). As Creswell stated, “These themes or categories are developed into broad patterns, theories, or generalizations that are then compared with personal experiences or with existing literature on the topic” (p. 133). The literature review was my conceptual framework to analyze these themes after interviewing the participants, and I used Creswell’s suggested six-step process to analyze the qualitative data.
Creswell’s Six-Step Process

For this phenomenology study, the data analysis needed to be extremely focused and purposeful. Step one of the process entailed transcribing interviews and sorting primary data into different types or themes. Through such a process I analyzed the participants’ significant statements, placed them into meaning units, and developed an essence of their description using the hermeneutic process (circle) (Moustakas, 1994). In Cudeiro-Nelsen’s (2002) qualitative study regarding superintendent leadership, she discussed the use of guidelines outlined by both Seidman (1991) and Rossman and Rallis (1997) that allowed for the organizing and transcribing of the interviews, observations, and artifacts. I used a similar process in the organization of data into categories that represented my theoretical lens.

In the second step of the process, I read through all of the data to understand the general themes relating to the information. I took notes on my initial interpretations associated with my general impressions of the information. As Creswell (2003) suggested, it is important to notice the tone of the ideas and the general impressions of the information.

For the third step, the actual coding process of organizing the material took place. For this hermeneutic study, I used my theoretical lens. This lens specifically centered on the leadership practices of shared vision, distributive leadership styles, and professional learning cultures. Such a framework was based and supported by the literature review. This process permitted me to code the data collected into recognized themes, with the analysis focusing on how the participants viewed their personal experience, the unit of
analysis, and how leadership theories define the way superintendents and principals understand and interpret the impact of the SITC learning model. By interpreting my findings through my literature review, I was able to suggest how this study contributes, supports, or contradicts prior research regarding superintendents and principals. Such findings may compare with concepts found in other studies or literature, “or it may combine personal views with an educational or social science term or idea” (Creswell, 2008, p. 266).

In step four, I coded the material into chunks. “It involves taking text data or pictures, segmenting sentences (or paragraphs) or images into categories, and labeling those categories with a term, often a term based in the actual language of the participant” (Creswell, 2003, p. 192). The settings, people, and themes must be pulled out of the study by thoroughly reviewing these terms and events. To reduce these events to themes, I was careful in placing such data into neat silos (Creswell, 2007). I also used the Scissor Sort Technique. Such a process entails multiple reviews of the transcript(s), the coding of text, the cutting apart of the transcript(s), and a final analysis by two or more researchers to decode the data collected into common themes (Sharndasani, Stewart, & Rook, 2007). I considered Creswell’s (2003) suggestions regarding the importance of reading all transcriptions carefully, listing topics, viewing information by its underlying meaning, clustering topics, abbreviating codes, and categorizing by grouping topics that relate to each other. I was also sure to note topics that were unrelated to my literature review yet could hold valuable data referencing my participants’ experiences with the SITC learning model.
To preserve the purpose of studying the phenomenon in my study, the SITC experience, I analyzed separately the individual lived experiences, as well as how the experience has changed the working relationship of the superintendents and principals of the five districts. In step four of the process, I used my coding to generate a description of the setting and/or people, as well as categories or themes, for analysis into a general description. Moustakas (1994) suggested that these descriptions need to be verbatim examples of textual descriptions of the phenomenon from the participants.

In the fifth step, I used a cross-case synthesis, in which a designed word table can “look for similarities and differences among the cases” (Creswell, 2007, p. 163). Overall patterns and comparisons of data to place into categories and to analyze relationships between terms were important. Listing and preliminary grouping, reduction and elimination, the clustering of themes, the recording of relevant statements, and the construct of the participant’s data develop a “composite of description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

The sixth step was a final interpretation or meaning of the data. “Moreover, when qualitative researchers use a theoretical lens, they can form interpretations that call for action agendas for reform and change” (Creswell, 2003, p. 195). New ideas and new questions could be raised by the data that were not foreseen in my research. Creswell referenced these as new lessons learned, related to the researcher’s personal interpretations, and “couched in the individual understanding that the inquirer brings to the study from her or his own culture, history, and experience” (pp. 194-195).
Inductive Analysis

Lastly, I considered the possibilities of the inductive findings from my research. “Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis” (Patton, 1990, p. 306). The purpose of this process is to condense the data collected into a summary format. This allowed the possibility of links between my research objectives and my actual findings. Such links must be defensible as well. The opportunity may exist to “develop a model or theory about the underlying structure of experiences or processes which are evident in the text (raw data)” (Thomas, 2003, p. 2). My initial condensing of the interviews allowed for the establishment of links to my research objectives, and a summary of such findings allowed me to develop a new model or theory about the underlying experiences of the leaders in the SITC learning model (Thomas, 2003).

Validating Findings – Review

Recognizing the fact that, as the researcher, I was the primary source for data collection, I made every attempt to limit the impact of any bias that could exist. Because of my knowledge of and relationships with my subjects, I recognized that my data analysis was one of the key challenges of this qualitative study (Creswell, 2003). To ensure the accuracy of information gathered from the interviews and statements made during data collection, I used member-checking strategies to negate misinterpretations and bias (Creswell, 2008). This allowed me to review my descriptions and to make sure that there was accuracy in my judgments. As part of this process, I also used CISD
trainers to determine the accuracy of my data, and utilized processes and questions outlined by Creswell (2008).

To further improve the accuracy and validity of my findings, I used triangulation methods to study generalization of multiple sources of data to a single point and reduce bias (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). I compared superintendents’ interviews with their peers, principals’ interviews with their peers, and data similarities and differences between the superintendents and principals across the five districts. The process included the interpreting of the data sources of the individual interviews with the paired interviews and a cross-case review. This method allowed me to find evidence that corroborated a theme or idea, hence supporting an accurate description of my findings. I also sent interviewees a final typed copy of their interview via email. All subjects were asked to read the transcript to check for meaning and accuracy. After reading the transcript, subjects were asked to provide a concept, phrase, and/or philosophical statement that epitomized their experience with the SITC learning model. This process allowed me to improve the accuracy of my findings and reduce my bias as a researcher (Creswell, 2003).

Such analysis ensured that my study is more accurate because of the multiple sources of this information and the processes used to describe my findings.

**My Role as the Researcher**

Since this phenomenological research study is taken from my reports of these life experiences, it was critical that I was constantly aware of my own “prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). As a superintendent, I
was extremely excited about the prospect of studying my peers and their influence on instructional leadership with their principals, yet I was prepared to find new knowledge and understandings by setting aside my predisposition and knowledge of the role of superintendent. At one time I enjoyed the role of principal and thought of myself as a leader who focused on instructional and learning strategies that improved achievement. When thinking of my current position as a researcher, yet also a superintendent, Moustakas’s discussions regarding the term *Epoche*, the Greek word meaning to abstain, clearly puts into context the importance of my ability to disconnect my current leadership role and the importance of clearing my thoughts about my occupation with my research. “We suspend everything that interferes with fresh vision. We simply let what is there stand as it appears, from many angles, perspectives, and signs” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86).

By using CISD trainers, I believe my purposeful sample accurately reflected the subjects I needed to study. Before I interviewed the participants, this process assisted me in selecting a group that matched my study’s criteria. The trainers’ observation of the superintendents and principals, especially as they monitored and adjusted the training sessions to the needs of the group, allowed me to interview the best selection of candidates.

Because I know each superintendent and principal, I needed to work diligently to keep their confidence and trust during this process. My positionality, or personal interest, could not bias my study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). As a superintendent, I recognized that I could not influence the interview process. An initial interview with the each superintendent took place before contacting principals. While my topic is not of a
sensitive nature, it was one where both the superintendent and principal could feel that the effectiveness of their leadership could be called into question. Such observations of behavior were placed in field notes on the behavior and activities of individuals at the research site, and strict confidentiality was held throughout the process.

Today’s superintendents feel extreme pressure to make their districts the very best they can be. My background in education and past and current research have established my thinking regarding leadership in education today. I too recognize the many challenges my colleagues face, and I needed to be careful to protect and respect their roles as leaders. Recognizing this, I needed to commit an extensive amount of time in my peers’ districts. I had to establish trusting relationships so these gatekeepers recognized that my research was valuable to them and that I, as an outsider, was not a threat or disruption to their districts. Creswell (2007) discussed the fact that such research does not have firm guidelines and that these types of studies are always evolving and changing. I recognized that such changes could be a disruption to the participants’ current responsibilities and roles. Clearly, I needed to convince each subject involved that I was not a threat to their position or their district, and that I was not there to find fault in their work or the norms or traditions that influence how they work.

My hope is that my research may allow superintendents and principals to reflect on their interactions and on how they might improve their focus on instruction. Creswell (2007) stated, “Giving back to participants for their time and efforts in our projects—reciprocity—is important, and we need to review how participants will gain from our studies” (p. 44). Therefore, recognizing that this work needs to be sensitive to the
vulnerability of my subjects, it was important that I not create any tension as I researched in these settings. Since I will most likely continue to work in my present district, I too needed to be extremely cognizant of my research role with peers and how it could influence my relationship with them after the study was complete. Furthermore, a strict respect for following a code of ethics by using informed consent, opposing deception, respecting privacy and confidentiality, and ensuring accuracy in the description of telling the stories of the participants was important (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

**Delimitations of Study**

In regard to this study, delimitations provided the boundaries and clarified what my research did and did not investigate. Delimitations allow the researcher to “narrow the scope of the study” (Creswell, 2003, p.147). For this research, I narrowed my boundaries to the following parameters: (a) participants were superintendents and principals in public schools, not other educational leaders who may have participated in the professional development experience; (b) participants participated in the CISD SITC learning model; (c) participants selected voluntarily shared their experiences as participants in the learning model; and (d) I focused specifically on describing the experience and meaning-making of the participants.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

Overview

This chapter contains the description of my subjects, an analysis of their interviews, and the themes developed from the interviews of five matched sets of superintendents and principals. I used a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological approach to study my subjects by collecting data from open-ended interviews. The interpretations of my findings were the result of inductive data analysis and data reduction, as described by van Manen (1990), in order to learn the leaders’ lived experience with the SITC learning model.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how superintendents and principals interpret and experience a sustained professional development process focusing on instruction and student learning, a form of the Superintendents in the Classroom (SITC) learning program. Specifically, I examined in what ways participation in the SITC learning experience changed the superintendents’ and principals’ knowledge and beliefs and behavior in three areas: their individual experiences, the working relationship between superintendent and principal, and the way they now think about and encourage student learning.
Description of Unit of Analysis

Subjects

For this study, I used a purposeful sample. All of the subjects were selected sets of superintendents and principals who work together and participated in the SITC learning model for at least a year, and who believed that they played a major role in improving instruction and student learning in their schools. A preliminary list of 26 potential participants of the SITC learning model was reviewed by the Calhoun Intermediate School District (CISD) assistant superintendent of instruction. This specialist, who was the primary lead trainer of the learning model, provided final approval of the five paired superintendents and principals (10 candidates), assuring that the final list of participants matched the study’s criteria and the subjects would be optimal for the study. Furthermore, this was a purposeful criterion-based sample, meaning the “sampling involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (Patton, 2001, p. 238).

Once I had the endorsed final list, I contacted the selected principals in each district by phone to provide information about the study and ask if they were interested in learning more about participating. After learning of their interest and their verbal willingness to participate in the study, I contacted their respective superintendents. The purpose of asking the principal first was to make sure that the positional power of the superintendent did not force a decision to participate on the principal. In all conversations during the process with the principals, none raised a concern that participation in the study would cause any disruption in their working relationship with
their superintendent. After these contacts were made, I emailed each subject a summary of the goals of the study and their official invitation to participate. Human Subject Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) protocols of consent, overview of the study, procedures for collecting the data, and the possible risks to participate were discussed before the interviews took place. I interviewed the principal first, and then followed the same process with the superintendent.

All of the chosen 10 subjects participated and no questions on the interview protocol were omitted. Furthermore, the following coding system delineated principals and superintendents by letters and numbers: P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5 for principals, and S1, S2, S3, S4, and S5 for superintendents. Numbering, rather than using pseudonyms, allowed for confidential analysis of the data to protect the participants in both their own district and within the CISD. I also used masculine pronouns to eliminate any identification, since only a few females participated in the study.

**District One**

Principal 1 is 40 years old with 14 years of overall experience in education, with the last two years in his current position as a first-time administrator. Superintendent 1 is 45 years old with 23 years of overall experience in education—15 years of overall administrative experience, including three years in his current position. Both leaders have been working together for less than three years. The district resides in a suburban setting.
**District Two**

Principal 2 is 35 years old with 14 years of overall experience in education, with the last three years in his current position as a first-time administrator. Superintendent 2 is 60 years old with 39 years of overall experience in education—19 years of overall administrative experience, including three years in his current position. The leaders have been in their same roles for the last three years. The district resides in a rural setting.

**District Three**

Principal 3 is 42 years old with 16 years of overall experience in education, four years of administrative experience, with three years in his current position. Superintendent 3 withheld his age, yet has 33 years of overall experience in education, 23 years of overall administration, and three years of administration in his current position. The leaders have been in their same roles for the last three years. The district resides in an urban setting.

**District Four**

Principal 4 is 50 years old with 28 years of overall experience in education, 18 years of administrative experience, with 13 years in his current position. Superintendent 4 is 54 years old with 30 years of overall experience in education, 22 years of overall administrative experience, and five years of administration in his current position. For this grouping, this principal has the highest number of years in his current position for all principals, and the superintendent has five years in this position. Together, these two leaders have the longest working relationship of all the grouped participants. The district resides in a suburban setting.
District Five

Principal 5 is 46 years old with 24 years of overall experience in education, 12 years of administrative experience, with four years in his current position. Superintendent 5 is 56 years old with 25 years in administration, and four in his current position. The leaders have been in their same roles for the last four years. The district resides in a rural setting.

Data Analysis

Data Collection Procedures

The interviews for this study were completed in a one month window. As per the process, the subjects chose the locations of the interviews. Most interviews were completed in their home district, yet a few selected my office as a neutral site. The interviews took approximately one hour to conduct. Through the process, interviews were recorded. I transcribed them by using Express Scribe transcription software. All interviews were transcribed verbatim so as to accurately reflect each subject’s experience with the phenomenon.

To triangulate the data, I sent interviewees a final typed copy of their interview via email. All subjects were asked to read the transcript to check for meaning and accuracy. After reading the transcript, subjects were asked to provide a concept, phrase, and/or philosophical statement that epitomized their experience with the SITC learning model. All responded to the meaning and accuracy of the transcript and they provided a final statement regarding their experience. Only minor changes were made to a couple of transcripts.
Analysis of Interviews

My initial review of the data found 25 similar concepts and/or phrases from my open-ended interviews. The analysis process was conducted in six primary stages. Through this analysis, six strong themes from my subjects were identified, including some subthemes. To answer my research questions, I used an inductive approach, often referred to as an emergent analysis. That is, I did not answer the questions one by one, but rather analyzed the interviews to find themes, and from those themes answered my questions. By using Creswell’s (2008), Foss and Waters’ (2007), Moustakas’ (1994) and Patton’s (1990) processes and suggestions as a template for my work, I was able to analyze the participants’ responses to my open-ended interview questions.

I conducted my analysis by first transcribing verbatim each interview to further develop a relationship with the data and to accurately reflect my participants’ stories. As I listened to my subjects and analyzed their experiences through the phenomenological process, I was careful to be aware that I may have prejudices or assumptions regarding my findings, and that I needed to approach the reading of transcripts with an open mind. Therefore, I used Patton’s (1990) description of following the Epoché process, meaning I worked to suspend my judgment regarding the initial findings and my thoughts relating to both the experience and the participants in my research.

Because my database was small, less than 500 pages, I next decided to analyze the data by multiple readings (Creswell, 2008). The open-ended interview questions allowed for in-depth inquiry of my participants’ experiences. As I read the transcripts, I made some notes in the margins to assist in recalling key ideas. As part of this process, I
tracked each leader by using five markers. Each district was labeled with a common color, yet principals were labeled with one line and superintendents received two lines. The lines were drawn throughout each transcript and I inserted line numbers as well.

For the third stage, I identified my unit of analysis so as to code the transcripts. I specifically used my research questions as a scanning device for coding data to answer my research questions (Foss & Waters, 2007). These were words, statements, and phrases that were similar in meaning and related to my research questions, as well as what I found as significantly important or new finds (Creswell, 2008). As I went through the transcripts that contained my unit of analysis, I labeled them and then gave them a code in the margins. By using Moustakas’ (1994) hermeneutic approach in exploring my topic, I was careful to be reflective when reading the narratives so new understandings could be found and I could question my presuppositions. I wanted to be sure that I could describe how superintendents and principals interpret their experience with the SITC learning program. In this way, I believe I was open to new ideas by being aware of my prior feelings and thoughts regarding the stories shared by my subjects.

In the fourth stage, I cut apart the transcripts with codes and placed them into similar piles, approximately 25. These initial groupings reflected my participants’ descriptions of their experience with the SITC learning model. By rereading each grouping of data, I made sure the codes were placed in piles that had similar characteristics. These piles also reflected the key phrases and statements associated with the changes relating to the working experiences of the individual leaders, the
relationships between the two leaders, and the changes in how the leaders thought about and encourage student learning after experiencing the SITC learning model.

In the fifth stage, I worked to place these piles into broad themes. These broad phrases, concepts, and terms allowed for more of an inductive approach to happen during my coding process. As Miles and Huberman (1994) stated, “A more inductively oriented researcher, by contrast, would focus initially on a more general domain or macro-concept” (p. 155). These key phrases were all very broad terms in research, thus allowing for emergent coding to take place when reading the transcripts.

In subsequent reviews of these units, my sixth stage, I reduced the broad themes into similar themes. The interpretation of these themes was completed by inductive analysis and data reduction. The process was to purposefully find themes in the interview transcripts based on emergent analysis and to use the Epoché process to suspend all efforts that may cause bias in the analysis work (Patton, 1990).

Through transcription, multiple reading of the data, coding, cutting of the transcripts, organizing data into broad themes, and then narrowing these broad themes into similar themes, six themes emerged from the descriptive data collected from interviews with the principals and superintendents. These themes reflect my participants’ descriptions of their experience with the learning model. Clearly, the hermeneutics framework allowed me to study the SITC learning model in a way that corrected my prejudgments regarding the experience, which has led to new prejudgments or the finding of themes from my analysis (Moustakas, 1994). These themes are presented below.
Emergent Themes

As Table 1 shows, I found six major themes by using both inductive and deductive analysis. The six major themes found were:

- Leaders developed new views of instructional best practices.
- New working relationships developed between the leaders and their teachers.
- Leaders adapted the SITC learning model’s PLC processes.
- Leaders shared personal reflections on the value of working with their peers and colleagues.
- The SITC training changed how the paired leaders work together.
- Leaders adapted the SITC training’s best practices onto their administrative team working processes.

Table 1 contains detailed demographic information for the superintendents and principals, and a breakdown of each response related to the six themes.

Theme 1: Leaders Developed New Views of Instructional Best Practices

In their descriptions, all of the leaders shared how the SITC learning model helped transform their thinking regarding effective teaching strategies and processes. This is striking because all of the leaders had at least 14 years of experience in education and they all shared how significant this training had been to create such a change.

Through my analysis, I also learned six insights concerning this theme with these leaders: (a) student engagement, (b) assessments, (c) narrowing classroom outcomes, (d) separating preconceived notions when observing instruction, (e) focusing on students during observations, and (f) how the model built improved their skills and instructional
Table 1

*Demographic and Thematic Distribution Among Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal/Superintendent</th>
<th>P1</th>
<th>S1</th>
<th>P2</th>
<th>S2</th>
<th>P3</th>
<th>S3</th>
<th>P4</th>
<th>S4</th>
<th>P5</th>
<th>S5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years as an Educator</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in Administration</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in Current Position</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Leaders developed new views of instructional best practices.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. New working relationships developed between the leaders and their teachers.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Leaders adapted the SITC learning model’s PLC processes.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Leaders shared personal reflections on the value of working with their peers/colleagues.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The SITC training changed how the paired leaders work together.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Leaders adapted the SITC training’s best practices onto their administrative team working processes.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
confidence so they could give better feedback to teachers and principals. Table 2 provides a distribution of participants’ responses regarding theme 1 as well as each subtheme.

**Table 2**

*Theme 1 Distribution Among Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal/Superintendent</th>
<th>P1</th>
<th>S1</th>
<th>P2</th>
<th>S2</th>
<th>P3</th>
<th>S3</th>
<th>P4</th>
<th>S4</th>
<th>P5</th>
<th>S5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Leaders developed new views of instructional best practices.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Assessment</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Outcomes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Preconceived notions</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Focusing on students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Confidence to support others</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Through my investigation, I found three principals who discussed learning new skills in improving student engagement; one of the three included the use of sound assessments, and a second of the three discussed how he had a new confidence to support others. Of the remaining two principals, one principal described the importance of improving formative assessments, while the other shared how the training had helped him better understand the importance of narrowing instructional outcomes for a single lesson.

In regard to the superintendents, all of them felt that they had a much better understanding of quality instruction and what it looked like. Four superintendents
discussed how the process had increased their instructional confidence so they could give
better feedback to teachers and principals, with one of those superintendents also sharing
how he is observing students more when visiting classrooms. Another superintendent
provided an example of how the process had changed his preconceived notions on
instruction.

For district three, I found that the paired leaders both were able to describe how the training had provided each of them with a new confidence in helping teachers improve.

**Student engagement.** When discussing the changes that he now experiences after the SITC training, principal 4 confirmed my findings regarding student engagement with a significant statement:

I think that’s the biggest thing that I got out of SITC was how we engage students in the math and the thinking and the problem solving and that it’s not done isolation; it’s done in groups of kids sharing and discussing and struggling with problems and looking at multiple avenues in which to solve the problems…to better prepare to go on in any type of career field.

**Assessment.** The following comment from this same principal also confirms my findings regarding new instructional skills and understanding good instruction and assessment design:

The differences I saw in instruction. Some were teacher led and students sit and get. And in other situations it was—I am going to call it an interactive type lecture. The differences that were out there in the classrooms in which kids are
exposed to as you look at it . . . is going to make a big difference on performance on assessments, on data assessments, on assessments where kids have to actually think and apply what they know as compared to just solve the problem and come up with the right answer.

Principal 2’s statement confirms my findings regarding new skills related to formative assessments:

I knew about formative assessments before I went into the SITC group, but the whole experience looking at the questions that the teachers are asking . . . that was certainly new to me. I know yes and no questions are low level questions . . . and that we need to get them thinking a little bit more, but I could really tell from going from teacher to teacher that there is some real power in that . . . who could ask the right questions and . . . when you can see it. This was new to me.

**Narrowing outcomes.** Principal 5’s statement is an example of how the SITC learning model reminded him of the importance for teachers to go from very broad instructional outcomes to narrowing down their instruction to more of a specific task or single outcome for each lesson. He commented:

I don’t know, maybe an induction or whatever, but the ability to bring something down to a very minute small level and then realize good amount of specific . . . realize you could do much less of each skill being taught each day to extrapolate that, but the skill of zeroing on something very small knowing, yes, it is just one little thing, it is ok to talk about one little thing. Because these are the bricks of the whole building are made of . . .
Preconceived notions. In regard to preconceived notions, superintendent 1, with over 23 years of experience, provided an excellent example of how the quality of the training had changed his fixed notions regarding instruction. When asked about what event stood out regarding the SITC learning experience, the leader stated:

Writing down our observations and what that would look like and leaving your assumptions and your preconceived notions and opinions out of the observation . . . all of that out, that was really difficult. It is hard to sit there and my mind go . . . oh, that was a good question or instead of saying what the question was . . . wow, if after all of these years I can have something so significant that really could impact my observations of teachers that quickly, then this is good stuff.

That was definitely an eye opener for me.

Focusing on students during observations. Superintendent 2 gave an example of how the SITC training had allowed him to understand the importance of increasing the observation of students over teachers when visiting classrooms:

I think the most impact came from going in and viewing more of what the students were doing and not what the teachers were doing. You know, my visits to the classroom are almost always focused on the teachers and just looking at it another perspective was really good for me.

Instructional confidence. Superintendent 4 provided an excellent example of how the SITC learning model increased his instructional confidence so he could give positive feedback to his teachers:
SITC gave me more skills in terms of questioning, not only what the teachers should question and how to question, but how I should question the teacher. And more importantly, how I don’t need to exert pressure on them, but to help open doors and maybe break down barriers.

Also in regard to confidence, both leaders from district 3 provided an example of how the training had allowed them to better to relate and support their teachers. Principal 3 stated, “So, the training has been really interesting and it’s a completely different way of talking with staff because I am not criticizing.” Superintendent 3 gave the example how the training had allowed him to better support others:

The learning model was very impactful on my ability to be more knowledgeable and skillful in helping guide principals. The largest impact was the hands-on dialog and reflection of practice with other educators that really influenced by knowledge and skill level.

**Theme 2: New Working Relationships Developed Between the Leaders and Their Teachers**

In their descriptions, all of the leaders discussed how the SITC learning model transformed their relationships with their teachers. While the SITC learning model and its training processes function similarly to a PLC, I found this striking that all of the leaders shared how they were using some of these new skills with their teachers.

Through my analysis, I also learned two insights concerning the new working relationships between the leaders and their teachers: (a) improved conversations, and (b) improved evaluation practices. Table 3 provides a distribution of participants’ responses regarding theme 2 as well as each subtheme.
Table 3

Theme 2 Distribution Among Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal/Superintendent</th>
<th>P1</th>
<th>S1</th>
<th>P2</th>
<th>S2</th>
<th>P3</th>
<th>S3</th>
<th>P4</th>
<th>S4</th>
<th>P5</th>
<th>S5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. New working relationships developed between the leaders and their teachers.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Improved conversations</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Evaluations</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Through my analysis, I found examples of four of the five principals, including the paired leaders of district five, discussing how the conversations had changed with their teachers. In regard to evaluations, I found two of the superintendents, and the paired leaders of both district one and district two, commenting on how the SITC learning model had been used in the evaluation process.

**Conversations.** When discussing the changes that he now experiences after the SITC training regarding distributive leadership, principal 1 confirmed my findings regarding changed conversations by sharing a reflection he had with one of his teachers:

He is a powerful teacher in the building, meaning that the communication is very direct. I am very direct with her but she also needs to work on our initiatives because she can be a thorn . . . so SITC has helped me to communicate better with her and my staff.

When asked if the SITC training had changed his thoughts regarding instruction, principal 3 also confirmed my findings regarding improved conversations with the following statement:
So that’s been really interesting and it’s completely different way of talking with the staff. Because I’m not criticizing … I’m not qualifying them based on the limited content knowledge. Talking about what are you doing to make these kids want to learn and this is definitely changed a lot of what we do. That’s about culture, rapport, relationships, and rigor and depth; those are things that that’s the passion part of teaching. Having teachers talk about that passion part with some real meat. It really has changed the conversations. Makes it way more exciting.

Principal 4 as well had strong statements supporting my findings. When asked if the training had changed his job, he stated:

It’s changed the conversations that I have with my teachers in regards to what they are having kids do centered on their student performance . . . so I understand where they are coming from and I know how to ask questions that I think better them in terms of their lessons and instruction.

From district five, both of the leaders provided an example that confirms my findings regarding changed conversations. Principal 5 also shared how the SITC learning model had changed the conversations with his teachers, specifically when working to create a new shared vision. His statement confirms my findings as well:

In our district it [SITC] definitely became part of that . . . part of the district visioning process. It became an intentional conversation in staff meetings and district-wide meetings. When the SITC came to our district, we had done a lot of work on the vision and mission stuff, and then our superintendent got active in
SITC and that involved us as principals, and that gave a lot of credibility to that process and incredible feedback to that. This supported our [original work].

Superintendent 5, when asked if the SITC model had changed his role as a leader, also gave an example of how the training changed conversations:

Well, in our district it really did. I knew what to look for and I now knew the conversations I needed to have with my teachers. I was able to do that a lot of ways in professional development with teachers . . . It added an educated credibility to it.

**Improved evaluations practices.** When asking superintendent 3 about how the SITC learning model relates to creating a shared vision, he provided an example that confirms my findings regarding evaluations:

To have some commonality and some similarity between the actual practices or work that the district is focused on and that just brings focus to the work that is research-based. It makes sense to break our own paradigms and habits. I think it that SITC has been a helpful way to help us do a better job of the evaluation. The point of this relates to the culture of bringing people to the same process with common practices.

Interestingly, I also found both of the paired leaders from districts one and two discussed how the SITC learning model helped to improve evaluation processes.

Principal 1 stated:

The model helps with trust, as long as you don’t backhand them with it. Because you could easily backhand them with it and say, oh, but during instructional
I witnessed this and didn’t go well and I am nicking you on your evaluation. I teeter with that . . . coaching vs. evaluation (how can I help them improve).

The superintendent from this district provided similar reflections of how to improve evaluation practices. He shared how the process had allowed him to better help teachers in improving their instruction by giving them the right support to change. When asked if SITC experience had changed his role as a superintendent, he specifically discussed he had learned the importance of improving practices in the evaluation process by giving support to the lowest performing teachers in his district. He stated:

I want to be in every single one of those bottom 30 classrooms because I want to know why they’re in the bottom 30 and I feel this training has given me some confidence to really go in with an open mind. I’m going to go in and find out for myself if they should be on the list . . . so I think that is what I am excited about . . . it is not about we are just going to hurry up and fire the bottom 30%; I want to see if they can change.

While by identifying weak teachers may sound aggressive, I thought that this was a unique statement from this superintendent, as well as a positive reflection of how the SITC learning model had changed his purpose as a leader. The following statement further shows how he is considering using peer-to-peer in the coaching process to help the bottom 30%: “I want to make sure we have given them all of the support to change and I think these observations and these activities [SITC] demonstrate even peer–to-peer works. This is really going to be helpful.”
For district two, the principal responded to the question of whether the SITC learning model influenced PLC structures in his district. He stated, “The SITC PLC is when I am evaluating teachers I have to make sure it is more of a clinical type thing, not you are a cool teacher.” His superintendent also provided an example of how the SITC training allowed for improving evaluation processes:

You have to look at those that aren’t being successful and do what is ever necessary to get them moving and so SITC has benefitted me . . . just from the standpoint of seeing a different perspective other than just the evaluation agenda.

That has been very helpful.

Theme 3: Leaders Adapted the SITC Learning Model’s PLC Processes

The original focus of the SITC learning model was to improve each superintendent’s knowledge and skills in the area of mathematics instruction, thereby allowing them to lead others in promoting new structural changes that increase student achievement. When studying the relationship changes in my leaders, I was surprised to find that the addition of principals in the process had also changed how the leaders transferred the SITC skills into supporting other programs and processes back in their school districts. The key to these findings related to responses from the interview questions that referenced the leaders’ thoughts on how the experienced changed and/or assisted them in improving PLCs, creating a shared vision, and/or distributing leadership. My intent was to study if these concepts had changed the relationships between the principal and superintendent, and I was excited to hear from their experiences on how this training was transferred back into their home districts as well.
In their descriptions, superintendents and principals shared how the SITC learning model was adapted back onto their districts’ school improvement processes. Through my analysis, I also learned of four key insights relating to this theme: (a) building trust, (b) using a common language, (c) peer-to-peer use with other subjects, and (d) visioning processes.

Through my analysis, I found all of the leaders providing examples, sometimes in more than one subtheme, of their adaption of the model back into their own district. I specifically found two principals and one superintendent who used the model to build trust; one principal and the paired leaders from district three, who shared how the model was used as a common language; one principal and one superintendent who provided an example of peer-to-peer work as well as the paired leaders from both districts four and five; and the paired leaders from district five, who discussed how the model was used for visioning processes in their district. In their examples, superintendents and principals provided descriptions of using the process both at the building level and across the district. Table 4 provides a distribution of participants’ responses regarding theme 3 as well as each subtheme.
Table 4

*Theme 3 Distribution Among Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal/Superintendent</th>
<th>P1</th>
<th>S1</th>
<th>P2</th>
<th>S2</th>
<th>P3</th>
<th>S3</th>
<th>P4</th>
<th>S4</th>
<th>P5</th>
<th>S5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Leaders adapted the SITC learning model’s PLC processes.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Building trust</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Using a common language</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Peer-to-peer and other subjects</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Visioning</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Building trust.** When asked if the SITC learning model had created any changes for him, principal 1 provided an example of how the model built trust with his staff:

The model helps with trust, as long as you don’t backhand them with it. Because you could easily backhand them with it [observation] and say, oh, but during instructional rounds I witnessed this and didn’t go well and I am nicking you on your evaluation.

Superintendent 2 specifically gave an example of how the program was adapted back into his district. When he discussed the PLC processes and how they were being modified and used in his district, he gave an example of how the program builds trust. He stated, “I do believe the staff is really buying into the PLCs and we are trying to perfect how we use them. So I think this event just adds to their confidence in us and their willingness to trust.”
Using a common language. When asked if the model lends itself to creating a shared vision, principal 1 specifically discussed how the model had created the opportunity to build a common language when discussion instruction. He stated, “The common language . . . Creating . . . the importance of common language and I truly believe systematically if we identify key common language points for the teacher to use with students, it works.”

Also, in regard to how the model builds a common language, the paired leaders from district three provided nearly the same reflection on an event that took place in their district. Both of their remarks referenced a professional development experience that took place in their district by a different group. The training was focused on classroom observations, yet both of these leaders shared in their interviews how they were frustrated with the different model and how they persuaded the trainer to adapt to the SITC learning model’s processes and common language. Principal 1 stated:

I felt that the [SITC experience] was a very powerful experience listening to what everyone had to say, but also to hear the suggestions and my own understandings when my understandings changed and to have my peers sit through this other process that wasn’t nearly as powerful or engaging as the SITC model. It was a very frustrating moment. It motivated me and it motivated other people who ended up coming together to force it to get changed. To more reflect the SITC processes and language that I was trained in. (P3, lines 26-33)

Remarkably, the superintendent from this district also shared similar concerns regarding the shortfall of the professional development activity and how he was part of
the group that worked with the trainer to change the model to be more like the SITC learning model:

Well, even when we started we found [in the other model] that this is backwards. Like I felt we weren’t starting in the right place and over a course of maybe two visits in the classroom as a team, I pulled the two principals from our SITC training aside . . . you know, I am just not sure of what we are doing is being effective. (S3, lines 152-157)

After a short discussion with his principals, the superintendent asked the leader of the training to modify the process to the SITC learning model, which the facilitator did. Overall, the experience was very enlightening for the superintendent, in that the SITC model had truly transformed their thinking on best practices. Additionally, I was very surprised that both leaders shared nearly the same response and how they both were able to use the SITC learning model and help change professional development training by using common languages and processes.

Superintendent 5 also provided an example of how SITC language was adapted into his own district for PLC processes. He stated, “The staff and the administration agreed that [SITC] would be the best vehicle to do it with . . . so that then becomes a common language that we use in creating a professional learning community.

**Visioning processes.** In their responses to prompts relating to PLC, distributive leadership, and shared vision, many leaders provided a number of examples that crossed into each of these areas, yet the leaders of district five provided the very best examples of how the model was used for visioning processes in their district. Principal 5 made one of
the most profound statements of the all the interviews in how the training changed not only visioning processes in his building, but also the district as a whole: “In our district it definitely became part of the district visioning process. It became an intentional conversation in staff meetings and in district-wide meetings.” His superintendent too shared many common themes, yet when asked if the training had helped to create a shared vision, he discussed how it had helped his district move forward in creating a shared vision of the model. He stated, “It [SITC] was adopted by the board. So, shared vision comes from political leverage, resources, and it comes from theoretical or philosophical leverage. And once you get all of those things together, you have a kind of tight system.”

**Peer-to-peer and in other subjects.** When asked about visioning processes of the model back into his district, superintendent 1 provided the following example of how the model was being used by peers back into his district:

We [the district] want to keep the peer–to-peer observations . . . we are putting together a plan for next year of how we can get it through and our goal is to expand this to all of the departments, not just math. I think that we have tried some of that hit and miss, but I don’t think we had the skill set to make it non-threatening, and it really is non-threatening when you look at just the facts (not your preconceived notions of the teacher) . . . there is still an intimidation factor, but I think that as long as you are relaying what you saw and what actually occurred, then I think that people feel more comfortable.
For district four, the paired leaders also provided examples of how the model is being used back in their district by peer groups. The principal discussed how the SITC learning model had helped to reduce the isolation of staff members and increased new conversations between peer groups. He provided the following statement regarding the model and the power of connecting staff members: “Building and district leadership cannot make instructional decisions in isolation. There must be collaborative action research done at the classroom level with meaningful conversation to establish curricular and instructional priorities. This model works.”

His superintendent also reflected on how the model was transferred to other subjects. When asked if it had changed his role as a superintendent, he stated, “We use this process in all subjects. We have really worked hard at that.”

In district five, the principal gave many examples of how they too were using the model for peer-to-peer interactions, and he provided a specific example of its use with two physical education teachers. As he finished discussing how these teachers had changed how they work together, he stated:

It helped with the whole district-wide movement to establish PLCs to say we are all professionals; not only do we teach in the same place, but we are learning in that process, to literally it was probably the next year we formed PLCs and we tried to begin to shift some of our professional development focus to what we are learning and doing together, planning together . . . intentional conversations about teaching and learning.
The superintendent also shared many common themes, yet the following statement is an example of how the training is being used with peers.

It comes down to are we instructing the way we need to instruct to get kids to reach their fullest potential, and that becomes the laser focus. So everything I have done since those experiences in the early years of the SITC has been about that . . . I leverage dollars and grant funds . . . endowment to support peer-to-peer development between teachers, peer-to-peer development between administrators, making sure we are in the classrooms doing observations, stopping by to see what the process and pace are going on in any classroom, and teachers are more familiar with me stepping into classrooms and not feeling so anxious about it anymore . . . so there are a lot of different things that I think have affected me as far as my style.

**Theme 4: Leaders Shared Personal Reflections on the Value of Working with Their Peers and Colleagues**

The SITC learning model training was performed in a number of school district sites. During my interviews, all of the subjects shared how the experience itself and the visits to the different districts, and their buildings, was a powerful experience for each of them. While many of the them shared how the opportunity to work with peer leaders from other districts was very meaningful, others reflected on the positive influence the activities had in finding value in participating in the program, as well as the opportunity to experience a true PLC.

As the leaders reflected in their interviews, they provided many examples of new peer relationships that were formed. In theory, the SITC learning model reflects PLC
structures (Elmore, 2000, 2004), yet the personal stories of these leaders supports that this was a true outcome of the experience. While some of their comments differ, nearly all of the leaders were very enthusiastic when discussing their experience. Table 5 provides a distribution of participants’ responses regarding theme 4.

Table 5

*Theme 4 Distribution Among Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal/Superintendent</th>
<th>P1</th>
<th>S1</th>
<th>P2</th>
<th>S2</th>
<th>P3</th>
<th>S3</th>
<th>P4</th>
<th>S4</th>
<th>P5</th>
<th>S5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Leaders shared personal reflections on the value of working with their peers/colleagues.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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Principal 3 provided an example of how the training had changed his thoughts about professional development and the collective power of the SITC members, and how it changed his building’s perceptions of how to improve instruction when they came to visit. He stated:

> The thing that stands out was the experience of having everyone in the building here . . . it was really a powerful experience. It made me look at the building and staff differently and it really changed the outlook of a lot of things that I was doing here.

Principal 5 also gave an example of how he believed the SITC learning group had symbolic power because of the makeup of the group’s participants and how they made a significant impression on him, his staff, and his students. When asked about what experience stood out regarding the SITC learning model, he stated:
I remember it made the day seem very important to the kids that all of them were here . . . guys in suits and gals coming in to watch them and their teachers . . . and I don’t think they really knew which, but it was a big deal kind of day. I was impressed by the fact that these superintendents did this voluntarily and that they seemed to really be serious about wanting to see what was going on in other people’s classrooms . . . I could see that it was growing into real serious conversations.

Superintendent 1 provided an example showing the power and the effectiveness of the professional development experience:

The SITC training really made me believe in professional development again and it has also helped me to understand how important it is to make that commitment to the work because I think you only get out as much as you put in, and even the one day I had to leave early, I felt that I had missed way too much and so if that is on a personal note, then I think for me it was so valuable that it reminded me that maybe I had professional development in the past, but I didn’t make the commitment to it and to really focus in and say, okay, this is important.

When asked to describe what stood out most about the experience of the SITC learning model, superintendent 2 gave an example of the power of the training:

The first visitation we did stands out because getting into other buildings and other classrooms other than your own . . . you come to get so engrained in what you are doing that you forget that there are others out there and they are doing a
good job, or how can you help others to become better, so that was the greatest experience and of course to have it done in our district was a great event.

When asked the same question regarding the experience, superintendent 5 provided an example that stood out for him. He reflected his thoughts regarding an experience that had taken place two years ago regarding the value of having people from other districts and how the different leaders worked collegially. He stated:

I think just one incident alone would be when I hosted the group and we had gone on classroom observations . . . we had a really good discussion about what is it we are looking for and quality instructional practices. It was really great to have that conversation with colleagues . . . the ISD superintendent was there and we all got on the same page with our coordinators and talked about what good mathematics instruction looks like and what good questioning looks like and those types of things. (S5, lines 23-28)

This leader further shared another example of how he now believes that the culture of the SITC group was a true PLC:

We looked at research, published writings that were peer reviewed, we challenged our thinking about what is versus what we want to see. The style that we modeled as SITC was every way what we would expect our teachers to do in PLCs. It was ideally what a PLC should be.

**Theme 5: The SITC Training Changed How the Paired Leaders Work Together**

In this theme, all of the leaders discussed the changes they experienced in their working relationship after participating in the SITC learning model. In interviewing
them, I specifically asked them to describe changes around their working relationships. While Elmore’s original model was focused on superintendents, I was very pleased to hear how the addition of principals to this work changed how the leaders worked together. Through my analysis, I also learned of three specific insights where the model provided these changes: (a) building of trust, (b) increased focus of conversations on instruction, (c) increased tension, (d) observed growth in superintendent’s instructional skills, and (e) collegial working environment.

The principals and superintendents shared how they took some of the components of the training, specifically the common language of how to look at instruction, and used it when they worked together. Through my analysis, I found all of the leaders provided statements reflective of how they had changed their work by focusing more on instruction: one principal provided a clear description of how the model built trust around his evaluation; all of the districts’ paired leaders, except those from district 4, discussed how the model increased their focus on instruction; the paired leaders of district four shared how the model may have increased conflict around their philosophical differences regarding instruction; and the paired leaders from district five shared how the process had made them more collegial in their work together. Table 6 provides a distribution of participants’ responses regarding theme 5 as well as each subtheme.
Table 6

**Theme 5 Distribution Among Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal/Superintendent</th>
<th>P1</th>
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<th>P4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. The SITC training changed how the paired leaders work together.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. Trust-Evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Improved focus on instruction</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Increased tension</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Growth in superintendent</td>
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<tr>
<td>e. Collegial</td>
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**Trust and evaluation.** When asked if the model had allowed for different conversations, Principal 1 provided an example of how the conversations were more reflective and that they actually helped build trust in the evaluation process:

> I am a reflective person and I told her that in my evaluation I need for her to be honest with me. If you see something that needs to grow . . . tell me, and so this SITC has built a trust with both of us.

**Focus on instruction.** When asking the paired leaders from district one if the SITC learning model had changed their working relationships, both of them provided an example of how their conversations are now more focused on instruction. Principal 1 stated, “Working in the SITC with the superintendent and being new has been very helpful for me to understand his insights and thoughts on instructional leaders and what is demanding of us and what he is as an instructional leader.” The superintendent from
district one also discussed how the process had helped to support his principal. When asked if the training had changed his conversations with his principal, he stated, “Oh, absolutely. I think when we talk it has provided us a focus for our conversations so now we’re having conversations about good instruction versus how are things going.” (S1, lines 81-84)

For district two, the principal provided an example of how their conversations and focus had changed, and how he felt his superintendent had become now more of an instructional leader than previously. When asked about whether the model had changed his relationship with his superintendent, he stated: “Basically the superintendent and I never talked about formative assessments before we went through this process. So I think that that is good that both of us can now know those conversations.”

When asked if it has changed or refined the working relationship, he replied, 

Absolutely. The sheer fact of he is my direct supervisor and him asking me to go along with the SITC classroom PLC group that the ISD is putting on . . . I was taken back. You are choosing me to go? And that sheer activity of being included that was great . . . maybe the tipping point . . . the one thing that got us over the edge to get us in the right direction.

When asked if the SITC model had allowed for the leaders to focus differently, superintendent 2 also shared an example of how the conversations with his principal had changed and were now more focused on instruction. He stated:

It did change the idea that we can sit down together and look at this problem and really focus on the problem. We reflected on the visits and the principal has plans
to work a little bit more on our problem of practice . . . formative assessments and so on and getting the feedback.

For district three, the principal shared how the model had changed his working relationship with the superintendent and he provided the following example regarding instruction:

I think SITC has redefined our relationships because this is one of those kinds of moments where it is a shared experience between us and we have a, like a benchmark that we can use in our communication on achievement, observations, and instruction and we reference it and so, yes. It has definitely refined it because it has given us a whole new vocabulary.

The superintendent from this district too had many reflections regarding his relationship with his principal. The following statement is insightful regarding how the training had helped to change the conversations between the leaders, specifically their increased focus on instructional matters. Also, the comment is reflective of another principal (not interviewed) who participated in the training. When asked if the model has allowed for different conversations, the superintendent provided the following example:

This model has helped me in being able to have more meaningful, focused conversation with principals. As a superintendent, I am not directly involved in what is happening in the classroom; therefore, it is necessary for me to have a strong knowledge base to help principals reflect on instructional leadership. In particular, it has been advantageous to be in this learning process with these principals. It really has helped develop relationships with them and to build a
common understanding of what “the work” is that is applicable to our focus in the
district in raising the level of achievement. So you just want to get the best that
you can and it is such a dramatic difference in the feedback that I get from
principals now about what they gain from those experiences compared to what we
were doing before.

For district five, the paired leaders gave examples of how the model had changed
their working relationship by focusing on instruction. What was unique in the principal’s
sharing was how the model improved his superintendent’s knowledge of instructional
best practices, especially as it related to studying problems at a micro rather than macro
level, and how the shared experience had greatly transformed their relationship. The
following is an example of this change:

   It definitely changed the way I was communicating with my superintendent.
   When we would talk about how teachers were performing…I think it was eye
   opening for him because a lot of his perceptions of teachers to that point had been
   based on what he was hearing from other people, which unfortunately happens in
   administration.

   This principal further shared the following that demonstrates how he believes
   conversations are now more collegial and how he feels that his superintendent’s new
   skills have allowed for more of a peer-to-peer relationship:

   I would definitely say that there were changes in how we communicated because
   for us it made the conversations more collegial, less supervisory. I think my
   superintendent picked up a vocabulary and a comfort level of talking about what
it is teachers do in the classroom that allowed us to communicate like principal to principal.

When asked if it changed or refined their working relationship, the principal further discussed the power of having the shared professional development experience because of the way that it positively connected the two leaders. He stated:

I don’t know if it was conscious at the time, but I think it helped to give us a common experience. The more common experience you have, the more bonding that can take place. It seems to me that this is a benefit of the program. To the extent the work you do is away from each other, and then you are just supervising or overseeing somebody else’s work, you don’t get the same thing as rolling up your sleeves and getting into it together and nobody is complaining.

For this district, the superintendent’s comments regarding his experiences was very exciting, in that he discussed how he felt that the SITC learning model had significantly improved his instructional leadership skills, especially when he shared that he had reached the superintendency in a non-traditional way. The following is an example of the superintendent’s expressed confidence in how he now feels working with fellow superintendents and his administration. He stated:

I felt much more comfortable after the SITC with my colleagues and principals around the table and being able to lead with that, as opposed to knowing that I had it [understanding good instruction] in me and then trying to figure out the rest of the game.
When asked if it had changed his working relationship with his principal, the leader stated the following regarding the use of data and evidence discussions:

Yes, it did. I was much more focused on data, although that was what my dissertation was, using data affectively to change practice, but after SITC it was not enough for principals to just report out to me that they had observed a teacher and that the teacher is doing fine. It was the kind of data, what kind of evidence do you show, what kind of instructional academic improvements are the kids making, what we have learned from that process . . . show me the proof . . . and so it wasn’t just a conversation.

Later in the interview, the superintendent provided the following example reflecting how he believes his conversations are more focused with his principal. He replied:

Yes. It is like pealing back an onion. You can go layer, by layer, by layer, and just the act and process of doing that kind of sets up the expectation with the administrators that they have to be deeper thinkers about these things as opposed to just being surface . . . and so if you continue to ask the questions, it is not like the little child that keeps on asking why, because it is really focused dialog about it and principals know that if they are going to talk instruction, they have to be deep about it.

**Increased tension.** When interviewing the paired leaders from district four, I found the responses to my questions regarding relationships to be somewhat reserved. I was taken aback to hear from the leaders that there was sometimes increased tension,
because in Elmore’s work, there is much discussion regarding focusing on facts and not individuals. While both discussed instructional conversations, they were both tense about how the model was being used.

During the interview with the principal, he made numerous comments supporting his teachers, yet when asked about changes in conversations with his superintendent, he provided an example of how he disagreed with the superintendent’s ranking of teachers and judging them on failure rate. He stated the following opinion reflective of their relationship changes:

I think our conversations in terms of failure rate and student success rates has changed . . . and if you just judge a teacher and their teaching ability on a failure rate, I think you have failed to look at what the teacher is doing in the classroom. It is one of those things that you have to come in and if you just base your decisions on just a number without going into the classroom to see how the kids are engaged, and how instruction is taking place to see how assessment is delivered, to look at how data is being used to make a difference, then I think you have a whole skewed picture of what is going on and I think that’s the tenets I have to have to battle and superintendents have to battle too. If we look at the end result and we look at the kids as a sheer number and we don’t look at the kid as a student we don’t look at the kid as having different things going on in their life what happens in that respect. I think you know it is really a stressor between principals and superintendents . . . we are advocating for our teachers, not that we aren’t wanting to do the administrative team thing. Our whole role is we want to
make sure that these kids learn, and we want to make sure they receive good information and great experiences . . . and this job just doesn’t focus on numbers.

For district four, the superintendent provided an example of how the relationship had changed from the shared experience and the increased tension that now existed:

I think the SITC training has made a difference because it has changed how I question them [principals]. I think it has refined it too, especially with one of my principals. There is a lot of truth you just need to know enough to be dangerous . . .

While I thought that overall there was some disagreements between the leaders, I was also hopeful that the following comment suggested that the superintendent may be able to resolve the conflict and improve his working relationship with his building principal by using the process correctly. He stated, “Yes. We have different conversations about instruction and the classroom, and data results and what those results mean and that is a big part of what we share in our individual conversations is the data piece.” In Elmore’s work, there is much discussion regarding focusing on facts and not individuals, and I believe this superintendent’s statement provides the opportunity for these leaders to separate their differences by focusing strictly on facts and not the individual.

**Principal’s recognition of the growth in his superintendent’s skills.** In another surprising find, two of the principals gave examples of how they believed the SITC learning model had improved the instructional leadership skills of their superintendents.
Interestingly, both of these leaders also were very positive of these changes as they relate to how their conversations changed regarding instruction and how they worked together. When asked if there were any changes in their working relationship, principal 2 gave an example of how he felt that his superintendent had become more of an instructional leader than previously:

Yes. I honestly can say that most of my first two years as a principal, and most of my conversations with the superintendent were consumed with behavioral issues . . . student behavior . . . teacher behavior . . . and money. That was pretty much it. The bad stuff my students were doing and we have really talked about primarily our math team . . . we do get into the conversations we can honestly think the good teachers are and what they do that makes them good and who are the teachers that are ineffective and what are they doing wrong. Our discussions have changed.

Principal 5 provided a response reflecting how he felt that the SITC learning model had changed his working relationship with his superintendent because of how the model had improved his superintendent’s knowledge of instructional best practices, especially as it related to studying problems at a micro rather than macro level, and how the shared experience had greatly transformed their relationship. He stated:

It definitely changed the way I was communicating with my superintendent.

When we would talk about how teachers were performing . . . I think it was eye opening for him because a lot of his perceptions of teachers to that point had been
based on what he was hearing from other people, which unfortunately happens in administration.

Interestingly, principal 5’s superintendent gave an example of how he had grown as an instructional leader, similar to his principal’s views:

I felt much more comfortable after the SITC training with my colleagues around the table and being able to do that and lead with that, as opposed to knowing that I had it [understanding good instruction] in me and then trying to figure out the rest of the game.

**Collegial.** While superintendent 5 shared how he could work more closely with his colleagues after the training, his principal gave an excellent example of how the training had allowed for the leaders to communicate collegially:

I would definitely say that there were changes in how we communicated because for us it made the conversations more collegial, less supervisory. I think my superintendent picked up a vocabulary and a comfort level of talking about what it is teachers do in the classroom that allowed us to communicate like principal to principal.

**Theme 6: Leaders Adapted the SITC Training’s Best Practices onto Their Administrative Team Working Processes**

When interviewing the principals and superintendents regarding their experience with the SITC learning model, I was excited to find that the leaders took their new learned skills regarding instructional best practices and utilized these new strategies back into their own districts. Many of my subjects reflected on how the learned PLC processes from the training easily were used with their administrative team. Through my analysis I
also found three insights regarding how the leaders described how the SITC learning model was adapted onto their administrative team: (a) used in school improvement and team processes, (b) visioning, and (c) improving relationships on the team.

All of the leaders provided examples how the SITC learning model’s structures transferred back onto the team school improvement processes and other administrative team meetings. Through my analysis I found two principals, one superintendent, and the paired leaders of district three discussing school improvement processes. In regard to visioning, I found two superintendents and the paired leaders of both districts four and five providing examples. I also found two principals and the paired leaders of district one providing examples of how the model improved team relationships. Table 7 provides a distribution of participants’ responses regarding theme 6 as well as each subtheme.

Table 7

Theme 6: Leaders Adapted the SITC Training’s Best Practices onto Their Administrative Team Working Processes

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<th>Principal/Superintendent</th>
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<th>P4</th>
<th>S4</th>
<th>P5</th>
<th>S5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. Leaders adapted model onto administrative team.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. School improvement</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Visioning</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Team relationships</td>
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<td>X</td>
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School improvement processes. Principal 1 provided an example of how the SITC learning model had caused new school improvement discussions to take place with members of the administrative team. He stated, “When we have been going through the
focus process, I see correlations the superintendent is making between the SITC and school improvement. They are focused on what they want . . . focused and collegial.”

Principal 4 also made a strong statement regarding how the model was used in a positive manner back in his administrative meetings. I was surprised when hearing his thoughts because he had also shared how the model individually increased tension with his individual relationship with his superintendent. He stated:

We do a lot of talking as I wouldn’t say necessarily as one principal to superintendent, but we do it in our administrative meetings. I think we have rich discussions where the superintendent listens to the principals and we share a lot of instructional ideas and the superintendent has good input and he brings good ideas and asks us good questions, but it happens in that larger context of that administrative team.

Superintendent 5 too provided a reflection on how the model was transferred back onto the administrative team, especially as it relates to PLC structures focused on instructional school improvement. He stated:

Every administrative staff meeting I hold administratively models what we expect out of a PLC and what we expect out of the practice of classroom teaching in a lot of ways. We start with the objectives for the meeting, we talk about some really quick little ground rules, we go through the agenda items, we have transparency, we post questions that come up, we get through the meeting and then we review the instructional objectives and whether we accomplished those or not . . . like we did in SITC.
The paired leaders of district three both gave an example of how the process is being used with school improvement. Principal 3 stated, “It has changed our principal meeting because this is what we do at principal meetings [SITC]; we don’t meet downtown, we meet at buildings, and we do this work in mass together and we come back and discuss it.” Furthermore, his superintendent stated:

The collaborative model lends itself to developing a system of learning. It helped to develop the district-wide practice around improvements in teaching practices and ultimately student learning. Our work this year was with administrators; the utilization of this practice with teachers next year is anticipated.

**Visioning.** In regard to visioning processes, superintendent 1 provided the following example of how he used the training to support communication of the vision for the district and to create a shared vision with his staff members:

I have my vision for the district, and obviously a big portion of it is continued growth and student achievement. This training helps us have one more tool in our tool box to get there. So for me with my team, I think they are saying ok we see your big picture, now here is some training that we need to use in our own leadership environment.

Superintendent 2 also provided an example of visioning with his team members and district staff members: “I think from the shared vision perspective, I believe our staff are coming around very, very well at all levels.”

I also found the paired leaders from districts four and five providing examples of how the training supported visioning processes back in their districts. Principal 4 stated:
I think that that’s been productive. It is not just this is the way it has to be, but we try to come to some type of common vision ultimately what is going to be best for kids in the classroom. I think that such a statement provides some hope that his conflicts with the superintendent may be resolved within the team.

His superintendent 4 also stated, “My shared vision because my principals, curriculum director, special education director, and my board’s vision. We are using the same language . . . we only want A or B teachers in our district.”

For district five, the principal gave the following statement referencing visioning processes at all levels:

SITC became an intentional conversation in staff meetings and district-wide meetings. I am not just the guy who is your boss saying that we need to have a vision and let’s get the statement up. We have the vision and mission statement; do we feel what goes on in the classroom supports that and if not, what do teachers need from us and what do we need to do? And so when SITC came to our district, we had done a lot of work on the vision and mission stuff, and then our superintendent got active in SITC and that involved us as principals, and that gave a lot of credibility to that process and incredible feedback to that. This supported our [original work].

Superintendent 5 also gave an example of how they used the SITC learning model for visioning processes:

The learning design model and SITC . . . we agreed, the staff and the administration, that this would be the best vehicle to do it with . . . so that then
becomes a common language that we use in creating a professional learning community. It also needs to be adopted by the board, and I did this when I was in another district too, from the SITC when we started talking about strategies like learning, writing across curriculum, those kind of things, I believe that has to be board adopted so that there is not just the superintendent’s good idea, but the board approves it, adopts it, and says this is the way it will be.

**Team relationships.** In regard to improving administrative team relationships, many of the leaders described how the model changed how the leaders worked together. When principal 2 was asked to discuss his views regarding PLCs and the learning model, he provided an example of how the training had improved administrative team cohesiveness and working relationships:

> The superintendent and I and the rest of the administrators are pretty collegial now and we are all on the important issues. We’re certainly on agreement we need to have a PLC and more time to talk with the teachers about data, instruction, those kinds of things . . . as far as the instructional piece, being where I want to be, I don’t think that is going to come until we get more of the system built, but we are starting to build it right now.

Principal 3 provided an example of this as well:

> I think the other principal and I have more of a developed relationship. I don’t know if it would have been accomplished in the past. You are an island unto yourself. Where this [SITC] has helped us have conversations. It has changed our principal meeting because this is what we do at principal meetings [SITC];
we don’t meet downtown, we meet at buildings, and we do this work in mass
together and we come back and discuss it.

For the paired leaders of district one, both provided examples of how the training
had changed some of the administrative team members’ relationships. Principal 1 stated:
Focused and collegial . . . we talk. We had a team meeting yesterday and there
was discussion about the high school pushing classes down into the middle school
and we need to do that. So, this process has probably created a lot of
communication that I would not have had an opportunity to work with my
superintendent.

His superintendent also reflected on this meeting and how the SITC model was being
used by the team, especially as it relates to how leaders use the training to focus on
factual information and not take issues personally. He stated:

So for me with my team I think they are saying ok we see your big picture; now
here is some training that we need to use in our own leadership environment, and
the other part it has really done is the dialog between my high school and middle
school and has blown out . . . I mean it has been great and that needed to happen,
because I think the one principal was threatened by the other principal because of
their skill set and that can be difficult, especially if gender issues play into the
discussion. So, I think this has really broke it down, because when the one
principal went over to observe classrooms in the other building, with the I-can
statements, it was like night and day when we went to visit their building. For the
principal to be able to say, “Wow, I’ve got to get it together. My teachers are way behind.”

Lastly, superintendent 1 also provided another example of how the model helped build relationships and expectations regarding instruction with his team members. “With my other principal it was more about building a stronger relationship because there are some tensions regarding instructional leadership. This is nice because this is neutral [SITC], but when we brought it back home it kind of came back together.”

**Summary**

Through the data analysis process, I developed six themes: (a) leaders developed new views of instructional best practices, (b) new working relationships developed between the leaders and their teachers, (c) leaders adapted the SITC learning model’s PLC processes, (d) leaders developed new appreciation for the value of working with their peers and colleagues, (e) the SITC training changed how the paired leaders work together, and (f) leaders adapted the SITC training’s best practices onto their administrative teams’ working processes. All of the subjects were strongly motivated in improving their districts, and they all provided reflection on how the model created changes in their leadership. Furthermore, the superintendents’ and principals’ descriptions of these themes reflected on their experience with the SITC learning model and depict a transformation of their individual leadership skills, their working relationship with each other, and their overall use of adapting the model to meet the needs of their home districts.
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY, INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Today’s educational leaders are more than ever being challenged by mandates that are increasingly focused on student achievement, and, as the complexity of tasks and responsibilities associated with these positions increase, effective relationships between superintendents and their principals are needed (Neuman & Pelchat, 2001). While there is strong research regarding effective practices that improve the individual positions, there are limited studies regarding the relationship of superintendents and principals, as well as the establishment of new processes and/or systems that build sound relationships and distribute work effectively (Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004), and very little research on what the SITC learning model does right.

In 2006, the Calhoun Intermediate School District implemented a form of Richard Elmore’s Network, which focused primarily on superintendents. As a participant, I found the experience to be incredibly valuable, in that the training provided new processes and skills to improve oversight of instructional programming. Over time, many superintendents in our group questioned whether we were missing an opportunity by not including one or more of our principals in the process. Once the superintendents convinced the trainers to include the principals, I recognized the challenges facing superintendents and how they interact with their schools through the principal, and I became engrossed in learning whether the inclusion of the principals would change the relationship between the leaders. While the Network’s original training intent was
focused on a core of superintendents (Elmore, 2004, 2007; Lashway, 2002), Rallis et al. (2006) questioned whether there was any substantial evidence that the superintendents’ learned behavior would allow them to change their working relationships with their principals. As a result, I became particularly interested in whether the experience of the SITC learning model improved the working relationship between the two leaders as it relates to research associated with effective leadership processes, specifically research relating to creating a shared vision, distributing leadership, and/or establishing professional learning communities.

Summary

Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and describe how superintendents and principals interpret and experience a sustained professional development process focusing on instruction and student learning, a form of Richard Elmore’s work. Recognizing the challenges facing superintendents and principals, I wanted to gain their perspective as it relates to their experience with the SITC learning model. This study was designed to examine how participation in the SITC learning experience changed the superintendents’ and principals’ knowledge and beliefs as well as their behavior in three areas: their individual experiences, the working relationship between superintendent and principal, and the way they now think about and encourage student learning. This study also focused on three questions related to these interactions and the SITC learning model:

1. How do principals and superintendents describe their changes in knowledge and beliefs, as well as behaviors, within their individual working experiences?
2. How do principals and superintendents describe their changes in knowledge and beliefs, as well as behaviors, around their working relationship with the superintendent/principal with whom they work?

3. How do principals and superintendents describe their changes in knowledge and beliefs, as well as behaviors, around how they think about and encourage student learning?

In Chapter II, I examined the literature regarding superintendent and principal working relationships. The specific review of the research aligned with the following four aspects of this study: (a) Elmore’s Network; (b) shared vision; (c) distributive leadership processes; and (d) those beliefs and behaviors that are known to improve student achievement, particularly as defined by DuFour’s Professional Learning Communities (PLC).

The primary focus of the Network’s professional development experience was to focus the work of the superintendents to be grounded in a theory of action. The process entailed the professional development of leaders by examining real problems through multiple sessions, and by structuring the process in the belief that such learning is the concept of a community of practice, with a professional group “engaged in the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise for the purpose of learning and building capacity” (Elmore, 2000, p. 3). In the process, practitioners, professors, and change agents committed to working together to test ideas and theories, review each other’s work, offer alternative views, and give both the emotional and intellectual support to help move their districts forward, yet the training primarily focuses on superintendents. While those conducting
research on the Network had common findings on how superintendents have developed their own skills, there was insufficient research regarding the transference of the superintendents’ new skills back in their own home districts (Choy, 2003; Elmore, 2000, 2004; Rallis et al., 2006). There was also no research as to whether the Network would transfer onto the principals (Elmore, 2004; Lashway, 2002; Rallis et al., 2006). Elmore (2007) stated, “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” (p. 23).

Research also suggests that superintendent and principal relationships that focus on creating a shared vision (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Fullan et al., 2004), distributing leadership (Burns, 1978; Kellogg, 2006), and establishing a professional learning culture to improve learning (Fullan et al., 2004; Sergiovanni, 2004; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004; Walters & Marzano, 2006) can increase student achievement. Furthermore, some research findings support the fact that superintendents who guide school districts in improving academic results for students also employ a number of strategies through distributed and transformational leadership (Kellogg, 2006; McBride, 2001; Rallis et al., 2006), and that a superintendent’s individual skill set in instructional knowledge positively correlates with increasing academic results (Waters & Marzano, 2006). However, researchers have yet to investigate whether a learning model, such as the SITC learning model, comprised of both superintendents and principals, changes the knowledge and beliefs of the individual leaders, their working relationship, and/or how
they think about and encourage student learning, nor have researchers investigated it using a phenomenological approach.

In Chapter III, I discuss my research methodology. This phenomenological design was selected because it allowed me to capture the stories of superintendents and principals who participated in the SITC learning model. The interpretation of my findings from these interviews was the result of data analysis and data reduction, allowing me to combine information into themes and subthemes relating to the views and experiences of superintendents and principals with the SITC learning model, which were organized and described in Chapter IV.

**Interpretation of Findings**

The summary of my findings represented interview data collected on five matched sets of superintendents and principals who participated in the SITC learning model. The leaders’ ages ranged from 35 to 60. It is also important to note that the superintendents had more years of experience than principals, both as educators and administrators. Interestingly, only one district had paired leaders who had worked together for more than four years. Detailed demographic information, as well as themes and subthemes, was presented in Table 1 in Chapter IV.

**Key Findings Related to Research Questions: A Revision of the Conceptual Chart**

In my first chapter, I presented the conceptual framework aligned with my initial assumptions regarding how participation in the SITC learning model changed superintendents’ and principals’ knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors within their individual working experiences; the working relationship between the two administrators; and how
they think about and encourage student learning. This framework is presented in Figure 1 (page 10).

While my earlier depiction centered on the idea that the leaders would have new understandings, based in literature, regarding processes relating to creating a shared vision, distributing leadership, and PLC processes, the findings of this research specifically refined the change in leadership skills of each participant and linked them to six concrete themes and a number of subthemes (see Figure 2 on page 183) that transcend my research questions.

In regard to my findings, the data suggest a number of areas where the synthesis of Elmore’s Network in Chapter II and leadership processes associated with shared vision, distributive leadership, and PLCs affirmed, added to, or disputed the research. Furthermore, my study adds new findings associated with the importance of principals joining the training and how it changed them individually, changed how they worked together with the superintendents, and changed the relationship of the leaders as well as the functionality of the administrative team. The comparisons between key findings of each theme in this study and previous research are described in Table 8 and will be outlined in the pages that follow.
Figure 2. Revised conceptual framework for Severson’s (2013) study.
Table 8

Comparison of Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison Summary between Severson (2013) and Previous Research</th>
<th>Previous Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leaders developed new views of instructional best practices</strong></td>
<td><strong>Affirms:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Increased new understandings regarding what good math instruction looks like</td>
<td>- New skills regarding instruction (City et al., 2010) Instruction (Elmore, 2000; 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Changed how to observe instruction in all subjects (not just math): Formative assessments/questioning techniques/engagement and the role of the teacher/created focus</td>
<td>- Formative assessments (DuFour et al. 2008; Dumas, 2010; Shannon &amp; Bylsma, 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Removed preconceived notions about observing instruction</td>
<td><strong>New Find</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Improved the instructional leadership skills and the overall image of the leader</td>
<td><strong>Adds to:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- New working relationships developed between leaders and their teachers</td>
<td>- Instructional Leadership and image (DuFour, 2003; Fullan et al., 2004; Kellogg, 2006; McBride, 2001; Waters &amp; Marzano, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Created positive conversations between leaders and teachers: Direct feedback with open reflections/new roles as coaches</td>
<td><strong>Affirms:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Enhanced leaders ability to identify teachers by specific skill level and effectiveness so as to provide support/coaching</td>
<td>- Superintendent conversations with teachers (Elmore, 2007; Rallis et al., 2006). Principals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Reinforced the importance of recognizing strong teachers</td>
<td><strong>Adds to:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Assisted in the development of a shared instructional vision</td>
<td><strong>Affirms:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Added to the development of a new teacher evaluation process</td>
<td>- PLC structures (DuFour et al., 2008; Choy, 2003; Platt et al., 2008; Shannon &amp; Bylsma, 2004). Instructional Vision Fullan et al., 2004; McBride, 2001; Rallis et al., 2006; Shuldman, 2004).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Disputes:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Teacher evaluations, especially with new state mandates (Elmore, 2004; Rallis et al., 2006);</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Comparison Summary between Severson (2013) and Previous Research

#### Leaders adapted the SITC learning model’s PLC processes
- Allowed for a common language when discussing instruction
- Created trust with factual observations that are not used to penalize teachers
- Promoted teacher to teacher peer observations in their own districts
- Utilized in subjects other than SITC learning model’s focus on math
- Allowed for distributive leadership, the formation of PLCs and shared visioning processes
- Transformed district school improvement processes by creating more of an instructional focus
- Leaders used SITC to modify a PD experience in their district

#### Leaders shared personal reflections on the value of working with their peers/colleagues
- Recognized a teacher’s inability to comprehend what good instruction looks like when they participated in a SITC session
- Allowed leaders to believe in professional development again and their willingness to participate in the yearly program
- The power of working with peer leaders, the ISD, and teachers from different districts
- Being selected to be a participant by the superintendent
- The host district shared that the experience changed the staff’s perceptions of the importance of improving instruction
- Superintendents and principals participation in math problems to experience student work first hand
- Original SITC group was transformed when principals were added
- Recognized SITC learning model as a true PLC
- Assisted district in recognizing a problem of practice

#### Previous Research
- Use of a common language (City et al., 2010; Rallis et al., 2006; Shuldman, 2004), trust (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Druskat & Wolff, 2001; Spillane et al., 2004; Teacher to teacher peers (Elmore, 2007; Rallis et al., 2006; Used in other subjects (DuFour et al., 2008; Elmore & Burney, 2000). Leadership, vision, and PLCs (Bush, 2003; DuFour et al., 2008; Elmore, 2004; Fullan et al., 2004; McBride, 2001; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Transformation and instruction (Burns, 1978; Kellogg, 2006; McBride, 2001; Rallis et al., 2006). Changed a PD session (Elmore, 2000, 2004, 2007; Muhammad, 2009; Rallis et al., 2006).

### Adds to:
- Trained staff to recognize good instruction (Choy, 2003; Elmore, 1997, 2004; Rallis et al., 2006; Waters & Marzano, 2006)
- Professional development (Kelley et al., 2005; Kellogg, 2006; McBride, 2001). Working with peers (Bolman & Deal; Elmore, 2007; Lashway, 2002; Rallis, 2006). Being selected and relationships (Bass, 1985; DuFour et al., 2008; Kelley et al., 2005; Kellogg, 2006; Lashway, 2002; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).

### Disputes:
- Hosting (City et al., Elmore, 2000; Rallis et al., 2006). Math problems (Elmore, 2000, 2007; City et al., 2010);
Table 8—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison Summary between Severson (2013) and Previous Research</th>
<th>Previous Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **The SITC training changed how the paired leaders work together**  
- Principal viewed the process as a better way for superintendent to evaluate them  
- Built trustful collegial discussions focused more on instruction than other district issues.  
- Being included in the training built a stronger relationship between leaders  
- Shared experience positively changed the conversations and built stronger relationships  
- Focused instructional issues-Macro to Micro  
- Superintendent was seen as a stronger instructional leader with principal and other leaders as well  
- Caused a difference of opinion between leaders-Increased conflict | Adds to:  
**Leaders adapted the SITC training’s best practices onto their administrative team working processes**  
- Transformed process onto administrative meetings and district practices—instructional focus, collegial, a PLC  
- Created new in district conversations between principal and superintendent in respect to other principals and instructional programming  
- Superintendents built new relationships with other principals that did not participate in training  
- Two principals who participated have developed a new positive relationship  
- Distributing leadership among leadership team  
- Increased communication regarding evaluations  
- Developed district-wide practices around improvement of teaching  
- Creating a shared vision with administrative team  
- Used model for accountability | Affirms:  
PLCs and instruction (DuFour, 2003; DuFour et al., 2008; Fullan et al., 2004; Kellogg, 2006; McBride, 2001; Waters & Marzano, 2006)  
Adds to:  
Affirms:  
- District-wide practices and school improvement (Cudeiro-Nelsen, 2002; City et al., 2010; DuFour, 2003; DuFour et al., 2008; Elmore, 2002; Gordon, 2002; Kellogg, 2006; Waters & Marzano, 2006).  
Affirms:  
- Shared vision (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; City et al., 2010; Fullan et al., 2004; Senge, 1990; Spillane et al., 2004). Accountability (City et al., 2010; Elmore, 1997, 2004; Lashway, 2002; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004).
Theme 1: Findings regarding leaders developed new views of instructional best practices. The data from this study show that the SITC learning model changed all of the leaders’ views regarding instructional best practices. While the leaders differed in their responses, all of them shared how the process had transformed their individual views regarding instructional best practices. This would suggest that training does have a large effect on improving the leaders’ knowledge of what good instruction looks like. I also believe that the leaders’ responses demonstrate how they have changed their thinking about student learning, as demonstrated by the subthemes of engagement, use of assessments, narrowing outcomes, changing their preconceived notions regarding instruction, observing students, and/or improved skills that provide them confidence to support others. This would suggest that the program allows for each of the leaders to find an instructional area and customize it to their needs.

The findings in this theme affirm that, even with the addition of the principals, both of the leaders increased their understandings of good math instruction (City et al., 2010) and formative assessments (DuFour et al., 2008; Dumas, 2010; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004), and removed some preconceived notions while observing teachers. However, I also found new data that adds to the literature. I specifically found that the training gave these leaders new skills that improved their overall confidence and leadership image (DuFour, 2003; Fullan et al., 2004; Kellogg, 2006; McBride, 2001; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Such findings would suggest that the SITC learning model not only improves the individual instructional skill set of the leaders, but it also transforms them to feel more confident in leading discussions and/or supporting others.
Theme 2: Findings regarding new working relationships that developed between the leaders and their teachers. The findings in this study also demonstrate that with the addition of the principal in the process, both leaders were able to use the training to form new working relationships with their teachers. With this theme I also found two subthemes: improved conversations and changed view of evaluation processes. From my data, I was able to affirm how the training allows for leaders to improve their conversations with teachers and how it formed new working relationships with teachers. Interestingly, I found that while the process affirmed much of the literature regarding how to give direct feedback with open reflections (Elmore, 2007; Rallis et al., 2006), I also found that all of the leaders felt that the skills they learned had allowed them to be better supporters of their teachers and that the process allowed them to better establish PLC structures in their buildings (DuFour et al., 2008; Platt et al., 2008). My findings also provided examples of how the training allowed the leaders to improve conversations that create a shared instructional vision, affirming the research regarding effective instructional conversations and processes related to visioning (Fullan et al., 2004, McBride, 2001; Rallis et al., 2006; Shuldman, 2004).

The most interesting finding regarding this theme was how some of the leaders discussed to what extent the training could be used for evaluation purposes. The data show they actually reflected on the new state professional evaluation system mandates and state school ranking processes and discussed how this training could be utilized for evaluation purposes. While this information added to the research (Archer, 2005; Choy, 2003; Elmore, 2000), I found a couple of the leaders specifically discussing weak
teachers, even to the point of labeling them as the bottom 30%. While the SITC learning model was designed to improve instruction and overall support for teachers, it is quite possible that some leaders may use their new skills to evaluate, rather than coach. Furthermore, it is possible that the training could be used purposely to document poor instruction for termination, yet that would be against the philosophy of Elmore’s original Network and the foundation of the SITC learning model (Elmore, 2004; Rallis et al., 2006).

Interestingly, it is important to note that the leaders may be adapting the training to address new state mandates associated with teacher evaluation and best practices. My findings suggest that some of the leaders, whose evaluation skills were outdated or lacking, may be using the process to improve how they accurately evaluate staff as well as address new state mandates, thus adding to current research.

**Theme 3: Findings regarding how the leaders adapted the SITC learning model’s PLC processes.** For this theme, my findings added much to the research regarding the use and/or modification of the SITC learning model. Whereas the original intent of the training was to improve the superintendent and principal’s knowledge and skills in addressing mathematic instruction in their districts, the addition of the principals added to the research. While I found that the leaders discussed the foundations of the model—building trust, using a common language, peer-to-peer work, and visioning, nearly all of the data demonstrated how the leaders adapted the process back into their districts.
The SITC learning model formed through the CISD was designed to focus on math instruction, yet the data suggest that the leaders were able to take these new skills and transform existing processes in their districts. Although the research shows that the model builds trust, (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Druskat & Wolff, 2001; Spillane et al., 2004), helps to establish a common language when discussing instruction (City et al., 2010; Rallis et al., 2006; Shuldman, 2004), is used in peer-to-peer reflection in math (DuFour et al., 2008; Elmore, 2007; Elmore & Burney, 2000; Rallis et al., 2006), and supports visioning processes and PLC structures (Burns, 1978; Bush, 2003; DuFour et al., 2008; Elmore, 2004), I found the superintendents and principals used the process in a variety of ways that were not discussed during the SITC learning model training sessions. For example, my findings demonstrate that many of the principals and superintendents used the training to work in subjects other than math, as well as with a variety of different groups. In fact, one superintendent used the model to leverage grant and endowment funds from outside the K-12 arena to support the creation of peer groups between both teacher and administrator groups. This would suggest that the model’s strength for this district is to support it as the process of how staff members work together to improve instruction.

Research findings also suggest that the use of the model, and the overall support for the process, may directly influence how a district conducts professional development. As seen in my data, the paired leaders from one district fully modified a professional development activity so it would emulate the SITC learning model more closely. This may suggest that the new learned skills are not only valuable to each individual leader,
but it also may demonstrate how such a model can be adapted to meet the specific needs of a district. Furthermore, I find this as a valuable insight on the quality and transforming capabilities this program has had on the superintendents and principals, as they have been able to customize the best practices of their training to meet both their individual and district needs.

Theme 4: Findings relating to the leaders shared personal reflections on the value of working with their peers and colleagues. Findings in my study regarding the SITC learning model demonstrated that the training was very impactful on the leaders. Researchers (Kelley et al., 2005; Kellogg, 2006; McBride, 2001) have discussed the key attributes of professional development, and others have discussed the importance of peers working together in positive learning environments (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Elmore, 2007; Lashway, 2002; Rallis et al., 2006), yet my findings add to the research the stories leaders have shared relating to their working relationships with each other, their reflections regarding the power of the working sessions, how the process made them believe in professional development again, and the power of working with different districts and different leaders and teachers.

While Elmore (2000) and others have discussed how teachers work in isolation, it is also true that many districts do not always share best practices. My findings add to the research by suggesting that not only was the training effective in building instructional skills and team processes to solve problems, but it is quite possible that the addition of the principals in the process created a transformation of how leaders may establish new professional relationships with other districts. Clearly, the data suggested that those who
participate in the training now have the enhanced ability and skill set to establish such professional relationships.

Lastly, for this theme, I did find one principal who was able to describe in detail his frustration with a teacher who was unable to recognize good instruction. Although Choy (2003), Elmore (1997, 2004), and Rallis et al. (2006) have discussed how the model builds both knowledge and skill to recognize good teaching, I also believe this leader’s description was powerful and that it disputed these claims. The principal’s specific detail of observing the instructor and reflecting on his disappointment was also followed up with, “What do we need to do to help this teacher understand?” This would suggest that even strong professional development does not always cure or solve every staff member’s instructional need.

**Theme 5: Findings regarding how the SITC training changed how the paired leaders work together.** Findings from my study demonstrate that all of the paired leaders were able to discuss how the SITC learning model had changed their working relationships. As seen in the literature review, a number of researchers discussed how the model focuses on changes regarding superintendent behavior, yet with the addition of the principal, I found a number of ways that the SITC learning model extends the literature. Choy (2003), Elmore (2004), Rallis et al. (2006), and Waters and Marzano (2006) discussed evaluation processes as they relate to such an experience, yet my findings add to the research by discussing how trustful relationships between the superintendent and principal may allow for the development of new evaluation processes being formed as
superintendents work collaboratively to design goals with their building principals. Such work reinforces the importance of having a foundation of trust.

Related to the trust building results of my findings, I believe my data extends the research by providing detailed information on how each superintendent and principal were able to describe how their participation in the training changed their working relationship. This would suggest that the inclusion of principals not only allows for the effective individual professional development of both leaders; it also changes how the leaders work together as they address instructional challenges in their districts. This extension to the research relates to the fact that the literature review focuses primarily on how superintendents are able to build trust and focus (Archer, 2005; Choy, 2003; Elmore, 2000; Rallis et al., 2006), improve conversations and relationships with others (Fullan, 2006; Kellogg, 2006; Kotter, 2008, Neuman & Pelchat, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2004; Spanneut & Ford, 2008; Waters & Marzano, 2006), and create a focus when studying problems (macro to micro) (Archer, 2005; Choy, 2003; Elmore, 2000; Rallis et al., 2006). By adding the principal to the training, my data demonstrates how their inclusion extends the literature.

The most significant findings for this theme was that all of the leaders felt the changes in their working relationship were based the effects of the SITC learning model and how it had caused the conversations to be more focused on instruction and student learning. Because the original process models a PLC, I have found that these leaders developed new norms of how to study problems and work together. Waters and Marzano’s (2006) meta analysis of superintendents described the importance of strong
relationships between the superintendents with their schools, even to the point where poor or ineffective relationships had a negative correlation with student achievement. This would suggest that my findings demonstrate how the shared experience, such as the SITC learning model, may allow for superintendents and principals to develop a new purposeful bond that centers on changing their working conversations to be more focused on creating systems and processes set on improving student learning. I also believe that such work may help districts realign their focus, better prepare the foundations for creating a shared instructional vision, and create the necessary activities and processes that refine and prioritize how the leaders look at problems in their district.

My findings also differ in regard to improving relationships between leaders (DuFour et al., 2008; Elmore, 2000), in that the paired leaders of one district shared how the training had increased tension between them. This may suggest that an existing conflict and/or poor current relationships may not be transformed by using a shared professional development experience. Furthermore, it could be suggested that such a professional development process may be utilized by leaders negatively, as with one of the leaders discussing how they now have enough information to make them dangerous.

In regard to image, there is something to be said about the position. In my data I also found two paired leaders who were very collegial and respectful of each other. The data could suggest that this positive relationship was further enhanced by the training. Specifically, I thought they each provided comments that reflected how they support and recognize the professional growth of each other. This too would suggest that the PLC
foundations of the SITC learning model’s common experience can enhance relationships and further develop a professional growth of the leaders.

**Theme 6: Findings relating to how the leaders adapted the SITC training’s best practices onto their administrative team working processes.** The findings regarding this theme both affirm and add to research findings. In my study, all of the leaders provided data that demonstrate how the SITC learning model was adapted onto the administrative team, and I believe the addition of the principals in the process both affirms and extends previous research regarding the use of the training. Within this theme I also found three subthemes: inner team relationships, visioning, and school improvement discussions.

My findings add to the research regarding the creation of new instructional conversations between the superintendent and principal as it relates to supporting other principals within their district (Elmore, 2000, 2004; McBride, 2001; Waters & Marzano, 2006), as well as how the model has transformed the working relationship between two principals that participated in the model (Bass, 1985; DuFour et al., 2008; Kelly et al., 2005; Kellogg, 2006). This is a significant finding, in that the data suggest that new relationships are evolving between the paired leaders because of their work with the SITC learning model. I also found that these leaders were also utilizing their new skills to support other administrators as well.

Within the data there are also examples of how the training has improved the PLC processes of the team as they focus on instructional objectives. This affirms the PLC processes that are the foundation of the Network and supported by research regarding the
formation of PLCs (DuFour, 2003; DuFour et al., 2008; McBride, 2001; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Such a change in the team’s working environment also suggests that the shared SITC learning experience has allowed leaders to better collaborate and thus may improve conditions to create a shared vision and distribute leadership among team members (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; City et al., 2010; Fullan et al., Senge, 1990; Spillane et al., 2004).

In addition, my data also affirm how the SITC learning model improves and/or establishes PLCs focused on school improvement (DuFour, 2003; DuFour et al., 2008; Fullan et al., 2004; Kellogg, 2006; McBride, 2001; Waters & Marzano, 2006) and accountability of team members working together (City et al., 2010; Elmore, 1997, 2004; Lashway, 2002; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). This would suggest that the model also allows for new working relationships to be more purposeful in their work relating to school improvement, as well as an increased accountability of each administrative team members to meet educational goals.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

As described in my study, superintendents and principals are faced with a number of challenges and responsibilities. In the review of the literature, there are still many areas, especially regarding the relationship of the two leaders, that are yet to be discovered. Although this study found many valuable insights into how a shared professional development experience can change the individual and working relationships of superintendents and principals, it is not without some limitations.
First, because the design is qualitative, the research is not without its weaknesses. Qualitative data are subjective, and in this case, deal with a small sample size. Findings from this type of research may not produce definitive conclusions (Foss & Waters, 2007). While my qualitative study was able to describe the experiences of the leaders, it may be limited by its design. As a result, qualitative research tends to have less statistical power than quantitative research when it comes to discovering and verifying trends. Secondly, this study was limited by the number of districts (five) and participants (10) that were selected from one ISD, thus decreasing the generalization of the findings. In that regard, variables such as age, gender, years of administrative experience, and district configuration, all may influence the results of the data collected. Third, the focus was on only superintendents and principals without other district data that could be gathered from other school staff members.

In regard to future studies, it may be possible to analyze whether the established changes between the leaders continue, or research could be conducted with a specific case, where one district is studied over time to include data gathered from teachers as well. The research may also be expanded, over time, to include new groups of paired leaders who have been trained in the SITC learning model. It may also be possible to research models similar to the Network and the SITC learning model to study whether other professional development models improve the leaders’ working relationships.

In conclusion, I believe it is possible to extend the study by focusing on specific areas or themes found in my data. As an example, more research regarding the model and teacher relationships, specifically observations and evaluations, could be designed to
narrow the focus of the research. With the current national discussions taking place regarding teacher evaluation processes, there is a great opportunity to study whether the SITC learning model affects the responses of the leaders as it relates to district evaluation processes. Additionally, a quantitative study may be designed, such as surveying teachers from superintendents’ and principals’ districts, to gather specific information regarding the degree of changes from the teacher’s perspective. Moreover, a quantitative analysis of district test results could be studied to distinguish if such a model improves student achievement.

**Conclusion**

Today’s public school leaders face a myriad of complex challenges, and while there are some areas that these leaders cannot control, the establishment of effective working relationships between superintendents and principals must be an area that is recognized as being important to address. In the research, professional development focused on best practices that establish PLCs as one of the best opportunities to create systems where leaders learn new skills to address these challenges. Clearly, this study demonstrated how superintendents and principals adapted the SITC learning model to meet the needs and challenges of their individual districts. As seen with Richard Elmore’s Network and the SITC learning model, such professional development may significantly improve the instructional leadership skills and working relationships of school leaders.

While the research shows that the Network is successful, this study offered a review of the SITC learning model and how it supports the effects of adding principals to the group in improving their working relationships. While there have been numerous
studies investigating the individual leadership traits of superintendents and principals, there is limited research investigating whether a shared professional development process creates any significant change in the leaders. Therefore, this study extended the research as it relates to the effects of training both superintendents and principals. Such findings may support both superintendents and principals in creating new systems that not only improve their working relationships, but also extend their new knowledge and skills in supporting teachers and improving relationships among their administrative team. Furthermore, it is important for superintendents and principals to build relationships with all of their publics, and this is a model that enables them to do so.

As a superintendent, I have been able to recognize the increasing challenges that the position holds, yet even more noticeable has been the importance of having strong relationships across many staffing, parent, and community groups. I also believe that superintendents must lead in creating the right relationships and environments for teams of individuals to effectively work together, especially if we are to improve student achievement. To do anything less would be disheartening.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Interview Instrument
Interview Instrument

Study: A Phenomenological Exploration of Superintendent and Principal Experiences in a Shared Professional Development Process

Time of interview: __________________________
Date of interview: __________________________
Location: __________________________
Interviewer: __________________________
Interviewee: __________________________

Interview Questions

Thank you for consenting to participate in this study. I will be recording the interview so that my data will be accurate. You may request that the tape recorder be turned off at any point in the interview. I’m going to ask you a set of questions about the Superintendents in the Classroom learning model. First I will ask about an event that really stands out for you in terms of your learning with the model. Then, I will ask more about any changes that you experienced due to the model. When I ask you to remember your experience, think of the professional development model in its entirety- the group discussions, classroom visits, debriefing tasks, and your work with your own staff members.

1. Please describe an event that really stands out for you and captures your experience with the SITC learning model.

Research Question 1: How do principals and superintendents describe their changes in knowledge and beliefs, as well as behaviors around their individual working experiences?

2. What did you learn from this event?

Prompts:

3. Did it change how you understand your role (as a principal or as a superintendent?)

4. Did it change how you do your job? (conduct your business?)

Research Question 2: How do principals and superintendents describe their changes in knowledge and beliefs, as well as behaviors, around their working relationship with the superintendent and principal? In particular, I want to know about your communication style with your (principal/superintendent).
1. Either using the example you gave before (above), or other instances you remember about participating in the program, did you experience any changes in how you communicate with your (principal/superintendent)?

2. Has it changed or refined your working relationship, and if so how?

Prompts:

A. Can you describe any new skills that you have acquired that may have modified your working relationship with your (principal/superintendent)?

B. Has the model allowed you to have different conversations (principal/superintendent)?

Research Question 3: How do principals and superintendents describe their changes in knowledge and beliefs, as well as behaviors, around how they think about and encourage student learning.

I want to know more about your experience with student learning.

1. Please describe if, and how, the learning model has altered how you think about student learning?

2. Can you explain any new skills or strategies that relate to improving your district’s stance or actions toward student learning?

Last question: I’m particularly interested in the notions of establishing a shared vision, distributive leadership, and professional learning communities.

3. Can you give me your thoughts on each of those, if you have any, and how the program influenced your thinking or actions?

Conclusion of Interview

I will be using a pseudonym for you when I write up the transcripts for the interview. What would you like your alias to be? I will listen to your interview and write up the transcripts. Once this is completed, I will send the transcript to your email address and ask that you read it over. I will also ask for your response to a few reflection questions about reading the transcripts, such as:

1. Does the transcription attached accurately reflect your experience with the SITC learning model?

2. Is there anything you feel I should add or clarify about your experience with the SITC learning model?
3. After reading the transcript, what concept, phrases, and/or philosophical statement stands out about your experience with the SITC learning model?

4. Demographic information:
   a. Current contact information
   b. Age
   c. Years of experience as an educator
   d. Years of experience as an administrator and current position

Thank you for participating in this interview.
Appendix B

Informed Consent
Human Subjects Institutional Review board (HSIRB)

Consent Form

Western Michigan University
Principal Investigator: Dr. Sue Poppink
Student Investigator: John Severson

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled “A Phenomenological Exploration of Superintendent and Principal Experiences in a Shared Professional Development Process.” This project will serve as John Severson’s dissertation for the requirements of the Educational Leadership doctoral program at Western Michigan University under the supervision of Dr. Sue Poppink, his dissertation committee chair. 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 study will be to explore and describe how superintendents and principals interpret and experience a sustained professional development process focusing on instruction and student learning, a form of the Superintendents in The Classroom (SITC) program. Specifically, this study will examine how participation in the professional development learning experience changed the superintendents’ and principals’ knowledge and beliefs as well as their behavior in three areas. Those three areas are: their individual experiences, the working relationship between the superintendent and principal, and the way they now think about and encourage student learning.

Who can participate in this study?

For the study, a total of 10 subjects, (five districts) will be interviewed. Only same district superintendents and their principals who participated in the program for one or more years will be recruited. If only one of the pair agree to the study, that individual and their school district will be excluded from participating.

Where will this study take place?

An interview will take place in your school district, unless you request another site.
What is the time commitment for participating in this study?

For this study, you will be asked to participate in one semi-structured interview that is approximately 60 minutes in length. There will be only one interview session. Prior to the interview, a copy of the interview questions will be sent for you to reflect upon. The interview will be audio recorded to ensure the accuracy of the data gathered, and all interviews will be transcribed into transcripts that you will be able to review and edit at a later date. There may be a possible follow-up interview if further clarification is needed. No other meetings will be requested.

What will you be asked to do if you chose to participate in this study?

You will be asked to provide answers to questions in an interview format. You will be asked to later review your responses and provide feedback on the accuracy of the transcript. If you feel the transcript is accurate, no further questions or meetings will be requested. You will also be asked to provide general information about yourself, such as age, level of education, and years in your current position.

What information is being measured during the study?

This study will examine how participation in the professional development learning experience changed your knowledge and beliefs as well as your behavior in three areas. Those three areas are: your individual experiences, your working relationship with your (superintendent/principal), and the way you now think about and encourage student learning. Information gathered will be placed into categories so as to review for generalizations or theories from these themes as well as relating to research associated with research best practices.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?

If an accidental injury occurs, appropriate emergency measures will be taken; however, no compensation or treatment will be made available. All the information collected from you will be confidential. To ensure confidentiality, your name and the school’s name will not appear on any papers or tapes on which information is collected, recorded, or used in the dissertation dissemination process; rather it will only be known to the researcher. The tapes and forms will all be coded by using a pseudonym for participants (i.e. Superintendent 1, Principal 1, and so on) and as the student researcher, I will keep a separate master list with the names of the participants and the corresponding code numbers. Names of staff members, school districts, and/or any program or function that may identify the principals and superintendents will be generic so as to protect the identity of the participants. There are no other known risks/discomforts associated with participating in this study.
What are the benefits of participating in this study?

The interview questions and the results of the study may allow principals and superintendents to reflect on their experiences; specifically the new or enhanced skills that were learned by participating in the professional development program. Such reflection may also further their knowledge and support of effective working relationships, as well as improving classroom observations and evaluations. The findings of the study will also be given to CISD trainers who may therefore improve and/or enhance CISD professional development programming for these leadership positions.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?

There are no costs to participate in this study.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?

There is no compensation for your participation.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?

All written transcriptions, audio tapes, and associated forms will be locked in a filing cabinet in my home office. During the analysis process, CISD trainers will review the coded data, yet there will be no identifying language relating to the sites or subjects that the information was gathered. Once the study is complete, all data, including audio tapes, transcripts, data analysis worksheets, and researcher notes, will be locked in the Principal Investigator’s office for three years and will be maintained as per the HSIRB approval provisions.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?

You can choose to stop participating in the study at anytime for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decisions 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 consent.

Should you have any questions or concerns prior to or during this study, you may contact John Severson at (269) 317-6472 or Dr. Sue Poppink at (269) 387-3569 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 or via email at hsr@wmich.edu if questions or problems 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

Consent obtained by: __________________________

Initials of Researcher

Date

Date
Appendix C

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board
Letter of Approval
Date: February 18, 2013

To: Sue Poppink, Principal Investigator
   John Severson, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 13-01-42

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “A Phenomenological Exploration of Superintendent and Principal Experiences in a Shared Professional Development Process” 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: February 18, 2014