IS CRITICAL THINKING AND INNOVATION POSSIBLE WITHIN THE CURRENT

COMPLIANCE ENVIRONMENT? PERCEPTIONS OF ARIZONA PRINCIPALS

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ABSTRACT

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Public schools and its leaders are expected to prepare America's children to be contributing and informed members of society. More specifically, public school principals in Arizona are expected to be flexible and responsive as they lead school improvement on their campuses. They are also expected to comply with mandates (particularly state) which ultimately require them to utilize predetermined approaches and products with fidelity. This situation highlights a reality of principal leadership that Hughes et. al. (2019) suggested was highly discouraging to incoming principals, namely that principals were forced to adopt a compliance mindset if they wanted to continue in their role. Building on the foundation of this research, the investigator interviewed active, experienced, public-school principals (n=12) in the Phoenix Metropolitan area and utilized a grounded theory approach to analyze the principals' perceptions about their ability to respond to challenges and adopt innovative practices. This study uncovered how principals increasingly adopt a compliance mindset as they follow district guidelines. This study also highlighted a leadership paradox that exists in Arizona public schools, namely, that principals are faulted for following mandated programs and policies by the very forces that dominate education and require their fidelity to compliance.

Keywords: Autonomy, Principal, Innovation, Compliance

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wife, Tara, for her never-ending support and encouragement.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

For centuries, public school leaders across the United States have been tasked with the responsibility of preparing America's youth to contribute to their communities in meaningful ways. Over the years, principals have had to evolve to meet the needs of their students and, more importantly, have had to administer an educational system that has become significantly more complicated and difficult to navigate. As a consequence, principals have been expected to adapt and adjust to address the sometimes overwhelming and unavoidable challenges.

In the 21st Century, public schools have been under intense public scrutiny, resulting in pressure on federal, state, and local lawmakers who respond by encouraging the creation of policies and programs meant to solve the complex problems schools and principals face. These policies and programs affect principals whose challenges are twofold: First, they are expected to adopt a compliance mindset (Hughes & Davidson, 2020) and follow the directives they receive. Second, they are consistently criticized for the shortcomings of the approaches they are forced to employ (Barrington, 2022; The Learning Network, 2019; Schneider, 2016).

The case of the administrators in Arizona's public schools served as a focal point for this study. State legislatures that regulate public education in most states are extremely rigorous and centralized. In addition to regulations that mirror the reporting protocols of other states, Arizona legislators have intentionally allowed a degree of flexibility to private and charter schools through school choice legislation, increasing competition for already scarce resources (Finch, 2018).

If administrators in Arizona do not comply with state and federal mandates their schools lose on their rating, funding, and potentially their enrollment. The administrators who do comply – to fidelity – often lack the ability to resolve specific and localized problems. And, once again, their schools lose. The compliance mentality that has been adopted by most

school districts and many administrators in the past has impacted education negatively by limiting administrators' opportunities to react decisively as well as their ability to do what they consider appropriate.

The negative impact of the limitations on the work of school administrators who comply with state regulations is not uncommon or isolated. One example is the constant criticism school districts across Arizona receive for the poor academic achievement of their students (Anderson & Cohen, 2015; Education Weekly, 2020; Fischer, 2018; Will, 2000). The former assistant secretary for education of the Clinton administration, Gerald Tirozzi, stated in the most widely read Arizona news website, AZ Central, that Arizona's lawmakers' claims that the state's educational programs had markedly improved were reminiscent of "Michael Jackson's iconic moonwalk, portraying the illusion of onward movement — while sliding backward" (Tirozzi, 2018. para. 1). This type of criticism of the legislators directly affects administrators as the pressure to perform trickles down to the school boards, district officers, and then the principals.

Regardless of the reality, the constant negative publicity Arizona's educational system receives puts local education leaders in an untenable position. For example, principals are expected to work in an outdated system that is designed to perpetuate itself while also being expected to improve student achievement or risk losing their school letter grade and performance funding. Instead of voicing criticism, educational leaders must devoutly defend Arizona's image if they hope to recruit quality teachers and bring businesses into their communities.

While Arizona is not unique in suffering criticism for outdated and deficient educational policies (Lee & Chue, 2013), the state has a history of unenviable notoriety including a reputation for low spending and poor academic performance. Instead of delivering sound policy and increased resources, the state legislators point their fingers at

failing public schools and place the responsibility for poor academic achievement on the local officials who run them. Legislators and special interest groups, including charter school advocates, have taken advantage of the swell of public opinion that they themselves have helped to create to drastically increase opportunities for school choice in Arizona, further depleting resources originally earmarked for public schools (Finch, 2018). As a result of shrinking budgets and increased competition, administrators in public school districts have been forced to look for viable, affordable solutions to raise student test scores and improve school programs in hopes of attracting conscientious parents and to increase enrollment.

As part of its long-term strategy to shape schools into carbon copy standards-based organizations and to address the problems of struggling schools, the federal government has implemented programs that emphasize student accountability such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and encouraged the wide-spread adoption of evidence-based practices (EBP) and the standardization of educational interventions (Nikolska, 2020). As a result, most administrators have been discouraged from "thinking outside the box". The lack of time and resources for collecting data to demonstrate the effectiveness of unique school programs has forced principals to adopt pre-packaged EBP, so they can avoid criticism and ultimately, responsibility for achievement (Powell, et.al., 2009).

An equally important aspect of the impact of these standardized programs on the work of administrators is the fact that they have been more focused on complying with state and federal mandates than on the wellbeing of their students (Rodriquez, 2015). Markowitz (2018) echoed Rodriguez's argument and noted that most schools are adopting an almost endless list of pre-packaged solutions in the form of "teaching methods to ensure that their state's students fulfill (NCLB) requirements" (p. 35).

As Hughes and Davidson (2020) have observed, school leaders at the state and local level have been forced to adopt a standardization mindset. To adapt their school curriculum

to state regulations, administrators have opted to select and purchase business-backed programs that had demonstrated some past success in improving student performance in some schools. These programs were used in different contexts and under conditions that may or may not be possible to reproduce.

In this new reality, adopting a standardization mindset is enticing, if not mandatory, to meet their teacher's needs. For example, in Arizona, a state that has essentially eliminated preparation requirements for classroom teachers, principals can purchase and provide their teachers with ready-made curriculum, professional development, and accountability protocols that have proven to improve student achievement in other schools. Scholars may debate whether pre-designed programs are inherently better. Ready-made programs promise to meet the needs of teachers but, instead, seem to mirror past approaches at making education "teacher proof" and providing shortcuts for states like Arizona (Solution Tree, 2021) that have essentially eliminated the need for principals to demonstrate initiative and innovation in curriculum development or behavioral programs. Principals have, seemingly, been given little choice; sacrifice autonomy and adopt a compliance mentality or, instead, think outside the box and risk notoriety.

Background of the Study

Public schools across the U.S. have been facing challenges that require principals and administrators to lead with decisiveness and flexibility to address increasingly complex situations. Principals throughout the country and certainly in states like Arizona are expected to implement programs by following strict guidelines with fidelity (Harn & Stoolmiller, 2013) as well as guarantee that these programs will improve their student's achievement and behavior. These approaches can have uncertain and risky effects since they require that administrators adopt what Hughes and Davidson (2020) called a "compliance mentality" that responds to the pressures of federal and state regulations and the business sector (Hughes,

2019). To examine the dilemma of principals who must "comply with fidelity" the following

elements will be discussed:

- The concept of fidelity and expectation of compliance.

- The use of evidence-based-practices (EBP) to encourage compliance.

- The challenge of balancing standardization and autonomy.

- The shifting role and participation of principals in program development.

- The effects that compliance has on the hiring of administrators and the expectations
  about their performance.

Fidelity and Expectations

A central challenge for many principals who likely function within a compliance

framework is the expectation from the central office that principals will not deviate from

implementation protocols, regardless of the school's circumstances or individual needs. Harn

and Stoolmiller (2013) defined fidelity as the level of accuracy and exactness to which a

program or intervention is reproduced when compared with its original intended design.

Program developers see fidelity as essential since fidelity implementation is integral to

program success (Harn & Stoolmiller, 2013), and is likely vital for their efforts to promote

their product.

Assuring that principals are committed to fidelity is so important to validate the data

stream supporting a product that, in the product developer's view, implementing evidence-

based programs without fidelity measures is likely a waste of time. As a result, the need for

commitment to fidelity is reviewed with school leaders during initial training and again

during follow up visits (Solution Tree, 2021). Also, evidence-based-practices are reviewed

and emphasized with the expectation that they will be implemented with fidelity.

Mihalic et al. (2004) criticized the program designer's assumption that pre-designed

programs could effectively be implemented without significant commitment from

practitioners. The authors pointed out that correct implementation would take significant training, additional resources, and a willingness to implement the program with fidelity. Mihalic et al. stated that, "discovering what works does not solve the problem of program effectiveness. Once models and best practices are identified, practitioners are faced with the challenge of implementing programs properly. A poorly implemented program can lead to failure as easily as a poorly designed one" (p. 49). The question one must ask is: are principals willing to rely on and implement evidence-based practices and comply with these expectations?

Evidence-Based Practices and Compliance

Evidence-based practices (EBP) is a term professional use to refer to programs or curricula that have been researched, implemented, and measured for effectiveness. These programs have been endorsed by researchers such as Cooper et al. (2009) who celebrated the current popularity of EBP in educational circles and rated them superior to other "home grown" methods of teaching (p. 166). Given the effectiveness and popularity of EBP and their seeming ability to improve student achievement, school leaders are sensible to comply with EBP and follow the protocols encouraged by for-profit companies.

For-profit educational companies are not a new idea in the educational world. Educational consulting companies are adopting a new strategy and capitalizing on EBP to encourage compliance. For example, Samuel Odom and other educational consultants created the IRIS website, a for profit educational consulting service, to teach the importance of adopting EBP in schools but also set up systems designed exclusively for monitoring teachers' fidelity. Odom (2019) used the IRIS website to ask school leaders to imagine that they had been diagnosed with a disease. In such situations, according to Odom, the obvious treatment anyone would choose was the one that had been proven to work. Odom's analogy

suggests that promoting the effectiveness of EBP has become a business strategy that directly translates to the education community.

Although proponents of EBP often use similar medical references to tout the approach, they advocates do not have an immediate answer for what should be done in the rare instances in which the "approved treatment" does not work and the "medical staff" lacks training, ingenuity, or even the spirit and inclination to try to do something different. Medical metaphors such as the ones used by Odom (2009) refer to instances of life and death, but educational challenges cannot be treated as if they were a disease of the heart or lungs. Instead of accepting Odom's argument and analogy, the educational community should ask whether leaders should wager the future of our youth by embracing fidelity without leaving room for change and adaptation.

Notably, many researchers disagree with Odom for various reasons. Some have stated that learning outcomes should not be the only focus of schools. The consideration of the materials being taught is also fundamental, if not more important. Biesta (2007), for example, believed that the original democratic educational regulations created flexibility in the system and allowed for a thorough responsiveness to the needs of the community. Biesta also maintained that users of the educational systems should have a say in deciding which materials should be taught. Biesta (2007) maintained that advocates of standardization should not simply ignore the importance of flexibility or act as if flexibility did not have any value.

For Biesta, education is a moral and political act and those who are responsible for creating educational standards should not discount the input from school leaders who are directly involved in the education process. A balance between standardization and autonomy is desirable and necessary if legislators hope to reach their goals for improved student achievement and improved school efficiency.

Balance

Farley-Ripple et al. (2018) asserted that the act of reducing educational research and practice into an either/or choice between autonomy and standardization was unproductive for researchers and practitioners. The researchers stated that relying solely on standardization to implement a successful program was a short-sighted approach that would almost certainly have unintended consequences. Farley-Ripple et al. referred to the unanticipated outcomes of education practitioners who experiment as "happy accidents" and acknowledged that these "happy" innovations could not have taken place if these educators had not had the freedom to carry out their work without being fixated on results (p. 238).

To create and manage educational programs, state and local leaders should seek to balance a hyperfocus on structure, which can create a "one size fits all" mentality, and autonomy that requires the efforts of outstanding leaders' to produce effective outcomes. Arizona school districts have apparently elected not to balance the two approaches. In most districts, many administrators have chosen to adopt the standardized models and practices and train practitioners to use them. Their attitude suggests that if principals implement standardized programs and follow the steps with fidelity, the programs will have an immediate and prolonged positive impact (Solution Tree, 2021). Principals have not always been under pressure to follow guidelines and comply with prescribed practices and their role has changed substantially after the compliance mentality became prevalent in schools.

The Role of Principals

From the days of the one-room schoolhouse until the late 20th century, the principal was considered the unquestioned authority and the purveyor of all knowledge (Hughes & Davidson, 2020) whose role was to educate the youth and prepare them for a meaningful life (Lee & Chue, 2013). The success or failure of a school were also attributed to principals because they oversaw the teaching and learning of math and reading. Although the principal's

position as the figurehead of the school has not changed for over 150 years, principals no longer possess the authority and autonomy they once did (Hughes & Davidson, 2020).

As district leaders have restructured districts to meet federal and state mandates, the role of the principal has been deliberately altered, imposing accountability and expecting compliance instead of authentic local leadership (Hughes & Davidson, 2020). Decision-making has largely been transferred to the district's central offices, whose administrators' single responsibility seems to be to comply with state mandates for federal reporting and protecting the status quo. Consequently, as Anderson and Cohen (2015) indicated, principals are regularly dissatisfied with their position in the school's decision-making hierarchy, making recruitment and retention of principals extremely difficult.

Capacity or Compliance

Superintendents who are tasked with hiring and training school administrators often rely on notions of leadership to describe the ideal candidate and to train new hires. And although superintendents emphasize that principals should be dynamic, forward-thinking, and capable of inspiring a shared vision, the reality is that most superintendents look for an administrator who can simply carry out the ever-changing requirements to manage a school (Sanko, 2020). To do so, superintendents have changed their hiring priorities and practices, and as Sanko (2020) explained "the serious nature of the role of a principal has shifted from that of visionary to that of executive director" (p. 76).

Not all principals are hired as managers, and yet managing the implementation of prescribed programs to fidelity is a large part of their responsibility. Principals have an expectation of a certain amount of autonomy when they take on the role and realizing those expectations impacts job satisfaction. After interviewing principals and superintendents that had gone through the hiring process as candidates and employers respectively, Anderson and Cohen (2015) concluded that candidates' perception of and expectation about the role of

principal played a large part in their satisfaction with and success in their job. As their study suggested, principals who were hired expecting to be autonomous leaders were highly disappointed when they found that the direction and vision for their school was determined by the district office.

Principals not only expect to play a significant role in their schools, but also expect to be trained in how to utilize critical thinking and problem-solving skills in adopting innovative practices. Hughes et. al (2019) surveyed 127 current Arizona principals and found that 88% of them agreed that critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills were necessary to be successful. Only 5% had received some formal training during their education, and only 6% felt that they had received professional development that met their current needs. In all, 80% of the principals believed that there was a pressing need for prospective leaders in education to understand critical thinking and problem-solving skills and receive training in both.

During the interview and analysis process, innovation was a common theme. Participants discussed practices that they believed were innovative and, in so doing, provided a working definition of innovation that was associated with any activities falling outside of the "normal" operating procedures for the school district or that broke from fidelity expectations. Therein, throughout the study, innovation and "thinking outside the box" were used interchangeably and principals were encouraged to share their experiences with adopting innovative practices. The question that should be asked is whether there is a need or even room for training principals to "think outside the box" in an environment where school leaders are expected to comply with fidelity.

Statement of the Problem

The challenges of educating children have been growing exponentially. While school leaders are overstretched because of the new demands that are being placed on them, principals face increasingly complex challenges (Hughes, 2014; Hughes, 2019; Miller,

2018). Since complications in the process of teaching and learning are inevitable, practicing fidelity and repeating the same approaches and behaviors rarely resolves the persistent challenges created by differences in school settings and other complex realities.

As a result of forced compliance expectations, principals have adopted a "more of the same " approach to leadership, which meets with frustration and criticism of stakeholders and dissatisfied principals. Novice principals reported that training programs focus on compliance before critical thinking and problem solving, two essential leadership skills (Hughes et al., 2019). The principals in training also reported that they received little significant training in autonomous decision making or problem solving. They reported feeling that the training in compliance was intentional. Most of these potential principals were currently in administrative roles or closely worked with administrators and could cite instances where innovation was discouraged.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to illuminate the perceptions including potential frustrations of principals concerning the freedom, or lack thereof, to adapt, modify, or otherwise improve struggling pre-designed programs intended to be implemented to fidelity. Specifically, the purpose was to gather insights of leaders from across Arizona concerning problem-solving and to examine instances in which implementing programs to fidelity restricted operational options for principals.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this research:

1. How does the underlying expectation of fidelity affect the principal's ability to adapt when and if they are called upon to meet the needs of stakeholders or the organization?

2. How does a principal identify alternative options when faced with unique problems not addressed by fidelity-founded practices if they are allowed to do so?

3. To what extent, and with what approvals are administrators allowed to consider alternative approaches to solving complex problems?

4. In what ways have leaders been prepared to "think outside the box"?

5. What recommendations do these administrators have concerning their situation and their ability to think critically and identify out of the box remedies?

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative methodology for various reasons, but especially because its subject matter had not been investigated. Following Hughes et al., (2019) who provided preliminary phenomenological consideration and utilized a qualitative approach, the researcher applied grounded theory to examine a topic that had not been sufficiently discussed in the literature.

Research documenting the lived experiences of principals is growing in popularity and is gaining the attention of members of the professional community (Deterding & Waters, 2021). The use of qualitative methods to examine this population has become more accepted and has been more productive because researchers and participants interact more freely during the interview process and more themes are discussed and collected (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2012).

Following the recommendation of Charmaz (2006), this study will adopt a grounded theory design. As outlined in the methodology, the researcher adjusted data collection processes to better align the study's design with the data analysis. According to Charmaz (2006), the deep analysis of data analysis writing required by grounded theory provides researchers with the tools to properly explore an idea or issue. Grounded theory also requires that researchers follow systematic guidelines while allowing flexibility for data collection and

analysis. As Charmaz elaborated, grounded theory allows that "research participants bring their own unique experiences, understanding, and points of view to the topic at hand (p. 7).

Jones and Alony (2011) followed Charmaz (2006) by pointing out grounded theory's rigorous and systematic approach to uncovering social processes and flexibility which provides the researcher freedom to be creative. The researchers also noticed additional benefits such as effectiveness to clarify complex phenomena, openness to social issues and socially constructed experiences, freedom from previous knowledge and information, and adaptability to various types of researchers. Grounded theory's systematic method of analysis does not require the formulation of hypotheses, so researchers are free to examine their topic and observe issues that arise during their research. The researcher can also gain deep insights into a topic with which they are unfamiliar and avoid assumptions by relying on data (Jones & Alony, 2011).

Jones and Alony's (2011) research guided the researcher's decision to select grounded theory as a methodology, especially since this study aimed to address a complex social phenomenon, specifically, to explain how and why leaders make decisions. To formulate the research questions the researcher also utilized grounded theory since the protocols allow for exploration and did not require assumptions. Finally, because grounded theory's rigorous process involved constant comparison, analysis, and limits the influence of perceptions and bias, the researcher was better equipped to examine the thought process and decision-making behaviors of principals.

Significance of the Study

District leaders spend a significant amount of time working on program development and implementation that they believe will positively impact student achievement. In contrast, principles are expected to carry out the plans and implement the programs with little consideration or input into the programs' development. When unexpected challenges

interfere with program implementation someone at some level is called upon to resolve the conflict.

This study addressed a large gap in the research on U.S. public school principals by providing insights on and assessing the practices of campus leaders. The research also addressed the motivation of principals who implement prescribed programs and explore how they perceive their roles which require that they solve the increasingly complex problems schools face. By drawing attention to the potential "autonomy gap" school principals experience, this study can help district leaders understand the importance of shared leadership in promoting success in their districts.

Definition of Terms

Accountability: Refers to the variety of formal and informal ways by which school officials "give an account of their actions to someone in a position of formal authority, inside or outside the school" (Elmore, 2008, p. 140).

Autonomy: Refers to the ability of an individual to act within the confines of the scope of their role. Autonomy also assumes that the individual has been given authority to act by a governing body that sets the parameters of the assigned position.

Autonomy gap: Refers to the difference between the amount of autonomy that principals think they ought to possess to lead effectively and the amount of autonomy they possess, given the accountability constraints to which they are expected to adhere and the type of school that they lead (Adamowski et al., 2007, p. 22).

Compliance: A disposition to yield to others. (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 1961).

Fidelity: The degree of exactness with which a program is introduced and then copied or reproduced.

Government: Refers to the nation state's command-and-control regulatory instruments. The use of command-and-control regulatory instruments is the quintessence of

government.

Innovate: To introduce or adopt new practices that significantly change the workings or structure of accepted practices of an organization.

Principal autonomy: Refers to the authority and flexibility that site-level principals exercise to lead staff effectively, to make decisions based on the needs of their constituents, and to make program improvements that meet or exceed federal, state, or local mandates (Adamowski et al., 2007; Gawlik, 2008).

Public school: Refers to a school organization governed by "state and local education agencies (districts) and publicly elected or appointed school boards" that receives "nearly all [its] funding from local, state, and federal governments" (Alt & Peter, 2002, p. 1).

*School Administrator: R*efers to any central office staff member in a public school setting who is responsible for directing and administrating and is identified by the school board in a leadership role.

Acronyms Used

- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)
- National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE).
- No Child Left Behind Act of2001 (NCLB)
- Critical Race Theory (CRT)
- Evidence-based practices (EBP)
- Social Emotional Learning (SEL)
- American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)
- Race to the Top (RTTT)
- Coronavirus disease of 2019 caused by SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19)

Limitations

This research's participants were principals at 12 different public schools in Arizona. The interviews were conducted in the Phoenix Metropolitan area. Interviews were limited to one hour to accommodate the principals' schedules.

Delimitations

This study focused primarily on the principal population. Superintendents, teachers, and other school leaders were not included. Although a large part of this research examined the impact principals have on their schools, interviews were not held with other school personnel that may or may not have been affected by the principal's decisions.

Summary and Organization of the Study

Topics such as social pressure on leaders, reduction of principal autonomy, and the preparation of principals to exercise critical thinking skills are complex and deserve additional research. More to the point of this study, additional research examining the extent to which principals have adopted a compliance mindset is valuable in framing additional study. This study, which gathered the experience of principals and qualitatively analyzed their responses, has the potential to shed light on the grievances and needs of principals and is organized to achieve that goal. Chapter 1 introduced this study's research topics and its research questions. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on the history and effect of federal education policy, including the research that has addressed the impact of policies on principals' autonomy. The chapter also discusses the literature surrounding the compliance mindset; to explain the need for training and mentorship for principals.

Chapter 3 provides a review of the methods of data collection utilizing a Grounded Theory approach and also describes the procedures for analyzing the data to encourage the emergence of a theory. Chapter 4 includes a description of the research, a report of its

findings, and an analysis of the findings. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the study and its findings, a summary of the findings, recommendations for future study, and implications of the study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Being a leader in education has never been an easy undertaking. In the days of the one- room-schoolhouse the principal was the teacher as well as the custodian and the person who lit the fire to heat the building. Some outside guidance and support in those times would likely have been welcome, the alternative reality during this side of the millennium is that there may be too much outside direction and interference (Hughes et al., 2019).

This study emerged from literature noting ways the essential role of school leadership has increasingly been stunted by competing and often non-complementary school improvement efforts that have resulted in a compliance mentality (Hughes & Davidson, 2020). More to the point, and more specifically, the focus of this exercise was directly connected to the emergence of this compliance mentality, particularly regarding its overtaking the ability of principals to think and contribute critically to situations where the fidelity model may not resolve matters efficiently or effectively.

The following research questions guided this research:

1. How does the underlying expectation of fidelity affect the principal's ability to adapt when and if they are called upon to meet the needs of stakeholders or organization?

2. How does a principal identify alternative options when faced with unique problems not addressed by fidelity-founded practices if they are allowed to do so?

3. To what extent, and with what approvals, are administrators allowed to consider alternative approaches to solving complex problems?

4. In what ways have leaders been prepared to "think outside the box"?

5. What recommendations do these administrators have concerning their situation and their ability to think critically and identify out of the box remedies?

Supporting these questions with known literature, this critical review also considered the ability of principals to meet the needs of their stakeholders if they adopt the compliance

mentality and, as a result, cease asking probing, important questions that may lead to innovation and "outside the box" solutions to the problems they face. This line of inquiry has important implications for day-to-day practice as well as the long-term quality of student instruction.

Framing the Perspective of This Study

This study originated from an appreciation for how high the stakes are when discussing and making decisions about the education of our children in the public education system. In 1948 Justice Felix Frankfurter wrote in the landmark decision *McCollum vs Board of Education,* "The public school is at once the symbol of our democracy and the most pervasive means for promoting our common destiny" (Quillen, 2018. p. 45). This decision created a unique, yet tenuous, expectation that the government and its lawmakers play a significant role in directing the education of America's children (Butler, 1994). Given that the nature and aim of politics is to control the direction of our "common destiny", politicians naturally would seek to create policies that direct the actions of school leaders and thereby direct the learning of students.

Hughes et al. (2019) undertook a phenomenological investigation targeting the perceptions of leadership trainees. The collective effort of that undertaking documented incoming administrators beginning their leadership training with the expectation that the training would give them direction in innovation and critical thinking skills. The leaders in training voiced a perception that contemporary training seemed to be more focused on appeasement and avoiding litigation than training critical thinking. Research has shown that public school administrators begin their service with the intent to make an impact on the school and community but quickly find that the lawmakers' interjections into the system of public education have resulted in unrealistic expectations, mandates, and a "this is how things

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are done" atmosphere. As a result, some of the leaders shared that the training for the leadership role had become frustrating and contradictory (Hughes et al., 2019).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to examine practitioner attitudes and insights towards their preparation in and ability to utilize critical "outside the box" thinking. As stated in Chapter 1 and examined in greater depth here, the argument has been made that school administrators have been operating under a model of compliance, accountability, and fidelity to standards and products for the duration of the 21st Century (Hughes & Davidson, 2020). Public policy plays a role in that frustration and explaining those policies and their effect on the escalating expectations of public-school administrators is the focus of this chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature outlining events, policies, and practices which have influenced the practice of independent critical thought as opposed to efforts to standardize, if not even dominate, educational practices to the point of utter compliance.

The research being reviewed will consider historical, pedagogical, and political motivations. This chapter will also include a review of the role that resulting public policies played in expanding the expectations placed on principals, specifically, the expectation that principals will execute program and policy implementation with fidelity. This chapter will review the effect that these expectations of fidelity had on principals including less of a focus on developing critical thinking skills in leaders and more of a focus on training compliance. Finally, this chapter will outline the research surrounding principal training and consider the availability of evidence of the need for additional critical or "outside the box" training and mentoring to prepare principals for the unforeseen circumstances that are inevitable in school leadership.

Background Information

Leaders in public education stand, many times, alone with the responsibility of making decisions that will affect the trajectory of a school. Being sufficiently prepared as a leader is critical in being able to respond to the complex nature of the role (Hughes, et al. 2019). At a time when critical thinking skills would appear to be at a premium, leaders have had their authority removed, or significantly decreased, seeming to abdicate the role of standard bearer, or decision maker. Hughes and Davidson (2020) observed that leaders tend to adopt a compliance mentality over time, which leads to leaders, in a very practical way, losing their nerve, seeking solutions from sources outside their direct leadership influence. The practical question explored in this study was: have principals adopted this compliance mentality, effectively turning over their decision-making authority, without realizing the effect of their decision and how their effectiveness may wane as a result?

In the study cited earlier, Hughes et al. (2019) illustrated the frustrations of aspiring leaders that independently recognized the emerging compliance mentality but had not succumbed to the compliance mentality during their training. As if seeing the emperor without his new clothes, these leaders in training, pointed out the seemingly incongruent nature of the expected practices of a school leader and the training program. Hughes (2019) concurred that the training of school leaders may lack a practical, critical thinking focus and that mentoring was a possible vehicle that could help to avoid adopting the compliance mentality, sidestepping the "go along to get along" mentality.

In support of that effort and to draw attention to the path that has led to the adoption of a fidelity mindset, this review targets three major themes:

1. Historical views of expectations and influences as well as directional determinants of school operations (Sputnik through Today).

2. The Fidelity Compliance Mindset

3. Training and Thinking Outside of the Box

This chapter begins with a historical view and follows an outline of sequential and deliberate policy decisions that lead to a fidelity/compliance mindset. Finally, the chapter comes to rest on the importance of training leaders to think outside the box. In the end a conceptual framework will emerge that informs this study.

Historical Views of Education

The first section of this review is the history of policy decisions framed in social context. Reviewing the historical context should illustrate how social pressure placed on educational leaders after the launch of Sputnik to the time of the Donald Trump presidency (1957-2021), school leaders have walked a path of increasing expectations of compliance. The intentional increasing demands and expectations that every school across America deliver the same thing - namely, a standardized educational experience implemented with fidelity, are shown in this section to be ineffective, if not intentionally counterproductive.

The Race Begins: Sputnik

To this day and including today, current American educational policy is derived from layers of decision making that has been motivated by the paradigms and expectations of legislators and other political leaders (Hemetsberger & Thyri, 2022). The attempts, over the years, to use public education as a political tool has resulted in higher and higher expectations for our schools' leaders. Adding to the challenge, political leaders have created policy that has resulted in creating an educational system that has become a platform for finding children who can be trained to bring about the politician's vision for America. The focus on reforming the educational system was evident midway through the 1900s when America began its journey into space.

On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, a satellite that could orbit the earth and send a signal back to earth. Much of America initially viewed this act as a novelty

that didn't have a bearing on their lives (Hemetsberger & Thyri, 2022). Over the next few months, America's views seemed to change. Fueled by Cold War sentiments, the American public voiced its concerns that the Soviet Union was winning the technology race. This "educational crisis" and the "achievement gap" became the discussion topic at dinner tables (Kay, 2009).

In relatively short order, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958. Kay (2009) reported that Congress justified the bill and stated, "(Congress) finds and declares that the security of the Nation requires the fullest development of the mental resources and technical skills of its young men and women… The mastery of modern techniques developed from complex scientific principles" (p.2). In a significant way, education became the vehicle, used by politicians, to combat and address public concern.

Ironically, in trying to respond to the problem, lawmakers created a different one; the fallacy that education was the key to solving America's problems. The role of high schools changed dramatically during this era. In less than a decade, schools changed from being a source of community education to the forum for a national search for scientists and mathematicians (Hemetsberger & Thyri, 2022). Principles were expected to hire teachers that could help the country combat the Cold War and, as a result, funding was moved from the arts and music education to the sciences (Branscome, 2012; Wissehr et al., 2011). And equally of note – public education was not being driven by educators or best educational practice as much as educational circumstances were being highlighted and intertwined with the political dealings of the day.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act

A landmark bill that had significant impact in terms of structure and expectations that the Federal government would be involved in the day-to-day decision making of school leaders is the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Motivated by the passage of

the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, lawmakers looked to expand the federal government's implementation of civil rights by pressing for and passing the ESEA. ESEA was not a simple move to make at the time (Guthrie, 1968). The Johnson Whitehouse saw the ESEA bill as a needed expansion of the Civil Rights Bill that would offer opportunities in education to disadvantaged people. The work done by the Johnson Whitehouse was also a masterful demonstration of political maneuvering.

The ESEA bill had to overcome severe opposition and the proponents of the bill formulated compromises that allowed the bill to be passed. The friction centered around three major points of contention: race, religion, and federal control (Guthrie, 1968). Guthrie also pointed out that contention around these areas, as outlined below, was a hallmark of the civil upheaval of the time.

Race: Many lawmakers had begun to believe that segregated schools were bad. The bill would basically defund schools that chose to continue to segregate. This was a highly volatile issue because Southern Democrats wouldn't vote for the bill without assurances that school aid to segregated schools would only be cut off after a "lengthy advanced notice" (p.5).

Religion: The bill allowed religious schools to benefit from federal funds. "Assistance" bills had not made this concession in the past and, as a result, had had difficulty gaining the support of lawmakers that came from areas highly populated with religious schools.

Federal Control: Northern U.S. Republicans didn't want to vote for a bill that would give the federal government more control over educational funding. They believed that the states should be given the ability to control how the funds were spent. Southern U.S. Democrats believed that Congress should be able to dictate how the funds were spent.

Title 1: The most significant part of the bill was the creation of a Title 1 formula that allowed states to calculate their need based on the number of students in poverty in their specific areas (Guthrie, 1968). Guthrie (1968) pointed out that this compromise was tough for both sides to swallow but compromise made returning to their constituents having voted for the bill bearable. Title 1 was the first policy specifically meant to redistribute funds based on financial need.

Researchers have suggested that the layers of policy that schools function under do not recede over time but rather serve as the foundation for future policies, creating the layered system of bureaucracy that educational leaders confront today (Hemetsberger & Thyri, 2022). The new and unprecedented expectations of Title 1 have remained and expanded over the years.

Most significant to this study, ESEA introduced the expectation that school leaders would report to the federal government the quality of implementation of federal programs, including efforts to improve equity and stop segregation, as a condition of receiving funds (McDill & Natriello, 1998). To the point, Title 1 was used by the politicians to create compliance in school leaders that were reluctant to comply with the Civil Rights Bill.

The results of this political maneuvering and its funding has created a dependence on the federal government for programs that many schools take for granted today. Principals in lower income areas rely heavily on the funds allocated by Title 1 for after school programs, pre-schools, and lunch programs. The expectations of compliance have remained in place and, as has been shown with federal influence, continued to expand (McNeil, 2009).

A Nation at Risk

One example of deliberate political maneuvering is the National Commission on Excellence in Education's report, *A Nation at Risk*. The Commission, called into existence by Terrel Bell, the secretary of education in the Reagan administration, consolidated public

sentiment for education reform and increased federal power by creating a narrative and giving that narrative a seemingly independent and academic feel. Mehta (2015) documented the desire of Bell to bring education to the forefront of the nation's mind. Bell's determination was driven by a belief that education was extremely important in the shaping of the country's role in the world and that the country needed a close examination of education quality. The result of the work of Bell and the Commission was one of the most masterful uses of political manipulation up to that time (Mehta, 2015).

The final 1983 report, was a compilation of all these efforts and was published with an explosive and unexpected preamble by Commissioner Gerald Holton, titled "*A Nation at Risk*." The Commission recommended several interventions that should take place to combat the growing shortcomings of the educational system. That list included increased rigor, increased graduation standards, the development of tests that would measure achievement at a state and local level, and a focus on subjects like reading, math, and computer sciences. A *Nation at Risk* also called for an increase in the expectations made on schools for reporting academic outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 1983).

The report effectively made public education an important national issue and intentionally cast doubt on the public education system (Mehta, 2015). The Commission was clear in its criticism of the public school system and its call for reform. The authors of the report stated, "Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world" (Goldberg & Harvey, 1983, p. 1). Tommy Tomlinson, who worked on the report stated that the commission had achieved its goal. He said, "Education was no longer the low man on the totem pole; indeed, not since Sputnik had its visibility been so high (p. 24).

No Child Left Behind Act

Continuing with the theme of governmental expansion and oversight, the next section talks about the adoption of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). NCLB was the result of a perceived increasing gap in student achievement and increased requests for alternative options for education (Kraft, 2018). NCLB was written with the belief that measuring student testing, combined with high standards, would drive the necessary steps required to realize improved student achievement. Achievement standards were increased for reading/language arts, science, and math. Teachers were designated as "highly qualified" if they were properly credentialed and trained in their subject area and schools were expected to be safe and violence free (Nikolska, 2020).

As a reform effort, NCLB was the most intrusive and most expensive of any of the reform efforts attempted to that point (Kraft, 2018). The expectation that schools would transform because of the efforts of think tanks and policies implemented by the federal government showed that leaders of the reform movement of the day had disregarded the lessons demonstrated by past reformers (Nikolska, 2020). Principal autonomy was seen as a roadblock for reformers that held the view that standardization of practice would lead to equity in student outcomes. In very practical terms, the hope was to "principal proof" schools and provide principals with programs that would answer their problems (Nikolska, 2020).

Kraft (2018) stated that the federal government guidelines requiring principals to hire teachers that could meet the standard of "highly qualified" did more to discourage prospective teachers from entering the field than to encourage student growth. García and Weiss (2019) attributed the difficulty in hiring teachers in today's economy largely to the mandate that teachers be highly qualified in their fields.

This challenge, compounded by the other behavior and societal pressures creates real problems for the efforts of principals. In *Hiring at Risk*, Hughes (2014) pointed out that

hiring practices needed to be updated to allow more innovation and flexibility, rather than making them more restrictive. He stated:

> For too long, hiring has been carried out in isolation, through outdated practices, with the potential improvement of practice perhaps even being written off with a catchphrase that gives lip service to supporting the very importance of hiring the best but doesn't appear to relate in any way to actual efforts to bring this tremendous most important responsibility about. (p. 10)

In a study comparing national trends between public and private schools from 1991-2012, Lee and Lee (2020) found that accountability structures initiated with NCLB had a significant impact on decision making when principals were prioritizing their academic goals. After interviewing principals and collecting survey data from principals across 45 states, Mitani (2018) found that principals carried a significant burden of stress due to the expectation that their schools comply with the NCLB guidelines. Specifically, the implementation of the Common Core curriculum. Mitani (2018) also found that principals were much more likely to leave their jobs if expectations from school boards and superintendents included sanctioning teachers that opposed the NCLB guidelines.

Race to the Top

Immediately after taking office in 2009, President Barrack Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), which carried a 787-billion-dollar price tag. Obama stumped for the bill by insisting that the country needed the federal government's assistance if people wanted to see recovery from the recession and improvement in job opportunities. Former President Reagan's administration sent a commission to build support for their vision of a preferred educational agenda through "*A Nation at Risk*" and, utilizing similar political tactics, Obama used his charisma and political prowess and spoke relentlessly about his vision to "fundamentally change America" and redistribute America's resources to those minority communities that were in need according to Bromann (2012).

Keeping the promise to create change, the ARRA allotted 115 billion dollars to states

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to help them avoid layoffs in the education sector (Kraft, 2018). A small percentage of that money, 4.5 billion dollars, was tied to an education reform initiative called Race to the Top (RTTT). The initiative called for states to compete for the grants by implementing practices and policies that were meant to reform schools. If Reagan's efforts to create change through "*A Nation at Risk*" were masterful, then Obama's political maneuverings with RTTT border on genius. RTTT and, more specifically, the promise of much needed funds during a time when schools were suffering, was the carrot that was needed to drive the reforms that Obama wanted to see. As will be shown next, most states never received the funds, but every state made sweeping changes in hopes of receiving federal aid (Weiss & Hess, 2015).

To receive the RTTT grants, states had to show evidence that significant systematic changes had been made to improve schools. Even before receiving any funds, school districts were expected to improve and expand Special Education programs and states were expected to create higher and more rigorous standards for measuring college and career readiness. Many states also expanded their charter school offerings to offer educational choice to families (Weiss & Hess, 2015).

Howell (2015) stated that the RTTT initiative was a masterful piece of political maneuvering. Obama essentially forced the states to look at education policies that were controversial and adopt practices that would have been politically damaging to his administration if the federal government were to mandate them. McGuinn (2016) pointed out that Obama intentionally avoided the gridlock in the US Congress and "opted to make education policy through creative, expansive, and controversial uses of executive power that changed the national political discourse around education and pushed states to enact important policy changes regarding charter schools, common core standards and assessments, and teacher evaluation" (p. 399). In the end, almost every state adopted educational policy that transformed their evaluation protocols and state curriculum.

The RTTT initiative was relatively short lived, but the reforms are still evident today. When President Obama took office principals would evaluate teachers periodically or when complaints were made by parents. By the end of his presidency, principals were expected to evaluate teachers multiple times a year using a multi-point evaluation tool (Howell & Magazinnik, 2017). Wieczorek et al. (2019) found that principals became more adept at carrying out evaluations efficiently and in a timely manner but compliance with the evaluation expectations did not make principals better at identifying the pedagogical needs of the teachers.

The Fidelity Compliance Mindset

A Half Century of Influence

From Sputnik to Obama the federal government had expanded its influence in the education sphere and as a result the control of the school moved farther and farther away from principals. The expectation by society that schools were the vehicle for solving America's problems and overcoming our social and economic challenges has been well documented. Each administration built on the layers of policy that had come before and expanded the government's role to answer the needs of the time. Also, each new policy and program added to the expectation put on principals, reducing their autonomy.

The expectations placed on principals have varied and were both implicit and explicit. Sputnik resulted in society's quiet expectation that schools train those that would answer the country's need for math and science experts. The ESEA and Civil Rights era brought about sweeping social change that principals were expected to navigate in both curriculum and personality conflicts. Reagan had created the narrative that schools were a national resource and through "*A Nation at Risk*" had solidified the public view that education was a system that needed to be managed at a national level. The Bush administration made significant

changes to reporting and standardization and Obama followed that trend by increasing those expectations.

As this literature review continues to look at the most recent political and social expectations surrounding principals the researcher will rely more on current events reporting than extensive research and literature. The impact of political and social expectations on principals will be evident as the literature expands to include news reports from national and local sources to show the prevalence of the mindsets that will be discussed.

Social Media Liabilities

One of the frequently voiced criticisms or for some aspects worthy of acclaim had to do with the polarizing approach former president Donald Trump instilled in his political dealings. As a result of Trump's approach to typically detour from existing policy the effect that Trump's presidency had on societal pillars such as education and school leadership is still being unearthed (Wong, 2022). The polarizing policies and incendiary rhetoric caused problems for principals beyond the expectation of compliance or policy implementation that have already been discussed in this chapter. Trump's actions, along with his social media influence, increased the new age of educational criticism and stakeholder skepticism (Hughes et al., 2020). Rather than covering additional ground on the effect of federal policy on principals this section will focus on the effect such a figure had on the culture and expansion of the "culture wars" that principals were expected to navigate.

Trump appealed to the voter that believed the government had grown too large and its influence was systematically taking away American freedom. He also appealed to those that believed that American culture was under attack by the progressive movement in politics (Lynch, 2019). Salena Zito, CNN contributor, and Brad Todd, a Republican consultant interviewed 300 voters from the Midwest that voted for Obama in 2012 and for Trump in 2016. Zito and Todd's interview respondents were mostly hourly workers in physically

demanding jobs that reported having suffered personal or financial hardship due to changes in the job market. Lynch (2019) stated that these voters where, "a Trump base of infrequent and late-in-life voters, many unmarried and unaffiliated with political parties and civic organizations, who 'crashed' the GOP, drawn in by Trump's message of bringing manufacturing jobs home" (pp. 293-294).

From the beginning of candidate Trump's campaign, there was very little room for middle ground which created an atmosphere of contention and conflict. Hughes (2019) wrote that Trump's election and his divisive nature would complicate the already challenging educational landscape. Hughes stated:

> During the past ten years there has been ample evidence of expanding challenges for society, social justice, and subsequently school leaders. Not all the challenges have to do with the most recent presidential election in the United States, but plenty of them do according to Strom and Martin (2017). And, as former Superior Court judge and longtime friend of the president, Andrew Napolitano (2019) related, there is plenty of reason to be concerned about long-term consequences of positions taken by the president. (p. 6)

Ultimately, Hughes (2019) predicted that a lack of preparedness to solve problems and deal with conflict would hamper efforts of school leaders who were trapped within a compliance reality. Where the previous sections have focused on the role that the federals policies and national leaders have played in intentionally transforming the role of schools, and molding the educational landscape, the next section will discuss the resulting compliance mindset that many leaders, especially principals, have adopted to navigate the restrictions and expressed unrealistic expectations.

The Fidelity and Compliance Mindset

Great principals that actively direct the workings of their school are primarily responsible for the school's success (Grissom et al., 2021). As has been mentioned, principals are responsible for hiring successful teachers, adopting curricula that will fit the needs of their students, and maintaining morale and teacher satisfaction. Dicke et al. (2020) stated, "A

great principal, just like any other manager, is critical to retention because most people don't leave organizations, they leave supervisors" (p. 1051).

Recognizing that principals play such a critical role in the success of schools (Skyhar, 2020; Grissom et al., 2021), superintendents at the local and state levels have expressed an interest in developing and hiring highly qualified potential leaders. Policymakers seem to have taken a different approach entirely. As outlined in the previous sections, the laws and policies have intentionally been designed to create a system of public education where leadership is secondary to compliance. The expectations call for principals to comply by implementing practices and programs to fidelity. In so doing, a system has been created that rewards those that adopt a compliance mindset and stay in their lane.

As already referenced in this study, there are new principal candidates who are not satisfied with the training provided that seemed to be intent on building a compliance mindset. The excited, driven, and new principals felt the weight of increased expectations of reporting, standardized testing, implementing pre-designed curriculum, and adopting federally mandated policies that replace opportunities for innovation and autonomy (Hughes et.al., 2019).

In a call for additional research on the subject of principal experiences within the current educational culture, Nehez and Blossing (2020), state that the role of the principal has been studied in depth but the amount of information about how principals feel about their role is lacking. The authors state that the research is hyper-focused on identifying the attributes of successful principals but doesn't explore the feelings of principals that find themselves restricted to pre-designed principal practices. Also lacking is research exploring the principals' desire to develop those attributes and refine them once they are in the role.

Complex Situations That Principals Face

One of the themes of this study was how the fidelity mindset is not equipped to handle many of the challenges and expectations that principals face today because the situations are extremely complex and difficult to navigate. In many cases, policy has yet to catch up with the circumstances the principal may face. The following section will cover a few of these topics, namely:

1. Hiring Efforts

2. Leading Through Conflict and Adversity

3. Concerns with Critical Race Theory

4. Coronavirus disease of 2019 caused by SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) Protocols

Hiring Efforts

Putting together a high-capacity team is the most important thing a building administrator will do according to Hughes (2014). Principals in their current roles are an untapped resource when district and state leaders are taking the temperature of the hiring environment. Though that sentiment might seem easily achieved when taken at the surface level, there are multiple challenges to maintaining effective hiring practices when considered in the complex context of a school setting.

As has been discussed earlier, hiring teachers that meet the strict guidelines of being "highly qualified" can be a daunting task. With teaching becoming an increasingly difficult job and the expectations on teachers rising, principals are struggling to find teachers that will commit to the strenuous work, let alone meet the standard to be considered highly qualified.

At the time of his writing, Hughes (2014) stated that principals were primarily self-taught when hiring qualified teachers and this can lead to an underutilized opportunity to improve their organization. Hughes (2014) also pointed out that, to avoid conflict, principals are more likely to adopt a "play it safe" mentality rather than searching for a candidate that

will be a good fit for the organization. Instead of making choices to make a difference, Hughes pointed out that there was continued complacency in hiring almost 20 years after his original focus on the topic. He later (Hughes, 2018) provided school superintendents with data supporting these positions on minimal preparedness and the effects this data could have on creating a highly capable teaching staff. Status quo and reliance on "hand me down" approaches (Hughes, 2018) are not the only problems trapping school leaders into a compliance approach to hiring. New ones are emerging in ways that contradict the intent that drives them.

Additional pressure is placed on principals to hire teachers that reflect the makeup of their school. For example, Goldhaber et al. (2019) called for principals to hire teachers based on their race. The authors cited the "role model effect" that occurs when minority students are taught by teachers of their same race. The expectation that a principal will consider the skin color of a candidate rather than his or her qualifications during the hiring process is illegal but is gaining traction in the public debate. Goldhaber et al. (2019) pointed out that the emergence and acceptance of critical race theory provides a solid foundation for the adoption of such practices. Ultimately, there is a need for more diversity in our teaching ranks. Those doing the hiring very much should consider the perspectives of Goldhaber, et al. Leaders need to have the critical perspectives to recognize that a recommendation is an added consideration to weigh into the mix and not an ultimatum that changes – in its entirety – the direction of future actions.

Leading Through Conflict and Adversity

Even after assembling a highly invested team of educators, managing the complex nature of human interactions can be a daunting task in the best of circumstances. The reality is there are growing challenges and increased complexity that schools face on a daily basis (Hughes, 2014; Hughes, 2019). Navigating the current issues such as growing discord

(Hughes, 2019) and the pandemic that our society is grappling with adds a new dimension to the role of the principal. Hughes and Davidson (2020) assured leaders that conflicts would arise that would create stress and conflict and encouraged leaders to develop decision making skills.

Hughes (2019) and later Hughes and Davidson (2020) suggested that understanding the complex nature of societal shifts and being aware of the feelings of their followers may help principals lead with more intentionality. The complex nature of leading through conflict calls for leaders to be authentic and worry less about following leadership protocols and more about finding ways to inspire a shared vision. A leader that finds ways to speak authentically and recruit those that believe in a vision is going to be more successful than one that follows prescribed conflict management protocols (Hughes, 2020). Hughes said:

> "Those who tap the human side of team building inspire more broadly and more genuinely. More frequently, they are able to secure the investment of others in a commitment to a shared cause. In so doing, they consistently exceed the outcomes generated by those angling for passive acceptance and momentary buy-in. (p. 28)

Concerns With Critical Race Theory

The need for principals to be able to lead through conflict was highlighted with the reaction of communities and staff to the narrative surrounding reports of schools adopting Critical Race Theory curricula. In 2014 Critical Race Theory (CRT) was an obscure educational theory outlined in the Harvard Law Review in 1993 by Cheryl Harris (Harris, 2020). Most people only interacted with CRT if they were working in academia, and even then, students could go their entire educational career without citing it. Beginning in Loudoun County Schools in Virginia, parents began showing up to school board meetings asking why their children were being taught that their skin color made them racist (Porter, 2021).

Parents across the country watched news reports of parents loudly criticizing school board members for allowing the concepts of CRT to be taught to their children. One agitated parent quoted from her child's book to get the school board's reaction. She said, "'whiteness'

leads white people to make deals with the devil for 'stolen land, stolen riches, and special favors.' White people get to 'mess endlessly with the lives of your friends, neighbors, loved ones, and all fellow humans of color for the purpose of profit'" (Washington Examiner, 2021).

Whether or not CRT was being taught in schools, parents across the country were concerned, and in some cases convinced, that the ideas were dangerous and demeaning and had no place in their schools. This concern started a hailstorm of public record requests. Angry and concerned parents attended school board meetings to ask questions and demand transparency. Ellis (2021) stated that parents confused CRT with equity and sensitivity training that was taking place on campus, but the misunderstanding reached new heights. In a matter of months, the criticisms were echoed by some political leaders who used the conflict as a platform for candidacy for public office.

During these difficult circumstances, principals were expected to remain professional and non-confrontational. In many school districts principals were given letters to send out refuting the claims that CRT was in their schools. This did not stop parents from accusing principals from hiding the truth (Washington Examiner, 2021). As was mentioned, professional training on how to deal with unique situations was sorely lacking or non-existent. Principals worked to build the trust of their communities by holding meetings with parents, posting information on the school website, and encouraging teachers to avoid teaching controversial topics (U.S. News, 2021). Principals that had taken proactive roles in distributing curriculum that was seen as controversial were called out at school board meetings and some district and school leaders were forced to resign (Ellis, 2021; U.S. News, 2021).

COVID-19 Protocols

Another recent example of a challenge that tested the utility of compliance or, for that matter, principals' willingness to comply with implementing outside protocols to fidelity was the response to the Coronavirus disease of 2019 caused by SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic. Principals were expected to follow directives that changed daily and, regardless of their own feelings about the accuracy or viability of the solution, implement the directives with fidelity (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020). In their research, Stone-Johnson and Weiner (2020) interviewed 17 principals and collected data surrounding the principals' ability to meet the needs of their community. Stone-Johnson and Weiner (2020) reported that the principals felt like outsiders in the policy development process and expressed their frustration about not being included in the discussions surrounding the protocols that would affect their schools in such a drastic way.

Also, principals were expected to become experts in online learning almost overnight. Pollock (2020) found that school leaders were expected to not only provide educational experiences for children that were fundamentally outside of their influence because the students were remaining at home, but also provide extensive digital instructional leadership as teachers navigated the relatively untested waters of new technologies. Principals in the study said that families expected school leaders to have answers for problems that, in many cases, the principals could not control while the teachers were dealing with the ever-changing circumstances and challenges of online learning.

As schools closed across the country, principals were forced to innovate and make quick decisions based on the hierarchy of needs. Physical needs and emotional safety were considered before academic needs. Almost every school district used federal funds to pay for meals for children. Principals were responsible for organizing the distribution of these meals equitably and with limited resources (Kaul et al., 2020). Principals checked in with teachers daily to assess if online classes were being conducted to ensure a sense of normalcy for

students. Kaul et al. (2020) also found that as schools were closed principals played a significant role in teacher emotional stability.

Returning to school was a complex and difficult part of the pandemic that polarized communities. The polarizing nature of the political rhetoric of the time made returning to school a political football that kept school boards and principals constantly under fire. Principals were expected to keep a calm demeanor during the many changing deadlines for opening schools. Principals were also responsible for preparing schools to open in unprecedented ways that were time-consuming and expensive. In Arizona, school boards relied heavily on state and county medical personnel to give guidance on policy and practices. Principals were then expected to adhere to school board decisions regardless of their own feelings about the necessity of the protocols (Mueller et al, 2021).

Following the protocols came with a set of unique challenges. Principals and school boards were not prepared for the community backlash from instituting COVID-19protocols. The quarantine measures quickly became a contentious topic. Some parents believed the quarantine efforts were unnecessary and that COVID-19 was just another excuse to remove their freedom. One parent went so far as to go to Mesquite Elementary School with zip ties to arrest the principal for quarantining his child. Principal Diane Vargo was terrified and had never dealt with an incident like this before. She said, "He had video in my face, and two other men barged into my office. And one of them was carrying zip ties… They were three big men. She said each of the men was recording her and her assistant "and threatening to arrest us" (Planas & Ciechalski, 2021).

These situations would be difficult to deal with in the best of circumstances but without direction or training or feeling empowered to act, principals were left to fend for themselves. Predicting the next unique or complex circumstance that principals will face is impossible. Attempting to create guidance that will address every situation is unreasonable

and unrealistic. Although research shows an intentional determination by policy makers to "leader proof" schools, research also suggests that giving principals the appropriate tools to think critically and training on how to apply those tools, paired with the autonomy to act is a necessary next step in preparing principals to be successful (Hughes, et al. 2019).

The Common Theme

The situations and challenges just shared have more in common than may meet the eye. Each of the situations, namely, the difficulty of hiring, leading through conflict, community concerns about CRT, and COVID-19 protocols, have a few common themes. These themes include the following:

1. Indecision: The situations exposed the weaknesses inherent in top-down approach to public school management, namely, indecision.

2. Training: The situations could not have been anticipated and, as a result, training programs had not prepared principals to act in a decisive manner.

3. Responsiveness: Principals had to wait for information from legislators, policy makers, and district leaders before acting to address the concerns of their local communities because of the top-down approach to decision making adopted by public schools.

4. Autonomy: Principals lacked the autonomy to act.

Training Principals to "Think Outside the Box"

Hughes et al. (2019) suggested that leadership training, mentorship, and autonomy were critical in both future and current principals. As has been referenced, aspiring principals expressed their desire to avoid the complacency and compliance mindset that seemed to overtake so many of the principals currently in leadership positions. The principals in training voiced their commitment to avoid the "that's the way it is" mentality but were concerned that without the support and training from district and state leaders, compliance was unavoidable.

Another fear of the aspiring principals was that roadblocks existed to discourage innovation and that the aspiring principals would be expected to maintain the status quo rather than find innovative solutions that were "outside the box". The principals in training referenced current principals that had lost their drive to lead their schools and had adopted a compliance attitude as a rational for their concerns. Hughes and Mouw (2017) captured this trend and articulated the need for mentors positioned outside the school that, because of their separation from the school dogma, were able to coach their mentees to maintain a leadership mindset. This encouragement of innovation, largely viewed by participants as stepping outside of the fidelity mindset and typical practices of the school district, is discussed further in Chapter 5.

In describing the principal/mentor relationship, Hughes and Mouw (2017) described the interaction of one mentor with a new principal that was feeling discouraged. In the instance the authors covered, Hughes and Mouw reported that a crucial element of the activity - and the subsequent role of the mentor was to remind the principal "to stay true to who she originally set out to be as a leader. She recognized a 'drift' away from her core leadership dispositions as she was completing her training, sought support to bring her back in line with original beliefs, and additionally sought to address perceived gaps in her formal graduate program training" (p. 8).

Hughes (2020) pointed out that leaders at the district level would benefit from encouraging positive relationships between veteran and novice teachers and structuring mentoring programs that give experienced leaders more autonomy to build capacity in the novice leaders. He said, "What happens when instead you embrace human motivation and empower a cross-section of veteran and newer (leaders) to envision the future course of school district challenges, limitations, and possibilities? They conduct themselves respectfully, independently, and productively. They more than "get it" and are passionately

invested in the reality everyone is facing" (p. 27).

As principals that are trained to problem solve continue to take on new roles, such as instructional leaders, head counselors, or Human Resource directors, they will look for innovative ways to include others and delegate. Leadership training is a significant factor in their success during this process (Barnett et al., 2017; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Hughes, 2020; Thessin, 2019; Tuma & Spillane, 2019). Hughes (2020) specifically addressed the need to update leadership training practices to meet the needs of the ever-changing educational landscape. Mentoring is a practice that should be carried out, but Hughes (2020) called for mentors to look closely at the practices they were passing on to new leaders to avoid passing on a "more of the same" mentality.

Conceptual Framework

This study relies on information gleaned from the literature to form a working framework that can be used to access and activate the inputs from interviewed administrators in ways referenced in Chapter 3. The literature explained multiple developments that have helped shape what many consider to be a complex and volatile environment for principals to succeed within. The framework of understanding developed through the literature revealed a condition where administrators and the very organizations they serve are increasingly forced to conform to outside interests, particularly state and federal governments (Hughes & Davidson, 2020).

In what might be likened to being an "administrator proof" development teachers and now school leaders are expected to rely upon pre-packaged products in compliance with legislation dating back to NCLB. The argument that emerged from the history provided here and summarized by Hughes et al. (2019) suggested that administrators are no longer trained nor expected to be the critical thinkers and problem solvers they were prior to NCLB – and instead are implementers of fidelity-based operations. The cadre of phenomenologically

oriented reflexive administrator trainees (Hughes et al., 2019) identified this situation and brought a blend of teacher and trainee perspectives forward.

This study aimed to gather the direct impressions of active, experienced administrators who are working under the conditions described throughout this chapter. These efforts were undertaken to contribute to the broader understanding of whether creativity and critical thinking are practiced or even valued in a compliance-centered educational reality described in an article co-authored by this investigator. To that end, the researcher recognizes the need to transition from the areas of research covered in the literature review to the collection of data about principal experiences in the Phoenix Metropolitan area. The research questions have been framed to examine the claims of the literature and gather data of the lived experiences of principals through a grounded theory approach which will be detailed in Chapter 3.

Model Research Projects

Researchers have used similar methodology designs to the approach used in this study. Having access to these studies provided important knowledge and also strengthened the validity of employing the approach that has been outlined in this study. Specifically, grounded theory research was shown to be an effective methodology for studying the experiences of subjects. Jones (2016) studied the effects of the principal's beliefs about social emotional learning (SEL) and how SEL influenced their staff. Using a grounded theory approach, Jones (2016) interviewed 8 principals from schools in similar socio-economic settings and found that the major barriers to effective SEL training included the principal's preconceived ideas about SEL, lack of desire to implement SEL training, and the inability of staff to model the SEL behaviors. The author concluded that expecting a principal to implement training while these issues were unresolved created a significantly challenging atmosphere.

Ostovar-Namaghi (2012) used a grounded theory approach to study the autonomy gap. The study focused on the difference between the academic training and research that was taking place and the daily experience of schoolteachers. The critical look at the academic approach to practical research pointed out that educational philosophers spent too much time contemplating the theory of leadership, while giving little to no attention to the experiences of teachers. Researchers focused on the development of theory by interviewing language teachers in Iranian public schools. Specifically, the patterns of teachers' behaviors when choices were placed before them where flexibility was expected. The study concluded that theory based on philosophical discussion fell short in describing the challenges that teachers faced in the classroom.

Schneider (2021) interviewed 10 school principals using a constructivist grounded theory approach to identify their legal training levels. The study focused on the way that principals processed and evaluated legal issues in schools. Themes emerged that pointed out the practical nature of the principals' approach to problem solving. The reality of the situation the principal faced, and the considerations of the case played into their decision of how to act more than the study of the law. The creation of a common-sense approach of the principals led the author to form a theory on principal behavior. Principals were trained on specific behavior and understood the law but demonstrated outside the box thinking when placed in the emotionally charged environment of a leader.

Lastly, Kownacki et al. (2020) used a grounded theory approach in studying state mandated shared leadership between principals and teachers in Pennsylvania. While interviewing 6 principals and 20 teachers, the authors found a series of themes that emerged including the disparity of beliefs between the principals and the teachers, the disdain for accountability controls, and the differences in the beliefs of who was best suited to make decisions to help the students reach their full potential.

The teachers believed that their role as teachers and their daily interactions with the students best qualified them to make decisions that would affect the children. Principals on the other hand believed that policymakers had the best interests of students in mind when they implemented policies such as accountability measures for students and high stakes testing. Teachers and principals wanted to share in leadership responsibilities and believed that shared leadership was effective and important but the chasm between the beliefs of the two groups made finding a shared vision practically impossible. The shared leadership model, without autonomy, was found to be impractical in the experience of both principals and teachers.

Summary

This chapter has focused on the ever-changing educational landscape and the policies and laws that have shaped it. From Sputnik to the present, lawmakers have encouraged and instituted policies that encourage compliance and discourage innovation. Research informs us that principals are looking for opportunities to have an impact and they expect to do more than maintain a compliance attitude toward their schools. The complex challenges that principals face call for leaders to be skilled in problem-solving, critical thinking, and leading innovative change effectively. They also need to know how to gather people around them that will support them, both as followers and as mentors. There is literature that presents a compelling need for training of principals in new and innovative problem-solving tactics. Hughes (2014) called for reformers to keep in mind that without the input of those involved in leading schools, reform is a futile exercise. He said:

> Anyone invested in sustainable school improvement, particularly in American schools, needs to focus beyond reactionary quick fixes that are aimed at appeasing legislative mandate manufacturers. They need instead to focus at least as much on and promote a continuous improvement mentality that best capitalizes on distributed leadership efforts and is more consistent with recommendations from international sources such as Bush (2012) who identify and support the need for initial preparation and ongoing leadership development throughout the career of an administrator. (p.11)

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Leaders expect to be included in decision-making. Critical thinking skills and an "outside the box" mentality is motivating and exciting for those that aspire to take on leadership roles (Hughes et al., 2019). Creating that capacity in school leaders will benefit the educational outcomes for all stakeholders. Research shows that training leaders to think critically and innovate is an effective tool in school improvement because taking an active role in the development of programs and policy encourages commitment in school outcomes. Finding out what current leaders think about these ideas is critical to improving and planning for training and mentoring. Also, finding out if principals believe they are adequately equipped to deal with the challenges they face is the purpose of this study and uncovering what they believe they need to be effective will have an impact on professional development practices.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Principals in today's education system have been tasked with leading change while simultaneously being directed to follow instruction guides, products, protocols, and procedures they didn't have a hand in crafting. Also troubling, when the inevitable problems show themselves, the only recourse leaders seem to have is to continue to follow through with the proven pre-packaged products to fidelity. As shown in Chapter 2, the deliberate efforts of policymakers to create a school that is a reproducible product that essentially becomes a "principal proof" system has created an environment where principals potentially find the expectations of their job unrealistic, and as a result, frustrating and stifling.

School improvement efforts have focused greatly on student outcomes but very little on the development and motivation of principals who frame the environment that makes those outcomes possible (Hughes et al., 2019). This chapter outlines, describes, and justifies the use of a grounded theory approach to collecting information about 15 principals and their experience with the compliance mentality, especially concerning their preparation to respond to situations with flexibility and autonomy.

Restatement of the Purpose

The purpose of this grounded theory qualitative study was to illuminate administrator perceptions and potential frustrations concerning their abilities and freedoms to adapt, modify, and otherwise improve pre-designed programs intended to be implemented to fidelity. More to the point, the purpose of the study was to gather insights of leaders from across Arizona concerning problem-solving and sought explicitly to focus on instances where implementing programs to fidelity has restricted operational options for administrators.

Although several definitions of principal autonomy exist, this study was built from a foundational definition of principal autonomy as the ability to direct the selection,

implementation, and evaluation of instructional materials and processes to respond to the needs of the students and teachers. Based on grounded theory design, data was collected by:

- Interviewing 12 principals

- Constantly comparing and analyzing the data

- Allowing the data to inform the process of identifying categories and creating theory with the expectation that a new definition of principal autonomy would become apparent as the study was carried out.

Research Questions Restated

Supporting questions with known literature, the critical review outlined in Chapter 2 considered the ability of principals to meet the needs of their stakeholders if they adopt the compliance mentality and, as a result, cease asking probing, important questions that may lead to innovation and "outside the box" solutions to the problems they face. The following research questions guided this research:

1. How does the underlying expectation of fidelity affect the principal's ability to adapt when and if they are called upon to meet the needs of stakeholders or organization?

2. How does a principal identify alternative options when faced with unique problems not addressed by fidelity-founded practices if they are allowed to do so?

3. To what extent, and with what approvals are administrators allowed to consider alternative approaches to solving complex problems?

4. In what ways have leaders been prepared to "think outside the box"?

5. What recommendations do these administrators have concerning their situation and their ability to think critically and identify out of the box remedies?

Research Design Procedures

This qualitative study utilized a Grounded Theory approach to examine the experiences of high school principals across Arizona, from the Phoenix metro area,

concerning the compliance mindset. This study focused on the every-day workings of principals as they reflected on whether the policies and procedures expected of them hampered their ability to react appropriately to the variable and unanticipated needs of their community, teachers, and students. Interviews were conducted to allow principals to reflect on their current and past experiences as well as the training they received and continued to participate in to help them be successful. Lastly they were ultimately asked to reflect on if they could succeed given the circumstances.

Following the Grounded Theory procedures, this study utilized questions with a wide range of possibilities, allowing the principals to focus on and dive deeper into the subjects that they found most important. As will be discussed in this chapter, this style of interviewing has been shown to be effective in allowing categories and themes to emerge that can then be analyzed and presented to create a theory that can inform research in the area.

Interviews were conducted with subjects being provided the context of the study and the parameters of the research. Participants were not given pre-designed questions to avoid directing the subjects' responses. During the interviews, notes and memos were written to allow the researcher to identify categories and themes that the subject believed were important. Interviews were also recorded for review later. Additional questions were asked to encourage the subject to dive deeper into areas of interest. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and then annotated to add to the themes and continue to build a foundation for the next interviews. During the process of interviewing, coding, and identifying themes, a theory emerged that will be presented and analyzed in Chapter 4.

The remainder of this chapter will explain the Grounded Theory methodology and procedures to provide context and the rationale for utilizing this approach in this study. The sections and subsections are as follows:

- Assumptions of Qualitative Design and Grounded Theory

- Rationale for Grounded Theory Qualitative Research

- Interviews and Data Collection Procedures

- The Role of the Researcher and Principal in this Study

- The Selection of Participants

- Theoretical Sensitivity

- Validity and Reliability

- Data Analysis Procedures

  - Constant Comparative Analysis

  - Open Coding

  - Axial Coding

  - Selective Coding

- Generating Theory

Assumptions of Qualitative Design and Grounded Theory

The beginning assumption of any qualitative study is that reality and perception may not be compatible. The understanding that the physical world exists is paramount but acknowledging that reality is tied to perception is also critical (Charmaz, 2006). Creswell (1994) explained: "Qualitative research is interpretive research" (p. 147). The qualitative process is necessarily an inductive process (Charmaz, 2006), in which data are collected for the purpose of interpretation. The data include the information provided by the subjects as descriptions and narratives. Marshall and Rossman (1999) described the benefits of qualitative research in the pursuit of uncovering information. The authors stated that "qualitative research is especially suited for the exploration of an area of study where gaps in the research have been identified or where large quantities of research have been developed from other theories". That is, the qualitative researcher is looking for knowledge that emerges over time rather than "tightly prefigured" ideas (p. 2).

In a grounded theory approach, meanings and categories and theories emerge from the data and as more data are made available the categories are added to and the theory is refined (Charmaz, 2006). This is used as a part of the inductive process, along with notes and memos about the circumstances, respondent tone of voice, and theoretical implications. The researcher builds meaning by closely examining and analyzing the data inductively.

The qualitative researcher applies the content of the situation to attribute value and meaning to the respondents' comments. Tone of voice, informal speech, and context of the comments are all considered when collecting data. The reporting of the data takes on a more informal voice, allowing the reader to add context from their own experience in the interpretation of the results.

Rationale for Grounded Theory Qualitative Research

This section describes qualitative research design and focuses on Straussian grounded-theory research design and presents a rationale for using this design in the development of a theory, providing answers to the research questions as outlined above. Straussian grounded theory design allowed the researcher to uncover trends and patterns in the interviews of the 12 Arizona principals and their perceptions of principal autonomy and the expectations of implementing pre-designed programs with fidelity.

As outlined in Chapter 2, principal leadership and the role of the principal in managing change has been an area of increased interest and research as the role of the principal has changed. These studies have led to the growth and heightened interest in the emerging concept of standardization. Still, research has been focused primarily on the role of teachers and principals in implementing programs, the results of their efforts, and the strategies they used to reach fidelity in instructional practices. Much of this research has been quantitative. Research studies dealing with principals' perceived success or satisfaction has often relied on prefigured categories.

Grounded theory design is particularly fitting in this study because the grounded theory methodology leads itself to the emergence of content throughout the interviews. As interviews occur themes emerge that can be categorized into patterns that hold meaning. As the research progresses these patterns lead to the development of a theory. The interview itself changes as the questions shift to inquire after the emerging themes and patterns. Using interviews, researchers interact with the subject and the subject matter being investigated, expanding the understanding of the material and the perspective of the respondent.

Reflexivity is an integral part of the research. The interviewer must make a conscious decision to adapt and give each interview a unique role in the research. Adjusting to the circumstances of the interview as they arise also allows for more in-depth investigation when a theme of interest arises. Although the process is an exploration of values and biases and subjective experience of respondents, qualitative interviews are seen as a valid, reliable research tool because of their authentic adherence to the data and the perceptions of respondents. The concept of sampling is an assumption that theories formulated for one group "will probably hold for other groups under the same conditions" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 49).

Grounded theory is built on other important assumptions. The following are a few of the most critical:

1. The researcher will maintain the integrity of the study while participating as an observer. Bias is assumed but not imposed on the respondent by the researcher. Also, the researcher does not force the data into predetermined categories.

2. Abstract ideas are the outcome of concrete narratives that help the researcher discover meaning during and after the interview process.

3. Constant comparative analysis allows the researcher to use the principal's perceptions to generate more generalized concepts and meanings.

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4. Concepts and categories and meanings and theory generated from a small number of subjects can be useful in providing direction for additional corroborating research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

5. This study adds to the body of research rather than being exhaustive.

6. Participation in close collaborative conversation allows the researcher to illuminate the perspective of the respondent and use constant comparison analysis to move from the subjective toward neutral observation. Observing how someone says something is just as important as what was said.

Interviews and Data Collection Procedures

Data collection is an integral part of qualitative research. Glaser and Strauss (1967) brought attention to the need for rigorous data collection as a part of qualitative research and called for researchers to adopt an academic mindset toward data collection as well as an empathetic view. In this study, collecting the individual lived experiences of the principals followed the single primary method for data collection, namely Active Interview Theory.

Holstein and Gubrium (1995) developed the Active Interview Theory to create a "conceptual sensitizing device" that would allow interviewers to gather the "hows of social process" and the "whats of lived experience" (p. 5). Holstein and Gubrium (1995) discouraged "prospecting" to gain information. They suggested that rather than interviewing with the intent to transmit information or treating the respondent as a "vessel for answers", the interviewer should treat the experience like a social encounter where the interviewee is a companion on a journey of discovery (p. 7).

Holstein and Gubrium (1995) also explain that this coordinated effort to find meaning in the experiences of the respondent creates a synergy that "unavoidably implicates" the interviewer as an active participant in the research (p. 3). Holstein and Gubrium (1995) referred to the active interview process as an exercise in interpretation. As a result, the reality

of the principal's experience is a combination of what is said and the interpretation of the emotions and intensity of how the answer is given.

During the interviews the researcher will strive to "collaborate" with the respondent with the goal of having a "friendly talk" that will create a relaxed atmosphere and allow for conversation to flow freely. Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater (2012) stated that this "collaboration" is the hallmark of a good interview and interviewers are not just asking questions to satisfy the collection of information, like a survey. Rather, the interviewer is just as interested in the nuance of a respondent's reaction to a question as to the content of the answer. The goal is to dive as deep into the person's reason for answering a question a certain way and asking for clarification and details that will allow for sincere answers to emerge (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2012, p. 219). In this way the active interview is filled with spontaneity and improvisation. The interviewer provides structure and focus of the "conversation" and provides opportunities for the respondent to include context and details to the narrative (p. 76).

During the interview, important details such as body language or inflection in the voice or the intensity of emotion while answering questions were included in the memos and notes. These memos constituted the artifacts that highlighted the significant parts of the interviews that were interpreted by the researcher. Transcripts and recordings were included as artifacts and acted as significant anchors to the data.

This study was designed with the understanding that all interviews would be professional and well thought out while, as stated above, maintaining flexibility and a conversational tone to avoid pre-determining the path the interview would take (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2012). To that end, this study utilized interviews with principals for data collection for three reasons:

- To encourage the principals to help in the creation of meaning during the interview.

- To encourage authenticity in the data collection process and allow for flexibility to follow lines of questioning that will enhance the narrative.

- To follow emerging concepts and themes as they are revealed by the principal, especially those that may be considered conversational or offhand by the principal.

The following section outlines the role of the researcher and interviewee in the interview process in more detail and, more specifically, outlines the procedures and expectations of both during the Active Interview process.

The Role of the Researcher and Principal in this Study

The role of the researcher is particularly important in Grounded Theory research. When compared, Straussian grounded theory differentiates itself from the classic approach by accepting that the researcher cannot be completely independent from the research or the subjects. When researchers and participants are in similar fields it's important to recognize that the common experiences will give the researcher valuable insight while interviewing subjects. The researcher needs to be aware that bias exists, but rather than expend energy avoiding it, the researcher works to mitigate it, acknowledge it, and use the bias as an advantage (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) explained that researchers that made conscious decisions to not allow their bias to shape their theory were more valuable than ones that pretended to conduct research without a history of experience. Corbin and Strauss (2008) shared that completely avoiding bias was almost impossible. Honesty about the relationship between researcher and subject is important and the shared experience of both participant and researcher can benefit the research.

The experience of the interview should be intimate and personal (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Holstein and Gubrium (1995) stated that interviewers "are deeply and unavoidably implicated in creating meanings that ostensibly reside within respondents" (p.

3). The interviewer, if successful at setting a comfortable atmosphere, interacts with the subject in their world and sees things from their perspective and accurately records the subject's understandings and recollections. In this way the interviewer and the principal collaborated to affect the data collection process (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

The researcher took on the role of a good listener and, in so doing, connected with the subjects in a meaningful way. Framing questions effectively and using additional and probing questions prompted valuable responses and gave added insight into the true feelings of the respondent (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2012). Also, an important part of the interviewer's role is to communicate "that the subjective view [of the respondent] is what matters" (p. 110).

As active participants in the study, the respondents were given the opportunity to create the narrative as they worked through the interviews with the researcher. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) described the interviewee as a storyteller. This is not to suggest that the respondent made up stories or experiences. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) stated that "The improvisational narrative combines aspects of experience, emotion, opinion, and expectation, connecting disparate parts into a coherent, meaningful whole" (p. 28).

The respondents had the freedom to relate their experiences as they perceived them. That included piecing together fragments of experiences to create meaning and show patterns that accentuated their positions. In this way the subjects took on the role of researcher of their own experiences and provided preliminary "coding". Allowing the respondent to create a narrative is an important step in the process of data collection. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) believed that the purpose of the interview is to allow the respondent to construct their narrative and the role of the interviewer is to assist in that construction and record how the process of creation takes place.

"Elite interviewing" was a goal of the interviewer (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 113) or, more to the point, finding candidates that could give answers that best represent the experiences of principals in Arizona is an important consideration. Principals were chosen for their expertise and knowledge of program adoption and implementation as well as their expertise as instructional leaders. The goal of the researcher was to explore the perceptions of principals that had been given adequate time in their position to have navigated complicated situations and formed opinions on autonomy and fidelity.

The researcher is a high school administrator in Arizona who researched the topic of principal preparation (Hughes et al., 2019) during the final stage of his masters-level leadership training. The early opportunity to recognize the dissonance resulting from being trained to function as a leader yet subsequently not being allowed to carry out that role as envisioned shaped this researcher's professional development, training trajectory, and eventual research interests.

The participants were aware of the researcher's role as a school administrator. As a result, the interviews were believed to be generally more relaxed and open. This was beneficial as the researcher was better able to relate to the principals and encourage them to share authentic perceptions about their role. Notably, the principals shared examples of what they believed were roadblocks to school productivity that were typically not discussed in other meetings or shared in casual conversation. Principals also used affirming and validating language such as, "You know what I mean", or "You live it, so you know what I'm saying."

The Selection of Participants

The process of "theoretical sampling" or the process of simultaneously deciding the data to collect, coding the data, and analyzing the data during the interviews was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and expanded upon by Corbin and Strauss (2008). This process

was utilized by the researcher. As a result, the process of collecting data carried on while the interviews were taking place allowing the researcher to choose subjects without a theoretical framework (Breckenridge & Jones, 2009). The researcher's response to the data allowed for flexibility in requesting interviews as the study was carried out. As the theory emerged throughout the interviews, gaps in the data became more evident, allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions. As a result, Holstein and Gubrium (1995) stated that choosing a group of subjects to interview is an "ongoing process." "Designating a group of respondents," they said, "is tentative, provisional, and sometimes even spontaneous" (p. 74). However, this study included parameters for selecting interviewees to ensure the validity of the study and the application of the findings.

The subjects of this study were selected from high school principals in the Phoenix Metro area. Subjects were selected from at least five school districts with more than 10,000 students and multiple high schools. Preliminary research was conducted utilizing school websites, personal connections, and references from school administrators to identify principals with more than 5 years of experience.

Theoretical Sensitivity.

The critical objective throughout the interviews that utilize grounded theory is for the researcher to maintain perspective on the "theoretical purpose and relevance" of this type of research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), namely, the uncovering of theory rather than the disproving or proving of facts. The interviews were designed to flow from one subject of interest to the next without designing a list of pre-designed questions. Creating a detailed list of questions that all subjects were expected to answer could have been detrimental to the recognition of significant themes when they arose. Glaser and Strauss 1967 specifically addressed the need for constant decision making to add or remove questions as new data are was introduced. This practice kept the conversation fresh and relevant to the data (p. 48).

Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggested that the experience of the researcher and his background are factors that need to be considered in theory generation. Emerging theory directs the researcher as the interviews are conducted and the interviewer becomes a partner in the identifying of themes and categories. An important distinction is drawn in grounded theory between data and theory. Data can be collected in a sterile manner. Theory, on the other hand, is informed as the data are collected and the researcher draws temporary conclusions and works to find themes. Sensitivity to the emerging theories and the ability to pivot as new data are collected is a necessary skill that requires the researcher to draw conclusions and redirect questions or generate new concepts, taking on an important role in the interview process.

Validity and Reliability

The question of validity is addressed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Statistical sampling carries the weight of answering questions that verify evidence. Statistical sampling correctly makes assumptions about what populations might do in similar circumstances or under similar conditions. Theoretical sampling, in contrast, is used to discover information that can be categorized and systematized to show relationships. Identifying how information and data are related to each other can then be inferred to hold from one group to another. In short, if the data collected over time, with constant adjustments to new information, is accurately interpreted, then the data should remain valid in similar conditions when applied to other groups.

A benefit of research based on the human experience is the "representative and diverse nature of the complex experiences of humanity" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 26). Sampling a group that can speak to the impact of a phenomenon is a powerful way to gather interpretations that are difficult to categorize or interpret when using statistical sampling. Including a variety of people from diverse backgrounds that are in the same positions, such as

the principals in this research, allows the different principals' experiences to speak to the experiences of other principals in a representative role.

Data Analysis Procedures

The purpose of this section is to explain the methodology involved in data analysis in this study. Glaser and Strauss (1967) explained that people have a natural tendency to find patterns and researchers are no different. Utilizing a method for collecting and organizing data allows for theory to be generated while maintaining the integrity of the research. This section explains the constant comparative process that was utilized in this study, specifically, the coding process, which led to the creation of theory.

Constant Comparative Analysis.

The analyzing of data in grounded theory research is referred to as constant comparative analysis. Strauss (1987) explained that during the data collection process, details are compared that inform the researcher and allow for adjustments to questions as early as the first interview. "Indicators", or small details are systematically categorized and compared to each other and then later compared to the data. The researcher collects memos and records the interviews to allow for detailed comparison of all indicators and to begin the process of noting differences that will allow for inductive coding and the generating of concepts, categories, hypotheses, and theories.

This process is described as constant because the researcher continually refers to the origin point of analysis and looks at the data again with the new eyes. Each "pass" through the information allows for more detail to be coded and categorized. As this process continues, the researcher collects new data while simultaneously analyzing and comparing the results with the data collected in the past (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Types of Coding Used in This Study

The coding practices outlined in grounded theory include open, axial, and selective coding. These coding practices were utilized for data organization and analysis as explained by Corbin and Strauss (2008).

Open Coding: The researcher compartmentalized the data into groups based on apparent trends, similarities, and themes, and then closely examined the data and questioned its validity when compared with the other data collected.

Axial Coding: The researcher analyzed one concept or category at a time, much like focusing on an idea as that idea revolves around an axis or focal point (Strauss, 1987). Coding in this manner allowed the researcher to develop subcategories that illuminated the category and provided information to the researcher through the emergence of theory.

Selective Coding: The researcher identified variables in the form of categories. The "core" categories that were identified during this process were used to inform and guide the research, specifically, the selection of additional subjects.

Generating Theory

The end outcome of all research, and especially this study, is to be able to create a working theory that will inform researchers and allow for application in the real world. Theory generation is the end outcome of grounded theory. Glaser and Strauss (1967) set the parameters for generated theory by pointing out two critical elements, namely, the conceptual categories, which include their properties, and the hypothesis or ties between the categories and their given properties. The generation of a hypothesis sets the stage for the generation of a theory.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) stated that in the early stages of the work, the researcher will be overwhelmed by the amount of information. As the research progresses, a hypothesis will emerge that will help drive the research to a focal point that moves from unrelated categories to a theory that "emerges" from the data (p. 40). Theory is, by necessity, open-

ended. This emerging theory or "tentative theory" is the foundation of future interviews and will allow the researcher to trim down questions to get the most pertinent information (McGhee et al., 2007, p. 335).

The building of a theory is an ever-evolving process of data collection, adjustment, and refinement. During the process the researcher is expected to move from the broad abstract ideas and categories to core categories that can inform a hypothesis and lead to the generation of theory. Theory can then act as an explanation of how the subjects, on a larger scale, interact with their environment, providing a foundation for future research.

Figure 1

Grounded Theory Process
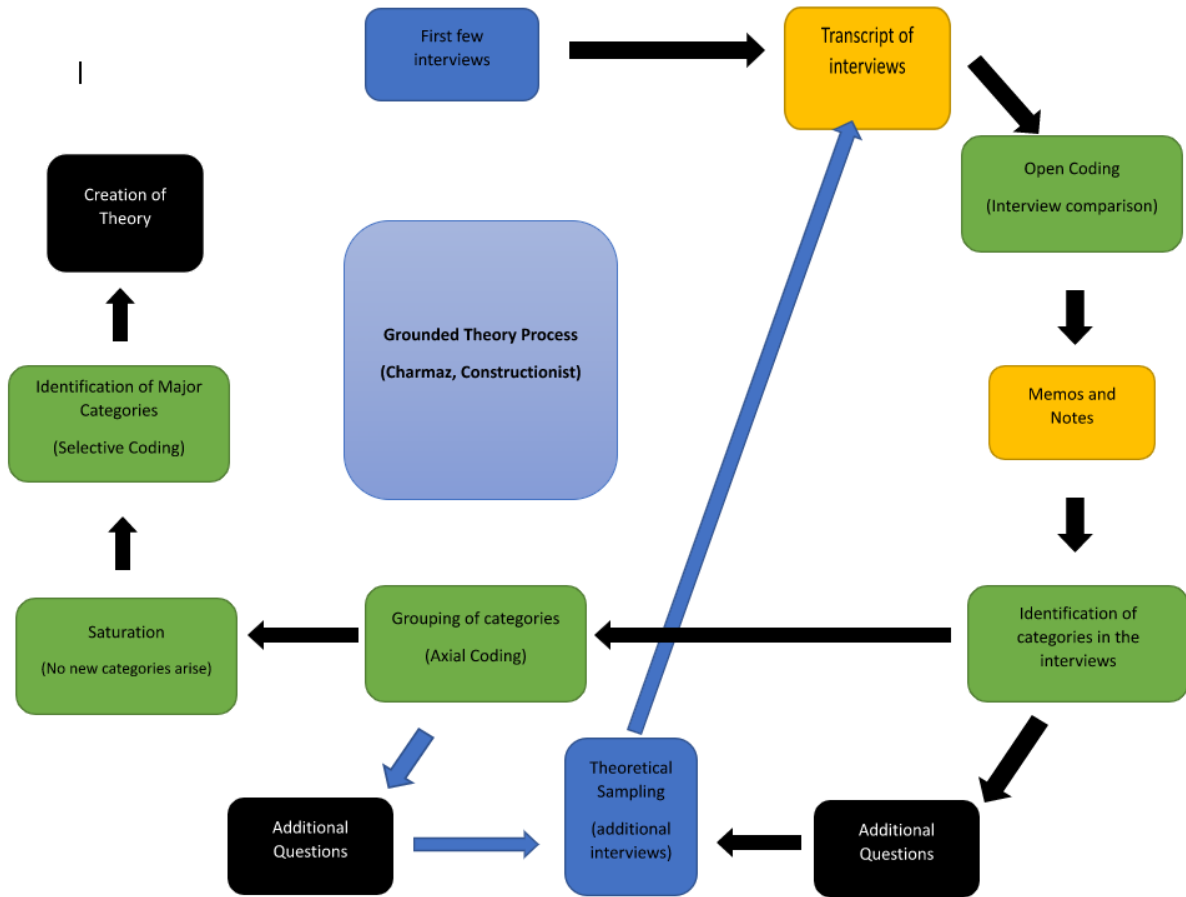
Note: Figure created by author.

Method for Verification

Glaser and Strauss (1967) believed that quantitative research was more concerned about the act of verification than qualitative research. They stated that the generation of theory is the sole outcome of research, and that verification lies in the application of the theory over time. According to Glaser and Strauss, verification plays a significant role in all research but shouldn't be the primary motivation for conducting studies. Morse et al. (2002) argued that verification is defined differently in qualitative research. In their view, the rigor of the study is maintained by the process itself. Essentially the process of qualitative research

is "self-correcting" (p. 17). This process of constant evaluation of the data leads to research that is valid, rigorous, and reliable.

Limitations

This research was limited to the experiences of principals at 12 different public schools across the Phoenix Metropolitan area of Arizona. Interviews were limited to one hour. Theoretical sampling may also contribute as a limitation because the subjects were not selected randomly from different groups to best represent the wider group of principals across the state.

Delimitations

This study focused primarily on the principal population. Superintendents, teachers, and other school leaders were not included. Although a large part of this research examined the impact principals have on their schools, interviews were not held with other school personnel that may or may not have been affected by the principal's decisions.

Summary

Chapter 3 explained the methodology of this study, reviewed the research questions, and described the study procedures. A grounded theory methodology was outlined and the rationale for using this methodology in this study was given. Principals in 12 high schools across Arizona will be interviewed and their answers will be coded, categorized and concepts and themes will be identified leading to the emergence of theory. This qualitative data will then be analyzed utilizing review protocols and procedures outlined in a grounded theory approach as a foundation for future interviews. Chapter 4 will present the findings and summarize the analysis of the data.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Principals play a unique role in the public education system. They balance the expectations of the community, students, and staff that they interact with every day with the sometimes-calculated outcomes of a fidelity mindset. The principals interviewed in this study have arrived at their positions in various ways but the challenges they face have common themes. This chapter will focus on the findings of the interviews and highlight the common themes that surfaced during the interviews. The chapter begins with a brief introduction of each of the 12 participants included in the study, including an overview of their experience and training.

The research in this study was gathered utilizing a constant comparative method. The interviews were conducted with a commitment to allow the participants to share their thoughts without interruption or significant breaks in the conversation. This was addressed for many reasons outlined in Chapter 3, but especially because the subject matter had not been investigated with significant depth. Grounded theory allows for interviews to be conducted in a fluid manner. In this case, examining a topic that hasn't been researched previously allows for some flexibility in gathering lived experiences.

The popularity of principal interactions as outlined by Deterding and Waters (2021) has led to several interviews recording principal actions and less of a focus on the mindset of the principal. Sunstein and Chisteri-Strater (2012) encourage the free discourse with participants because it uncovers a wider, more authentic representation of themes. Allowing the participants to share their thoughts with minimal redirection and conducting the interview in a conversational manner uncovered an illuminating pattern in the interviews. The results of the interviews, including the organization of themes and the identification of interesting patterns are reported in Chapter 4.

Findings and Results

Throughout the chapter the findings will be reported as a series of themes that demonstrate emergence of a theory. The purpose of this qualitative study was to illuminate the perceptions including potential frustrations of principals concerning the freedom, or lack thereof, to adapt, modify, or otherwise improve struggling pre-designed programs intended to be implemented to fidelity. Specifically, the purpose was to gather insights of leaders from the Phoenix, Metropolitan are of Arizona concerning problem-solving and to examine instances in which implementing programs to fidelity has restricted operational options for principals.

Following the recommendation of Charmaz (2006), this research was conducted using a grounded theory design. As outlined in the methodology, the researcher adjusted data collection processes to better align the study's design with the data analysis. According to Charmaz (2006), the deep analysis of data analysis writing required by grounded theory provides researchers with the tools to properly explore an idea or issue. Grounded theory also requires that researchers follow systematic guidelines while allowing flexibility for data collection and analysis. As Charmaz elaborated, grounded theory allows that "research participants bring their own unique experiences, understanding, and points of view to the topic at hand" (p. 7).

Following the constant comparative analysis techniques, the researcher asked initial questions and then allowed the participants to answer the questions in a fluid and conversational manner. The researcher would return to the research questions periodically and prompt the participants to discuss the topics outlined in the study. The participants were aware of the research questions and the purpose of the study but many of the discussion topics focused on details and stories and experiences that didn't pertain to the research or answer the questions.

During additional interviews, the phenomenon of participants sharing information that didn't answer the questions continued. It was clear that the participants believed they were sharing information that was important and relevant. Rather than repeatedly directing participants to answer the questions, the researcher asked questions directed at the research and allowed the participants to answer with information they believed was important.

Given the previous explanation of how the data was collected and with the support of the research committee, the findings are reported in such a way that the research questions and their answers are highlighted first followed by the additional themes focused on by the principals. The sections of chapter 4 are organized as follows:

Section 1: Participant overview - a summary of the participants utilizing data collected by the researcher including codes, themes, and impressions of the researcher.

Section 2: Open coding themes.

Section 3: Participants' answers to the following research questions.

- How does the underlying expectation of fidelity affect the principal's ability to adapt when and if they are called upon to meet the needs of stakeholders or the organization?

- How does a principal identify alternative options when faced with unique problems not addressed by fidelity-founded practices if they are allowed to do so?

- To what extent, and with what approvals are administrators allowed to consider alternative approaches to solving complex problems?

- In what ways have leaders been prepared to "think outside the box"?

- What recommendations do these administrators have concerning their situation and their ability to think critically and identify out of the box remedies?

Section 4: Themes of topics not related to the research questions.

- Finding balance

- Leadership

- Building relationships

- Controlling the narrative

- The expectations of principals

- Mentorship and training experiences that prepared principals for the role.

- Advice for superintendents and principal training programs

Section 1: Participant Overview

Participants in this study were principals from across Arizona that have led schools of more than 2000 students in districts of more than 10,000 students. The principals had a range of experience but had been in their school districts for more than 5 years and were familiar with the expectations of the district leadership. The following section includes expressions from each principal that highlight their leadership style, expectations of district leadership, innovative activities, and most important attributes for principals. The summary of each participant follows:

Principal 1

Leadership style: Hands on. Involved in the details. Hires people that can handle his expectations and will follow his leadership. Believes in collaboration and working with people to accomplish goals. Takes on large tasks and major changes that he believes his school can accomplish.

Expectation of district leadership: Leads with a purpose and with clear vision. Communicates. Holds schools accountable.

Innovative activities: Implementing a 1-to-1 initiative.

Most important attribute for principals to have: The ability to build relationships. People must come first.

Principal 2

Leadership style: Collaborative. "You can't make decisions without knowing what people think about the situation."

*Expectation of **d**istrict **l**eadership:* A clear vision and good communication is important. It's difficult to fulfill your role as a school leader without the support that is communicated, not just given behind closed doors.

Most innovative activity: So much of our day is lost by sitting in an office. I've been intentional about meeting people where they are. We have a young staff, and they appreciate that I've been out and around the school in a way that hasn't been done before.

Most important attribute for principals to have: Being a servant leader and being invested in the school matters. It brings a certain feeling of family.

Principal 3

Leadership style: I'm an involved leader. I've had a wide range of experience that gives me the ability to give feedback and direction.

*Expectation of **d**istrict **l**eadership:* Loyalty matters to me. I had an experience where I consistently was passed over for principal positions and yet I was asked to do work that affected the entire district. It helped me to be prepared to be a principal, but I felt like I wasn't connected enough. It wasn't until I left the district and made a change that I was made a principal.

Most innovative activity: I just decided that I was going to talk with my staff about creating a welcoming environment. I asked my staff to build relationships with kids and we made plans that helped support those efforts.

Most important attribute for principals to have: You have to know people and what motivates them. You think you have to know a lot to be a principal but that's not the case. You just need to be willing to work and know how to build relationships.

Principal 4

Leadership style: I'd describe myself and a combination of directive and collaborative. I want to hear from people but I also need to get certain things done. You can't form a committee for every decision. I feel like people want a balance of leadership and listening.

Expectation of district leadership: I felt like I was ready and prepared to be a principal but I didn't get a few principal positions when I thought I was the best choice. I changed districts after I realized that people were making decisions for reasons that wouldn't benefit me. I value when our district looks around the state to find solutions. Whether it's hiring or installing programs, or problem solving, I appreciate when our leaders find solutions that are working instead of shutting the door to new ideas.

Most innovative activity: I have worked hard to change the narrative about our school. We have outstanding students and outstanding teachers, but we consistently must battle this narrative that because of our location and our demographics that we are a poor school. We've spent hours coming up with ways to connect our community with our school and to get our message out about our great CTE programs and our outstanding academics. My goal is to have kids look at our schools and be excited about coming here.

Most important attribute for principals to have. Principals need to be able to say, does this thing we're being asked to do, fit the needs of our students. The district has to do things a certain way because we are a unified district. Our leaders aren't always thinking about the needs of my campus because they are concerned about all the schools. I've found that being able to speak up and be innovative is very appreciated.

Principal 5

Leadership style: I want people to feel like they are a part of the process. We have work groups and leadership meetings to help ourselves achieve. I like trying new things and stretch myself and I like to build capacity in others so they can do similar things. People shouldn't be pigeonholed. They can think outside the box if you give them permission.

Expectation of district leadership: Clear vision helps me lead effectively. I'm willing to try new things, but I don't want to go in a direction without knowing where the district is headed.

Most innovative activity: We have adopted every aspect of the PLC process and that is hard work. The changes we've made are substantial and that is hard in an organization where so many people take their work seriously. We've tried to look at grading differently and that is a challenge, but we are doing it.

Most important attribute for principals to have. Advocating for your students and teachers and community is important. You can't tell your leadership "no". I have to trust the people in my buildings, but I also am out and seeing what is being done. We're a part of a system that is unified and we must trust that those involved in the process are doing the work. Then we look at what the outcome is and evaluate. If we try to do the job for the person we are leading, then we obviously have trust issues.

Principal 6

Leadership style: I feel like a teacher first. I love teaching. If I share what I know and see with those I lead I know they will eventually do what they need to do. I feel like I'm still learning my leadership style but I'm obviously in a position where people expect me to guide our school. I listen to a lot of people as I make decisions.

Expectation of district leadership: I have to have a belief that those in leadership are making the right decisions for the best reasons. Our superintendent isn't a visionary leader. I'm sure there's a vision but it doesn't come across in the day-to-day interactions. I was able to sit down with our superintendent when I was hired to get advice and, at the time, that superintendent was definitely a visionary and wouldn't compromise on it. I liked that.

Most innovative activity: I came to school every day and expected things to be new and different every day. There was a lot of pressure to get things done. I was able to build

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relationships and calm things down. We didn't need innovative processes. We hired a consultant to help us revamp our mission and vision and values and that has made all the difference.

Most important attribute for principals to have: You have to be able to communicate your vision and direction. Our mission and vision direct everything we do. There are so many things that you have to juggle. There are times you have to make a decision to set down a ball. Maybe you'll pick it up later.

Principal 7

Leadership style: You don't have to constantly be in people's faces and you can't be everyone's friend. So you have to communicate constantly and be there for people. Stern people can be good leaders if they are good communicators. You can't do this job alone. You have to involve others.

Expectation of district leadership: Those guys don't always get out. The teams at the district office have changed a lot over the years. Our district leadership is a lot of good people but they can't do everything. That makes them have to say 'no' alot. We try to help people understand the 'why'.

Most innovative activity: We would like to have an intervention period during the day. I've been working on it for a couple years. I think people are nervous about the way it will play out so we've run into a few snags but I'm working on it and having conversations about how to pull it off.

Most important attribute for principals to have: Relationships and being able to work with other people is first and has to be the first priority.

Principal 8

Leadership style: I facilitate and manage people well. I like people and enjoy the work we do together. I think there's a lot of good people that can help you if you give them the

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opportunity to do that.

Expectation of district leadership: The district needs to communicate expectations clearly, not only with the principals but with the staff. There needs to be an allowance for individual plans at the sites as well as accountability.

Most innovative activity: I worked with our administration team to come up with a staffing model that has served us well. We were able to fill all of our positions because we didn't just post a position and wait to see if it would be filled. We broadcast the position on social media and talked about all the benefits of being a teacher at our school. We talked about the fun we have and the family we built. This is a good place to be and we wanted people that wanted to work here.

Most important attribute for principals to have: I think principals have to be patient. Teachers don't always move fast. District leadership doesn't always want to do what you want to do. Students don't do what you expect. If you can't handle disappointment when things fail, you will just get frustrated.

Principal 9

Leadership style: I engage my campus leaders. I'm not warm and fuzzy but I get along with most people as long as they are heading the same way I am.

Expectation of district leadership: As a principal I need a certain level of autonomy. I need mentorship and training, but I would like to do my own thing. We are lucky in our district to have a leadership team that allows us to try new things and to take risks. We need to do our homework and think things through, but I know that I can try some things within our district framework.

Most innovative activity: We've started holding 10-minute micro professional development sessions. We give a quick lesson once a week and then allow our teachers to practice the skill, get a quick training, and then practice it during the week.

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Most important attribute for principals to have: I think you have to be able to think ahead. I worked to be marketable and to make decisions to build a diverse background of experience. Too many people get pigeon-holed into roles and I think you have to be intentional about learning a wide variety of skills.

Principal 10

Leadership style: I'm a mentorship person. I believe in being assertive and having a clear guide to your decision making. But, in the end, you have to make things happen. People will get on board with you if you have good ideas and collaborate with the right people.

Expectation of district leadership: I wish they would get into the sites more often. There's been a big shift recently. We used to have quite a lot of trust from the district in the "old days". We were supported. Those were my most productive years. I was excited and motivated. I felt like the recent changes have moved away from that. They have different goals.

Most innovative activity: I have tried to implement a program for the past year that could be used to track our students' college readiness. We finally have the opportunity to get it in front of the board. If I wasn't so competitive it would have been very easy to let this goal go by the wayside. Who has the time to work this hard to make things happen. Before the change in district leadership, we would have been given a green light right away. Our biggest struggle is finding a way to pay for something that many other districts in the state have already purchased.

Most important attribute for principals to have: You have to build trust with people. Having that trust from your leaders and building trust with your staff. They have to trust that you'll do the right thing and work for the best interest of the school.

Principal 11

Leadership style: I'm a person that wants to connect. I'm someone that has had

opportunities to be other places but I choose to work in this position so that comes across in my leadership style. I work hard and don't apologize for what I do. I'm not one that shies away from confrontation. Sometimes I'll stir things up just to make my team think outside the box. I don't attack people, but you have to be in a growth mindset to be ready to change.

*Expectation of **d**istrict **l**eadership:* I don't have all the answers. I'm open to listening to others. I expect others to do the same.

Most innovative activity: We started health and wellness time on our campus. It's important to give people time to relax and have fun together. It has changed our culture. We have small groups that get together during a designated time and we allow people to spend time together in tasks that are fun and more informal.

Most important attribute for principals to have: Humor is an important part of this work. One minute you are talking about a tough thing that happened in the locker room, the next minute you're watching kids at lunch. There's so much variety with this age group. You have to be able to take it all in stride and be a happy person regardless of what you are faced with.

Principal 12

Leadership style: I've been in the district for years and I've been in a lot of different positions so I was prepared to be a principal. But it was humbling and frightening to be put in this position because I'm following a principal that was loved by everyone. I knew her and knew what she had accomplished. That's not something you come in and make a lot of changes to.

*Expectation of **d**istrict **l**eadership:* The district didn't give any direct mandates, but they don't want me to mess things up. That's a quote. They want me to put my mark on the school. Our district expects to be the best at everything.

Most innovative activity: We took a school that was brick and mortar and turned it into an

online school in four days. The pandemic made us learn to be proficient and taught us the value of tools. We were expected to go 1 to1 just a few months before the summer started but it didn't kill us because we were coming off the pandemic but it was still a big task. *Most important attribute for principals to have:* You need to be willing to have hard discussions and understand productivity. Your vision drives your work but if you have a hard time following through on things then you're going to struggle to get anything installed.

Section 2: Open coding themes

After the interviews were completed, transcribed, and provided to the subjects for review and feedback, the data was analyzed using an open coding process. Each line or sentence was assigned a code. Forty-six initial concepts were noted and categorized. Utilizing the constant comparative method as outlined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), repetition started to show in the responses and a point of saturation was reached after 12 interviews. An analysis of the coded concepts from the interview transcriptions showed provisional themes that emerged from the open coding process. These concepts are shown with their corresponding theme in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Open Coding Findings

Themes	Codes
The Roles and Responsibilities of Principals	Overwhelming
	Constant pressure
	No Time
	Unintended additional work

	Making up for others' shortfalls
Communication	Sharing clear intentions
	Build support
	Need more training
	Very necessary
Building Relationships	Most important skill
	Getting things done
	Who you know matters
	Know your friends-be aware of backstabbers
	Everyone wants to make a difference
	Make time to meet others
	Remember names
	Can't do the job effectively without the skill
Controlling the Narrative	Intentional actions
	Changing how you are seen as a leader
	Controlling what people see about your school
	Social media important
Innovative and Thinking Outside the Box	Not sure I'm innovative
	Survival more than innovation
	Trying to meet expectations is difficult enough
	Tried new things, failed, not interested in trying again
	Waiting on the District Office

Challenges in the Innovation Process	Challenging others
	Getting others to believe
	Getting permission to try new things
	No clear process
	Depends on who is in charge
	Status Quo is protected
	People don't want to help or work that hard
The Expectations on Principals	(Listed below)
Preparation and Mentorship	Mentor may not have known he/she was my mentor.
	Watching as an assistant principal was the best training.
	No formal training available.
	College classes were too removed from reality.
	Mentor was someone I was friends with.
	Mentor was easy to talk to about challenges.
	Mentor listened
	Watching the bad choices of my leader shaped my leadership practice.
Advice For Superintendents and Principal Training Programs	District leadership is removed from the reality of today's principal.
	Don't make decisions without consulting site leadership.

	There are unintended consequences - be aware.
	Listen to principals
	Service

Section 3: Participant's answers to the research questions.

Research Question 1: How does the underlying expectation of fidelity affect the principal's ability to adapt when and if they are called upon to meet the needs of stakeholders or the organization?

Principal 1: I may not always ask for the blessing (of the district leadership). I think I've been doing this long enough to know my people. I have more leeway.

Principal 2: We don't have much money so funding is a consideration. We have to be innovative. So, with things like professional development, I have to be creative. Our teachers wanted to go to an ASC workshop. There were around 15 people that were interested. I priced it out, and it was going to be $11,000 to send 15 people to, and I was like, we can't pay that. So I contacted the lady running the conference and said, Hey, you know we really want these 15 people to get the benefit from your sessions, but we can't pay $11,000. So she's working with us and she's going to come out and do school site sessions for us at like half the price. Sometimes it's just asking questions. Hey, why can't we do something different?

Principal 3: The very first one is simple, be visible and welcoming. I want this school to be the light on the hill. I had heard (from the teachers) that, while this was a good school, there was still a lot of "no" and "don't" and that's all I'll say. So, not the welcoming you need to be great. By being welcoming I mean, you walk in a classroom, and a teacher would be making the kids who didn't finish their homework sit on the floor. I would say, are you creating a welcoming environment? We had already started seeing more of a disconnect between teachers and kids and it needed to stop. And so, every staff meeting, I would have an exit

ticket like, "What did you do this week that made your classroom a welcoming classroom?" Then I would share it.

Principal 4: We're preparing kids for the state assessment and the ACT. Tests that the state has to give. That was the decision by the State, not by our district. The district tells you you have to do it during this window, and they say you need to think about giving your kids exposure to the ACT. You need to think about whether your scores are going to matter. It's going to be published. You have to decide. How are you going to prepare your students, so you have one school (in the district) that says, "We're going to do ACT prep every Friday. We're going to stop teaching and we're going to do ACT prep. At my school, I may say I, I can't do that every single time we change the state test. So, we have a plan. We promise teachers that this is what our initiative is. We have students that are reading at the fourth and fifth grade reading level. We have students that are reading at the college level. We have curriculum that we've agreed to teach. We've unpacked standards we've done test preparation this way. We have to stay the course, right? We have to say that we believe if we teach well that the kids will still do well on the ACT. I'm not going to take ACT crap and put it in every Friday.

Principal 5: It's been quite an experience. When I first got here 6 years ago, the school was untouched. It was like the old high school that did things in silos, and there was no collaboration, and the grading was standard of 0 to 100 scale, and everybody kind of did their own thing. If they worked together, it was sort of because they liked each other, and they shared some things. And now it's PLC centric and the essential standards are identified. We've got intervention time built in the school day. We have lots of opportunities to try new things and look at things in a little bit of a different way.

Principal 6: So what we've done is we really tried to look at baby steps we can do to make our campus utilize these resources in a way that is helpful for students. We really try to make

sure that our teachers have specialized PD training just for them. That is how to use these resources every faculty meeting. So, we have a tech team that we created, which is a team of teachers. I'm a big believer in teacher-led committees, so I believe that they equally have a stake, an investment in what's going on our campus. It looks different when it's led by teachers and not driven by administration. And so our team has put together these little mini pods that we run in our staff meetings. We'll have ten-minute micro PDs on topics that they can actually take back with them and utilize the skill sets that they've acquired to kind of augment and boost instruction in their classrooms. To add to their toolbox.

Principal 7: And you know it's going to take a little bit to get something done. You're trying to make a difference and you do what you need to do. A lot of the things I do aren't innovative, you know, they're just what you do in the work.

Principal 8: Well, sometimes you run into things you don't expect. Like, you know, I, I didn't realize that there was an emotional tie to the product that our district currently uses because we had just adopted it the year before. There was a committee of people who adopted it who had consciously rejected the product we were advocating for. Who, I think, took offense to me, even suggesting that we change course again. But when I made that suggestion, I didn't realize the background. You know, while you're doing things, there's a whole bunch of forces at play.

Principal 9: I didn't ask, I just did it. I think the first one that comes to mind, and it's easy, is our 1-to-1 initiative. So, we recently went 1-to-1 this past January in a partnership with Intel and Dell in an attempt to create more opportunities for kids that, you know, and close the digital divide. Because they don't necessarily have the access or the resources and support to be able to have the things that some other pupils may have access to at home. And so what we've done is we really tried to look at it and say, these baby steps are how can we make our campus utilize these resources in a way that is helpful for students?

Principal 10: You don't have as much freedom when you're using a research-based program. You have to implement it if you are required or expected to get the exact gains that they say you'll get. You have to implement exactly how they say you should implement it. And if you don't, then don't expect to get those gains, right? And so to implement that program that I wanted with fidelity, I would have had to get the teacher training before school started. I would have had to give my kids access to at least two months before school. Yeah. So I don't know. But it won't be what they advise you to do. It won't. I won't be able to spend the amount of minutes that they require and the teachers won't get through all those small lessons, those individual skills or small group lessons in the amount of time I have left this semester. So it's messed up.

Principal 11: We've eaten lunch together for 15 years. The whole team eats lunch together. That is something that is a non-negotiable that you do not miss lunch.

Principal 12: One of the things that we saw this year, our first normal year, right before the end of summer, and said, hey, we're going to go 1-to-1 with you and we're going to have everybody have a laptop. Watching the news last night, they would say it was a failure because of the learning loss that's happened across the state of Arizona. But we took a school that was brick and mortar and teachers who've been teaching, some of them master teachers, and turned it virtual within like four days. A brick-and-mortar school into an online school. It wasn't perfect by any stretch of the imagination. I don't think any school district went virtual and said, yeah, we should do this again. We should just scrap the whole, you know, in-person learning.

Research Question 2: How does a principal identify alternative options when faced with unique problems not addressed by fidelity-founded practices if they are allowed to do so?

Principal 1: You know we're able to implement some little things that affect us, and I think put us ahead of some other schools that again. I don't mean it bad, but I will say, 'This is what we're doing and you know it's within the framework of what we're told we can do, and that you know we're going to go do that. So I think that's that that balance and I think that's the key to leadership, knowing what you can do and what will get you in trouble, and what doesn't get you in trouble or you can play chess and take a chance and do something, knowing that if it fails, it may be your tail. But you did it for the right reason because it's for the betterment of the kids.

Principal 2: I think there's a lack of training, but I think that that's just an education in general. There's not much other than going to the new teacher or the new AD workshop, or going to conferences. You learn so much of it on the job. That's something that our district is very open to listening to, and even asks us. This summer they said, "What supports do you need?" And we said, "More training."

Principal 3: There's so much I tell people that complain about education. I could never do that. I'm like, you get to go to work every day and have something different to do, and have challenges to overcome. Imagine showing up and everything just worked all the time without any problems. It'd be boring.

Principal 4: But you also want to be a school that stays current with the needs right now, and with the kids that are walking in the door today. When those grandparents or parents send their kids here today, they say, "Wow, I wish I went to school now, because of the things you're doing today. It's easy to stay with the status quo and to keep people in their comfort zone. But one of the things I talk about when people walk the campus with me is we have these really great teachers who are doing amazing things and I have kids who don't care or see it for what it is.

Principal 5: I had to focus less on my expertise. I knew enough to be dangerous to my own people. Intimidating. So, even though that's my expertise and I have lived it, I could see that there were probably some potential challenges by working on change. So, that's the other thing. You kind of have to slow down. Know when to slow and know when to go. I think that's important when thinking outside the box, and thinking about how to lead change. You have to take the temperature. You can't drain your people dry.

Principal 6: No one here is actively trying to harm children. But changing our culture is hard. We just have different routes to go about changing things. I want to make sure that my people know that our district people and our staff are on the same team. There's more support here. How can we partner and work together? That's probably been my biggest challenge, to be fair.

Principal 7: You have these ideas and you hit a snag. We have the momentum and then someone in the business department can't find a way to pay for something so we have to stop the work. We have the answer but it's tough to get them to listen, to hear you. We just have to get over the hurdle, not stop running.

Principal 8: I think staffing is going to be a continuing concern and a properly trained workforce. Fewer people have gone through teacher preparation programs. So those people will be in shorter supply even with some of the salary increases. Because we know that we're still behind many private sector positions that require less education. One of the reasons it's a challenge is that our schools are not designed to teach people how to become teachers. They're designed to hire proven teachers. You know. And support them and evaluate them and make sure they're doing what they're supposed to.

Principal 9: I think right now it's a real challenge in the state of education affairs here in the state of Arizona. Our legislature doesn't help us. Sometimes I just feel like school districts are versus their own people. So I think the biggest challenge that I have right now is getting my

people to see that, number one, we (the administration) work for the same school district that they work for.

Principal 10: When you're using a research-based program, you have to implement it if you are required or expected to get the exact gains that they say you'll get. You have to implement exactly how they say you should implement it. And if you don't, then don't expect to get those gains. And so to implement that program that I wanted with Fidelity, I would have to do it perfect. But it won't be to what they advise you to do. It won't.

Principal 11: Teachers aren't expressing their needs. From my perspective, and being a practitioner, I don't think the teachers don't care. I think that teachers are struggling because things are affecting them. And I think that teachers don't really know sometimes how to bridge that gap and say, like, hey, I care. And this is what I need. And this is how I need it.

Principal 12: There is a little bit of a challenge when you're trying to put your vision and what you want the school to become and everywhere you turn, there's a reminder of (the former principal) on the campus. (The former principal) was a friend. But it's a challenge to be independent of the past.

Research Question 3: To what extent, and with what approvals are administrators allowed to consider alternative approaches to solving complex problems?

Participants in the study shared very similar responses to this question. In almost every case the principals turned this question into a discussion about how to deal with having their ideas turned down. For example, Principal 1 stated, "Let's say there is a principal out there that is a little frustrated and feels like they don't have the ability to do some things, or that maybe somebody keeps saying "no". It's still good to take the shot. I think you have to use some of those Macro leadership strategies that you know they teach us. I mean you create a demand.

Principals 4, 9, and 11 gave examples where they carried out plans without asking permission because they were certain their proposals would be rejected. These principals also discussed their longevity as principals and how their seniority and experience gave them the confidence to work without fear of being reprimanded. Principals 2, 3 and 12 shared their experience with gaining support for their ideas before approaching district leaders. None of the principals shared experiences where they went to the district office with an alternative solution to a complex problem. The principals focused on themes that will be shared later in this chapter. Principal 10 talked about a multi-year plan to get a program approved to help improve student achievement.

Research Question 4: In what ways have leaders been prepared to "think outside the box"?

When the researcher asked the participants for examples of "thinking outside the box" four participants shared that they had implemented 1-to-1 technology on their campus. Principal 9 said he had set a schedule that encouraged freshmen to learn the culture of their school. Principal 11 said that eating lunch together as a staff was one of her most important activities. Each principal acknowledged that the activities they installed were not considered innovative but were important to the success of their school.

During the interviews, the participants discussed the ideas of innovation and outside of the box thinking as a foreign concept. They discussed thinking outside the box by talking about difficult situations they had experienced like the death of a student or dealing with the COVID pandemic. Principals 8 said, "Innovation is something you do when you have time. And I don't have time. We are asked to do a lot and it keeps piling on. There's not time to get everything done."

Principal 10 made a similar statement. She said, "I'm trying to get my academics in line. I'm a Title school and that keeps us busy. We deal with things other schools don't see. I

put in the idea of sharing information with another school and I can't do that because it costs money and we can't figure out how to pay for it. I have it figured out but (name excluded) won't listen."

Research Question 5: What recommendations do these administrators have concerning their situation and their ability to think critically and identify out of the box remedies?

After the first three interviews the researcher noticed a pattern when asking the question concerning recommendations. The question was worded to uncover themes concerning innovation and how principals could find ways to be innovative. The first response from Principal 1 concerned superintendents and district leaders listening to principals and gathering their input before making a decision. Principal 2 talked about being visible and visiting schools as a way to know what was happening before trying to create policy. The researcher adjusted the question in the next interviews to "What can a superintendent do to help foster innovation or help you successfully think outside the box?" Again, the responses followed similar themes such as: listen, be aware of the needs of your schools and consult your principals.

Principal 2 was very specific with her advice. She said, "To be quite frank, I had an administrator kind of call me out last year, saying, you know, Hey, you advocate for teachers, like it was a bad thing. Aren't we supposed to advocate isn't that the job that we signed up for? Principal 4 believed districts could help principals be innovative by offering different types of training. He said, "There's a lost art of communication. I'm 10-15 years older than some of the people I work with and I don't use social media or communicate on social media as much as they (younger teachers) do. I'm not into the things that they like or know the meme's that they talk about. That change has happened almost overnight. I've had to learn how to communicate with people that don't know how to communicate clearly or deal with disappointment or talk with parents about difficult topics."

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Principal 11 talked about the importance of mentoring for prospective principals. She said, "I take training my deans just as serious as training and teaching the kids I'm responsible for because that's my legacy. That's what I'm going to leave behind. I always tell new administrators, just know going into it that you're not going to make a ton of money, but your legacy and what you are going to leave behind is what kids do, and what kids will do post-secondary. Be visible and listen. You're not going to be able to move a school at all if people don't think that you're available to them, that they can trust you and that they can see you. That goes for all the districts.

Section 4: Themes of topics not related to the research questions.

The Roles and Responsibilities of Principals

The participants pointed out a variety of responsibilities that principals were expected to carry out as well as many responsibilities that the principals believed went unnoticed by the staff and the public. Responsibilities included the following:

- Managing school operations

- Student discipline

- Student events

- Managing parent complaints

- Planning and supervising sporting events, plays, assemblies, college fairs, future freshmen events

- Fundraising

- Student surveys

- Meet with district leaders about school concerns

- Managing school schedules

- Feeding all students breakfast and lunch

- Improving student performance on the ACT

- Improving the school's letter grade

- Manage more than 50 emails a day

- Recruiting students to your school

- Competing with charter schools

- Hiring teachers

- Firing teachers

- School security

- Planning student activities

- Conflict between students and teachers

- Managing needy teachers

- Ensuring classroom management

- Acting as a role model

- Helping teachers build their confidence

- Providing general strategies for helping teachers grow professionally

- Building trusting relationships with teachers

- Building Professional Learning Communities

- Being a good listener

- Evaluating teachers

- Discipling teachers

- Being visible and approachable

- Strategically supporting teachers in an unobtrusive manner

Embracing these responsibilities is a part of the role of being a principal. All the participants discussed the overwhelming nature of the job and the difficulty of managing expectations. An additional role of the principal is to work to improve the school. Principal

10 pointed out the importance of being an advocate for her school and that district administrators don't understand what principals are asked to do in today's principals role. She stated, "(District) administrators sometimes forget that we are professionals too. I would never tell a teacher no on an idea they wanted to try. I might say, give me the data that shows that this is working and I want to see progress monitoring steps along the way, but I never say no on a trial of an activity just like that. I wouldn't deflate somebody. Why am I going through all this work? Why am I in this position if you're just going to give me everything that you want me to implement. Then I'm not a leader, I'm just a cog. Now, you hired me to be an effective principal for the school. Then let me do my job and support me on my job. Don't hinder my performance."

The responsibility of student achievement has always been a responsibility of principals but the inability to control every aspect of a student's learning can be a hurdle that is discouraging. Principal 9 said, "There is a limit to what a principal has the ability to control. I've started what I call a freshman school of success, which is like a freshman camp. The whole goal behind it is to create a more prepared freshman student that is able to take on the rigors of our courses as sophomores. We have new students that we know will struggle with school, but we just treat them like another kid coming on campus. I didn't ask to do it. I just did it because I believed it would work.

Finding Balance

In one form or another the principals pointed out the necessity of finding balance in their role. Some principals talked about their role as a "calling" or a role they were led to fulfill. Others talked about the necessity to pursue a leadership role due to financial realities and responsibilities. Principal 4 said, "I went into the training program with a close friend who later became a principal right away. I wanted to stay a teacher for a few more years because I really loved it. I knew I wouldn't be able to do it forever. I was married and we

were expecting our first kid. I knew it was just a matter of time."

Principal 1 talked about how he had to learn to balance his desire to "change the world" and effect student learning with the teachers' ability to teach. He said, "You can have great ideas and start implementing them, but you're working with people. People are complicated, and reluctant, and they don't like change."

Many principals talked about the importance of balancing their role as the leader that assured compliance with district programs with the need for the staff to feel safe and secure in their jobs. Three principals said they were concerned with taking on the principal role because they knew it would affect their relationships with the teachers they knew on campus.

Leadership

Principals agreed that principals play an important role on campus in many ways. Principal 8 said that his role was taking the temperature of his teachers and how much change he could reasonably expect to undertake every year. After more than 10 years in the district he had seen multiple initiatives and programs introduced and he sometimes feels the frustration of the school staff. "It's important that we continue to improve. We have a good relationship with our district leaders and want to continue to foster that and build it. Sometimes, those in those positions forget that we are working on the same goals. We are busy trying to navigate the consequences of very difficult circumstances like angry parents or hiring issues."

Principals shared that leadership is completely dependent on relationships in a school setting. Principal 1 said, "We are dealing with people. We aren't in the private sector where we can just make a change because it's good for the company. We have rules. But more than that, there are consequences. We have to persuade people and work with them where they

are. We have to convince them that what we are saying is the right thing to do and help them see the benefits. It can be tricky."

Leading a school is complicated in other ways. According to Principal 9, parents expect you to be able to solve their problems. He said, "We have great people involved in our schools. But there are parents that don't understand that we don't have the ability to solve their problems. We can't wake their kids up for them. They feel helpless."

The theme of leadership was centered around leading the staff and teachers. Leading the students and directing their learning was primarily seen as a result of good systems being put in place and initiatives being introduced. Principal 10 talked about the leadership practices of a Title 1 school and how important it is to "lead up" and help those in district leadership understand the impact that their decisions have. She stated, "I have to recruit the other principals in our district to reach out to the district leaders when we need to make changes that would benefit all the high schools. One principal will agree with me and then another one. But they may not be focused on that issue right then. I'm helping to motivate them to see things my way and that's exhausting. I can understand why people just sit back and ride it out."

During the interviews multiple principals from multiple districts talked about the fear that district leadership had of change. None of the principals blamed the district personnel specifically. Principal 6 said, "We all want the same thing. They see a bigger picture and I have to trust that they are making a good decision. But sometimes I know that they are just tired of the hard work and the limited resources, especially now."

Principal 5 summed up her view of leadership in the principal position when she stated, "We have to trust that people will work hard. Of course, we are 'quality control' and we need to be visible and looking for results but we have to trust our people. And I want those that oversee me to see the same thing. They need to trust me."

Communication

During the interviews communication was a common thread in the discussion. Leadership was closely tied to the skill of clearly communicating and doing it at the right time and in the right way. Principal 4 said, "People need to feel heard and valued. I'm someone that likes to get things done but people need to know you care about them." Principal 5 said, "I'm tough. I like to be seen that way. But I'm also aware of people and their needs. I have a reputation of being fair and letting people know exactly what I think. I want a team around me that will question what I say and then not get angry at me when I tell them they're wrong. I say it in a nice way, but I have to push for my vision and make sure other people hear me."

Communicating with the district leadership led to a discussion surrounding a term that was eventually identified by the researcher as "leading up". This theme emerged throughout the discussion and the researcher repeated it during the discussions to have the principals discuss the concept. "Leading up" meant that a principal would develop a plan of communicating with those in authority over them in such a way that the problem was clearly explained, the solution presented, and the person in authority given the opportunity to make an easy decision. Each principal said that "leading up" was observed in every discussion and every meeting. Those that had the ability to communicate clearly and made the effort to develop a commonsense solution were usually successful at attaining their goal.

Building Relationships

Whether it was communication, or leadership or "leading up", every discussion revolved around relationships. Principals discussed the necessity of building strong relationships. Those relationships ranged from close friends to those in leadership that they didn't like but had to work with to be successful. Principal 9 said, "Relationships are the key to getting things done. I may not agree with what someone says but I have to work with that

person tomorrow. I can't damage my relationship just to prove my point." Principal 8 said, "I have people I call because I know they trust me, and we've worked on projects in the past. I trust them." Principal 10 said, "Through all my years in this district I've built relationships with people that have moved into other leadership positions. I'm sure I got this position because those people know me and know what I will do in this job."

Relationships with teachers was a theme throughout the interviews. The principals talked about how much they relied on the quiet leaders that had influence on their school. Principal 5 said, "I put people on my leadership team because they can get things done that I can't." Each principal referred to people on campus that played significant roles in swaying the opinions of teachers and parents.

Principal 3 talked about the importance for district leadership to maintain relationships with their schools. She said, "Sometimes people at the district level forget what it's like. I know. I have been in that position. I left a district because I felt like my leadership didn't value me. I'm leading a school twice the size of that school but I couldn't break into the group that made decisions."

Controlling the Narrative

The next theme that the researcher identified was the role that communication and transparency played in controlling the narrative concerning the school and its policies. Each principal referred to the challenges of COVID-19 and the impact communication played during the shutdown of the schools. Principal 4 said, "Covid turned everyone into experts. At the beginning everyone was afraid. As we moved into the pandemic, people felt like they knew more so they pushed back." Principal 8 said, "Communication was the most important part of that time. All of those things which you support became very important because people were overwhelmed. They felt like they were in the dark and they felt like every day the story was changing about COVID and what counted and when you had to wear a mask

and how long you had to be gone. You know, in some ways that COVID played to my strengths because I was already pretty good at communicating and stuff like that.

Answering the concerns of the staff and the community were a major part of the day-to-day role of the principals during the 2019/2020/2021 school years. Most of the principals talked about the County and State guidelines and were waiting for the weekly guidance. The principals understood the need for a central message. Principal 11said, "Nobody knew what was going on. It was a tough time. The meetings that were taking place by the superintendents were important because they would bring that information back to the principals."

Interestingly, none of the principals mentioned using social media to spread information. The principals relied on form letters prepared by the communications departments at the district office. Principal 1 said, "I didn't know enough to be able to send out information on my own. There wasn't enough time in the day to come up with a message. But people wanted answers and we couldn't give them. When were we coming back to school? Would masks be required? Would kids need to be vaccinated? That entire time was confusing, and we are lucky to have it behind us."

The researcher followed up with questions regarding the challenges the principals faced in the implementation of their ideas. These challenges are outlined below.

The Expectations on Principals

The principals discussed the role that expectations played in their ability to accomplish their goals. Those expectations varied and are captured below in the following categories:

1. Expectations for Student Achievement

2. Expectations from District Leaders

3. Expectations from Staff

4. Expectations from Community

Expectations for Student Achievement

      The principals talked about student achievement as if it were the obvious choice for an expectation that should be placed on a principal. However, none of the principals talked about their innovative ideas as if they were going to have a significant effect on student achievement. Principal 8 said, "Of course student achievement is why we are here. Building a PLC is supposed to help with student achievement but getting people to look at PLCs with fresh eyes, because we've done it for so long, has been my biggest challenge." Principal 10 said, "The district expects improvement of 3% in math and science. That's the goal they've given me. We need to do that. We're a Title 1 school and our kids can make that progress, but we'll need to get others involved."

Expectations from District Leaders

      The role that the district office played in setting goals was not discussed by very many principals in a negative light. Instead, the principals were expected to set their own goals and report on their goals and their findings using data. None of the principals felt pressured to complete the goals. "We may not see the results of some of our efforts for years." said Principal 4. "We know that COVID was brutal on student skills and the outcomes are going to be tough to justify for a few years. But the district understands that too."

Expectations from Staff

      From the office staff to the maintenance staff to the teaching staff, all the principals felt a responsibility to provide a positive work environment. Having clear goals and guidelines was a common theme in the interview but maintaining positive relationships, as mentioned above, was discussed more frequently than any other topic. Striking a balance between the expectations placed on teachers and staff and the expectation that the principal be able to resolve the concerns of every staff member was a common discussion point.

Principal 3 said, "My teachers are all different". She continued, "They all have different ideas of what needs to happen to make their students successful. They have a favorite program or a plan. When you tell them that the district doesn't want to approve that program and they get discouraged, you try to help them out and help them understand. But I may not agree with the decision. I think the process we use to approve district programs is arbitrary. So I work to advocate for the teachers."

Principal 9 had a similar point of view but went about dealing with the district office in a different way. I'm lucky that our associate superintendent is willing to let us try things out. We're pretty competitive in our district and that makes me want to try new things. We have a green light most of the time to make mistakes. We have to pay for them sometimes, but I'd rather try a new thing and be wrong than not try and act scared."

Expectations from Community

Principals are aware of the political nature of their role. All the principals referred to their responsibility toward their community in some way. Principal 6 talked about the inability to solve all of the concerns that the parents had about athletic success. "We are a highly competitive school, and we are constantly playing for a championship in some sport. Our parents expect a lot of us and there's a lot of pressure. You can't make everyone happy all the time." The athletic pressure was only mentioned by multiple principals. Principal 7 talked about the importance of athletics in the culture of the school. He said, "We've always been a school that is expected to be excellent in sports. It's a part of our culture. We have parents that bring their kids to us as 9th graders specifically because they are looking for scholarships."

The expectation of community members was discussed as an abstract concept. The community typically referred to parents and extended family. The principals felt a responsibility of customer service and being available. Principal 2 said, "When a parent

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shows up to talk about a teacher, you make time. People just want to be heard. They are usually reasonable. The ones that take up all your time are the ones that have needs that you can't meet." The principals talked about the positive interactions they had with parents but the pressure to meet the expectations of parents was a recurring theme.

Social Media

Principal 2 said, "Social media is a new and different animal. When we were in school you had a bad day and you dealt with it at school and then it was over, and the next day was a new day. Today's kids and parents have a bad day and they have to live it over and over with other people reposting their mistakes and they have to live with that. It's not fun and it's a thing we aren't equipped to handle."

Principal 4 said, "I don't think anyone is trained to deal with people just constantly berating you day in and day out. Social media makes it easy and an everyday practice. You don't like what your principal did to your kid? You can get online and yell at them and get everyone else behind you. We aren't supposed to take that kind of abuse, but it happens. There's no chapter in a book about that."

Mentorship and Training Experiences

The researcher specifically directed the participants to reflect on their training for the principal position. Principals 1, 9, and 11 felt that they were prepared for the challenges of being a principal by being an assistant principal and watching the positive and negative actions taken by their principals. The other principals said that preparing for a principal was difficult to do without being in the position. On the job training was valued by all principals as the most effective way to learn how to do the job. Professional development was valued by all the principals. Principals 1 and 8 felt like professional development for principals was the most valuable support a superintendent could offer their leaders. None of the principals referred to their training programs in college when talking about training to be a principal.

Conclusion

The researcher prompted the participants utilizing the research questions outlined above. Using the constant comparative method, the researcher asked questions to uncover themes relevant to the research and allowed principals to discuss topics they felt were important while answering the questions. This process uncovered a number of themes that the principals felt were important but didn't address the research questions directly. The research questions that focused on innovation and thinking outside the box were the most difficult questions for principals to answer. The interviewer repeatedly prompted the principals to share examples of work they had done that demonstrated innovation or outside the box thinking. As outlined above, the principals shared programs and initiatives that are commonly being practiced across Arizona such as 1-to-1 initiatives or having administrators work with incoming freshmen to prepare them for the rigors of high school. These findings raise additional questions about the ability of a principal to innovate or find unique solutions to the challenges they face.

All the principals felt that their actions were typical and, when referencing innovation, principals pointed out that, although their work wasn't innovative, it was important on their campus. The principals in this study discussed the skills of communication, positive interpersonal interactions, patience, and perseverance as necessary for principal success. Understanding the law, reaching benchmarks in student achievement, and principal training programs were mentioned as necessary activities but were typically afterthoughts in the discussion.

Conclusions in the research and a synopsis of the findings will be shared in Chapter 5. The researcher will also share implications for the practice of principal training and hiring practices. Recommendation for further research will be included.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The researcher set out to discover how principals incorporated innovative practices and critical thinking in the daily execution of their jobs. To that end, the researcher gathered and analyzed the principals' responses to multiple prompts to discover the extent that innovative solutions were considered or even allowed as they worked to resolve complex problems. Building upon the findings described in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 offers a detailed interpretation of the data as well as a discussion of the implications and recommendations generated through this study. The chapter begins with a brief reintroduction to the topic including the research questions. This is followed by a summary of the findings and then a discussion of the conclusions organized according to subtopic. After discussing the implications linked to this study, the investigator offers both practical and research recommendations.

This study was conceptualized from the writings of Dr. Thomas Hughes whose work in capacity building to mitigate conflict provided several resources including Hughes and Davidson (2020), Hughes et al. (2019), and Hughes (2021). Across the body these publications, the author(s) discussed leadership styles, principal preparation, and the observation that principals regularly conform to the status quo as dictated by legislation or organizational expectations.

Specifically, Hughes (2021) discussed the mechanisms inherent within the education system which perpetuate leadership practices that incentivize a compliance mentality for administrators. Hughes and Davidson (2020) discussed how both funding and instructional autonomy have declined in public schools since the end of the 20th Century leading to an environment that advantages the adoption of ready-made programs.

Hughes et al., (2019) undertook an effort to contribute to principal training programs by examining the perspectives of students who were preparing for administrative

roles. Across the body of work, Hughes encouraged the development of conflict resolution and critical thinking skills in current and future leaders. Along with student interaction, Hughes gathered survey data from experienced principals and confirmed that critical thinking and conflict resolution were a much-needed and unrepresented part of training programs. Across his body of work, Hughes reported that these skills were not prevalent in the literature or current leadership programs. Finally, Swaninger (2022) recently offered confirmation of Hughes' position while reporting that administrators participating in his study were not focused on increasing teacher or organizational capacity in order to better address conflict and other challenging situations.

Specific to critical thinking, the prospective administrators interviewed in Hughes (2019) consistently commented on the limitations of living within the "fidelity culture" that they had witnessed for years. Collectively they shared how the final leg of their training moved them to recognize the shortcomings of following the status quo and further warned them that efforts to adopt alternative practices would not be automatically successful. As described by Hughes et al., (2019) there is reason to expect that personal and professional dissonance can result when novice administrators struggle to know what is expected from them. This is particularly possible upon their having to undertake a compliance role when they originally believed that they were being trained to be leaders.

Being able to address these concerns openly in their final course offered freedom that motivated the group to contemplate how to do better within the existing environment. The shared belief in the limiting leadership issues raised in Hughes et al., (2019) provided the foundation for the development of this study. Building on Hughes et al., (2019), this project sought to investigate ways administrators function in their role as campus leaders and how they incorporate any, if even limited, opportunities to make innovative as opposed to prescribed changes on their campuses. The study also investigated how administrators

have viewed their opportunities for input in the decisions made by the district office. Lastly, the study reported on the perceptions that principals have about their role and their ability to lead their schools. Specifically, this study sought to answer the broader research questions below:

Research Questions

- How does the underlying expectation of fidelity affect the principal's ability to adapt when and if they are called upon to meet the needs of stakeholders or the organization?

- How does a principal identify alternative options when faced with unique problems not addressed by fidelity-founded practices if they are allowed to do so?

- To what extent, and with what approvals, are administrators allowed to consider alternative approaches to solving complex problems?

- In what ways have leaders been prepared to "think outside the box"?

- What recommendations do these administrators have concerning their situation and their ability to think critically and identify out of the box remedies?

Summary of Findings

As discussed in Chapter 2, a well-publicized outcome of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation is how wide-spread programs and innovations are expected to be "research-based" moving forward. While the concept of research-based programs seems very efficient and well-developed at one level, this study has investigated one of the underrepresented deficits resulting from the mandated approach. Namely, this project targeted complacency within a system that largely asks school leaders to support and carry out someone else's orders to fidelity with no opportunity for change even when it is necessary.

As the interactions continued onto the completion of the interviews, the building

sense of dissatisfaction generally shared by principals gave way to acknowledging that a lack of autonomy is "just the way it is." Other specific and literal examples of this sentiment shared in the principal interviews included:

- "(District leaders) have just been away from schools for a while."

- "I don't have the option to…"

- "I just have to be patient."

- "Nobody wants to be 'that guy' who complains or asks for too much."

Although the principals exhibited relaxed mannerisms that indicated a heightened comfort level with the interviewer, the principals also consistently showed increasing hesitation to openly criticize district officials as each interview progressed. Feelings kept just below the surface, consistently brief responses, and numerous instances where no response was offered complicated the interviews and even more so, the analysis. The principals' hesitancy also entangled efforts to interpret post-analysis findings and presented a meaningful and wide-spread sense of dissonance to the investigator. This inherent complexity spurred the need for a summary of findings which, hopefully, is of benefit when attempting to make sense of seemingly self-contradictory information concerning innovation and day-to-day responsibilities.

The findings to the research questions are as follows:

Table 2

Summary of The Research Questions and Findings

Research Question	Finding

How does the underlying expectation of fidelity affect the principal's ability to adapt when and if they are called upon to meet the needs of stakeholders or the organization?	Principals reported being overwhelmed and in "survival mode." They deliberately described ways they were not focused on innovation. The actions they reported were directed toward meeting the district agenda, which increased the difficulty of meeting the needs of their students.
How does a principal identify alternative options when faced with unique problems not addressed by fidelity-founded practices if they are allowed to do so?	Principals reported that they looked for solutions to unique problems by reaching out to other principals or asking district leaders for guidance. They did not report looking for innovative solutions.
To what extent, and with what approvals are administrators allowed to consider alternative approaches to solving complex problems?	Principals indicated they were constantly solving complex problems as they led their schools. The principals reported that the overwhelming number of complex problems kept them from taking on tasks that were truly innovative or "outside the box". Principals are expected to follow policy and protocol above all else.

In what ways have leaders been prepared to "think outside the box"?	Principals stated they were trained to comply with fidelity expectations. They received training on a variety of ways to complete the tasks set by the district office. Principals reported they were not prepared as students, assistant principals, or by their mentors to think "outside the box" or to find innovative ways to run their school. During the interviews, principals indicated that they were not selected to be principals as a result of innovative practices.
What recommendations do these administrators have concerning their situation and their ability to think critically and identify out of the box remedies?	Principals did not make recommendations on how they could improve their ability to think critically. Principals said they were working to meet the expectations of those that didn't understand their role. Principals also stated that they generally felt underappreciated, ignored and that their opinions were not valued.

	Principals have adopted a compliance mindset and primarily work to comply with the guidelines and expectations of the district office leaders, teachers, students, parents and community members. Principals rely heavily on collaboration to find solutions to complex problems and look to district leaders for permission before acting.

Discussion

The findings summarized in Chapter 4 and compiled in Table 2 lead to the finding that principals do not adopt or implement innovative practices because they are neither actually trained nor expected to perform as innovative leaders. The following discussion is organized according to the following headings to highlight the areas of gradual implementation of practices that finally lead to principals adopting a compliance mindset:

- Principal Preparation and Professional Development
- Critical Thinking
- Dissonance and Conformity
- Compliance vs Innovation
- Leadership vs Task Completion

Findings based on completed interviews confirm that principals regularly carry out complicated tasks and implement significant changes at their schools. Continued interaction with participants revealed that the tasks principals choose to complete are largely carried out in the name of compliance, not innovation. This phenomenon manifests itself through multiple comments in the interviews, starting with the systems used to

prepare and train principals.

Principal Preparation and Professional Development

Training programs and professional development are typically advertised in a manner which emphasizes the study of leadership skills and change-management. The principals interviewed for this study did not appear to believe the training or professional development they were introduced to were designed to prepare them to lead. In contrast, they voiced ways these programs, and professional development in particular, were developed to train principals to carry out their work with fidelity. Principal 10 said,

> What we do in PD is learn how to use a research-based program. You have to implement it if you are required or expected to get the exact gains that they say you'll get. You have to implement it exactly how they say you should implement it. And if you don't, then don't expect to get those gains, right? And so, to implement that program that I wanted with fidelity, I needed to know how to do it the way they wanted.

This perception was consistent with the perspectives advanced by Hughes et al., (2019) where the participants were introduced to the practical realities and limitations of contemporary compliance-oriented school leadership during their final course. Hughes' research and this study aligns with and affirms the research of Rodriquez (2015) and Markowitz (2018) who stated that schools have pre-packaged education to meet state mandates and, as a result, principals are essentially managing the prescribed processes.

Principals are considered a significant part of the *leadership pipeline* that supplies the pool of leaders for the ranks of upper-level district-leadership positions. Therein, the preparation question arises: Will principals that have been trained and further conditioned to comply with district mandates become innovative leaders if they eventually acquire greater flexibility and opportunity in their future roles? Impressions shared by participants in this study suggest that newly advanced upper-level leaders do not alter the approach or practice of those that they replace. While there is reason to believe that those arriving at the district level tend to lack innovative skills and insights, in reality, as referenced by study

participants, the actual lack of opportunity to do more than perpetuate the compliance mindset may be the greater issue.

The almost unanimous feedback from principals was that district leaders could improve and also validate critical thinking growth by including principals in the decision-making process and provide them with professional development that was meaningful and relevant. The current reality poses multiple questions. First, are district leaders motivated to train principals to be innovative actors at their schools? If not, would this also be a product of the district leaders' experiences and training, or would it be the result of the compliance demands they face from school boards and legislative mandates? Further, with principals receiving compliance-based professional development and little opportunity to develop critical outlooks, could principals critically analyze their role and give meaningful suggestions for professional development? Finally, how will principals prepare to be critical thinkers if training programs and work settings continue to follow a compliance prescription?

Critical Thinking

The principals in this study shared that the skills of critical thinking and creative problem solving are some of the most important yet least emphasized elements of principal training. Principals were clearly frustrated with the inability of those in the district office to model creative problem solving and flexibility as leaders. Principal 8 said, "I know we have to be good with our money but when all you hear is 'No', and everyone knows that other districts around us are doing the thing I'm asking for, it makes it hard."

Based on the interviews, principals represented that district officials were unprepared to anticipate the many challenges that principals would have to face and, as a result, principals felt unprepared when asked to lead with pre-determined mandates. This perception aligns in a troubling way with the insights of Miller (2019) and Hughes (2014) and Hughes

(2019) who foretold how expanding societal challenges would only continue to grow, leading to increased educational complexity and a need for flexibility and adaptation.

Seven of the principals offered challenges experienced during COVID-19 as examples of the way that school systems were unprepared to adapt. Five of the principals stated that their districts were forced to add 1-to-1 programs when schools were shut down, and revealed some of the cost of losing ability to adapt and improvise. This deficit negatively impacted the role of the principals as they worked long hours to hand out computers to students, preparing teachers to work online, and establishing policies for student discipline in an online environment. Principal 3 said, "What do you do when a student moves his computer and faces the camera to the ceiling? Nobody was ready for that. Do you call home? Fail him? Things like that were frustrating but everyone had to deal with it." Situations like this forced principals to utilize critical thinking skills that had been eliminated from their leadership repertoire for years.

Principals shared other recent challenges that showcased their limited ability to think critically and respond with flexibility. The situations included:

- Changes in the political climate and the resulting heightened emotions from students and parents
- New types of Title 9 complaints
- The challenges of hiring qualified teachers
- Parent concerns with Critical Race Theory
- Specific needs of students and staff concerning gender
- Social Media increasing expectations of accessibility and responsiveness.
- Transgender athletes in sports
- COVID-19

The body of completed interviews lead the investigator to conclude that principals do not have an effective system of support to address the growing challenges they face. Principals noted that they were sometimes told to navigate the complicated issues listed above "as best as you can" until the district was ready to communicate policy. For example, Principal 2 discussed the rising number of transgendered students and the social pressure that the principal felt from both the students and the community. The district had not established a policy to assist principals and directed the principals to talk with the parents and "come up with a solution". Realistically, there are instances where consistency of practice is a necessity. Practices surrounding transgender issues is a probable example of this. That said, the message principals receive to first "stand down" and comply but then "do the best you can" when there are no solutions, would appear to create more dissonance than success.

The expectations that principals will affect change while simultaneously adhering to strict mandates that have limited utility is unrealistic. Mandated academic programs that are intended to improve student achievement and mandated social programs that are intended to solve societies complex problems seem to complicate the principals' role. Eight of the twelve principals said they had implemented pre-designed programs that were intended to improve student achievement. All the principals commented on recently adopting or reviewing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum that would be implemented in the future.

Principals 1, 2, 4, 6, 9, 10, and 11 mentioned interactions that made them feel that they did not have the autonomy to make significant decisions for their schools. These interactions included examples like the expectation that principals attend professional development outlining exactly how principals should interact with their teachers when giving feedback and directions on how to implement COVID-19 policy. Principal 12 said he felt that principals were expected to manage the conflicts that arose because of policy changes during the pandemic and support the district procedures. All the principals felt that county medical

professionals, and not district officials, were the ones in charge of their schools during the shutdowns. Principal 1 said, "COVID caught everyone by surprise. We had to equip our people to be at home and try to teach. We lost a lot of learning. We went 1-to-1 overnight but it was hard and obviously we're paying for it."

Principal 9 indicated that lack of autonomy is not the only challenge that principals face. She reported that the complicated nature of district bureaucracy created a system that was slow to respond in unique circumstances. She said, "The school was ready to move forward, and we had things in place to get (new program). We had the funding. We had the schedule in place. It went through four people before it was turned down. It stayed on one person's desk for almost two months and then we got the answer, 'Oh, that won't work. We can't favor one company over another. Go back and get two more quotes.' We did and they still turned it down." Limitations like these impede the progress schools profess to aspire to. They also introduce forms of organizational discord, which is examined next.

Dissonance and Conformity

Throughout the study principals made clear that they were expected to lead on campus despite the realization that they did not have the autonomy to act decisively when presented with situations that called for such action. The nervous banter and even laughter when the principals discussed the mandates from the district office and the hesitancy that was prevalent in principals' responses when discussing the roadblocks they faced were evidence that the principals were not completely comfortable when criticizing district officials or policies that affected their campuses. These instances clearly reflected a clear level of dissonance in the principals' perceptions of their role and the expectations they face.

Principal 9 indicated that lack of autonomy is not the only challenge that principals face. As has been referenced already, she reported that the complicated nature of district

bureaucracy created a system that was slow to respond in unique circumstances. She said, "The school was ready to move forward, and we had things in place to get (new program). We had the funding. We had the schedule in place. It went through four people before it was turned down. It stayed on one person's desk for almost two months and then we got the answer, 'Oh, that won't work. We can't favor one company over another. Go back and get two more quotes.' We did and they still turned it down."

As principals discussed the roadblocks they had faced over the years, they recounted ways they had changed their expectations to deal with the fact that they couldn't act. To the extent that they felt it was possible, the principals repeatedly indicated they had altered their practices to be less creative and instead comply with the district policies and protocols. As an example, Principal 8 described the district expectation that he would raise ACT scores, then related the frustration he felt when his request for approval of a program that was proven to improve ACT scores was denied by the district officials.

Participants freely shared additional examples of what they described as the alterations they made in their overall leadership approach as they were forced to meet district expectations. The changes described by the principals in this study were the very compliance-based adjustments that aspiring principals in Hughes et al. (2019) feared they would be forced to make as they set out to begin their administrative careers. They recognized that complying with a steady diet of top-down expectations could significantly limit the scope of their leadership role and stunt the continued development of their overall effectiveness.

Specific evidence of dissonance and resulting conformity addressed in this section includes the conflict that principals shared as they recounted how they dumbed down their roles over the years. They were aware that their time was spent doing work that had little to do with innovation, but they had resigned themselves and adapted internally to accept that

this was not a part of their job. As evidenced in the interviews, principals had simply set aside the concepts of innovation or redefined them and had become hyper-focused on task completion.

The aspiring principals who weighed in within Hughes et al. (2019) expressed a high level of apprehension as they anticipated having to set aside their independence to meet the expectations of fidelity to district mandates. The interviews of the principals at later stages in their careers show that the feelings of apprehension and the resulting frustrations appear to lessen as the principals resign themselves to the diminished range of their leadership roles over time. Therein the more experienced principals in this study were aware of the dissonance they had felt and expressed their frustrations. Yet, over time, these frustrations seemed to impact their attitudes to a lesser degree than the newer principals that were interviewed. Finally, and more noteworthy, principals in the study believed that the leaders at the district level were so far removed from the campus leadership role that the district leadership had embraced the dissonance as their reality and were actively working to preserve the status quo.

Compliance vs Innovation

The progression moving from training priorities to the de-emphasis of critical thinking and on to the resulting dissonance experienced by administrators leaves us at the final question for discussion – does the job of a principal include opportunities for innovation as advertised or is compliance, as reported through interviews, what principals should expect? Throughout the interviews, principals shared detailed perspectives concerning wide-ranging school improvement practices. More specifically, they shared their feelings about adopting district-led initiatives that resembled innovation but were actually practices that had become common in public education such as small group instruction or 1 to 1 technology initiatives. Consequently and collectively, respondents

supported a local point of view and working definition that innovation amounted to acts which significantly changed instructional practices or stepped away from already established fidelity expectations. Curiously, deviations from the status quo and fidelity expectations were not considered by principals when setting campus goals to improve student achievement.

Though principals are described as *instructional leaders* the principals who participated in this study reported that they were focused on the daily work of testing, staff development, and student discipline more than leading their schools to improve instruction through innovative practices. Due to this reported intense focus on task completion, principals seem to become conditioned to maintain the status quo and, at least indirectly, come to see that as their primary responsibility.

Many of the principals confirmed that the goals set for them by the district office were a significant, if not the most important, priority in their planning. The expectation to implement specific programs and follow strict guidelines, i.e., "with fidelity" (Harn & Stoolmiller, 2013) was a concern for many of the principals during the interviews. They felt like they were discouraged from finding their own solutions and not allowed to consider local adaptations that would improve outcomes. The principals also said that their job did not require them to demonstrate innovation. They said their success as principals was dependent on how well they could follow prescribed practices in order to raise test scores, improve survey responses from parents and students, and maintain staff morale.

As mentioned above, district leaders often set goals for principals to achieve. Added to this, districts offer professional development on how to achieve those goals and provide training on techniques and programs that will accomplish the goals. In short, while principals indicated that training is important, they also indicated that all the steps, from the development of goals to the implementation procedures, are prescribed at the district level.

Though schools frequently have site teams and engage in professional learning communities, their overall opportunity for impact is questionable considering the insights shared by administrators in this study. These findings confirm the assertion from Hughes (2019) and Hughes and Davidson (2020) that compliance-tasked principals may not even have an option to adopt additional materials, adjust the training protocols, or adapt the goals to fit their schools' specific needs.

The compliance conditioning that occurs in public schools evidently takes place as well-meaning mentors pass on practices that have been passed on to them over the years. Hughes (2021) stated, "Schools and their leaders have been increasingly forced into a continuing compliance reality. It has become safer for many to abandon who they set out to be as a leader in favor of adopting 'experienced' leadership styles, whether they are even effective or right for the times" (p.1).

This incarnation of "zombie" leadership, as described by Hughes (2021), was evident in the interviews as all principals named mentors that had helped them implement practices over the years. Principal 11 said,

> I got to see how he (the mentor) did it (the principal role). I would pick his brain on how he handled things and how he looked at things. I would mimic how he would articulate things differently. He definitely was someone that I would say I still look up to today. I look to him as a mentor and call for advice. I remember asking him, how can I get your habits? How can I mimic your structure?

It is possible that the compliance mentality is perpetuated by leaders handing down practices that make an innovative mindset and innovative practices difficult to adopt. The literature discussed this in Chapter 2 (Hemetsberger & Thyri, 2022.; Howell, 2015.; Hughes, 2018; McNeil, 2009) and the findings of this research demonstrate that the current public school systems have not been operated with much room for flexibility for decades and the changing the status quo outside of mandates and fidelity-based undertakings is challenging. As a result, comments such as the ones from Principals 3 and Principal 5

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indicate that leaders become complacent and don't consider innovative leadership practices. For example, when asked to share her recent innovative practices, Principal 11, stated that she didn't consider most of her practices innovative. When pressed, she shared that one of the most significant things she had implemented was the practice of meeting with her administration staff at lunchtime every day. As another example, four principals shared that the most innovative practice they had implemented was a 1-to-1 tech initiative on their sites.

The fact that principals adopt a compliance mentality and struggle to implement innovative practices is not a criticism that should be leveled at principals. The compliance mindset discussed in this study was evident in the principals' responses and seemed to be the natural outcome of working in a mandate-based environment. An environment that less regulated organizations like charter schools do not face. Sadly, the very legislators who restrict public schools while giving complete autonomy to charter, are the biggest critics of those who are forced to rely on predetermined one-size fits all solutions they have mandated.

Implications for School Leaders

This study was a follow-up to Hughes et al. (2019) that sought to contribute to research concerning the true role of principals and their practices as leaders, along with their perceptions of the role they play on campus. It specifically sought to analyze how principals viewed their role as potential innovators and change agents. The results of the study consistently revealed that principals involved in this project considered themselves to be capable of being effective leaders on campus, but did not have the true opportunity nor the time to pursue or act upon innovative practices. In many cases after experiencing dissonance over the inconsistencies between their job expectations and actual work conditions, principals collectively dismissed innovation as a central part of their role.

It became apparent during the interviews that principals had largely accepted their work setting reality and eventually replaced any thoughts towards innovative pursuits with increased internal peace involving the compliance expectations they face. The following implications can be considered based on the findings:

1. District leaders and their leadership styles play a significant role in how principals choose to run their schools. Beyond being forced to adopt programs, practices, and curricula that have been determined in advance, the expectation that principals contact the district office for direction anytime a significant problem occurs seems to be a common characteristic evidenced across the participants from this study. At the very least with regard to the settings accessed through this project, the need to obtain permission stands out as a major pillar in the compliance mentality that is evident in this study. This reliance on district officials not only perpetuates the compliance mentality, but according to analysis, suggests that it also leads to complacency. As former superintendents, Hughes and Davidson (2020) suggested that building capacity in principals can encourage principals to address conflict with increased skill and can lessen the burden on district leaders. This point of view seems to be supported by the participants statements in this study and the principals preferences for leadership opportunities. Though these findings come from a limited sample, applying the concept of developing and empowering leaders (Hughes and Davidson, 2020) could prove to be an important step in overcoming complacency and improving Arizona schools.

2. According to findings from this study, principals perceive a level of dissonance that sits below the surface, creating frustration and influencing interactions with the district office and can impact schools and staff generally. This development was

anticipated within Hughes et al. (2019) and confirmed through this research. Assuming district leaders are not aware of or concerned with the dissonance referenced here, they should strive to become aware of how principals interpret the responsibilities given to them and the expectations principals have toward autonomy.

3. Participants indicated that when administrators advance higher up into district-level leadership roles, they instinctively perpetuate the same compliance-centered style of leadership modeled by previous administrators. According to Anderson and Cohen (2015) district leaders would do well to review principal participation in district decision making and include principals, especially when decisions will impact a principal's school. Along with priorities advanced by Hughes and Davidson (2019), it is clear that there are benefits from more collaborative and supportive top-level leadership approaches that are possibly being overlooked in parts of Arizona.

Recommendations for Future Related Research

This study explored many important insights and perceptions of experienced principals in the Phoenix Metropolitan area. The findings of this study have significant implications for school leaders, principal training programs, and professional development implementation. Additional research is recommended to further the study of principals and their perceptions of themselves as leaders.

The lack of literature concerning the role of innovation in the principal position and the perceptions of principals as leaders made organizing a literature review difficult. The gap in the research was originally recognized during the final course of administrative training of the researcher during preparation for the principal position. While taking masters courses to earn the principal certificate, the researcher co-authored preliminary research for this study (Hughes et al., 2019) and found that opportunities to lead, as it had

been taught in the leadership books, were not a reality for most principals.

The perceptions of prospective principals in Hughes et al. (2019) led to insights that set the groundwork for gathering the perceptions of principals in this study. The responses offered within this study were predicted within the available literature (Hughes, 2014; Hughes, 2018; Hughes 2019; Hughes et al., 2019; Hughes, 2020; Hughes & Davidson, 2020).

Further research into the perceptions of principals is needed to expand the insight into this topic, and in order to better address many questions that were brought up as a result of the research.

Future research may clarify and expand the findings of this study and explain some of the principals' responses or hesitancy to respond.

There are several recommendations for future research.

1. Utilizing interviews in a grounded theory approach was effective in gathering entry-point data for this study. The principals felt comfortable and relaxed during the interviews but still demonstrated a distinct level of discomfort when discussing sensitive topics. A quantitative tool that encouraged anonymity such as a survey might allow principals to share more information than they did in the interviews. This study could be expanded to include a larger number of principals if it were done as a quantitative exercise.

2. The study could be replicated and include principals from a variety of school sizes and could compare the responses of principals from smaller schools with principals in larger schools. Future research might also expand to include middle and elementary school principals.

3. Participants in this study were current, experienced principals. Future investigations could emphasize principals that had been promoted to the district office as the primary source of information.

4. Future research could include the perspectives of superintendents and look deeper into their expectations of principals and innovation practices. Specifically, it would be insightful to learn if superintendents believe they themselves as professionals are allowed to deviate from the status quo any more than the participants in this study addressed.

5. A final recommendation would be to conduct a follow-up study to Hughes et al. (2019) that included the perspectives of teachers that were training to become principals or had attained their principal certification to identify the expectations they have concerning autonomy in their future role.

Practical Realities

At this point in the discussion, the experience and positionality of the researcher becomes relevant to mention. When asked, the principals in the study did not remember any significant training they received in their principal training programs. Some of the principals went so far as to say that the training they received did not prepare them for the principal position. This was not the experience of the researcher. The researcher was fortunate to receive training during the culminating course on how to balance the pressure of completing mandated tasks with his desire to remain innovative. Over time the researcher has learned the value of that course and the unique training he received.

Training programs face training standards and accreditation challenges that strongly influence the offerings and practices that are inherent in standardized, formal

programs. Principal training programs should reflect the nature of the principal position and the expectations of superintendents. Principal training programs typically include a requirement that students complete many hours of observations and administrative work. During that time, students are expected to demonstrate that they have experience and expertise in each of the professional standards listed in their evaluation. The evaluation process encourages a high level of reflection and may require an equally high level of autonomy if principals are to adopt practices that will help them improve.

Principals discussed another reality that is a significant challenge to adopting innovative practices. The principals confirmed that district leaders and other district personnel are unfamiliar with the specific needs of their schools, especially if they have not had experience in the principal role. This reality increases the difficulty of persuading them to adopt new or innovative ideas. Confirming the insights, perspectives and training received by the investigator, the principals in this study unanimously agreed that relationship building and being able to influence others was one of the most important skills a principal needed to be successful.

Conclusion

The history of public education referenced in Chapter 2 illustrated ways that educational policy and the resulting practices are subject to the pressures of social change. This pattern has been evident throughout history and is in place even today, during what has been commonly termed the culture wars in American society. As evidence of dissatisfaction with student achievement has increased, policymakers have responded by instituting systems that increasingly adopt practices that lead toward control and expectations of fidelity (Hughes & Davidson, 2020).

As a result, public schools in Arizona, where this study was conducted, face the challenge of competing for funding with charter and private schools that are not required to

meet the same standards of service and demonstrated equity that public schools face. The heightened scrutiny and regulation that public schools experience and the perhaps even almost hostile legislative environment has created conditions that encourage school leaders to adopt and rely on prescribed programs for purchase that advertise proven increases in student achievement along with record profits for corporate America.

This study shows that as a result of protracted attempts at making schools more consistent, and streamlined, principals with expanding accountability expectations frequently struggle to find opportunities or practical ways to provide allowable alternatives to fidelity-based practices. Therein, the collective mindset of participants depicted innovation as being little more than anything that differed from top-down fidelity-driven status quo.

This study exposed ways increased compliance resulting from a fidelity mindset discourages principal innovation and potentially creates dissonance in principal's perceptions of their leadership role. Subsequently, this study highlighted a leadership paradox that exists in Arizona public schools. Principals are expected to produce winning results despite funding and staffing shortages, and are widely if not universally faulted when the mandates they are forced to utilize do not result in desired outcomes.

The dissonance resulting from the current dominated educational climate was repeatedly and consistently evidenced in the responses of the participant interviews. While speaking positively of their figurative influence on schools and their desire to impact their students, the principals regularly acknowledged that they have almost zero authority to design, decide on, or modify the instruction or operations of the schools they lead. The administrators' responses in this study support that the status quo is well-established in public schools – though the originators of this domination take no responsibility for the struggles and alleged failures of public education in Arizona.

While history has shown a cyclical pattern of independence and dominance, there is little evidence suggesting change in this pattern in the near future. Still, when the cycle shifts, how ready will school leaders be to truly lead instructional efforts in their schools when called upon to do so? Further, by the time that happens, how much damage will have been done to school culture, traditions and practices? Some of that questioning relates to uncertain developments and one needs to be mindful that efforts are well underway to continue the domination subjected to public schools. That said, and taking a more general path, there has been ample evidence as of late that educators can and will work through an expanding array of challenges they can expect to face (Hughes, 2014; Hughes 2019; Miller, 2018). No matter who is in charge of the broader educational system, how will leaders know how to respond to the challenges we cannot even envision today, if they are not allowed to develop in ways (Hughes and Davidson, 2020) that allow them to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are meaningful and utilized in an impactful manner?

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Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Letter

NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY
Office of Research Compliance

Institutional Review Board for the
Human Research Protection Program

525 S Beaver St
PO Box: 4062
Flagstaff AZ 86011
928-523-9551
https://www.nau.edu/IRB

To:	Adam Larsen
From:	NAU IRB Office
Approval Date:	August 14, 2022
Project:	Doctorate Dissertation Thinking outside the box: The role of educational leaders in decision making.
Project Number:	1652016-1
Submission:	New Project
Action:	APPROVED
Project Risk Level:	MINIMAL RISK
Approval Expiration Date:	August 14, 2027
Next Report Date:	
Review Category/ies:	**The project is <u>not federally funded or supported</u> and has been deemed to be <u>no more than minimal risk</u>.**

This project has been reviewed and approved by an IRB Chair or designee.

- Northern Arizona University maintains a Federalwide Assurance with the Office for Human Research Protections (FWA #00000357).
- All research procedures should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the guidance.
- The Principal Investigator should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that affect the protocol and report any unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others. Please refer to Guidance Investigators Responsibility after IRB Approval, Reporting Local Information and Minimal Risk or Exempt Research.
- All documents referenced in this submission have been reviewed and approved. Documents are filed with the HRPP Office within IRBNet. If subjects will be consented, the approved consent(s) are available within IRBNet upon approval notification from the HRPP Office.

Important

The principal investigator for this study is responsible for obtaining all necessary approvals before commencing research. Please be sure that you have satisfied applicable external and University requirements, for example (but not limited to) data repositories, listserv permission, records request, data use agreement, conducting University surveys, data security, international, conflicts of interest, biological safety, radiation safety, HIPAA, FERPA, FDA, sponsor approval, clinicaltrials.gov, tribal consultation, or school approval. IRB approval does not convey approval to commence research in the event that other requirements have not been satisfied.

Appendix B: Script to Solicit Participants

Good morning.

I'm interviewing principals across Arizona to complete my Doctorate research. Would you be willing to meet on Zoom for between 45min – 1 hour sometime in the next couple of weeks?

My study is about the leadership role that principals play on campus and in the district and how you apply your leadership skills. Your input would be important. I'm interviewing principals from larger schools in larger school districts in the Phoenix area with varying years of experience.

If you are able to help me, please respond to this email and we can schedule a time that will work for you.

Thanks,

Adam Larsen

Appendix C: Questions to Guide the Interviews

1. What experiences have you had that prepared you to be a principal?

2. What types of innovative practices have you implemented during your time as a principal?

3. How do you adapt when you are asked to do something but it's not working?

4. How are you involved in the leadership decisions on your campus?

5. What is the role of the district leadership in decision making and how effective do you think they are?

6. How are you involved in the leadership decisions at the district office?

7. Tell me about a time when you were expected to implement a program or follow a policy.

8. What did you do when the way you were supposed to but you knew it wouldn't be effective.

9. How do you identify alternative options when faced with unique problems?

10. Who do you turn to when you run into problems on your campus?

11. What is the process you follow when you're faced with a challenge where the solution isn't evident?

12. Have you ever received pushback for taking initiative and trying something new? How did you react to the feedback?

13. What does "thinking outside the box" mean to you and how do you do it on your campus?

14. Have you received training to prepare you to innovate or solve problems creatively?

15. What recommendations do you have for leaders that are training principals?

16. What recommendations do you have for district leaders?

Appendix D: Consent to Participate Form

NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

Office of Research Compliance

Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: Doctorate Dissertation Thinking outside the box: The role of educational leaders in decision making.

Principal Investigator: Adam Larsen

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you do not have to participate. This document contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate.

This study will collect the perspectives of high school principals concerning the tasks they are asked to complete as they carry out their role as a school leader. Principals will be interviewed to find out their feelings about their ability to "think outside the box" when they are faced with unique situations.

You will be interviewed for approximately one hour.

You may remove yourself from the study at any time, including during the interview.

There are no expected risks to you as a result of participating in this study. You will not benefit directly from participating in this study.

Interview notes and personal data will be kept on a secure drive and all identifiers will be removed from documentation to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

Your name will not be used in any report. Identifiable research data will be encrypted, and password protected.

Your responses will be assigned a code number. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in an encrypted and password protected file. Only the research team will have access to the file. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the list will be destroyed.

With your permission, I would like to audiotape this interview so that I can make an accurate transcript. Once I have made the transcript, I will erase the recordings. Your name will not be in the transcript or my notes.

NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

Office of Research Compliance

Because of the nature of the data, it may be possible to deduce your identity; however, there will be no attempt to do so and your data will be reported in a way that will not identify you. Information collected about you will not be used or shared for future research studies.

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study you may contact **Adam Larsen** at 623-432-2213.

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact the Human Research Protection Program at 928-523-9551 or online at http://nau.edu/Research/Compliance/Human-Research/Welcome/.

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form, and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I affirm that I am at least 18 years of age and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

_____   _____   _____

Printed name of subject   **Signature of subject**   **Date**

AGREEMENT TO BE AUDIORECORDED

Subject Signature:_____ Date:_____