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# Challenges to Instructional Leadership: Superintendent and Principals' Experiences

Mason, Vincent Paul

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Challenges to Instructional Leadership Practices: Superintendent and Principals'

Experiences

by

Vincent Paul Mason

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study revealed that there are significant challenges to a superintendent's and principals' ability to effectively practice instructional leadership. These challenges to instructional leadership are categorized into five themes: vision/mission; teaching and planning time; managing classroom instruction; student success/progress; and positive atmosphere. Of these five themes the superintendent and principals effectively demonstrated instructional leadership except in the area of student success/progress. More focused attention and professional development is required in this area. Dealing with emergent issues, ensuring stakeholder input, working with reluctant staff members, financial limitations, and accountability requirements were found to be the most significant challenges to instructional leadership practices.

This exploratory case study was conducted using semi-structured interviews and document analysis to collect data. The units of analysis were a superintendent, fifteen principals, and sixteen teachers from a high performing school district in Alberta.

This study also describes eight recommendations related to superintendent and principal instructional leadership practices and five suggestions for future research. Recommendations for policy-makers (reduce the number and scope of accountability requirements), superintendents and principals (developed a comprehensive school district strategic plan), trustees and community stakeholders (provide training to ensure that roles and responsibilities are understood), and superintendent and principal preparation programs (establish mentoring and support) are specifically mentioned.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Introductory Statement**

This study is designed to contribute to the knowledge of instructional leadership, but more specifically it describes what challenges impede the ability of a superintendent and principals to engage in effective instructional leadership practices. Effective instructional leadership is pivotal for school system and school growth and improvement. In this era of educational accountability, where superintendents and principals are expected to demonstrate achievement results and use data to inform decisions, the skills and knowledge of these individuals matter more than ever. While not completely ignored, superintendent instructional leadership is comparatively unstudied when compared to principal instructional leadership. Augmenting the knowledge base of instructional leadership is timely and prudent.

This study involved the superintendent, fifteen principals, and sixteen teachers from a variety of school types (e.g. primary, elementary, middle school, high school, outreach programs) and from different locations within one school district. Using a semi-structured interview guide, participants were asked to reflect on various attributes of instructional leadership. By responding to the interview questions based on instructional leadership participants had an opportunity to discern and describe the diversity of elements that impacted a superintendent's and principals' ability to participate in effective instructional leadership.

The findings of this study will contribute to the understanding of instructional leadership and the challenges that impact the implementation of effective instructional leadership. An exploratory case study was selected for this study because it was seen as a means to “contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena” (Yin, 2009, p.1).

This study may be of interest to superintendents, school principals, central office administrators, vice-principals, school board trustees, and other researchers who are interested in effective instructional leadership. This research explored how a superintendent and principals managed the dimensions of instructional leadership and strove to overcome any challenges that impeded their ability to be effective instructional leaders.

### **Context for the Study Topic**

In North America, the release of the report *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) brought an increased focus on educational accountability and organizational effectiveness. This report was the catalyst for a number of education reforms being initiated during the 1980s. These educational reform initiatives dictated new expectations for school district and school leadership, replacing emphasis on organizational efficiency and management issues with emphasis on student learning, teacher professionalism, and accountability (Bjork, 2001). According to Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, and Glass (2005), the role of the superintendent has changed from the less visible manager to a highly visible “executive who needs vision, skills, and knowledge to lead in a new and complex world” (p. 1).

The desire for more accountability was also driven by the change in economic and political ideology, referred to as the New Right, which escalated in the 1970s and 1980s as a result of the consequences of a worldwide recession (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 2002). The New Right incorporated new policies, marketing tactics, and electoral strategies that promoted conservative policies. Prior to the recession, public institutions such as schools were continually funded with little or no expectation to report on the progress of the students, schools, or district. This lack of accountability measures was not acceptable to the values of the New Right: “This ideology has captured the allegiance of many governments and, as a consequence, much greater emphasis on accountability is a critical part of the context in which school leaders now work” (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 2002, p. 850).

Superintendents and principals in the province of Alberta have also seen an increase in accountability requirements over the past twenty years. The Department of Education holds every school district answerable for ensuring that the needs of students are met, that the best possible student achievement results are accomplished, policy initiatives are applied, and that resources invested in education are appropriately utilized (Alberta Learning, 2003).

In 2003, the Department of Education in the province of Alberta initiated a Learning Commission that produced a report entitled *Every Child Learns. Every Child Succeeds*. The purpose of this report was to create and articulate a vision for the future of education in Alberta. The final report from Alberta’s Learning Commission provided 95

recommendations with educational accountability deeply emphasized in these recommendations. The Alberta Commission on Learning Report (2003) stated:

Accountability is critical. Students want to know that they are making the grade and ready for their next challenges. Parents want to know how well their children are achieving on a regular basis and in comparison with provincial standards. And the public deserves to know how well our education system is preparing young people for their futures. (p. 12)

As it related to the issue of accountability, the Alberta Commission on Learning further stated that:

Education is too important to simply assume things are going well. High standards must be set and met ... All the various players in the education system should have clear roles and responsibilities and should be accountable for fulfilling those responsibilities. Teachers should be accountable for continually improving their students' achievement. School boards should continue to be accountable to their electors and to the province and should have the necessary flexibility and resources to meet their communities' expectations. The provincial government should be accountable to parents, students, and all Albertans for the overall quality of Alberta's education system and the results our students achieve. (p. 38)

As the context of public education in Alberta shifted to encompass a significant focus on educational accountability, more pressure to achieve high levels of student achievement was felt by all levels of educational organizations. The expectation of

meeting high standards of student achievement is not the sole responsibility of teachers and students in their classrooms but is a responsibility shared among all levels of the school system including superintendents and principals. This difference in focus and increased concentration on educational accountability caused school systems to reflect and adjust their practices and procedures in order to change their systemic indicators of system success. For example high school completion rates are now used as indicators of systemic success and growth.

In Alberta, superintendents of school systems are held accountable for high levels of student achievement. With the onset of stronger accountability in the area of student achievement from the Department of Education, superintendents are required to provide students with every opportunity to achieve to the best of their ability and to obtain a high level of success (Alberta Learning, 2003).

For the most part, during this age of accountability, research on effective schools has focused on individual schools, suggesting that the capacity for improvement and change resides at the school level (Hill, Holmes-Smith, & Rowe, 1993; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Lezotte, 1994; Mulford, Gurr, & Drysdale, 2006). However, as Norton, Webb, Dlugosh, and Sybouts (1996) explained “although these studies made important contributions to the education reform literature and administrative practice, the instructional leadership role of superintendents, those at the other end of the school hierarchy, have been largely ignored” (p. 6). Instructional leadership is defined a set of practices and beliefs resulting in a focus on instructional improvement and increased

learning for students (Borba, 2002). Practices associated with instructional leadership include:

... developing and articulating a vision and mission; focusing on academic achievement; promoting high expectations for student, staff and organizational performance; developing a school culture that promotes student learning and teacher professional growth; participating in staff development; and spending a significant amount of time at school sites observing teachers in the classroom.

(p. 18)

Although the literature offers many descriptions of the roles of teachers and principals pertaining to instruction, less attention has been given to the practices of superintendents that are associated with effective instructional leadership in school districts (Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Bridges, 1982; Peterson, 1999). In the age of accountability and student achievement this is likely due to the observation that teachers have a more direct impact on student achievement than do principals and superintendents (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). In recent years there has been more written about the superintendency, but the literature in general has emphasized such topics as the 21st century challenges of finance, diversity, and governance, and the shortage of qualified superintendents. According to Glass, Bjork and Brunner (2000), “whether or not superintendents can measurably affect student achievement has not been the subject of extensive research” (p. 62). Therefore, there would appear to be a gap in the research with regards to instructional leadership and the role the superintendent has in this area.

What is also noteworthy is the lack of research that examines the challenges to superintendent and principal instructional leadership practices. The inclusion of improving student academic progress as a mandatory standard of superintendent and principals' performance highlights the critical role of these administrators in curriculum implementation, instructional leadership, and, ultimately, student performance. As a result, superintendents' and principals' job responsibilities have been reprioritized, and in some cases redefined, in response to standards and the accompanying accountability issues. Likewise, priorities have been externally set on both the instructional and organizational leadership dimensions of the superintendents' and principals' role (DiPaola & Stronge, 2001). However, despite the fact that the roles and responsibilities of superintendents and principals have significantly changed, very little research has been completed in the area of challenges to superintendent and principal instructional leadership practices.

To overcome the gap in research as it related to superintendent and principals' instructional leadership, the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) embarked on an initiative intended to help build superintendent and principal leadership capacity in Alberta (2009). The CASS "Moving and Improving" leadership development proposal plan helped to build superintendent and principal leadership capacity. Specifically, the "Moving and Improving" project was implemented to create a *Framework for School System Success* intended to help guide school system initiatives that aim to improve student learning. The *Framework for School System Success* identified twelve dimensions of high performing school systems with one of them



explicitly being “Investing in Instructional Leadership”. Narrow initial research results from the CASS “Moving and Improving” leadership initiative, in particular the “Investing in Instructional Leadership” dimension, indicated that instructional leadership practices of superintendents and principals is beneficial for increasing student achievement (2009). Leithwood’s (2008) review of the evidence regarding sixteen studies of high performing school districts underlined the priority placed on instructional leadership by these jurisdictions at both the school district and school level. For example, in one of these sixteen studies, Eilers and Camacho (2007) noted that in their case study of an urban elementary school that had achieved poor results under the terms of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, that effective leadership coupled with multiple and coherent district supports resulted in dramatic improvements in student achievement. However, the results of these sixteen studies are relatively limited in scope and little analysis is given to describing the challenges that impact the instructional leadership practices of superintendents and principals.

### **Statement of the Problem**

With increasing demands for academic accountability, the focus for superintendents and principals has also moved toward effective instructional leadership. Most of the research in this area has focused on principal instructional leadership (Bjork & Keedy, 2001). Leadership at the school level, particularly the instructional leadership role of principals, emerged from early effective school studies and identified it as an important characteristic of effective schools (Hill, Holmes-Smith, & Rowe, 1993; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Lezotte, 1994; Mulford, Gurr, & Drysdale, 2006).

However, fewer empirical studies on the instructional leadership role of superintendents have been published (Bjork, 2001; Bredeson, 1996; Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006; Castagnola, 2005; Kultan, 2010; Morgan & Peterson, 2002; Peterson, Murphy, & Hallinger, 1987).

Although in the 1990s the literature on superintendent instructional leadership started to develop, several authors continued to call for more study in this area (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999; Leithwood, Leonard, & Sharratt, 1998). Carter, Glass, and Hord (1993) pointed out that while there were approximately 15,000 school districts in the United States research on the superintendency had not been systematic and dynamic. Therefore, it is evident that there is a need for further investigation of the instructional leadership practices and beliefs of superintendents and what challenges exist that impact the behaviours of these individuals.

The available research that pertains to instructional leadership is more prevalent and more extensively developed for principals than superintendents. Also, the available research evidence that focuses on the instructional leadership practices of superintendents and principals, and if any challenges exist, is not well developed (Eilers & Camancho, 2007; Leithwood, 2008; Stein, Harwell, & D'Amico, 1999). As educational accountability becomes more of a priority for school systems and stakeholders, it would be beneficial to have a better understanding of the instructional leadership practices of superintendents and principals and if any challenges exist to impact these practices. In view of the demand for increased accountability from educational stakeholders an

analysis of superintendent and principal instructional leadership practices, and if any challenges exist that impact these practices, is timely and prudent.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this exploratory case study is to examine the instructional leadership practices of a superintendent and a sample of that superintendent's principals to determine if any challenges exist to impact these practices. The overarching research question for this study is:

*What, if any, challenges to the instructional leadership practices of a superintendent and their principals exist?*

The following four exploratory sub-questions focus on the instructional leadership practices of the superintendent and principals. Using Krug's (1992) dimensions of effective leadership taxonomy...

1. In what ways do a superintendent and his or her principals demonstrate instructional leadership?
2. Are there any challenges to instructional leadership for a superintendent and his and her principals?
3. Are the challenges to instructional leadership different for a superintendent, as opposed to his or her principals?
4. What strategies are used, by the superintendent and his or her principals, to overcome instructional leadership challenges?

To address this research question this qualitative study focused on the superintendent, fifteen principals, and sixteen teachers in the same school district in the province of Alberta.

### **Potential Significance**

The findings from this study will be of interest to superintendents, senior administrators, and school board trustees who are interested in instructional leadership and its impact on student achievement. These findings may also be informative to educators and policy makers in Alberta and in other provinces and states. The findings of this study will be specific to one school district in Alberta. Therefore the findings will not be applicable to other settings or situations. However, the findings may resonate with other educators and researchers as they examine instructional leadership. Lastly, this study will add to the research literature that relates to the field of instructional leadership practices with particular reference to the challenges experienced by superintendents and principals.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical framework enhances the significance of a study and is used for guiding the methodology and discussion (Anfara & Mertz, 2006). The theoretical framework that informed this study was social constructivism. This construct views learning as an active process in which individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work, and focuses on what takes place or what does not happen in organizations (Liu & Matthews, 2005). Social constructivism takes the view that

“knowledge in some area is the product of our social practices and institutions or of the interactions and negotiations between relevant social groups” (Gasper, 1999, p. 855). Generally put, social constructivism contends that knowledge is sustained by social processes and that knowledge and social action go together. It is less interested in the cognitive processes that accompany knowledge.

Recent challenges to social constructivist ideology have placed this theory in a curious position. While Vygotsky’s theory of social constructivism is assumed, by many, to be the origin of social constructivism, other scholars have claimed that he cannot be social enough. Lave and Wenger (1991), for example, in proposing their situated learning theory, disapproved of Vygotsky’s concept of learning internalization and scientific concepts for they contain only “a small ‘aura’ of socialness that provides input for the process of internalization, viewed as individualistic acquisition of the cultural given” (p. 47). Another noted criticism regarding social constructivism is in its emphasis on learner active participation. It is often seen that social constructivism too easily dismisses the roles of passive perception, memorization, and all the mechanical learning methods in traditional didactic learning (Fox, 2001).

Utilizing a social constructivist theoretical framework for this study relied on the participant’s view of instructional leadership, identified the processes of instructional leadership among the participants, focused on the specific contexts in which instructional leadership occurs, and attempted to make sense of or interpret the meanings that the participants had about instructional leadership and whether any challenges existed for its implementation.

## **Assumptions**

This research is guided by the following assumptions:

1. Education is a publicly funded initiative, and, therefore there is a strong obligation for educators to be accountable.
2. The role of the superintendent and principals is complex involving many functions which require managerial responsibilities and instructional duties.
3. Superintendents and principals engage in instructional practices as they carry out their roles and responsibilities.
4. Superintendents and principals can create a focus on learning by persistently and publically focusing their attention on learning and teaching.
5. Superintendents and principals build strong professional communities by nurturing work cultures that value and support their teachers' learning and efforts.
6. Superintendents and principals maximize their actions by mobilizing efforts along multiple pathways that lead to student, professional or system learning, and by distributing leadership among individuals in different positions.

## **Limitations**

The following indicate the limitations of this study:

1. Only one school district in the province of Alberta has been selected for this study.

2. The identification of instructional leadership practices and what, if any, challenges exist to impact these practices are limited to a superintendent, fifteen principals, and sixteen teachers in one school district.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Accountability:** refers to the obligation for schools systems to produce improvement in student achievement. A system designed to hold school districts, schools, and/or students responsible for academic performance. Accountability systems “typically consist of assessments and public reporting of results” (Haglund, 2009, p. 9).

**Challenges to Instructional Leadership:** situational and/or behaviour factors that have been identified as serving to inhibit superintendent and principal instructional leadership performance (Malishan, 1990).

**Central Administrator:** superintendent, deputy superintendent, assistant superintendents, associate superintendents, directors, consultants, and coordinators whose particular job responsibilities are broader than one particular classroom or school.

**Central Office:** term used interchangeably with district office, typically referring to the location of the senior management (e.g. superintendent, associate superintendent) and their support staff.

**Classroom Teacher:** a full time certified teacher who plans and guides the learning experiences of students in classroom situations.

**Instructional Leadership:** a set of practices and beliefs resulting in a focus on instructional improvement that are intended to achieve increased learning for students.

**Mission/Vision:** Mission is a concise description of an organizations overall purpose and role. It gives direction to the programs and services that the jurisdiction provides for its students (Alberta Education, 2010). Vision describes a possible and desired future state for the organization, grounded in reality, which inspires and guides decisions and actions (Borba, 2002). In this study mission/vision are used in combination as this was how the respondents used them.

**Principal:** a school administrator responsible for the daily operation at a particular school site.

**Professional Development:** is any program or course intended to improve school system staff effectiveness. Successful school districts have an “integrated professional development strategy that centers on enabling staff to improve their knowledge and skills” (Haglund, 2009, p. 10).

**Superintendent:** the superintendent is the chief executive officer of the board and the chief education officer of the district. The superintendent is selected by the Board of Trustees and approved by the Minister of Education.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. This first chapter describes the context for this study, statement of the problem, purpose, potential significance, theoretical framework, assumptions, limitations, and definitions of key terms. Chapter Two presents a review of the literature on the following topics: similarities and differences between social constructivism and constructivism; Krug’s (1992) dimensions of instructional leadership; the changing role of the superintendent; historical view of



leadership in this era of accountability in education; and three leadership practices and their impact on student achievement. Chapter Three describes the methodology of the study and situates it within the field of qualitative research. It includes a detailed description of the interpretive paradigm; qualitative research methodology; case study research; exploratory case study method; study participants; demographics; data collection techniques; document analyses; data triangulation; trustworthiness; reliability; external validity; data analyses; ethical consideration; and limitations. Chapter Four presents the findings from the participants' interviews, as well as an analysis of the documents related to the study. Chapter Five presents the findings as they relate to the research questions and the implications for practice, research, and policy. Chapter Six, provides a brief summary of this study and a discussion of the conclusions drawn from the research. This discussion is followed by the researcher's recommendations for future research that arose from this study.

### **Chapter Summary**

As school superintendents and principals move towards a greater focus on instructional leadership in an era of higher educational accountability, what challenges, if any, exist to impact the instructional leadership practices of a superintendent and principals? In order to respond to this research question four sub-questions are explored using Krug's (1992) dimensions of effective instructional leadership taxonomy, namely in what ways do a superintendent and principals demonstrate instructional leadership? Are there any challenges to instructional leadership for a superintendent and their

principals? Are the challenges to instructional leadership different for a superintendent and principals? And, what strategies are used to overcome instructional leadership challenges?

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction**

This study seeks to answer the research question: *What, if any, challenges to the instructional leadership practices of a superintendent and their principals exist?* This chapter draws upon existing research to develop a rationale for this study. The review of the literature is divided into five parts. The first part of this literature review outlines the similarities and differences between social constructivism and constructivism. Social constructivism was used as the theoretical framework for this study. The second part describes Krug's (1992) dimensions of instructional leadership. Krug has developed five broad dimensions of instructional leadership and these were used as an integral part of the data analysis. This information has also been provided so as to enable a comparison of the other indicators of instructional leadership mentioned in this chapter. The third part examines the changing role of the superintendent. As the role of the superintendent is central to this study, providing this information outlines how their position has grown and is considered to be changing in its areas of practice. The fourth part provides a historical view of leadership in this era of accountability in education. The current climate and increased interest in public school accountability significantly impacts the instructional leadership practices of superintendents and principals. Understanding this contextual factor illustrates how and why superintendents and principals carry themselves as instructional leaders. The last part explores three leadership practices and their impact on

student achievement. Focusing exclusively on one set of leadership practices does not allow for a full appreciation of the diverse theoretical and operational skills associated with leadership procedures. An examination of leadership practices has been supplied to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this area of research.

### **Constructivism and Social Constructivism**

For this study social constructivism was used as the theoretical framework. The purpose of this section of the literature review is to provide a brief synopsis of the attributes and differences of constructivism and social constructivism. A differentiation between constructivism and social constructivism is important because as Raskin (2002) has indicated:

. . . one comes across so many varieties of constructivism that even the experts seem befuddled. Terms like ‘constructivism’, ‘constructionism’, and ‘constructive’ are employed so idiosyncratically and inconsistently that at times they seem to defy definition. (p. 2)

This confusion is not because constructivism and social constructivism cannot be distinguished from one another. The former focuses on meaning making and the constructing of social worlds through individual, cognitive processes while the latter emphasizes that the social world is made real through social processes and interactions (Liu & Matthews, 2005). However this simple distinction masks the variety and heterogeneity both within and between them which serves to distort the distinction.

Constructivism is commonly associated with western intellectual figures such as Jean Piaget, George Kelly, and Ernst von Glasersfeld (Gergen, 2000). Constructivism

proposes that each individual mentally constructs the world of experience through cognitive processes. It differs from positivism in its argument that the world cannot be known directly, but rather by the construction imposed on it by the mind. In other words constructivism is commonly understood as the ability of learners to take abstract concepts and actively make meaning of them via concrete experiences, as opposed to passively learning via the direct transmission of knowledge. Constructivism is concerned with how we know and by implication how we develop meaning.

One of the main critiques of constructivism lies in its reliance on “an individually sovereign process of cognitive construction to explain how human beings are able to share so much socially, to interpret, understand, influence and coordinate their activities with one another” (Martin & Sugarman, 1999, p. 9). Essentially Martin and Sugarman’s point is that constructivism suggests a highly individualistic approach without reference to social interaction and contexts that make self-reflection possible. To some extent this weakness of constructivism is being addressed by social constructivism.

Social constructivism is based on the notion that knowledge is the product of our social culture and organizations or of the connections and exchanges between related social groups (Gasper, 1999). Generally stated, social constructivism is how individuals construct knowledge from one another and collaboratively create a culture of shared meaning. When one is immersed within a culture one is learning all the time about how to be a part of that culture on many levels.

Lev Vygotsky, the founding father of social constructivism believed in social interaction and that it was an integral part of learning (Powell, 2009). All of Vygotsky’s

research and theories are collectively involved in social constructivism and language development such as, cognitive dialogue, the zone of proximal development, social interaction, culture, inner speech (Vygotsky, 1962). Some versions of social constructivism maintain that objects exist only after individuals or groups communicate about them (Keaton & Bodie, 2011). At one level an object's existence is determined through an individual's sensory perception; through communicative acts, both intra – and interpersonally, they are defined and eventually embody meaning. The social process of defining the object (i.e. its construction) enables it to exist in a social context, to have meaning. Given this social constructivist's position, confusion often surrounds exactly what is being socially constructed. It is not the physical composition of an object that is brought into existence, but its social composition, the ideas which define that object within a social context (Keaton & Bodie, 2011). In other words, communication changes how objects are perceived and the range of potential meanings they can represent.

Recent challenges to social constructivist ideology have placed Vygotsky's theory in a curious position. The most common challenge is that social constructivism takes the concept of truth to be a socially "constructed" (and thereby a socially relative) one. This challenge leads to the charge of "self-refutation" (Wenger, 1991). If what is to be regarded as "true" is relative to a particular social group, then this very conception of truth must itself be only regarded as being "true" within this group. In another social formation, it may well be false. Further, one could then say that truth could be both true and false simultaneously.

Another challenge of social constructivism is that it holds that the concepts of two different social groups to be entirely different and unequal (Wenger, 1991). Therefore, it is impossible to be in a position to make comparative judgements about statements made by these different social groups because of different worldviews. This is because the criteria of judgement will have to be based on some worldview or the other. If this is the case, then it brings into question how communication between different social groups about the truth or falsity of any given statement can be established.

While Vygotsky's theory is assumed, by many, to be the origin of social constructivism, other scholars have claimed that he cannot be social enough. Lave and Wenger (1991), for example, in proposing their situated learning theory, disapproved of Vygotsky's concept of learning internalization and scientific concepts for they contain only "a small 'aura' of socialness that provides input for the process of internalization, viewed as individualistic acquisition of the cultural given" (p. 47). Another noted criticism regarding social constructivism is in its emphasis on learner active participation. It is often seen that social constructivism too easily dismisses the roles of passive perception, memorization, and all the mechanical learning methods in traditional didactic learning (Fox, 2001).

One of the complicating factors in any discussion of constructivism and social constructivism is the ambiguity in the utilization of these concepts which seems to vary by its particular context and use. For the purposes of this study social constructivism emphasizes that the social world is made real through social processes and interactions and perceptions of these interactions. Utilizing social constructivism as a theoretical

framework for this study called for the participants to share their views of instructional leadership, recognize the practices of instructional leadership, focus on the certain settings in which instructional leadership occurred, try to explain the understandings that the participants had about instructional leadership and whether any challenges were evident that impacted these practices.

The theoretical framework that drove this study was based on the five dimensions of instructional leadership identified by Krug (1992): defining mission, managing curriculum and instruction, supervising and supporting teaching, monitoring student progress, and promoting instructional climate. Waters and Marzano (2006) argued that superintendents can influence student learning through managing the dimensions of instructional leadership. Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2004) concurred by claiming that research suggests that effective leadership can improve student achievement. Therefore, this study focused on the practices of a superintendent and principals in each of the five dimensions of instructional leadership. In the next section Krug's (1992) five-factor taxonomy of effective instructional leadership is discussed.

### **Krug's Dimensions of Effective Instructional Leadership**

The importance of leadership in school districts and schools has led to a closer examination of the superintendent's and principal's role and a better understanding of what instructional leaders do (Blase & Blase, 2004; Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005). Instructional leadership involves the strategic application of knowledge to solve context specific problems and to achieve the purposes of schooling through others. Although the problems that face instructional leaders are numerous and the contexts in



which instructional leaders operate diverse, Krug (1992) has made the argument that instructional leadership can be essentially described in terms of five broad dimensions: defining a mission; managing curriculum and instruction; supervising and supporting teaching; monitoring student progress; and promoting an instructional climate.

### **Defining a Mission**

The first role of superintendents and principals is to explicitly frame school system and school goals, purposes, and mission. A school district or school that has not fully considered how it will go about the process of education has no criteria for judging whether it is successfully engaging in that process. People who are skilled in this area often discuss purpose and mission with staff, students, and the community. They take advantage of opportunities to stress and communicate goals. Further, they try to make themselves visible in their environment and they communicate excitement about education to staff and students.

### **Managing Curriculum and Instruction**

Effective leaders provide information that teachers need to plan their classes effectively and they actively support curriculum understanding. Although they usually do not teach, superintendents and principals need to be aware of the special needs of each instructional area. Without a broad knowledge, superintendents and principals cannot provide the resources teachers and staff need to carry out their mission effectively. Superintendents and principals skilled in this area provide information teachers need to plan their work effectively. They work to ensure a good fit between curriculum

objectives and achievement testing and actively support curriculum implementation. Their primary emphasis as superintendents and principals is with instructional rather than administrative issues.

### **Supervising and Supporting Teachers**

Although mandates and traditional hierarchical structures have usually assigned principals and superintendents a narrow, evaluative role with respect to teachers, the effective instructional leader is more broadly oriented to staff development. That is, the effective instructional leader is proactive rather than retrospective regarding teachers and focused on what can be, not what was. Superintendents and principals focusing on supervising and supporting teachers spend time encouraging them to try their best and they coach and counsel teachers in a supportive manner. They attempt to critique teachers as though they were a mentor rather than an evaluator. They encourage teachers to evaluate their own performance and set goals for their own growth.

### **Monitoring Student Progress**

The school district's primary product is a population of graduates who have the technical and life skills they need to cope in an increasingly competitive world. Good instructional leaders need to be aware of the variety of ways in which student progress can and should be assessed. Even more importantly, instructional leaders need to use assessment results in ways that help teachers and students improve and that help parents understand where and why improvement is needed. Instructional leaders regularly review performance data with teachers and use this information to gauge progress toward

educational goals. They provide teachers with timely access to student assessment information.

### **Promoting an Instructional Climate**

Those who survive for very long in leadership positions soon learn that their primary objective is to motivate people to do what needs to be done. When the atmosphere of the school district or school is one that makes learning exciting, when teachers and students are both supported for their achievements, and when there is a shared sense of purpose, it is difficult not to learn, particularly in the critical first years of school when lifelong attitudes toward education are forming. Effective instructional leaders create that atmosphere. Instructional leaders strong in this area nurture learning in a variety of ways. They encourage teachers to innovate. They regularly recognize staff members' efforts, write letters of commendation for a job well done, and ask parents to praise teachers for their good work.

Krug's (1992) five factor taxonomy of effective instructional leadership is similar to Hallinger and Murphy's (1987) research on defining the principal's key instructional leadership roles and responsibilities. They felt the principal's role included three categories and 21 more specific functions which defined instructional leadership behavior: managing the instructional program, promoting the school learning climate, and defining the school mission. In the first category, managing the instructional program, the principal is required to be involved in the school's instructional development. This includes supervising and evaluating instruction, co-coordinating the curriculum, and monitoring student progress. The second category, promoting a positive school learning

climate, involves creating a climate that supports teaching and student engagement. This includes promoting professional development, providing incentives for teachers, maintaining high visibility, protecting instructional time, and providing incentives for learning. In the last category, defining the school mission, the principal is responsible in collaboration with the staff to ensure that the school has clear measurable goals that are focused on student learning. The principal is responsible for the clear academic vision and to communicate it to the staff.

According to Krug (1992), instructional leadership can be described in terms of five broad dimensions: defining a mission; managing curriculum; supervising and supporting teaching; monitoring student progress; and promoting an instructional climate. A brief description has been provided to clarify the characteristics and attributes of each dimension. The next section discusses the changing role of the superintendent.

### **The Role of the Superintendent**

When referencing high performing or significantly improved school districts, both Shannon and Blysmas (2004) as well as Cawelti and Protheroe (2002) gave significant attention to superintendent and district leadership. Since the means to obtain high achievement and school district wide improvement are culture related and since superintendent leadership is so frequently referenced, one must explore the role of superintendent leadership in relation to student performance.

The last quarter of the 20th century saw many efforts made to rethink and improve education for students. There were countless attempts to improve public schools ranging from new standards for student achievement to more school choices being made

available to parents. But one important dimension was largely overlooked: school district leadership, governance, and teamwork (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000). Not until the educational reform efforts of the 1980s were implemented did researchers begin to examine what an effective superintendent looked like in regard to student achievement and school improvement. The importance of the superintendent's evolving instructional leadership practices was captured by Carr (2005):

Traditionally the job of the superintendent was to manage the district well: to make sure the budget balanced, the buildings and grounds were in good shape, and the buses ran on time.... Today, the role of superintendent is considerably more challenging and certainly changing. A CEO doesn't do the work of a salesman. Neither does a superintendent try to teach kids. But unless each of these institutions is focused at the top, those who are in the trenches cannot do their job—whether it's making a profit or educating the next generation. (p. 14)

Much of the prior research on superintendents was related to governance issues, finances, and management — roles that do not directly impact student achievement (Castagnola, 2005). Bredson (1995) attributed the lack of instructional leadership by the superintendents to “time constraints, role overload, the press of other priorities, and lack of personal interest in curriculum and instruction” (p. 17). As a result, superintendents had only superficial involvement (e.g. verbal support and delegation of responsibilities) with instructional matters. Farkas (2001) added that “to survive administrators must manage the politics, the daily pressures, and the mandates of their district” (p. 11). This

research indicated that if superintendents are to accomplish all their responsibilities strong instructional leadership from them will need to occur more regularly.

To help superintendents understand their new role as instructional leaders, the Lighthouse Project (Iowa Association of School Boards, 2007) studied high achieving districts. Findings from this project indicated these districts were characterized by:

- (a) leaders who pursued high and equitable achievement goals for all groups of students;
- (b) the courage to acknowledge poor performance and the will to seek solutions;
- (c) a superintendent and other leaders at the helm who developed and nurtured widely shared beliefs about learning, including high expectations, and who provided a strong focus on results;
- (d) schools that emphasized the achievement of every student in every classroom and took responsibility for that performance;
- (e) staff who not only wanted their students to graduate from high school but also to leave high school fully prepared to be successful in college; and
- (f) consistently high expectations for all students, regardless of students' prior academic performance. (p. 12)

The responsibilities for superintendents embedded in these findings are a vast array of change for today's superintendents and significantly impact their instructional leadership practices.

Recent studies regarding superintendents have attached their role to instructional leadership through curriculum and instruction. Bjork (1993) claimed that beginning in the early 1980s, the need to re-evaluate the superintendent's role in instruction had become increasingly obvious. Elmore (2000) added to the discussion by stating

“administration in education . . . has come to mean not the management of instruction but the management of the structures and processes around instruction” (p. 6).

The role of the superintendent has historically vacillated from a focus on instruction to management and back to instruction practices (Kultgen, 2010). Unfortunately, superintendents are forced to be less attentive to instruction so attention can be directed to managing a political climate that includes working with multiple stakeholders, Trustees, and the Ministry of Education. This can be difficult to accomplish when one considers that respect for district leaders has been eroded as the job has assumed added challenges such as increased accountability requirements. Effective superintendents are said to be vital to the success of any improvement effort (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006). The superintendent’s role has grown over the years to include an undeniable expectation by stakeholders that they be at the forefront of efforts related to student achievement.

To make gains in curriculum and instruction a school district will not see success without the active involvement of the superintendent (Castagnola, 2005; Sergiovanni, 1990). School districts with superior student performance have superintendents who are closely involved with curriculum and instruction initiatives. Byrd, Drews, and Johnson (2006) further explained that superintendents that experience success are dynamically immersed with determining instructional priorities and areas that require particular attention. For example, if analysis of school district data indicate that there are specific gaps in student achievement in a subject or grade area, superintendents in high achieving school districts purposely direct personnel, resources, and professional development to

focus on these gaps. These superintendents also emphasize that strategic staff recruitment and selections are made to assist in alleviating these gaps by ensuring that skilled and experienced teachers are hired and purposefully placed. Lastly, superintendents in high performing school districts clearly define the mission and goals related to instructional matters and then make certain that the fiscal planning processes and resources needed to support the mission and goals are implemented.

Some research has been devoted to establish what superintendent instructional practices best influence student performance (Jones, 2008; Miller, 2003). For example, collaboratively developing school district goals, creating and communicating an instructional oriented vision, and stressing the importance of professional development have been identified as skills exhibited by superintendents in school districts with high student achievement. Likewise, studies have been conducted to determine what principal leadership characteristics positively impact the performance of students (Waters & Marzano, 2007; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Setting high expectations for students and staff, creating a culture of continuous learning, and strategically monitoring student progress have been found to be skills effectively demonstrated by principals who have been able to positively influence student achievement. Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) have also claimed there is a significant relationship between leadership and student performance. Ensuring collaborative goal setting, monitoring student performance, and allocating resources to support the goals of student achievement are some of the leadership practices their research has linked instructional leadership to student achievement. In the 1980s, critical questions were asked about the



superintendent's role as it related to instructional reform, especially regarding student achievement (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). The fact is the research pertaining to the superintendent's role in as an instructional leader, and its impact on student achievement, is not as fully developed as it is for principals in this area (Boone, 2005; Hanks, 2010). Castagnola (2005) concurred, when he stated that the superintendent's role as an instructional leader, when compared to the understanding of the principal's role, is clearly not as present in this discussion:

. . . research continues to lack a clear definition and agreed upon measures of what constitutes effective school system leadership and offers little information on how superintendents should play their role in improving student achievement.

Information is needed regarding the practices of superintendents in high performing districts. (p. 6)

According to Wooderson-Perzan and Lunenberg (2001) it is challenging to credit an increase in student performance to any one variable as many factors influence student performance, including elements schools cannot control. Superintendents who successfully emphasize specific leadership responsibilities can provide needed pressure and support to keep all schools in their school district on target with academic goals (Hall & Hord, 1987).

Cudeiro (2005) studied several successful superintendents and found they used various strategies to develop principals, communicate their beliefs about what is educationally important to principals, and the roles they expect principals to fulfill. For example, the superintendents placed a focus on student learning by establishing a school

district wide vision centered on meeting student learning needs. They clearly defined what it means for principals to be instructional leaders. Superintendents held principals accountable for being instructional leaders. Next, they aligned principal supervision and evaluation with the instructional leadership focus. Principals acknowledged a need for a school district wide focus in the areas of literacy and mathematics. Principals were supported by reorganizing central services. Lastly, they hired assistant superintendents or deputy superintendents who had been effective principals themselves and saw their role as both supportive and supervisory. It is apparent from this study that superintendents working in conjunction with principals, having a clearly defined vision, and possessing high expectations relative to instructional leadership are vital to improving student achievement.

With the increased focus on accountability that school districts and schools are facing, the superintendent's concern is increasingly shifting towards instruction. Research has indicated that school district leaders are in the best position to guide instructional improvement (Hord, 1990). More recent research supports a greater degree of responsibility for student achievement occurring at the school district level (Fullan, 2005; Beldon, Russonello, & Stewart, 2005). Classrooms are the way they are in large part because of what happens at the school district level. According to DuFour (2004), the instructional leadership duties for superintendents have increasingly become more apparent: "If schools are expected to rise to a new standard of providing high levels of learning for all students, then all persons, including the superintendent, must become active team members in achieving this goal" (p. 15).

Though Waters and Marzano (2006) have identified activities in which the superintendent engaged in to produce positive student achievement, Byrd, Drews, and Johnson (2006) claimed there is no correlation between superintendent leadership style and student achievement. Byrd et al. also added that superintendents must increase lines of communication among stakeholders and allow for autonomy at the school level in order to have a positive impact on student academic achievement. Both Byrd et al. and Waters and Marzano pointed to autonomy at the school level as being important. Waters and Marzano explained that autonomy is exhibited when the superintendent provides clear, non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction, but gives those responsible for school leadership the authority for deciding how to meet those goals.

Effective superintendents provide and communicate focus, parameters, priorities, and expectations. Superintendents in successful school districts work closely with their boards to set clear goals centered on high expectations for students and student performance (Hill, Wise, & Shapiro, 1989). Superintendents in school districts demonstrating improvement are said to be “dynamic, united in purpose, involved, visible in schools, and interested in instruction. Superintendents provide encouragement, recognition, and support for improving student learning” (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004, p. 2). Morgan and Peterson (2002) also explored superintendents in successful school districts and found many practices in common regarding the management of instruction:

- (a) establishing student goals; (b) staffing of principals; (c) supervising and evaluating staff; (d) establishing a district focus on curriculum and instruction; (e)

reinforcing technical core operations; and (f) monitoring curriculum and instruction. (p. 180)

Their conclusions revealed that superintendents that are more involved with curriculum and instruction are more likely to lead highly effective school districts (Morgan & Peterson, 2002). However, Morgan and Peterson do discuss that identifying and understanding the multifaceted practices of the superintendent is difficult to determine.

Watts (1992) also described twelve superintendent instructional leadership tasks that were associated with high student achievement that aligned with those articulated by Morgan and Peterson (2002):

(a) collaboratively developing goals; (b) evaluating instructional effectiveness; (c) facilitating instruction through budget; (d) provide direction for instruction; (e) supervising instruction; (f) monitoring instructional programs; (g) developing principals as instructional leaders; (h) developing instructional policies; (i) reviewing research; (j) selecting personnel; (k) facilitating staff development; and (l) communicating system expectations. (p. 29)

Closely associated with the findings of Morgan and Peterson (2002) and Watts (1992), Peterson (1999) also identified five themes consistent among superintendents focused on instruction. They include the superintendent's capacity to:

(a) create and communicate an instruction oriented vision; (b) be highly visible; (c) illustrate the importance of instruction through professional development; (d) receive school board support; and (e) use assessment and evaluation to determine if instructional expectations and goals are met. (p. 1)

To further add to the research of the role of the superintendent and how their practices can impact student achievement, Peterson, Murphy, and Hallinger (1987) examined twelve school districts focused on academics and found that the superintendent's role was key in establishing district effectiveness. Within these school districts, superintendents:

- (a) set goals, (b) provided expectations and standards, (c) participated in staff selection, (d) provided direction in staff evaluation, (e) established and ensured consistency toward instructional and curriculum focus. (p. 88)

Additionally, in a case study, Kultgen (2010) identified a five step process where the superintendent impacted student success. Those steps were:

- (a) develop a shared vision; (b) implement district goals; (c) consistently communicate expectations; (d) allow principals to implement goals; and (e) hold principals accountable through monitoring. (p. 139)

It is apparent from the research that superintendents must clearly communicate a vision for change, articulate it effectively to all concerned, provide leadership for instruction, evaluate progress, and create a process for professional development, all while keeping standards and expectations high if student achievement is to improve. MacIver and Farley (2003) identified common trends from multiple studies, including the need for a focused message from the central office about the critical nature of student performance and its relationship to good instruction as being important.

Identifying "instructionally-focused" superintendents is not an easy task since as Peterson (1999) noted:

. . . surrounded by politics, a superintendent would never admit that he/she is not focused on issues of curriculum, instruction and student achievement. The managerial reality of the position often forces the district superintendent to concentrate on issues other than instruction. (p. 4)

Morgan and Peterson (2002) also articulated the view that understanding the multifaceted practices of the superintendent as an instructional leader has proven to be hard to identify in spite of research to the contrary. Instructional leadership remains one of the least understood characteristics associated with the role of the superintendent. In a review of the literature, Bjork (2001) concluded that:

Heightened interest in large-scale, systemic reform during the late 1980s raised serious questions about superintendents' contributions to reform and particularly to improving student academic performance. As a consequence, a resurgence of scholarly inquiry helped describe the changing landscape of superintendents' work, increase interest in their instructional leadership role, and lay the groundwork for redefining their role in school reform. (p. 2)

Bjork (2001) has suggested that there has been more written about the superintendents' role in recent years, however, the literature has typically emphasized such topics as the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges of finance, diversity, and governance, and the shortage of qualified superintendents. On the other hand, the research does describe in some detail how the role of the superintendent has evolved from simple clerical duties in the late 1830s into that of a teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, communicator, and chief executive (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005;

Kowalski, 2005). While neatly separating the changing role of superintendents into distinct phases or categories is virtually impossible, Kowalski (2005) noted that conceptualizing the evolutionary role of superintendents was essential for "understanding the complexity of the position and the knowledge and skills required for effective practice" (p. 3). Therefore, while less attention has been given to the practices of superintendents associated with effective instructional leadership in school districts, the available research does indicate that the role of the superintendent, both historically and currently, is complex and not easily studied.

In the era of reform and accountability, it is now perceived that not only should the principal act as an instructional leader, but the superintendent must act as one as well. Additionally, Bjork and Kowalski (2005) argue that the school district superintendent has a legal as well as moral obligation to ensure that schools achieve a high standard of excellence. It has also been noted that the position of the superintendent within the hierarchy suggests they have the ability to influence the focus and direction of the district organization. Doyle (1998) spoke to this notion by stating that:

The true superintendent will be the CAO: Chief Academic Officer . . . That is what school should be about, that is what school leadership should be about . . . Academics first, academics last. Everything else should contribute to the schools' academic mission. (p. 16)

Superintendents are now being held accountable to provide effective, authentic and rigorous learning for all students (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). However, there are many other demands facing superintendents which make their role much more complex

than in the past. Nonetheless, it is becoming increasingly apparent from the available research that effective instructional leadership from superintendents is vital to the success of any improvement effort directed towards positively impacting student achievement especially in this era of educational accountability.

In the current age of increased accountability, few would argue that the ability of superintendents to effectively identify obstacles to learning and consequently implement systematic solutions to produce positive changes has become an increasingly difficult task (Carlson, 2004). Kowalski (1999) argued that the “superintendent must be the primary catalyst for change” (p. 50). Yet, these changes can only occur with the support of school administration, teachers, support staff, students, and the community.

According to Firestone and Shipps (2005), leadership roles of superintendents in successful districts included a “distinct element of top-down leadership” with systemic support and encouragement of local initiatives that supported district goals (p. 93). Superintendents of effective districts provided system coherence and support from the top to sustain change efforts in curriculum alignment, instruction, and assessment practices (Chrispeels, 2002).

Davies and Davies (2005) noted that superintendents of high-performing school districts provided strategic leadership while Halverson (2005) argued that they can create the conditions for strong professional communities. Not surprisingly, researchers have found that successful leaders need a repertoire of skills and practices to draw on to influence performance outcomes (Leithwood, 2005).



Through their research Leithwood and Riehl (2005) identified core superintendent leadership practices as setting directions through the development and articulation of organizational vision, conveying high expectations for performance, fostering an acceptance of group goals, monitoring performance, and effective communication. In addition, other core leadership practices included developing people and organizations through strengthening school cultures, modifying organizational structures, building collaborative processes, and managing the environment. Leithwood and Riehl (2005) also indicated that if these core leadership practices were exhibited at the district level they would have a positive impact on student achievement.

Although the literature does detail the evolving instructional leadership practices of superintendents, the majority of empirical evidence about leadership effects on student achievement in the current context of accountability has come from research on teachers, principals, and not superintendents (Firestone & Riehl, 2005; Leithwood, 2005; Smylie, Bennett, Konkol, & Fendt, 2005). Until recently, superintendent leadership effects on student achievement have “been considered too indirect and complex to sort out” (Leithwood, 2005, p. 2). Lastly, as Johnson (1996) noted, superintendents must fashion instructional leadership out of three sometimes conflicting roles: instructional, managerial and political. As instructional leaders, superintendents bear ultimate responsibility for improving student achievement. As managerial leaders, they have to keep their districts effective and operating efficiently, yet taking risks to make necessary changes. As political leaders, they have to negotiate multiple stakeholders to get approval for programs and resources. The logistics and demands of the managerial and political roles

are time consuming and impact the amount of time and energy that a superintendent can direct towards their role as an instructional leader.

While the research pertaining to superintendent instructional leadership is less well developed than that for principal instructional leadership, the research that describes the barriers to either superintendent or principal instructional leadership practices is far more sparse. In a study completed by Harchar (1993) that examined administrative instructional leadership, it was found that the barriers to successful instructional leadership focused on four main categories: mind set or negative attitude of teachers; department of education mandates; time constraints; and parental opposition. According to Waddell (1992), one seemingly universally reported item that impacted administrators' abilities to be effective instructional leaders was the lack of time available to accomplish their duties and responsibilities. Once superintendents and principals had completed addressing student, parent, staff, and administrative concerns very little was left to devote to instructional leadership practices. Lastly, according to Hartzell (1995), a significant barrier to administrative instructional leadership practices is the lack of training available before administrators take on the role of evaluating teaching staff. Administrators are largely untrained and inexperienced when the task of teacher evaluation is completed and as a result overemphasize personality features that they are familiar with. This approach may occur because poor or inadequate teaching practices are not easily visible to the uninformed evaluator. Current research about the barriers that impact administrative instructional leadership is scant. Further research in this area, especially in this era of educational accountability, would be timely and beneficial.

As the instructional leadership practices of superintendents have come to be more clearly defined, it is apparent that superintendents are becoming more responsible and answerable for student achievement. This has led to a shift in instructional leadership practices away from managerial duties to more of a focus on instructional responsibilities. It is evident from the literature that the role of the superintendent is multifaceted and diverse and researchers have struggled to highlight the exact nature of these duties and responsibilities. Because of the educational accountability era that schools districts and schools currently find themselves in superintendents are directing more of their energies towards being an effective instructional leader as a means to positively impact student achievement. The following section examines leadership in the era of accountability.

### **Leadership in the Era of Accountability**

The current climate in education has renewed an interest in public school accountability. The landmark American report *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) ushered in the focus on the performance of public schools and increased accountability across North America. The passage of an expanded list of state and provincial legislation led to an ever-growing list of issues superintendents and principals must address including: improvement of student performance on standardized tests; increased graduation requirements; and meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student population (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005).

Superintendents and principals are under increased pressure to improve district and school level performance outcomes. Legislated accountability systems and evaluation

methods (i.e. school district report cards) that label districts as successes or failures based on defined performance indicators and results contribute to the challenges school system administrators face (Bracey, 2003).

In the past, educational leaders “were expected to simply set the stage for student learning” through effective management of fiscal, organizational, and political conditions in their school districts (Firestone & Riehl, 2005, p. 2). Accountability standards imposed by the province or state contribute to the pressure felt by superintendents and principals to boost student achievement. The availability of new data processing technologies and assessment instruments increased the capacity for measuring student, school, and district performance outcomes. With the greater capacity for measuring performance outcomes, superintendents and principals are increasingly being held accountable for student results using district and school achievement outcomes as indicators of their effectiveness (Firestone & Riehl, 2005). Subsequently, superintendents and principals have had to demonstrate a wider array of knowledge, more advanced technological skills, and a longer list of personal leadership qualities such as collaborating with diverse stakeholders to improve student achievements and being able to effectively understand and use student results to positively impact classroom instruction (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). For example, according to Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, and Glass (2005) a review of the empirical research suggests that school district leaders work effectively in school settings with highly diverse student populations when they focus their efforts on:

. . . building powerful forms of teaching and learning that are appropriate and effective for the students being served; creating strong communities in schools

characterized by a personalized environments in which students can succeed; expanding students' social capital by recognizing students' attitudes toward schooling as assets rather than deficits; and nurturing the development of families' educational cultures to enhance student learning and success in school. (p. 14)

In the province of Alberta, educators are held responsible for more than test scores. The accountability model used by the Department of Education in Alberta is a student-centered model that focuses on the following elements: safe and caring schools; student learning opportunities; student learning achievement; preparation for lifelong learning, world of work, citizenship; parental involvement; and continuous improvement (Alberta Learning, 2003). In Alberta “open, complete and understandable information must be available about all aspects of the education system including policies, funding, results achieved and all the various factors that affect student achievement” (Alberta Learning, 2003, p. 38). This philosophical perspective has manifested itself into an accountability instrument called the Accountability Pillar in Alberta. The purpose of the Accountability Pillar is to “provide a new way for school authorities to measure their success, and assess their progress towards meeting their learning goals” (Alberta Education, 2010). One of the driving factors for implementing the Accountability Pillar was to ensure that continuous improvement is supported and maintained. In Alberta the Accountability Pillar ensures that all school jurisdictions measure the same factors in the same way at the same time, thus creating consistent data that are publicly evaluated and reported.

Accountability systems have been criticized for several reasons. In the United States, accountability systems that reward or sanction on the basis of average student scores create incentives for schools to boost scores by manipulating the population of students taking these tests. For example, schools have been found to label large numbers of low-scoring students for special education placements so that their scores are not factored into school accountability ratings (Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). Evidence of strategically placing students in special education programs in the grade level just before the one for which school-level scores produce school accountability rankings have also been found (Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). For example, at the high school level these actions may include not only student placements in program categories such as special education by the denial of admissions and the encouragement to leave school. Accountability systems such as these create incentives for school districts to place low performing students in programs that may not be in their best interests, and encourage school district officials to locate new accountability loopholes to manipulate student placements and thus influence the data reported regarding student achievements.

Accountability can come in many forms and information about achievement can come from a variety of sources. The current contextual climate in Alberta necessitates that the public has the right to know and to be satisfied that their educational system is operating effectively and efficiently and that students are learning what they are expected to learn. Because public education is a hallmark of our society, the public's attention to accountability is becoming more evident. Therefore, defining the responsibilities of all educational stakeholders and holding them accountable has now become a significant

priority for all involved in public education. It is in this environment of increased educational accountability that superintendents and principals must demonstrate effective instructional leadership.

While there are several concerns related to implementing an accountability system in education, there are also several advantages. For example, according to Miller and Smith (2011), an accountability system that is capable of identifying aspects of student performance that are within a school's control could provide more accurate information about school quality by providing educational stakeholders with more accurate information about school quality after controlling for the effects of student background on student outcomes. Of course separating the factors that are within a school's control from those that are not, in relation to student achievement, is more easily said than done. Miller and Smith (2011) further articulate that another benefit of accountability systems is that in the absence of reliable information about actual school quality, educational stakeholders must rely on imperfect substitutes to estimate school quality, such as socio-economic composition of students and pupil – teacher ratios. Lastly, Miller and Smith (2011) state that another benefit of accountability systems is access to expertise. Provinces and states may be able to attract and retain higher-quality experts to develop, implement, and manage an accountability system compared to what individual school systems could attract for the same task. This advantage assumes that such expertise exists and that experts would be hired based on competency rather than political affiliation. Developing a methodology for measuring student and school jurisdiction performance is a challenging endeavor that would likely benefit from a more global

perspective. While there are several reasons why policymakers should exercise considerable caution when developing and implementing accountability systems, there are several reasons why these systems are beneficial. These benefits increase the stakeholder awareness of public education and allow for better understanding of the strengths and gaps evident in education.

Largely because of political and societal demand, the interest in public school accountability has significantly risen over the past thirty years (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005). This increase in accountability pressure has caused superintendents and principals to focus more on student achievement and improve district and school level performance outcomes. The last section of this literature review will examine three leadership practices.

### **Leadership Practices**

It has been stated that effective district and school leadership is pivotal for improvement and growth (Hess & Kelly, 2007). Today, in order to be successful, superintendents and school principals must be able to master unprecedented challenges, tasks, and opportunities. Superintendents and principals are the front-line managers, the small business executives, and the team leaders charged with leading their staff to new levels of effectiveness. In this new era of educational accountability, where district and school leaders are expected to demonstrate bottom-line results and use data to inform decisions, the skill and knowledge of superintendents and principals matter more than ever. One consequence of increased accountability in education has been the increase in school choice and opportunities being provided to superintendents and principals to



exercise flexibility in creating school environments that better meet the needs of students (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008). In this environment, school district and school improvement rests to an unprecedented degree on the quality of leadership and the ability of superintendent and principal preparation programs to produce skilled and prepared individuals able to successfully confront these challenges. Therefore having a firm understanding of the various types of leadership styles that are available to aspiring school district and school-based leaders would likely be well received and useful information (Northouse, 2004).

Although leadership has fascinated us for some time, the diversity of leadership definitions and descriptions can be confusing. Northouse's (2004) review of available scholarly studies on leadership claims there are many ways to define what leadership is. The word has different meanings for different people. Not surprisingly, Northouse indicates there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it.

Northouse (2004) indicated that there are common attributes that are pivotal to the concept of leadership. He identified these as: process; influence; group context; and goal attainment. Northouse (2004) defines leadership as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 3). Influence is concerned with how a leader affects followers because without influence leadership does not exist.

From a school district and school perspective, Davies (2005) supports Northouse's (2004) definition of leadership. He agrees that leadership is about setting

direction and inspiring others to work towards improved student achievement or engagement. Davies articulates that it is not one person alone but rather a group of people who provide leadership in the school district or school and through a collaborative leadership approach inspire others to work towards engaging students with the best opportunities to learn and as a result increase the likelihood of student success. Davies also reiterated the notion that leadership must take place within the context of the organization and the wider society. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) agree with Davies' position of leadership within a context by stating:

Most contemporary theories of leadership suggest that leadership cannot be separated from the context in which leadership is exerted. Leadership is contingent on the setting, the nature of the social organization, the goals being pursued, the individual involved, resources and time frames and many other factors. (p. 9)

Leadership models can assume many different forms. Hallinger (2003) claimed that in the past twenty-five years many new conceptual practices of educational leadership have been proposed and researched. Some of these practices are moral leadership, transformational leadership, and instructional leadership.

### **Moral Leadership**

Greenfield (1999) has outlined that in the past twenty years one of the limitations to the study of moral leadership is that few scholars agree on a clear and consistent definition when referring to moral leadership. Moral leadership is often connected with the qualities of heroic and charismatic leaders. A more practical description of moral

leadership as described by MacBeath (2003) is “leadership that rests on a commitment to values within an organization, such as trust, reciprocity, or honesty” (p. 2). This definition involves staying the course with what is believed to be right regardless of the personal or political agendas that may be present or creating influence.

School leaders are expected to embrace and acknowledge cultural diversity while at the same time maintaining their primary responsibility of ensuring student achievement (Dantley, 2005). According to Starratt (2004) in order to meet these expectations, the work of educational leaders must be intellectual as well as moral: “An activity characterized by a blend of human, professional, and civic concerns; a work of cultivating an environment for learning that is humanly fulfilling and socially responsible” (p. 3). As mentioned above, leadership is a complex concept and leadership definitions and descriptions can be confusing. Moral leadership is a different type of leadership. Rather than aspiring to being followed or showcase their own skills, moral leaders tend to develop the capacities of followers. These individuals are characterized as being driven by core values (e.g. social justice) and are motivated by the pursuit of a social responsibility. The moral context of district and school leadership moves educational leaders beyond doing things right. Rather, they are morally obliged to do the right thing. Such is the primary focus of moral leadership.

Education has been described as being intrinsically concerned with the moral education of students regardless of their age. Greenfield (1999) agreed that superintendents and principals must use more than technical, managerial or bureaucratic forms of administration and leadership:

Moral leadership in schools seeks to bring members of that community together around common purposes in a manner that entails being deliberately moral in one's conduct, toward and with others and oneself, and in the service of purposes and activities that seek to meet the best needs of all children and adults. (p. 9)

Sergiovanni (1999) described the responsibilities of school leaders as being both technical and moral in nature. Technical work is the management characteristics of leadership. As managers educational leaders coordinate and schedule all aspects of the school day to ensure that it is operating efficiently. The technical side of administration is important and must be dealt with effectively because failure to do so will result in confusion and frustration. However, as also described by Sergiovanni, the moral domain of leadership is demonstrating the important goals and behaviors, and showing others what is important and valued in the school. The moral impression of leadership develops attitudes and behaviors in students and staff that support the societal practices of justice and fairness in the school and the larger community.

Sergiovanni (1999) indicated that leaders must use moral aspects of leadership when they are performing their technical part of administration. The two aspects of leadership are too interrelated to be separated and each is dependent on the other. Leadership unites management know-how with values, morals, and ethics. Sergiovanni also explained that educational leaders use "normative and technical rationality" when making decisions (p. 43). Normative rationality requires behavior that is based on what we believe to be good, while technical rationality relates to behavior based on what is

effective and efficient. When a superintendent or principal is deciding on scheduling, staffing, etc., the decision must also be made from a moral perspective.

Also as it related to leadership, Sergiovanni (1992) believed that under certain conditions some behaviors are wiser to use than others. He refers to this as the “hand of leadership” (p. 5) and described it as being incomplete. To understand a leader’s behavior Sergiovanni stated that it is necessary to consider the heart and the head of leadership as well as the hand. The “heart of leadership” (p. 5) refers to what a person values and is committed to. The “head of leadership” (p. 6) has to do with the theories of practice the leader has acquired over time and how the leader uses these experiences to influence particular challenges and situations. The interaction of the heart, head, and hand are necessary to fully understand leadership:

If the heart and the head are separated from the hand, then the leader’s actions, decisions, and behaviors cannot be understood. The head of leadership is shaped by the heart and drives the hand: in turn, reflections on decisions and actions affirm or reshape the heart and the head. (p.7)

One of the most challenging aspects of possessing and exhibiting moral leadership is to bring together diverse people and have them effectively focus on a common cause. Moral leaders need to strive to establish the shared goals, objectives, and expectations that are needed for a strong school community to flourish. They must help to determine the dreams, values, and beliefs of everyone who has a stake in the school. All stakeholders in a school must agree on this purpose and hold true to it: “This binding and solemn agreement represents the school’s covenant” (Sergiovanni, 1991, p. 135).

Moral leadership according to Dantley (2005) must ensure that professional policies and practices are democratic and include all who may be marginalized by gender, class or race. Educational leaders as moral leaders must stay focused on achieving the primary goal of academic achievement while at the same time operationalizing equity for all involved. The school district or school leader cannot accomplish this objective in isolation or by working alone. The school district or school must operate on the same set of ethical principles and values as the community and therefore the broader community must be involved. Moral leadership in school districts and schools, according to Greenfield (1999):

. . . seeks to bring members of that community together around common purposes in a manner that entails being deliberately moral in one's conduct – toward and with others and oneself, and in the service of purposes and activities that seek to meet the best needs of all children and adults.  
(p. 9)

Superintendents, principals, teachers, and students are people in an organization who regularly interact with each other in close quarters on multiple levels. Greenfield (1999) stated that we have limited knowledge of how people come to understand one another and accomplish meaningful tasks. Little is known about how superintendents, principals, teachers, and students make sense of their world. Greenfield (1999) believed that the comprehension of their world, the sense they make of their experience, is important to understanding how people respond to the events in the school environment.

From Greenfield's standpoint: "The perspective of the other is at the center of moral leadership" (p. 23).

Starratt (2004) identified three virtues that are needed by leaders to lead with moral leadership. Those virtues are authenticity, responsibility, and presence. The virtues of authenticity, responsibility, and presence interact and need one another to achieve the maximum benefit for moral leadership. These three foundational virtues interact and complement each other and are basic to the reflection and action of moral educational leaders.

The superintendent or principal as a moral role model must work to create and sustain climate, culture, and community--a "life-world" that exemplifies the very values that he or she espouses. Political, social, and economic pressures are placed more than ever on school leaders to deal with the everyday realities of schools (i.e., accountability, fiscal constraints, drugs, vandalism, violence, dealing with irate parents, bullying, sexual harassment, racial discrimination, verbal assaults, and sabotage). These pressures create real problems for schools and school leaders. In complex societies, producing and sustaining a vital public school system is a tall order. It cannot be done without a dedicated, highly competent teaching force--teachers in numbers, working together for the continuous betterment of the schools. One cannot get teachers working like this without leaders at all levels guiding and supporting the process (Fullan 2003).

Through the three principles of moral leadership--integrity/authenticity, balance, and systemic thinking--the educational leader can successfully create that life-world. As he or she acts, so he or she instructs, guides, and leads. True leaders understand that their

"actions speak louder than words," and that they must "practice what they preach" for inevitably they "shall reap what they sow."

School climate, culture, and community are direct reflections of leadership (Fullan, 2003). The relationships created, the structures supported, and the decisions made impact the entire school. The leader must consciously and intentionally take actions that are in the best interests of the students (authenticity/integrity), while modeling the importance of caring and just relationships (balance), and understanding that decisions have consequences across the entire system (systems thinking). This gives the leader the opportunity to cooperate with all stakeholders in the community, assuring them that the school reflects the communities' intended goal: to assist young people in fully realizing their potential with the understanding that they are connected to others through a web of interrelationships.

In conclusion, Greenfield (1999) stated that moral leadership has received limited attention in educational administration and many are cynical about its value as a guide to practice, research, and theory development. Greenfield reiterated that there is much that is not understood and there is a need to more thoroughly study moral leadership empirically to add to the field's knowledge base. However, the characteristics and attributes of moral leadership, from the perspective of Catholic school districts, are exceedingly pertinent and meaningful. Leadership personified through the commitment to specific values guide all decisions and actions. The overt amalgamation of human, professional, and social justice concerns distinguishes these school districts in such a fashion that the aspects of moral leadership are not simply isolated conceptions. Rather,



the characteristics of moral leadership are deeply embedded and positively influence and impact the creation of an effective school community.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leadership was first generally discussed as a theory during the 1970s and 1980s. Transformational leadership theory claims that a relatively small number of leadership behaviors or practices are capable of increasing the commitment and effort of organizational members toward the achievement of organizational goals (Leithwood, 2012). The values and aspirations of both leader and follower are enhanced by these practices. Transformational leadership theory argues that, given adequate support, organizational members become highly engaged and motivated by goals that are inspirational because those goals are associated with values in which they strongly believe—or are persuaded to strongly believe. Transformational leadership theory does not, however, predict the behaviors of organizational members resulting from the influence of transformational leadership practices. Northouse (2004) also indicated that this form of leadership emphasizes emotions, values, and high levels of personal commitment to goals. This type of leadership practice involves a scope of influence that moves followers to accomplish more than what is generally expected of them.

Bass (1985) argued that transformational leadership motivates followers to do more than the expected by doing the following:

1. Raising followers' levels of awareness and consciousness about the importance and value of specified and idealized goals, and ways of reaching them;

2. Getting followers to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the team or organization; and
3. Moving followers to address higher-level needs. (p. 20)

Hoy and Miskel (2001) stated that transformational leadership focuses on certain beliefs and that transformational leaders are expected to:

1. Define the need for change;
2. Create new visions and muster commitment to the visions;
3. Concentrate on long-term goals;
4. Inspire followers to transcend their own interests for higher-order goals;
5. Change the organization to accommodate their vision rather than work within the existing one; and
6. Mentor followers to take greater responsibility for their own development and that of others. Followers become leaders, leaders become change agents, and ultimately they transform the organization. (p. 414)

As indicated by this research, transformational leadership creates significant change in the life of people and organizations. It redesigns perceptions and values, and changes expectations and aspirations of staff. Unlike other leadership approaches, it is not based on a "give and take" relationship, but on the leader's personality, traits, and ability to make a change through example, description of an energizing vision, and challenging

goals. Transforming leaders are idealized in the sense that they are a role model of working towards the benefit of the team, organization and/or community.

In their relationship with followers transformational leaders utilize one or more leadership factors that are characteristic of this type of leader: idealized influence or charisma, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation (Hoy & Miskel, 2001). Idealized influence describes leaders that are strong role models who exhibit high standards of moral and ethical conduct and are respected and trusted by their staff. These leaders use this influence to move people towards a created vision. Intellectual stimulation includes leadership that prompts followers to develop innovative and new methods of dealing with organizational concerns or problems. Individualized consideration means the leader concentrates on each individual's need for achievement and growth. The leader takes on the role of an adviser while assisting the follower to take responsibility to develop to their full potential. The last factor, inspirational motivation happens when the leader communicates high expectations to followers and encourages them through motivation.

Leithwood's (1999) model of transformational leadership consists of three categories of leadership practice: developing people, setting directions, and redesigning the organization. These practices are impacted by the specific school system context and judicial application regarding when specific practices are appropriate (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). There are eight dimensions that are covered by the three leadership practices:

building school vision, creating a productive school culture, offering individualized support, establishing school goals, providing intellectual stimulation, demonstrating high performance expectations, modeling best practices and organizational values, and developing structures to foster participation in school decisions. (p. 12)

The first category of practice in Leithwood's (1999) leadership model is developing people. Leithwood (1994) highlighted 'people effects' as a cornerstone of the transformational leadership model. Building capacity among staff members is directly related to the experiences the followers have with those in leadership roles. Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) claimed that the personal attention shown to staff as well as utilizing their abilities created an environment of enthusiasm and optimism. Offering intellectual stimulation, providing support for individuals, and modeling acceptable behavior are leadership practices that will assist the leader in developing people. Hallinger (2003) claimed that superintendents and principals who develop people provide recognition, are more approachable, seek new ideas, follow through on commitments, and know the problems of the school system and school. Setting direction is a significant aspect in developing shared understanding about the purpose, vision, and goals of the school system and school. People are motivated and challenged by having ownership in goals that are challenging but attainable. In redesigning the organization, transformational leaders realize the importance of the organization working and learning together and how this will contribute to improvements in teaching and student learning. It is essential for

the leader to create a culture of collaboration that ensures broad participation in decision-making (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

In the school system environment, MacBeath (2003) described the transformational leadership style as providing the vision and inspiration that is necessary to motivate all members of the school community. It transforms the organization by creating new cultures where collaboration is valued, high expectations are held, systematic enquiry is assumed to be the proper basis of professional judgment. This type of school system environment is also characterized as possessing high level discussions related to professional practice.

Education has been in a state of reform for decades and calls for reforming education and closing the achievement gap continue (Levine & Marcus, 2007). No position within a school district has more control over reform than that of the superintendent of schools. The superintendent, as CEO and the district's instructional leader, is accountable for providing the leadership that motivates principals and teachers to increase academic achievement by engaging all student groups in the work of learning (Schlechty, 2001). According to Waters and Marzano (2006), superintendent leadership does make a difference and effective superintendent leadership has been found to be associated with higher levels of student achievement.

Educational reform is needed and transformational leadership, exercised by educational leaders responsible and accountable for closing the achievement gap has the potential and promise for large scale educational reform (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Schlechty (2001) extended these thoughts by stating that transformational leadership is

the kind of leadership required to lead fundamental reform movements. He cited the absence of transformational leadership in our school systems, more than any other factor, as the reason behind the slow pace of school reform.

The theory behind transformational leadership is that an organization's effectiveness increases with the presence of leadership that is concerned with emotions, mission, vision, goals, ethics, values, meeting follower needs, and developing leadership capacity (Northouse, 2007). According to Bass and Riggio (2006), transformational leadership theory explains how leaders transform their organizations, their followers, and even themselves through leadership that influences, motivates, stimulates, and considers the needs of individual followers. Bass and Riggio also asserted that the application of transformational leadership theory can move followers to accomplish more than they believed possible and perform beyond expectations resulting in increased organizational effectiveness. It takes the forward movement of school leaders, teachers, students, and the community to follow a true transformational leader.

In non-educational organizations the evidence about transformational leadership is widespread and quite positively received (Wilmore & Thomas, 2001). While there is much discussion, both critical and supportive of transformational leadership in the educational literature, the empirical evidence about its effects in school system and school contexts is not as widespread. Even though the studies in this area are limited, the research evidence about the effects of transformational leadership in the school system and school context supports its suitability in schools (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

Although there are distinctive benefits to transformational leadership, research has also indicated that it is not an effective leadership practice. Evers & Lakomski (1996) argue that transformational leadership, as it is conceptualized in the literature, is not helpful in meeting the challenges of the current educational system. They suggest that Leithwood's components of effective leadership fall short of their promise. The literature in educational administration has been dominated by studies that critically examine the central role that the principal assumes in a school. Heck and Hallinger (1999) state:

By way of illustration, the preoccupation with documenting if principals make a difference has subtly reinforced the assumption that school leadership is synonymous with the principal. Scholars have, therefore, largely ignored other sources of leadership within the school such as assistant principals and senior teachers. (p. 141)

Starratt (2004) also indicated that there is a lack of research that examines the contributions of non-principal leaders in the school. For example, in many schools people such as department heads and counsellors provide invaluable leadership within the school and in the community. For the most part, research has focused on the principal as the source of power and leadership. Lastly, Gronn (1995) asserts that transformational leadership is "paternalistic, gender exclusive, exaggerated, having aristocratic pretensions and social-class bias, as well as having an eccentric conception of human agency and causality" (p. 20). Gronn also outlines numerous shortcomings of transformational leadership. For example, a lack of empirically documented case examples of transformational leaders exists; a narrow methodological base has been used (e.g.

questionnaires); no causal connection between leadership and desired organizational outcomes have been identified; and the unresolved question as to whether leadership is learnable has not been distinguished.

### **Instructional Leadership**

According to Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1999) the most genuine definition of instructional leadership is when, “the critical focus for attention by leaders is the behaviors of teachers as they engage in activities directly affecting the growth of students” (p. 8). Many adaptations of this form of leadership concentrate on this practice as well as a wide variety of variables that are believed to impact teacher behavior. Terry (1996) believed that superintendents and principals today must become instructional leaders. They must integrate the managerial tasks into the instructional leadership tasks to meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century student and school. Hallinger (2005) agreed that the superintendent and principal are expected to perform a variety of duties but he concluded that the effectiveness of these individuals is achieved when a correct balance among these roles is accomplished. Terry was in agreement with Hallinger that the management responsibilities of the superintendent and principal cannot be sacrificed on behalf of instructional leadership.

Unlike a manager, the instructional leader makes instructional quality the main priority of the school district and school and attempts to bring that vision to actualization. Lezotte (1992) attempted to describe instructional leadership by correcting the misunderstandings of strong leadership. Instructional leadership does not mean that the principal runs the schools and that teachers give up their professional autonomy and



individual freedom. Rather Lezotte illustrated that effective leaders lead through dedication, not authority, and staff follow because they share the leader's vision. Lezotte believed that learning for all is rewarding and offers all staff the opportunity and flexibility to continue in their growth as a professional.

Instructional leadership is complex and multifaceted. Superintendents and principals must find the proper balance when performing managerial duties and instructional leadership activities in order to ensure that the core business of teaching and learning is achieved. Superintendents and principals must also focus on the long term vision of school district and school improvement as a priority while maintaining an accurate perception of the present. They must encourage professional autonomy from staff while demanding ownership to shared vision and values (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Superintendents and principals today need to be strong instructional leaders who create a learning community in their school districts and schools and still fulfill essential management functions. Once again, maintaining the importance of balance between these two primary responsibilities is stressed. The superintendent's and principal's success is determined by the way in which these forces are brought together through their behavior.

When considering the notion that effective schools have strong instructional leaders, Smith and Andrews (1989) carried out an extensive study on how principals make a difference in creating effective schools. Conclusions from their study were that successful principals are dynamic leaders with high energy, tolerance for ambiguity, initiative, analytical ability, a sense of humor, and a practical stance toward life. This

study indicated that effective principals received more positive ratings from teachers than weak or poor principals. Smith and Andrews also identified eighteen different instructional leadership behaviors demonstrated by principals whose teachers identified them as strong instructional leaders. These eighteen different instructional leadership behaviors were grouped into four broad areas of interaction between the school principal and teachers: (1) the principal as resource provider; (2) the principal as instructional resource; (3) the principal as communicator; and (4) the principal as visible presence. While there are many variables involved when describing an effective or successful school, one of the most salient characteristics required is a strong instructional leader.

Research into effective schools continues to determine and indicate that successful instructional leaders consistently exhibit certain practices or traits. As a result of the consistency of these practices there is a greater confidence among researchers that important elements of effective instructional leadership can be identified. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) identified the following aspects of leaders' practices that promote improved teaching and student engagement:

1. Developing a deep understanding of how to support teachers;
2. Managing the curriculum in ways that promote student learning; and
3. Developing the ability to transform schools into more effective organizations that foster powerful teaching and learning for all students. (p. 6)

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (2002) identified six characteristics of instructional leadership that are represented in the form of standards for principals. Effective leaders:

1. Lead schools in a way that places student and adult learning at the center;
2. Set high expectations and standards for the academic and social development of all students and the performance of adults;
3. Demand content and instruction that ensure student achievement of agreed-upon academic standards;
4. Create a culture of continuous learning for adults tied to student learning and other school goals;
5. Use multiple sources of data as diagnostic tools to assess, identify and apply instructional improvement; and
6. Actively engage the community to create shared responsibility for student and school success. (p. 2)

According to this research, successful instructional leaders constantly demonstrate particular practices that influence or assist in the establishment of effective schools.

Generally these practices relate to creating a culture where high expectations of student and staff learning is instituted, and active support of students, staff, and the community occurs.

The research related to instructional leadership is widespread and has produced a wealth of findings concerning the impact of leadership on school districts and schools and their ability to meet the needs of students. DuFour (1999) described the importance of the principal as an instructional leader when he stated: “Where principals are effective instructional leaders, student achievement escalates” (p. 15). McEwan (2003) in her

analysis of effective schools research confirmed the significance of instructional leadership to student achievement by stating:

And while each researcher has generated a slightly different set of descriptors that characterize effective or excellent schools, one variable always emerges as critically important: the leadership abilities of the building principal, particularly in the instructional arena. (p. 1)

The research pertaining to instructional leadership styles is much more developed for principals than it is for superintendents. This section has described the research relating to three specific practices of leadership. The bases of authority for today's leadership practices rely heavily on bureaucracy, psychological knowledge or skill, and the technical rationality that emerges from theory and research (Sergiovanni, 1992). Full rich leadership practice cannot be developed if one set of values or one basis of authority is simply substituted for another. What is needed is an expanded theoretical and operational foundation for leadership practice that will give balance to the full range of values and bases of authority. In order to facilitate the understanding of this foundation the leadership practices of moral leadership, transformational leadership, and instructional leadership have been examined.

### **Chapter Summary**

This literature review chapter explored five topics. The first topic of this literature review outlined the similarities and differences between social constructivism and constructivism. The second topic described Krug's (1992) dimensions of instructional leadership. The third topic examined the changing role of the

superintendent. The fourth topic provided a historical view of leadership in this era of accountability in education. The last topic explored three leadership practices and their impact on student achievement. The ever changing role of the superintendent and principal and ongoing debates about educational leadership are indicative of the ways in which leadership by these individuals is a socially constructed phenomenon.

The following chapter, Chapter Three, will articulate the qualitative research design and methodology used for this study.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

A qualitative research design was chosen for this study to effectively understand the complex social phenomena of instructional leadership and the challenges that impacted superintendent's and principals' abilities to engage in this area of practice. This research design was selected because the researcher was primarily interested in understanding how participants made sense of their world (Merriam, 1998). Within this interpretive research tradition an exploratory case study was employed. As Yin (2009) states "the researcher has little control over events, and the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context" (p. 2). The case study made it possible for the researcher to examine, describe, and understand superintendent and principal instructional leadership and the factors that impact it.

This chapter begins with a description of the study's paradigm or world view. It then discusses qualitative methodology and case study research methods. An outline of how study participants were selected is provided. Data collection and analysis procedures are explained along with the strategies used to ensure trustworthiness. Ethical considerations and limitations of the study are also provided.

## **Interpretive Paradigm**

A paradigm, also referred to as a world view, is considered the foundational lens which researchers use to interact with the world around them. It is a “basic set of beliefs that guides action” (Guba, 1990, p. 17). Although paradigms remain largely hidden in research, they significantly influence the approach and practice of research. Paradigms are ultimately a general orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher holds. They are shaped by the discipline area and beliefs of the researcher and past research experiences. The types of beliefs held by researchers will often lead to embracing qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods approaches in their research. The diverse terminology and practices of research can often be confusing and daunting. However, generally speaking, the research paradigm impacts the span of all decisions made – from broad assumptions to details such as data collection and analysis.

The research in this study is approached from an interpretive paradigm. In this type of paradigm the researcher attempts to interpret and make sense of how others view the world (Creswell, 2009). The researcher focuses on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants. Researchers recognize that their own background shapes their interpretations, and they position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their personal, cultural, and historical experiences (Creswell, 2009). Lastly, rather than starting with a theory this type of paradigm generates or inductively develops a theory or pattern of meaning.

A foundational element of this study included the notion that the researcher engage with participants so that they can share their views (Patton, 2002). Research of this nature seeks to understand the context or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information personally. As the socially constructed realities of participants were considered, this study used qualitative approaches to best understand the views of a superintendent, principals, and teachers.

### **Qualitative Research Methodology**

According to Patton (2002) a study's research design should be determined by the nature of the research question. The research question guiding this study called for a qualitative approach since it is seeking to understand the lived experience of the participants. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) defined qualitative research as "research that involves analyzing and interpreting texts and interviews in order to discover meaningful patterns descriptive of a particular phenomenon" (p. 3). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) further described qualitative research as:

. . . a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. These practices transform the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, and recordings. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

Qualitative researchers are keenly interested in understanding the meaning people have built to make sense of their world and their lived experiences (Merriam, 1998).



Qualitative research involves the process of discovery to allow the researcher to better understand the meaning of the participants involved in the study. The researcher as an inquirer examines the experiences of the participants and attempts to develop new meanings by discussing these experiences with the participants. For example, the superintendent and principals in this study felt that they had a strong understanding and grasp how to use data to positively impact student achievement. Through discussion with teachers the researcher was able to develop a broader awareness of a disconnect that existed between teachers, the superintendent, and principals as it related to this topic.

Patton (2002) and Denzin and Lincoln (2005) have identified four components of qualitative research. First, qualitative research incorporates the natural setting as the source of data and information: “The researcher attempts to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Qualitative inquiry allows theory to be inductively created from the researcher’s interviews and observations in a real world setting rather than the laboratory.

Second, the researcher is responsible for data collection through the use of a research instrument. In both quantitative and qualitative research validity depends on the research instrument. Caution must be used to ensure that the research instrument is constructed to measure what it is supposed to be measuring and administered consistently: “The credibility of qualitative methods, therefore, hinges to a great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing fieldwork” (Patton, 2002, p. 14).

Third, qualitative researchers use methods that allow for flexibility and ability to build on implied knowledge (Patton, 2002). Fieldwork is approached with an open mind

and without being constrained by predetermined responses. Qualitative research allows the researcher to dig deeper into each person's experience.

Lastly, qualitative research generates a wealth and depth of detailed information about a limited number of people (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). During interviews participants are encouraged to tell their own stories reflecting on their day-to-day experiences: "Direct quotations are a basic source of raw data in qualitative inquiry, revealing respondents' depth of emotion, the ways they have organized their world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences, and their basic perceptions" (Patton, 2002, p. 21).

Patton (2002) and Denzin and Lincoln (2005) also identified several limitations of qualitative research. Some politicians and "hard scientists" display resistance to some qualitative studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). They often view qualitative research as irrational, tentative, and subjective. In addition these individuals refer to the researchers as journalists or soft scientists and this research as criticism rather than theory.

For Patton (2002) qualitative research reduces generalizability from data generated from quantitative research that can be compared and easily aggregated to produce a broad, generalizable set of findings. Qualitative research generates a wealth of detailed information on a smaller number of cases and "This increases the depth of understanding of the cases and situations studied but reduces the generalizability" (p. 14).

Qualitative researchers strive to make sense or provide order of the stories they hear from participants and how they intersect (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Using a qualitative research approach for this study allowed the researcher to examine

instructional leadership, and the challenges to instructional leadership by engaging participants in their natural settings. Therefore, the researcher was able to observe how participants make sense of instructional leadership and the challenges that impact these activities.

### **Case Study Research**

According to Yin (2009) a case study is used in many situations to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political and related phenomena. The case study has been a common research method used in education, psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, social work, business, nursing, and community planning. In all of these situations, the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social events. The case study method allows researchers to retain the meaningful characteristics of actual events. Yin (2009) also relates that a “case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18).

A case study involves organizing data for an-indepth study and comparison. Case studies can be about critical incidents, stages in the life of a person or program, or anything that can be defined as a “specific, unique, bound system” (Stake, 2000, p. 436). The case study approach to qualitative research creates a specific way of collecting, organizing, and analyzing data. The purpose is to gather comprehensive, systematic, and indepth information about a case of interest. The analysis of the data results in the product: a case study. Thematic analysis of the data is then used to determine patterns or

themes. The case study should take the reader into the case situation and experience of the person, group, or program being examined. Each case study should allow the reader to understand the case as a unique, holistic entity.

Yin (2009) described three main categories of case studies: explanatory, exploratory, and descriptive. This qualitative research study is an exploratory case study. According to Yin an exploratory case study can answer the “what” questions: “This type of question is a justifiable rationale for conducting an exploratory study, the goal being to develop a pertinent hypothesis and propositions for further inquiry” (p. 6). The outcome of this study is to contribute to the theories on instructional leadership and the challenges that impact these activities.

Although the case study is a distinctive form of inquiry, many researchers are critical of the case study strategy (Yin, 2009). In other words, case studies have been viewed as a less desirable form of inquiry than either experiments or surveys. One of the strongest concerns raised about case studies is the lack of rigor associated with it (Yin, 2009). For example, the case study researcher may have been sloppy or has not followed systematic procedures thus reducing the credibility of case studies as a method of inquiry.

Another common concern about case studies is that they provide little opportunity to generalize their findings to other people or settings (Yin, 2009). However, the purpose of a case study is not to generalize to other populations but rather to expand and add to theoretical propositions.

A third frequent complaint about case studies is that they take too long to complete, and they result in large unreadable documents (Yin, 2009). This complaint

may have a historical bias given the way that case studies were completed in the past, but this is not necessarily the way case studies will be done in the future (Creswell, 2009).

Despite the fact that these concerns about case studies can be alleviated, case studies are difficult to complete and must be approached and implemented with careful consideration and caution. However, the essence of a case study is to illuminate the real-life and complex social phenomena of an individual, group, or organization. Therefore case studies are to be valued as contributors to our knowledge base and not simply as alternatives to experimental designs (Cook & Payne, 2002).

### **Exploratory Case Study Method**

Qualitative research according to Patton (2002) is a varied field with a variety of approaches and methods. Patton (2002) described three types of qualitative data gathering methods: interviews, observations, and document analysis. For this study interviews and document analysis were used. The superintendent, fifteen principals, and sixteen teachers from one school district in Alberta were interviewed.

The superintendent and principals' interviews explored the diversity of instructional leadership elements and probed participants' understanding of their instructional leadership practices. Insights were also gained into the challenges that impacted their instructional leadership practices. Teacher interviews provided their perspectives of superintendent and principal instructional leadership practices, and its challenges. The topics discussed were guided by Krug's (1992) five-factor taxonomy of effective instructional leadership outlined in Chapter Two: defining a mission; managing

curriculum and instruction; supervising teaching; monitoring student progress; and promoting in instructional climate.

The examination and analysis of improvement plans, three year education plans, and annual education results reports further defined the instructional leadership expectations of this school district and individual schools. Improvement plans and three year education plans outlined the beliefs, values, vision, and mission of schools and the school district. These plans also described the goals of the school district and schools as well as the strategies to be implemented to accomplish these objectives. Annual education results reports identified areas of strength and concern for the school district and schools and held superintendents and principals accountable to strive for improvement.

Delving deeply into how superintendents and principals go about their work as instructional leaders, why they choose certain activities in which to become engaged, and what challenges are evident is critical to further developing the understanding of the roles they play in supporting student learning. The distinctive need to understand this complex social phenomenon lends itself to exploratory case study design. Case study research is an inquiry method that has multiple definitions and understandings. Davey (1991) defined a case study as a “systematic way of looking at what is happening, collecting data, analyzing information and reporting the results” (p. 1). Neuman (2003) described case study as the intensive investigation of a limited set of cases focusing on a limited number of factors. For Merriam (1998):

. . . case studies are differentiated from other types of qualitative research in that they are intensive descriptions and analyses of a single unit or bounded system such as an individual, program, event, group, intervention, or community. (p.19)

According to Yin (2009), case studies allow researchers to retain the “holistic and meaningful characteristics” of real-life events (p. 4). Yin further described a case study as an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). Therefore the researcher chose to use an exploratory case study approach because of the desire to examine and understand a real-life phenomenon in depth. However, such an in-depth understanding of a real-life phenomenon also incorporates significant contextual conditions because these conditions are highly relevant to the phenomenon of study.

Design for case study research must specify the unit or units of analysis to be studied (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2003). The unit of analysis can vary from an individual to a multinational company and the primary focus of data collection is on what is happening to that individual or group in a setting. For the purpose of this study, the unit of analysis was a school district superintendent and fifteen principals who are involved with instructional leadership.

Yin (2009) also promoted that a case study is a method of inquiry that:

- copes with a technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result;

- relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result; and
- benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. (p. 18)

As described by Yin, case study research comprises a comprehensive method that addresses the logic of design, data collection practices and detailed approaches to data analysis.

Exploratory case studies strive towards an all-inclusive understanding of related activities performed by participants in a social situation. Case studies always have boundaries and cases must be carefully selected in order to gather the necessary information in the allotted time to complete the study (Patton, 2002). This particular exploratory case study involved one superintendent, fifteen principals, and sixteen teachers in a high performing school district. The social situation for this study was the day-to-day practices of the superintendent and principals as they carried out their duties as instructional leaders. The boundaries were a superintendent, principals, and teachers located in central office, primary schools, elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools in one school district.

The dynamic challenge and exploratory nature of attempting to answer the research question: *What, if any, challenges to the instructional leadership practices of a superintendent and their principals exist?* lends itself well to the utilization of an exploratory case study approach. While there are limitations to this type of method, which will be discussed later, the means by which an exploratory case study allows for



the systematic examination of a real-life phenomenon in a context where boundaries, plus other methodological strengths, are not clearly defined outweighs these limits.

### **Study Participants**

According to Merriam (1998), “sample selection in qualitative research is usually (but not always) nonrandom, purposeful, and small, as opposed to the larger, more random sampling of quantitative research” (p. 8). The participants for this study were purposefully selected and consisted of one superintendent, fifteen principals, and sixteen teachers from the same school district in Alberta. For this study principals and teachers needed to have at least two years’ experience in a school that represented a portion of the grade range of kindergarten to grade twelve. To ensure principals and teachers from a variety of schools were selected as participants discretion was used to choose participants from different schools and grades. The sample size was adequate to support the purpose of this study which was to contribute to the knowledge of the challenges to instructional leadership.

In Patton’s (2002) view there are no rules for sample size. It depends on what it is the researcher wants to know and what will be useful and doable within the time and money allocated for the study. Purposeful sampling of this type does not allow the findings to be generalized back to other populations. Therefore the sample size just needs to support the purpose of the study which is unlike probability sampling that needs a sample large enough to generalize from the sample to the population of which it is a part.

The criteria used to select the school district for this study was high student achievement on provincial achievement tests and diploma examinations. Once the school district was identified the researcher contacted the superintendent by telephone, explained the purpose of this study, and asked permission to conduct this research in their school district. The researcher informed the superintendent that compliance with their jurisdiction research permission and approval processes would be strictly followed. Once the superintendent agreed to participate, they were asked to forward the recruitment notice to prospective principal participants. Principals were then free to contact the researcher at their discretion which reduced the potential for “soft coercion”. This meant that no participants felt a sense of pressure to participate from knowing that their names had been provided to the researcher by an individual in a position of power and authority over them (Patton, 2002). Interested principals contacted the researcher by phone or email. Each principal was sent the Ethics Consent Form which was reviewed and discussed when the interviews occurred.

Once the principals were selected they were asked to forward the recruitment notice to prospective teacher participants who would then be free to contact the researcher at their discretion, again reducing the potential for “soft coercion.” Interested teachers contacted the researcher either by phone or email. The Ethics Consent Form was also sent to each of the teachers. It was then reviewed and discussed when the interviews occurred.

The superintendent’s interview was held at the school district’s central office. Most principal and teacher interviews took place in their school in a room that was quiet and

free from disruptions. However, some principals and teachers asked to be interviewed at the researcher's office. Interviews took place in the months of January, February, and March 2012.

### **Demographics**

The school district selected for this study had a student enrollment within the range of 10,000 to 15,000 students. This school district has twenty-five schools with 10% of students enrolled in French Immersion and 8% of students have self-identified as First Nations, Metis or Inuit. This school district employs approximately 1000 staff members (550 teachers). Lastly this school district had an annual operating budget of over \$100 million dollars.

The superintendent from this school district has exclusively worked in education in Alberta for his or her entire career. The superintendent had worked in two school districts during his or her twenty-four year career. The superintendent has recently completed his or her first year in this role.

The principal group in the study consisted of eight males and seven females. Approximately ten of the principals were in the 40 to 50 year category and the remaining five were in the 50 to 60 year category. Experience as a principal varied. Two principals had 3 to 10 years experience, eleven principals had 10 to 20 years experience and the remaining two had 20 to 30 years experience.

Of the sixteen teachers in the study, twelve were female and four were male. Five of the teachers were in the 20 to 30 year category, five in the 30 to 40 year age group, and six were between the ages of 40 and 50. Years of experience for the teachers ranged from

five to 30 years. Six teachers had five to 10 years of experience, six teachers had 10 to 20 years, and four teachers fell in the 20 to 30 years of experience category.

### **Data Collection**

The data that was collected for this study was examined using the lens of a five-factor taxonomy of effective instructional leadership as described by Krug (1992). The essence of this five-factor taxonomy of effective instructional leadership involves commitment of educational leaders to five action areas. These areas are: defining a mission; managing curriculum and instruction; supervising teaching; monitoring student progress; and promoting an instructional climate. Applying this lens as it related to the superintendent and principals was a critical portion of this study.

Using a combination of data collection methods to obtain information provided a comprehensive perspective with regards to this exploratory case study (Patton, 2002). This study was a qualitative case study with two data sources used (interviews and document reviews) in order to measure the instructional leadership characteristics of a superintendent and principals and identify any challenges that may impact these instructional leadership practices. Data collection occurred over a three month period.

A strength of using an exploratory case study method was the opportunity to utilize a variety of sources of information (Yin, 2009). The use of multiple sources of evidence in this study allowed the opportunity to examine a broad range of individuals and documents — leading to “converging lines of inquiry” (p. 115). By accessing and examining multiple sources of data from various people and documents in this school district the aim was to provide corroborating evidence of administrator instructional

leadership. Data triangulation is the process of using a variety of methods to “illuminate an inquiry question” (Patton, 2002, p. 248). Data triangulation also reduces the potential problem of construct validity as multiple sources of evidence “essentially provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon” (p. 117). However, with the use of triangulation came a greater burden for the researcher. For example, the collection of data from multiple sources is more time consuming than if data were only collected from a single source (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). And lastly, through the use of triangulation the researcher also needed to be skilled in multiple methods of data collection and analysis.

### **Interviews**

The superintendent, fifteen principals and sixteen teachers from the same school district were interviewed. The purpose of interviewing according to Patton (2002) is to allow the researcher to learn about the other person’s perspective: “Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind, to gather their stories” (p. 341). Fontana and Frey (2005) regarded interviews as a source of information that one assumes is a true and accurate picture of the respondents’ lives. Each participant was interviewed face-to-face. The purpose of the teacher interviews was to have teachers reflect on their superintendent’s and principal’s practices as they carried out their responsibilities. During the superintendent and principal interviews they had an opportunity to reflect on their practices as they

carried out their duties. This led to further reflection on how their behaviors exhibited instructional leadership.

Each interview took approximately sixty minutes to complete. Length varied depending on the conversational level of the informant. As Patton (2002) suggested we can never fully understand the experience of another individual and we need to be cognizant of the time and effort needed to gain the necessary understanding for the study.

Interviews were focused semi-structured interviews in which a fixed set of questions (Appendix A and B) were utilized in order to corroborate if any challenges to instructional leadership practices for a superintendent and principals existed. Questions were aligned to Krug's (1992) five-factor taxonomy of effective instructional leadership (defining a mission, managing curriculum and instruction, supervising teaching, monitoring student progress, and promoting in instructional climate) and allowed for a thorough description by the participants.

A semi-structured interview is a process where the interviewer has established a set of questions beforehand, but intends the interview to be conversational (Yin, 2009). This structure, as well as the opportunity to delve into topics as they arose during the interview, allowed the flexibility to probe for further details. A semi-structured interview format was deemed advantageous because it was conducted with an open framework which allowed for focused, two-way communication. Probing questions such as the following were asked to drill deeper into the informant's responses:

- Can you give me an example?
- Can you tell me more about that?

- Can you give me examples of best practices?
- What did you observe?

The first five minutes of each interview provided an opportunity to talk socially with the participant. This was seen as a way to begin developing rapport with each participant. The researcher informed each participant that there were no correct or incorrect answers to the questions. The researcher also encouraged teachers, principals, and the superintendent to regard the interview as a conversation. The researcher ended each interview by letting the participants know how valuable they were to this study and thanking each of them.

Interviews were recorded digitally so data could be transcribed for analyses. The transcribed text of each interview was returned to each individual respondent for review, possible amendments, and approval. The researcher listened to the recordings as the transcripts were reviewed to ensure the meaning had not been lost in the translation to text.

Field notes during interviews were taken and interviews were recorded digitally so data could be transcribed for analyses. While interviewing, it was important to remain cognizant of Yin's (2009) emphasis on the importance of the researcher's skills and attributes. Yin claimed that a researcher must possess the ability to "question, to listen, to adapt, to possess a firm grasp of the issues and to maintain a lack of bias before gathering the data" (p. 69).

While interviewing the superintendent, principals, and teachers the intent was to emphasize the empathic neutrality stance (Patton, 2002). It was important for the

researcher to be interested and caring in the people being studied while remaining neutral about the information that was being shared. While participants were being interviewed it was important for the researcher not to make any comments about what the subjects were saying. However, if necessary, the interviewer asked participants follow-up questions that were important to further understand or clarify their previous comments.

### **Document Analysis**

The document analysis consisted of reviewing school improvement plans, the school district's annual education results report, and the school district's education plan. These documents were analyzed to support what the participants said was occurring within the school district and schools. The examination and analysis of improvement plans, three year education plans, and annual education results reports further defined the instructional leadership expectations of the school district and individual schools. Improvement plans and three year education plans outlined the beliefs, values, vision, and mission of schools and the school district. These plans also described the goals of schools and the school district as well as the strategies to be implemented to accomplish these objectives. Annual education results reports identified areas of strength and concern for school district and schools and held the superintendent and principals accountable to strive for improvement.

There are several advantages to utilizing a document review as part of this study. In examining school district and school documents the researcher was able to "uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem" (Merriam, 1998, p. 133). The districts and schools documents were readily available via



their web sites. As a result the researcher was able to gather this data in a way that was inconspicuous to participants.

Although there are definitive advantages to a thorough document review, limitations were also evident and had to be considered. For example, Yin (2009) has indicated that while documents are useful, bias is a potential factor to consider. Yin (2009) pointed out that bias of the person developing the documents must be recognized and considered and “not be accepted as literal recordings of events that have taken place” (p. 103).

### **Data Triangulation**

Triangulation of the data contributed to the validity of the data analysis (Patton, 2002). Triangulation is the process of using a variety of methods in combination so as to “illuminate an inquiry question” (p. 248). Marshall and Rossman (2006) defined triangulation as “the act of bringing more than one source of data to bear on a single point” (p. 202). In this study, the data collected from the superintendent and principals was compared to the data collected from teachers. This comparison allowed for an analysis of what the superintendent and principals indicated were their instructional leadership practices and challenges with what the teachers saw as their instructional leadership practices and factors that interrupted these activities. Review of the collected documents gave the researcher another level of analysis as to how the superintendent and principals are involved with instructional leadership. Lastly, examination of the data from the interviews and document analysis determined consistencies and inconsistencies as it related to instructional leadership. According to Patton (2002) “finding such

inconsistencies ought not be viewed as weakening the credibility of results, but rather as offering opportunities for deeper insight into the relationship between inquiry approach and the phenomenon under study” (p. 248).

### **Trustworthiness**

According to Glesne and Peshkin (1992) interviewing and document collection are important techniques in qualitative inquiry. Both of these methods were used in this study. The trustworthiness of the data is much stronger when it has been collected through several data collection methods.

The data collected from the teacher interviews were compared to the data collected from the superintendent and principals’ interviews to determine what the superintendent and principals said they did in exhibiting instructional leadership and what the teachers saw of their instructional leadership. Review of the documents provided the researcher with a more complete picture of the instructional leadership factors that were emphasized in this school district. This triangulation of data contributed to the validity of the data analysis (Patton, 2002). Triangulation with the data from the interviews and document analyses determined consistencies and inconsistencies as it related to instructional leadership.

Patton (2002) encouraged researchers to focus on rigorous techniques of data collection and systematic analyses. Extreme care was taken when collecting and analyzing data and all procedures were well documented. Yin (2009) stated that “the goal of reliability is to minimize the errors and biases in a study” (p. 36). This was

accomplished by ensuring that the procedures used were well documented and can be replicated numerous times with the same results each time.

### **Reliability**

According to Yin (2009), reliability is defined as “demonstrating that the operation of a study – such as the data collection procedures – can be repeated, with the same results.” (p. 40). Therefore, a researcher aiming for reliability would write up their research in such a way that future researchers following the same procedures as described in this study should arrive at the same findings and conclusions. As a result, as many procedures as possible are described in as much detail as possible so that future researchers can repeat this study and obtain the same results.

### **External Validity**

External validity, as described by Yin (2009), is defined as “the domain to which a study’s findings can be generalized” (p. 40). Critics of case study method often state that this approach offers a poor basis for generalizing. To ensure that external validity was achieved the data from all respondents was compared to Krug’s (1992) five-factor taxonomy of effective instructional leadership. This procedure stipulated that data collected from respondents was vetted through an external mechanism that examined the findings via an established criterion of instructional leadership.

## **Data Analyses**

According to Hamel (1993) case study research creates a great wealth of data. This was evident for the research completed for this study. Databases were prepared in order to assist with the sorting, categorizing, and retrieving data for analysis. As Patton (2002) stated, this was required to “get a sense of the whole” (p. 440). Therefore, it was imperative to ensure that, as thoroughly as possible, all data was labelled correctly and all interview transcripts were complete.

As noted by Patton (2002) verbatim transcripts are critical for qualitative analyses. Patton further explained that this is how we stay true to the material and ensure that the reader is hearing the interviewee’s voice and not the researcher’s voice. All recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and each transcript was labeled with the participant’s name, school and date of interview.

Data analysis was based on an inductive approach geared to identifying patterns in participants’ responses. To recognize the patterns in the gathered qualitative data required the ability to place the data into meaningful categories and themes. To accomplish this, as Patton (2002) suggested, a content analysis was completed: “Content analyses, then, involves identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary pattern in the data” (p. 463). This analysis identified the overarching themes and patterns prevalent in the evidence. It is also important to mention that Krug’s (1992) five-factor taxonomy of effective instructional leadership acted as a filter in the development of these themes.

Data analysis was conducted immediately after data collection. During the data analysis, the researcher identified themes from the perspective of the participants and sought to understand and explain these. To accomplish this, the following process was utilized: data from the interviews was transcribed as soon as the interviewer returned from conducting the interviews; after each interview was transcribed, the researcher read the data, and input themes and concepts into “descriptive matrices” (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 26); the researcher wrote memos capturing reflections about the tentative themes (Merriam, 1998); themes emerging from the interviews and data gathered were described and detailed quotes from the interviews were included as supporting information; and themes gleaned from this research were compared and contrasted with the themes found in the literature.

According to Patton (2002) and Creswell (2009) qualitative analysis has no rule book. Creswell further recommended beginning the analysis with a general review of all information. To accomplish this each transcript was immediately reviewed following each participant’s interview. Specific themes and participant tone were noted at this time. Transcripts were separated into two groups: superintendent and principals; and teachers. At this point it became necessary for the researcher to note key and recurring words. Patton (2002) described this as pattern recognition. Patterns are the mechanism that enables a large amount of data to be reduced into meaningful and manageable information. These patterns or themes are often called “core meanings” (p. 453).

The collected data was further reduced by coding the key and recurring words. The final step in the data analysis was to review the coded key words and place them into

themes. Patton (2002) referred to this step as classifying. This process was completed for the superintendent, principal, and teachers' interview data. Classification into themes allowed the researcher to contrast and compare the data collected from both groups of participants. The data was now ready to interpret.

Analysis of the documents associated with this study also identified particular themes and patterns. Krug's (1992) five-factor taxonomy of effective instructional leadership also acted as a filter in the development of these themes. These results were compared to the themes and patterns that emerged from the interviews. It was important to look for the consistencies and inconsistencies in the results. According to Patton (2002), "different kinds of data may yield somewhat different results because different types of inquiry are sensitive to different real-world nuances" (p. 248). An important exploratory case study element that was incorporated into this study was that data was collected from multiple sources. This aided in the development of "converging lines of inquiry", that aimed to corroborate the same facts or phenomena (Yin, 2009). The use of multiple sources of evidence allowed the opportunity to examine a broad range of individuals and documents. This process of triangulation helped to address any issues of establishing validity.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In conducting qualitative research it was critical that the researcher respect the rights, needs, values, and desires of the participants (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 1998). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) also cautioned that "because the objects of inquiry in interviewing are human beings, extreme care must be taken to avoid any harm to them"

(p. 70). The following safeguards were utilized to protect the participants: the research objectives were clearly articulated so that they were well understood by the participants; an opportunity was provided for participants to ask any clarifying questions that they might have; participants were informed of all data collection methods and procedures; participants' rights, interests and wishes were considered first when choices were made regarding the reporting of the data; participants were asked to voluntarily participate in this study and they were informed that they can withdraw from the study at any time; the edited text of each interview was submitted for participant approval; and participants' anonymity was guaranteed by the researcher and confidentiality from the researcher has been maintained.

Each voluntary participant was asked to read and sign a letter containing the above information. The digitally taped interviews, field notes, and the transcriptions are maintained in strict confidence and held in a secure place. All data is stored in an anonymous format for possible longitudinal research.

The rights of the participants were protected by subjecting the design of this study to the University of Calgary's ethics review. The ethics review process of the identified school district for this study was also honored and completed.

Another ethical matter that was considered and discussed with each participant was the notion that this study involves a single school district in the province of Alberta. Therefore, the Alberta Teachers' Association's Code of Ethics was also met prior to any administrator or teacher participating in their interview.

Lastly, the final report has been written using aggregated group summaries of results in a descriptive format. The anonymity of participants' data and all other data has been protected through the use of pseudonyms when direct quotes are used in this final report.

### **Limitations**

This study was conducted over a three month period with interviews starting in January 2012 after ethics approval had been granted. Data collected during the interviews may contain interviewer bias. Although the researcher attempted to conduct the interviews in an unbiased and consistent manner, all individuals bring certain biases to the situation based on their experience and knowledge (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, it was important for the interviewer to be aware, and be able to counter-act, these biases as best as possible. It should be noted that the data collected through the interview instrument was of a subjective nature based on the interpretation of the teachers' experiences while interacting with their superintendent and principals. Additional subjectivity came from the superintendent's and principals' perceptions of their instructional leadership behaviors.

Another limitation of the methodology used for this study was that it only included one superintendent, fifteen principals, and sixteen teachers being interviewed from one school district in the province of Alberta. Therefore this school district will not be representative of the remaining school districts in the province or those outside of it.

According to Patton (2002), "interview data limitations include possibly distorted responses due to personal bias, anger, anxiety, politics, and simple lack of awareness



since interviews can be greatly affected by the emotional state of the interviewee at the time of the interview” (p. 306). Therefore every attempt was made to ensure that participants were interviewed in a comfortable and distraction-free location and that the participant was in a mentally focused frame of mind. Also, every attempt was made to schedule interview times that are best suited for participants.

Limitations are also realized with the documents that were examined for this study. Not all records were maintained at the same high level of detail, completeness and accuracy. However, one of the strengths of a thorough document analysis was that it provided a view or perception that was not acquired exclusively through interviews (Patton, 2002). Additional strengths of a complete document examination were that the documents were repeatedly reviewed, they contained exact names, references and details of events, and that they provided information over a span of time that included many events and settings (Yin, 2009).

### **Chapter Summary**

In sum, the design of this study focused on one school district in the province of Alberta and attempted to answer the following research question: *What, if any, challenges to the instructional leadership practices of a superintendent and their principals exist?* This qualitative inquiry involved one superintendent, fifteen principals and sixteen teachers from the same school district. Data was collected through interviews and document analysis.

This chapter began with a description of the study’s paradigm or world view. It then discussed qualitative methodology and case study research methods. An outline of

how study participants were selected was provided. Data collection and analysis procedures were explained along with the strategies used to ensure trustworthiness. Ethical considerations and limitations of the study were also provided. The following chapter, Chapter Four, discusses the findings of this study and establishes themes of respondents' feedback. In addition, documents (e.g. school district education plans, school improvement plans, and annual education results reports) were also reviewed to determine if any triangulation existed between participants' transcripts and these documents mandated by Alberta Education.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

The overarching research question for this study was: *What, if any, challenges to the instructional leadership practices of a superintendent and their principals exist?* The semi-structured questions used in the interviews were informed by Krug's (1992) five dimensions of instructional leadership. Once the interview transcripts were analyzed five broad themes of instructional leadership emerged: vision/mission; teaching and planning time; managing classroom instruction; student success/progress; and positive atmosphere. It was found that these themes applied to the superintendent, the fifteen principals, and sixteen teachers. Each of these themes is discussed and reviewed in detail. In addition to the interview data, documents (e.g. school district education plans, school improvement plans, and annual education results reports) were reviewed to determine if any triangulation existed between participants' transcripts and these documents mandated by Alberta Education.

#### Themes

The following section describes the findings from interviews with all participants in a school district with high student achievement. These findings describe how a superintendent and fifteen principals viewed their daily duties as tasks related to instructional leadership. The data collected from teachers allowed the researcher to

understand whether teachers saw the same instructional leadership practices that the superintendent and principals indicated they were involved with, and what challenges they observed that influenced the performance of these duties. These findings are organized into five broad themes of instructional leadership that emerged from the study data: vision/mission; teaching and planning time; managing classroom instruction; student success/progress; and positive atmosphere.

### **1. Vision/Mission Theme**

For the purpose of this study the theme of vision/mission is the ability of the superintendent or principal to articulate the objective, reasons, and purposes of the school district or school in an explicit manner. These terms have been combined because the subjects in this study used them interchangeably. The theme of vision/mission closely aligns with Krug's (1992) instructional leadership dimension of defining a mission.

#### *a. Superintendent Perspectives*

The superintendent of this school district was direct in indicating that having a clear vision/mission was very important for providing guidance and clarity for what is to be achieved within the school district and each individual school. For example, when describing the purpose of having a vision for their school district, the superintendent defined it in this fashion: "The vision for our school district provides the road map of what we are attempting to accomplish. Without it we would simply be jumping from one random priority to the next".

In this particular school district the superintendent had been recently responsible for taking an awkward and complicated vision/mission document and revising it to the

point where three main priorities have been identified. In order to accomplish this task an extensive collaboration process was utilized that included many different stakeholders: “We felt that if we were going to embark on this process we definitely wanted to hear from as many stakeholders as possible”. Overall, the newly formed three main priorities have been well received and have become part of the school district’s culture. However, for the revised vision/mission priorities to be meaningfully accepted by stakeholders it took considerable effort and the ongoing repetition of these priorities in multiple settings for them to be assimilated:

For the first several months it was like I was a broken record. I had to keep repeating the new priorities over and over again. It was like people weren’t really ready to see these changes implemented until they had heard about them in several different settings.

It was apparent that the superintendent had to communicate the revised vision/mission priorities in as many different venues and on as many different occasions as possible for its wide spread acceptance to be successful.

Ultimately one of the greatest advantages of developing meaningful vision/mission priorities, that had extensive stakeholder input and wide spread acceptance, was that it provided direction and focus for district and school initiatives. The revised priorities were seen as being succinct and concise and as a result easier to work with as the school district and schools entered their various planning cycles. The superintendent summed this point up in this manner: “For me it was rewarding to see that after all of our collaboration efforts people could easily grasp and articulate the focus of

our school district and use them in their school settings”. It was apparent that as the revised vision/mission became part of the school district culture that more stakeholders became aware of these objectives and comfortable with assisting in its implementation.

Interestingly it also became evident that as the vision/mission priorities were becoming well understood and accepted by stakeholders that they also provided a sense of cohesiveness across departments, between central office and schools, and between schools. For example, the superintendent described how the school district’s education foundation program had been drifting with limited direction for the past several years. The school district’s education foundation program is a significant fundraiser for student scholarships and school initiatives that are outside of the traditional funding provided by Alberta Education. As the revised vision/mission became more of a part of the school district’s culture, components like the education foundation program used the vision/mission to provide direction and eventually better align their efforts with school district priorities: “Something like the education foundation program aligning itself more closely with our revised priorities was an unanticipated and welcome development”.

The superintendent also strongly indicated that having a relevant and functional vision/mission greatly facilitated the creation of measurable goals for the school district: “When the revised vision/mission was completed and it was being distributed to stakeholders it quickly became apparent that we would be able to establish more applicable measurable goals and objectives”. There were, however, questions of authority within the school district that needed to be resolved. For example, the superintendent noted that while measurable goals were more appropriately developed at

the district level, the superintendent and the senior administrative team had to be cognizant of local dynamics and sensitivities that impacted their goal formations:

We had to continually remind ourselves that we needed to be aware of the tug-and-pull that occurs between central office and schools when it comes to goal development. If we forgot this schools were very quick to remind us that we were impacting their operations.

*b. Principals' Perspectives*

Like the superintendent, all principals agreed it was essential to have a clear vision/mission for the school district as well as for their schools. Many principals saw that following the process the superintendent had implemented to revise the vision/mission priorities of the school district resulted in their school's vision/mission taking on added significance. For example, one principal articulated this point by stating: "It wasn't until recently that I saw our mission document as a life breathing document" (Bill Interview, p. 1). However, some principals did comment they were apprehensive of the superintendent's efforts in this area. These principals saw no need to augment the time or energy focused on vision/mission as they felt their school's mission was an accepted part of their school culture. These principals also commented that while many stakeholders could not repeat word for word the mission of their school, they had a strong enough understanding of its components that they could articulate its main messages:

Several years back our school went through a very thorough mission review and people have become appreciative of the culture of success we are trying to develop. It would be counter-productive for us to revise our vision this soon.

This would also confuse our stakeholders and impact what we are attempting to achieve. (Cathy Interview, p. 1)

Comments such as these are indicative of the ongoing struggle to balance district priorities with school autonomy.

Similar to the superintendent, principals strongly indicated and emphasized that it was important to articulate their school's vision/mission as often and in as many situations as possible. Most principals mentioned student handbooks, web sites, professional development sessions, morning announcements, staff meetings, student assemblies, parent council meetings, and newsletters as common places where they would mention, discuss or communicate their vision/mission. The opportunity to mention or accentuate the vision/mission was seen as occasions not to be missed. These instances allowed principals the chance to reiterate important themes or priorities that reflected the vision/mission of the school.

Without hesitation most principals commented that the vision/mission provided direction or a rationale for almost all decisions that they made on daily basis: "Everyone knows what the vision is for our school and does whatever it takes to keep it alive. The vision is the filter for our decisions" (Jason Interview, p. 1). For a large number of principals having a well-articulated vision/mission provided better alignment or cohesion for all stakeholders and as a result impacted their decision making processes and outcomes. Principals also observed that bringing together competing stakeholder perspectives was an ongoing challenge. However, a well-defined and understood



vision/mission focused stakeholders and as a result provided needed guidance in decision making processes.

As was mentioned above, for some principals they were not eager to engage in any revisioning processes as it related to their school's vision/mission. However, other principals saw that revising their school's vision/mission was a means to get stakeholders emotionally involved and that this could be a powerful process:

We have gone through a lot of staffing changes recently and the make-up of our community has also changed. We needed to pull together as a community so that we could better understand each other, what we wanted to accomplish, and how we were going to accomplish these objectives. (Lisa Interview, p. 1)

For schools like the one mentioned above the revising of the vision/mission created a better sense of unity between the school and the community it was attempting to serve.

All principals commented that there is a strong connection between their vision/mission and how this was used to establish measurable goals in their school improvement plans. Some principals did observe that Alberta Education's and the school district's measurable goals significantly impacted their flexibility in the creation of their goals: "After I create strategies to meet the needs of Alberta Education and the district there is not too much wiggle room left to address our needs or we become overloaded" (Sean Interview, p. 2). Nonetheless, all principals recognized and observed that having concise vision/mission priorities greatly assisted and facilitated the creation and implementation of school goals. The vision/mission priorities provided a rationale and focus for each school's improvement plans.

*c. Teachers' Perspectives*

With regards to the findings of teachers as it related to the importance of vision/mission and its influence on instructional leadership, most teachers indicated that there was a general understanding of the vision/mission in their school district and in their particular school. Almost all teachers saw the vision/mission as a mechanism that provided people with direction and cohesion for their actions. The vision/mission was also seen as a filter that influenced decision making and provided a rationale for decisions: "Our staff views the mission as an instrument that helps us to make decisions" (Kim Interview, p. 1). A majority of teachers indicated that their school's vision/mission was regularly reiterated in a variety of settings: "Our mission is usually mentioned in morning announcements, the web site, newsletters, and different types of meetings" (Rhonda Interview, p. 1). However, almost half of the teachers interviewed felt that their mission was not articulated enough. For example, several teachers expressed this point in this manner: "I know that we have one but I only hear it a couple of times a year" (Shelia Interview, p. 1).

When teachers were solicited to further describe how often the vision/mission of their school district or school was shared with them by administration, most teachers indicated that while the word-for-word version of their vision/mission was not shared, often the implied messages of the vision/mission were disclosed many times with students and teachers: "Administration regularly incorporates and crafts their messages using our vision" (Pat Interview, p. 1).

Lastly, with regards to the school district's three year education plan, annual education results report, and school improvement plans each of these documents prominently displayed a clear vision/mission which reflected the beliefs and values of the school district and individual schools.

For the superintendent, principals, and teachers in this study, having a clear vision/mission was important for providing guidance and clarity for what was to be achieved within their school division and individual schools. It was also felt by the participants that it was important to communicate the mission/vision in as many different venues and on as many different occasions as possible. These practices facilitated the vision/mission becoming widely accepted by stakeholders. One of the greatest advantages of developing a meaningful vision/mission was that it provided direction and focus for district and school initiatives. However, one of the greatest challenges in developing a concise vision/mission was that it took considerable effort to synthesize stakeholder input.

## **2. Teaching and Planning Time Theme**

For the purpose of this study the theme of teaching and planning time describes the ability of a superintendent or principal to support teachers so that they have a better understanding of the curriculum. The theme of teaching and planning time closely aligns with Krug's (1992) instructional leadership dimension of managing curriculum and instruction.

*a. Superintendent Perspectives*

During the interview with the superintendent it was outlined how important it was for the school district to focus on teachers teaching the curriculum and providing planning time so that teachers are better prepared to teach the curriculum:

It became apparent to us during our planning cycles and feedback sessions that at times teachers were not always teaching the curriculum. Far more times than I was comfortable with. Therefore we needed to ensure that teachers were in fact instructing the curriculum and structure our processes and systems as instructional leaders to confirm that teachers were using their teaching time effectively and had time to collaboratively plan with colleagues.

The superintendent also specified how information is provided to teachers so that they can effectively teach and plan to meet the needs of students. Attributes such as the residency model, professional development sessions, and the superintendent's address were mentioned in this regard.

The residency model is a recently implemented initiative where for one week per year five curriculum coordinators work with teachers in one school extensively on instructional strategies. While it is too soon to comment on the effectiveness of this initiative, it is hoped that it will positively impact and influence teaching practices, planning time, and student achievement.

The current focus of professional development sessions has also shifted in how they are planned and developed. Previous professional development sessions were an "information dump" for teachers with little engagement or time allowed to practice the

new skills or strategies. Recently, all professional development sessions have been revised so that teachers have time to professionally and actively discuss the focus of the professional development event. This simple and straightforward strategy has given teachers the opportunity to delve more deeply into and understand the concepts being discussed. Also, time is now set aside at professional development sessions so that teachers can practice the techniques being described. This has led to more teacher engagement and the ability to actively participate in professional discussions on these topics.

The superintendent's address, and monthly "soup with the super" luncheons, are seen as opportunities for the superintendent to reiterate the importance of teaching and planning time on student achievement. For example, one of the priorities for this school district is a clear understanding of literacy needs for all students across all grades. The superintendent takes the time to continually repeat this message so that it is not lost among other competing demands.

Although the superintendent does not teach, the importance of being aware of the special needs of each instructional area and being supportive in this regard was mentioned. The superintendent expressed this point by stating: "If we identify priorities we need to ensure that we support them adequately". Without this broad knowledge base the superintendent could not provide the teaching and planning time teachers need to effectively carry out their duties as they do not understand the needs of staff. The residency model is an example of the superintendent being aware of the needs of teachers and implementing a support to assist them.

When it came to discerning how much time the superintendent directed towards instructional leadership responsibilities and managerial duties, a “10% - 90%” split was quickly noted. According to the superintendent, ten percent of their time was spent on instructional leadership responsibilities. This observation was very disappointing for the superintendent:

It seems the more I attempt to engage in instructional leadership activities the more administrivia or managerial tasks become obstacles. This is quite frustrating especially when we are attempting to focus on becoming stronger instructional leaders.

While recognizing the importance of providing teaching and planning time the superintendent was very often not involved in these instructional leadership activities largely because of managerial duties.

*b. Principals' Perspectives*

In order for principals to provide adequate teaching and planning time for teachers they needed to be somewhat innovative in this regard. Two examples of these innovative approaches mentioned by principals were having subject specialists on staff and providing collaborative planning time both within and between schools.

When it came to the topic of the development of teachers and creating a team that has multiple skills available to be utilized and shared, some principals would hire subject specialist teachers rather than generalist teachers. These subject specialists would possess either additional training or credentials in a particular subject area that some principals saw as advantageous. For example, if these principals were looking to hire a

Math teacher they would hire a teacher who had an education degree as well as a math degree before they would hire a teacher with only an education degree. These principals reasoned that teachers with these additional skills or credentials enhanced the pedagogical discussion among staff and provided more indepth knowledge of the curriculum that could be shared with other colleagues:

When it comes to the hiring of teachers, I needed to be strategic and insightful in my decision making. Teachers who have either more experience or training, while generally more expensive to hire, provide more benefits and opportunities – assuming they fit in with the rest of the staff. (Kelly Interview, p. 2)

Principals expressed that these types of teachers knew how to plan more effectively, ensured that there was a good fit between the curriculum and what the teacher was attempting to teach, and how the teacher would assess for student understanding of the material.

As it related to the theme of teaching and planning time, most principals expressed the necessity for collaborative planning time both within a school setting and between schools. With regards to collaborative planning time within a school principals would schedule teacher timetables so that strategic common preparation time could be provided for specific teachers. For example, if there were three grade four teachers in a school they would be provided with common preparation time so that discussions related to teaching and planning could occur together. In order to free up teachers to take advantage of this time either the principal or vice-principal would teach all of the grade four students health or physical education with the assistance of support staff. Principals

saw this as a unique and strategic approach to encourage teachers to engage in professional discussions relative to teaching and planning: “In order to facilitate professional dialogue and growth we needed to provide professional development time that was embedded within the school day” (Marissa Interview, p. 1). Some principals asked teachers who were given common preparation time to submit a brief report about what was discussed in their meetings. This requirement provided the principal with updated information about teacher growth and identified any teacher issues that needed to be addressed. This requirement also made teachers aware that their principal had expectations of them coming from their common preparation time meetings:

This simple accountability step worked in two ways. It let teachers know that I cared about what they were discussing and would do what I could to assist them in their growth and development. But it also let them know that this time was not simply provided to let them complain about students. Thankfully almost all teachers appreciated the opportunity that had been given to them and worked very diligently. (Jason Interview, p. 3)

In this particular school district principals have the flexibility of scheduling one half day of additional professional development time per month beyond what is currently allocated in the school year calendar. The stipulations for invoking this option are that schools do this in consultation with their stakeholders, these changes in the school calendar are adequately communicated with stakeholders well in advance, and the Alberta Education requirement relative to the number of instructional hours are met. Principals saw this as a welcome opportunity to plan and coordinate collaborative



planning time between schools. The primary rationale for this initiative was to encourage professional dialogue about teaching and planning time among a greater number of colleagues:

I saw this as a wonderful opportunity to share skills and knowledge beyond our staffroom. If there was a science teacher expert at another school down the road I wanted to give my science teachers the opportunity to meet and engage in discussions with this individual. The hope being that my teachers would learn something new to use in their classrooms. (Sean Interview, p. 3)

Having the ability to plan and implement this collaborative time between schools has quickly become a part of this school district's culture.

While most principals do not teach, they clearly described what they saw as the instructional needs for teachers. Almost all principals discussed how important it was for teachers to be able to better differentiate their teaching in order to meet the growing needs of increasingly inclusive classrooms. The perspective of most principals as it related to this point can be summarized in the following statement: "Our classrooms are changing and becoming more diverse. Our teachers need the skills to meet these needs" (Michelle Interview, p. 2). Principals expressed that they are supportive of a more inclusive environment in their school and in their classrooms, however, preparing teachers to possess the necessary skills in these progressively diverse surroundings was an important concern for them.

When it came to discussing how principals spend their days either focusing on instructional leadership responsibilities or managerial duties, a large percentage of

principals expressed that there was a synergistic relationship between their instructional leadership responsibilities and managerial duties. When pressed to ascribe a percentage breakdown as to what types of tasks occupied their time on a daily basis, more principals indicated a 70% - 30% split, with 30% of their time being directed towards instructional leadership responsibilities. Principals did describe with frustration how managerial duties interrupted their desire to become stronger instructional leaders: “It’s hard to be an effective instructional leader when the furnace is not running or I have an upset parent in my office or central office is looking for some information” (Michelle Interview, p. 2). Principals recognized the importance of providing teaching and planning time though they are often not involved in these instructional leadership activities largely because of managerial duties.

*c. Teachers’ Perspectives*

As it related to the findings of teachers when they discussed teaching and planning time, almost all teachers were very appreciative of having common planning time. Teachers saw common planning time as a means to engage in professional discussions that likely would not be possible if this opportunity did not exist. Common planning time was also seen as a mechanism that facilitated team building among teachers: “Common planning time has greatly assisted our grade pod in collaborative planning” (Crystal Interview, p. 2). However, it should be noted that while teachers were appreciative of teaching and planning time, a large number of teachers felt that the superintendent and principals provided little direction and even less follow-up as to what was supposed to happen during this time. Teachers who made these observations were

looking for the superintendent and principals to be more actively involved in these sessions and be available to provide guidance and direction.

Teachers were requested to describe what were their key instructional needs and how did their administration support these needs. Most teachers expressed that their key instructional needs related to the desire to spend time with colleagues “unpacking” the curriculum so that they had a better understanding of the specific outcomes to be accomplished:

There are so many curriculum objectives that it is hard to decipher what they all mean or how much emphasis I should be placing on each one in my classes.

Talking with other teachers how they approach this concern has been valuable for me (James Interview, p. 1).

Principals were most often described as attempting to create environments where teachers could teach and plan together as being the primary way they supported the instructional needs of teachers. Some teachers did express that they were fortunate to have principals who were knowledgeable about their particular subject area and could empathize with their concerns more closely and provided more concrete and specific solutions.

Lastly, when teachers were given the opportunity to express what they thought the portion of their principal’s day was spent on instructional leadership responsibilities and managerial tasks, all teachers stated that their principals devoted a large portion of their day dealing with managerial tasks. Most teachers described this, at minimum, as being a “90% - 10%” split with the bulk of the principal’s day being focused on managerial tasks.

Some teachers felt that 99% of their principal's day was allocated towards managerial tasks.

An examination of the school district's three year education plan, annual education results report, and school improvement plans indicated the importance of providing supportive teaching and planning time for teachers within the district and at individual schools. These areas of focus are seen as being central in the drive to improve student achievement.

For the participants in this study the theme of teaching and planning time described the ability of the superintendent and principals to support teachers so that they have a better understanding of the curriculum. Several examples given to describe these support mechanisms related to the residency model, revised professional development sessions, and providing collaborative planning time for teachers. While the superintendent and principals expressed a strong desire to spend more time with teachers in this area managerial duties and tasks consistently and regularly interrupted this from occurring.

### **3. Managing Classroom Instruction Theme**

For the purpose of this study the theme of managing classroom instruction describes the ability of a superintendent or principal to provide feedback and information to teachers that encourages them to further develop their skills. The theme of managing classroom instruction closely aligns with Krug's (1992) instructional leadership dimension of supervision and supporting teaching.

*a. Superintendent Perspectives*

As it related to the theme of managing classroom instruction, the superintendent articulated the desire to be “in tune” or oriented to the needs of staff development and their requirements for managing classroom instruction. For this superintendent this meant attempting to create learning environments where teachers could feel safe trying new teaching strategies or techniques in their classrooms: “Teachers should feel confident and assured to try new things without worrying exclusively about outcomes”. This superintendent also felt that it was important to construct a climate where staff could grow and learn together with the necessary resources available to support this growth. This type of atmosphere was needed if the effective managing of classroom instruction was to occur.

With regards to staff development and managing classroom instruction the superintendent saw their role as ensuring that the right people are providing the necessary supports and training for teachers at the right time. In this fashion teachers are receiving timely and appropriate assistance that positively affected their classroom instruction:

The ability of teachers to effectively meet the needs of students is critical.

Therefore my role is to make sure they have the skills and supports needed, in a timely manner, so they can be successful.

This superintendent further went on to describe that it is also important to provide timely and appropriate professional development for principals so that they can effectively assist teachers. From the superintendent’s perspective principals have a critical role in the managing of classroom instruction:

If the role of the teacher is vital for student success then the role of the principal is also vital. Principals make sure that not only are teachers on the bus, but they are in the right seats. In other words teachers need to have the skills and training to be successful and it is the principal's responsibility to help make that happen.

With regards to encouraging teachers to continually improve their management of classroom instruction, the superintendent saw himself as a role model for staff: "If I am asking teachers to continually seek out new ideas and grow as a professional, I better be prepared to do the same thing". From the superintendent's perspective this meant that they needed to overtly communicate with all stakeholders how they had been involved with professional development related to managing classroom instruction, and how it had impacted what they did. The superintendent felt this approach was appropriate so that all staff could appreciate how they were all learning together and this would have a positive influence in the classroom.

In addition the superintendent expressed that if they were attempting to be a role model for teachers, they also needed to strive to create a culture where teachers worked in a safe environment and where informed experimentation and innovation was encouraged. The superintendent voiced this point by expressing: "Teachers should feel safe and confident to try new approaches in their classrooms and not worry about getting whacked by others". In order for this type of atmosphere to develop and flourish several initiatives were implemented to support this. For example, mentorship programs were established between schools and departments to facilitate the "cross-pollination" of ideas and

techniques between teachers. In this manner the desire was to enhance the skill sets of teachers to effectively manage classroom instruction.

*b. Principals' Perspectives*

For principals to effectively manage classroom instruction three components were mentioned. First, principals saw themselves as being a mentor or provider of information: “We see that teachers need a colleague to bounce ideas off of” (Sean Interview, p. 4). Second, they saw themselves as a role model and coach of necessary skills that teachers should possess if they were to successfully manage classroom instruction. Lastly, principals saw that they needed to ensure that teachers were in a position to succeed. Many principals broached this subject by declaring: “If my teachers have what they need to meet the needs of students we all will be successful” (Peter Interview, p. 3). Ultimately by implementing these three components principals attempted to safeguard a good fit between curriculum objectives and what was being assessed, and actively supported the understanding of the curriculum by teachers. By assisting teachers to manage classroom instruction principals were endeavoring to emphasize instructional leadership rather than administrative duties.

With regards to teacher professional development as it related to managing classroom instruction, principals saw their role as “mentor, supporter, mediator, seeker, and provider of information on a regular basis” (Diane Interview, p. 3). Principals saw their responsibility in teacher professional development as being “huge” and should occupy a significant portion of their time. Some principals described this area of emphasis as “needing to plant seeds” (Cathy Interview, p. 3) so that their teachers took

ownership of their professional development and it was the principal's obligation to provide guidance and suggestions to them. Lastly, other principals expressed how it was necessary to establish proper processes that made accessing professional development to improve managing classroom instruction easier for teachers:

If I provide or create a system where teachers can access professional development in this area, that makes life less complicated for them, I am betting that my teachers will be more likely to sign-up for professional development that focuses on this topic. And so far this has been the case. (Kevin Interview, p.4)

When principals described how they encouraged teachers to continually improve their professional practices for managing classroom instruction, there were a variety of responses given. Some principals would complete this task at the beginning of the school year when they discussed professional growth plans with teachers during one-on-one meetings. Other principals saw that it was necessary to update teachers on any professional readings that they had recently completed. Some principals would engage in "critical conversations" (Jim Interview, p. 4) with teachers following a walk-through of their classroom. Other principals found that they needed to challenge teachers to encourage them to grow and try new techniques. Lastly, some principals saw that they were required to facilitate professional conversations between teachers that stimulated them to "share with reckless abandon" (Sean Interview, p. 4) their skills and ideas about improving their professional practices as it related to improving the management of classroom instruction.



In the area of coaching and advising teachers in a supportive manner about managing classroom instruction, principals tended to see themselves as attempting to create an atmosphere that optimized the opportunities for teachers to be better learners. Principals also described spending considerable time trying to convince teachers that they were looking out for their best interests in a “safety net fashion” (Dean Interview, p. 4). Principals also expressed that they should be seen as a trusted colleague who would support teachers rather than evaluate them if a teacher were to bring to them a component of their teaching that they wanted to improve upon.

*c. Teachers’ Perspectives*

After reflecting upon the components of managing classroom instruction, most teachers felt their principals had a good sense of their professional development needs and that they were continually encouraged to seek out and try new professional development. Principals were seen as being largely supportive of teachers and inspired a wide variety of professional development options: “My principal is amazing at encouraging professional development opportunities” (Shelia Interview, p. 4). Teachers also indicated that they preferred to see their principals also actively involved in seeking out and trying new professional development as they believed this set a good example for staff and helped to create a tone in their school where professional development was seen as an important component of being a professional and a good teacher. Lastly, it was interesting to note that some teachers willingly wanted to engage in collaborative discussions with their principals following a classroom walk-through being completed by their principal. For example, many teachers described this observation in this manner: “I

have not had any real evaluations since my first year of teaching. I like when my principal gives me feedback about my teaching” (Shelia Interview, p. 4).

With regards to teacher development, most teachers felt that their preferred principal’s role was to be a mentor for them. Teachers were reluctant to engage in discussions about their development with their principal if they used or took an evaluative tone. Teachers expressed they wanted their principals to be aware and sensitive to their professional needs and also provide suggestions as to how they could improve their teaching strategies and techniques:

At times I need to remind my principal that when I bring questions to him about my growth as a teacher I do so not because he is my boss but rather because I am looking for suggestions or ideas how to get better at my craft. (Emily Interview, p. 3)

Lastly, a small number of teachers described how they thought not enough follow through or support was provided by their principal as it related to their professional growth plan (PGP). In this school district a teacher’s PGP is to be reviewed and discussed at the beginning and at the end of the school year. These teachers indicated that they would have liked more dialogue and support of their PGP several times throughout the school year. The rationale given for these observations was that these teachers wanted this type of contact more regularly as it kept them focused on their PGP and not likely to randomly select professional development initiatives or opportunities as they became aware of them during the school year.

Most teachers expressed that overall they saw their principals as being very encouraging in supporting them to continually improve their teaching practices. Principals proactively made teachers aware of professional development opportunities and urged them to participate in a variety of professional development initiatives. A very small number of teachers indicated that their principal was not encouraging of their involvement in professional development opportunities: “Professional development of teachers is not a focus or priority in our school and our principal is not overly involved in this area” (Simone Interview, p. 3). Some teachers also voiced that limited financial resources impacted their level of involvement in professional development activities.

When teachers were asked to respond to how their principal coached or advised staff in a supportive manner, teachers described their principals as having an open door policy and outlined a willingness to engage in professional discussions. These discussions would center on how to improve skills not only for teachers but for principals as well. Most principals were seen as a role model who was attempting to continually improve their abilities and actively modeled this mentality to teachers. Teachers were appreciative of the efforts of their principals in this regard and their perception of the “strength of character” of their principal significantly rose as a result of them being proactive in this area. A very small number of teachers indicated that their principal did not coach or advise them in a supportive manner.

An examination of the school district three year education plan, annual education results report, and school improvement plans did not indicate that managing classroom instruction was an area of focus or concern. The identified priorities for this school

district and schools in these documents were improving the literacy levels of students, increasing graduation rates, moving towards a more inclusive model for special education. As it related to these priorities there was some mention of improving classroom instruction but it was minimal in detail.

For the superintendent, principals, and teachers in this study managing classroom instruction described the ability of the superintendent or principals to provide feedback and information to teachers that encouraged them to further develop their skills. For the superintendent and principals this primarily meant ensuring that the right people were providing the necessary supports and training for teachers at the right time. In this manner teachers were receiving timely and appropriate assistance that positively affected their classroom instruction. The superintendent and principals also mentioned the importance of being a role model themselves for teachers in this regard by seeking out and participating in professional development that further developed their skills. Ultimately the superintendent and principals were attempting to create an atmosphere that optimized the opportunities for teachers to become better at their craft. Teachers, by and large, were appreciative of these efforts and saw the superintendent and their principals as being supportive of their desire to improve their teaching practices.

#### **4. Student Success/Progress Theme**

For the purpose of this study the theme of student success/progress describes the ability of a superintendent or principal to use student assessment results to help students and teachers to improve. The theme of student success/progress closely aligns with Krug's (1992) instructional leadership dimension of monitoring student progress.

*a. Superintendent Perspectives*

As it related to the theme of monitoring student success/progress, the superintendent indicated that as an instructional leader they attempted to use assessment results in ways that helped principals, teachers, and students improve and that also helped parents understand where and why improvement was needed. The superintendent also described how multiple sources of data were used to gauge if student success/progress was being made: “Data needs to be used in a constructive and not a punitive manner to measure student development”. Lastly, the superintendent expressed that data, theory, and practice needed to be used in conjunction with each other to determine whether student success/progress was being made or not and also to provide possible resolutions for areas of concern.

In light of the superintendent’s observations described above it was interesting to note that the superintendent did not assist staff to review and analyze student work to determine whether student success/progress is being made or not. The superintendent articulated that other individuals within the school district are largely responsible for these duties. However, the superintendent did state that they meet with principals regularly to review data and results for their schools which is then used to develop and implement school improvement projects.

The superintendent did observe that data, theory, and practice needed to be used in conjunction with each other to determine whether student success/progress was being made or not. For the superintendent it was important to begin with a thorough understanding of theory which would start the discussion relative to the significant

attributes that positively impact student success/progress. Once the philosophical pillars, based on current research, were outlined the research is then used to put the theory into practice or action. Data is then utilized to reveal successes and weaknesses in practices. Once these results are known the cycle begins again.

While the superintendent did stress that provincial accountability test and exam results are downplayed in this school district, most student success/progress discussions centered on this data. However, the superintendent did express that data on student success/progress is used to determine whether growth is being made and not in a punitive manner.

*b. Principals' Perspectives*

From the perspective of principals, the use of data to monitor student success/progress was something that they emphasized but also recognized was not done often or thoroughly enough: "Overall data is not used well to help staff design strategies for student improvement. People talk a good game but very little follow through is done" (Hannah Interview, p. 5). It was apparent from principals that data analysis which could impact teaching strategies that would influence student success/progress is not currently completed at a level that they wish to be at. While principals indicated that at times common preparation and planning times were used by teachers to examine student progress, this practice is not pervasively implemented or followed.

As it related to principals assisting teachers to review and analyze student work to determine whether student success/progress was occurring, all principals described the importance of this function: "Understanding current student results and progress is

important in influencing future teaching strategies” (Jim Interview, p. 5). Data analysis was seen as a vital feature in ensuring student success/progress was happening.

However, at the same time principals also described that data analysis to monitor student success/progress occurred infrequently throughout the school year and with very little regularity. Analysis of student progress/success usually happened when provincial accountability tests and exams were released and sometimes when student report cards were produced and distributed.

When principals were asked to explain how they used data with teachers as a tool to design strategies for improvement some of them described how data was broadly used: “For us data is used extensively to inform decisions” (Lisa Interview, p. 5). This is surprising given the observations mentioned above. Once again the bulk of data used to design strategies for improvement were provincial accountability tests and exams. Some principals described that they have a systematic application or analysis of student results, however, teachers are left to analyze most of the data on their own and change their strategies as a result. Little follow through is provided to teachers by principals in these situations.

In discussing the connection between theory, practice, and data and encouraging teachers to embrace all three of these elements in advancing their work, most principals described that theory asks teachers to try new teaching strategies and put these strategies into practice. Data is then used to inform teachers if student success/progress has occurred. However, most principals expressed that this process of connecting theory,

practice, and data is not done particularly well, and if it does occur little follow through is provided at any level.

*c. Teachers' Perspectives*

As it related to the theme of monitoring student success/progress the majority of responses from teachers were unexpected. Most teachers related that they were unsure how to analyze student data in order to influence their teaching practices: "I know that I should know how to examine student results to help future instruction, but I don't know how to effectively do this" (Carol Interview, p. 6). These observations from teachers were surprising because data analysis and using data to inform instructional decisions to support student achievement has been an area of emphasis in this school district for the past five years. Teachers expressed that they were looking to their administration, in particular their principals, for assistance in using data to improve student development and progress. Although teachers described an abundance of data being available to review, most teachers indicated that very little follow-up by their principals occurred related to how they analyzed data or how it impacted their future instruction in the classroom. One teacher summarized this point by expressing: "Other than looking at provincial achievement test results when they come out, we rarely look at or discuss how results can be used to improve student progress" (Marie Interview, p. 5).

When teachers were prompted to describe how their principal assisted them to review and analyze student work to determine that student growth was occurring, most teachers indicated that their principal rarely did this if at all. According to some teachers, a small number of principals would make themselves available to teachers to review and



analyze data to influence future instruction but only when asked to do so. Teachers were largely left this responsibility to be completed on their own.

All teachers expressed that provincial accountability tests and exams were almost exclusively provided by the principal as the only source of data to be analyzed and used to influence future instruction in classrooms.

Lastly, when the topic of the link between theory, practice, and data and how this could be used by the principal to improve their instruction with students, almost all teachers indicated that this was not occurring in their school. Although a small number of teachers did mention that with their Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS) project the link between theory, practice, and data was previously stated by their principal, the vast majority of teachers revealed this did not and was not happening at their school.

A review of the school district's three year education plan, annual education results report, and school improvement plans indicated that monitoring student success/progress was a very significant component of these documents. Extensive reporting and analysis of student success/progress data was included and described in these documents. These results formed the basis for most if not all improvement initiatives. It is interesting to note that while the superintendent and principals communicated that provincial accountability tests and exams are downplayed, these results appear almost exclusively in these documents.

For the purpose of this study the theme of student success/progress described the ability of the superintendent and principals to use student assessment results to help

students and teachers to improve. It was particularly interesting to note that while the superintendent and principals recognized the importance of strategically analyzing student data to improve instruction, they also expressed that this was not done often or thoroughly enough. Teachers also described that they were seeking support in this area from their superintendent and principals and were disappointed not to receive it. Lastly, the bulk of data used to design strategies for improvement was gleaned from provincial accountability tests and examinations.

## **5. Positive Atmosphere Theme**

For the purpose of this study the theme of positive atmosphere describes the ability of a superintendent or principal to motivate teachers to improve. The theme of positive atmosphere closely aligns with Krug's (1992) instructional leadership dimension of promoting an instructional climate.

### *a. Superintendent Perspectives*

For the superintendent it was important for them that their leadership style helped to create a climate where teachers were motivated to do what needs to be done in order to meet the needs of students and where learning is exciting for students and teachers. The superintendent saw that it was essential to nurture learning in multiple ways, see that teachers are supported for their achievements and were encouraged to be innovative. In this fashion a positive atmosphere would be developed and implemented in this school district that valued the gifts and skills of students and teachers.

In order for a positive atmosphere to be created the superintendent thought it was important to focus on two characteristics: be a learner themselves; and create processes

and mechanisms to move the organization forward. For the superintendent, they saw one of their roles as establishing “processes that allow others to more effectively complete their jobs”.

The characteristic of being a learner themselves was significant for the superintendent for a number of reasons. First, by being a learner themselves the superintendent was in a unique position to leverage organizational components to bring a focus on instructional leadership: “If people see that I am putting an emphasis on instructional leadership and striving to create a positive atmosphere, all other components of our school system will have this emphasis as well”. Next, the superintendent mentioned that leading by example helped to foster a community of life-long learners. The superintendent summarized this observation by stating: “When I put myself out there as being a learner myself others have bought into this perspective and we have become a dynamic community of learners no matter what our ages or at what point we are at in our careers”. Lastly, establishing and recognizing that a sense of community has been created has facilitated the formation of teams coming together which has constructively impacted the development of a positive atmosphere in this school district. The superintendent was very definitive in their description of this point by expressing: “A pleasant surprise out of this focus on all of us being learners has been the realization that we can accomplish more and bigger things by working in teams which have naturally come together”.

The superintendent also mentioned that another characteristic of working towards creating a positive atmosphere in the school district was to develop and implement

processes and mechanisms that moved the school system forward. For example, from the superintendent's perspective one of their roles was to reduce the amount of paperwork that was required to be completed by teachers if they were involved with a grant that had been provided by Alberta Education. The superintendent reasoned that if additional supports could be given to teachers so that they could focus more on the purpose of the grant rather than on the required paperwork the likelihood of student success and teachers being motivated would increase. In instances such as the one described above the superintendent would contract out the completion of Alberta Education required paperwork to recently retired teachers. The superintendent saw this as a means for teachers to be attentive to the important task of working with students, not being distracted by secondary responsibilities, likely increasing the chances of student and teacher success, and hopefully impacting the establishment of a positive atmosphere. For example, as it related to this observation the superintendent conveyed: "At times we need to be creative when we are looking for ways to establish a positive atmosphere. Most solutions are quite straight forward and not too expensive to implement".

When the superintendent was asked to further explain how they have striven to create and foster a community of learners that work towards establishing a positive atmosphere, they once again reiterated that by being a learner themselves they were in a unique position to leverage all components of the school district to focus on instructional leadership and its various elements. The superintendent was succinct in their description of this point by voicing: "It is satisfying to observe how my behaviour as a life-long

learner can influence others into coming together and as a result creates this wonderfully positive climate to work in”.

The superintendent went on further to explain that when it came to the encouragement of teachers to be innovative and create engaging learning environments for students, they described the desire to develop an environment where it is alright for teachers to fail. The superintendent articulated that they were attempting to produce a tradition or culture where it is safe for teachers to fail but at least they tried something new in their classrooms with their students: “I would rather teachers try something new and fail than repeat the same lesson plan year after year”.

The superintendent also saw that providing opportunities for teachers to plan together was important in the establishment of a positive atmosphere. The superintendent reasoned that if teachers could plan together and share each other’s successes and failures a stronger community of learners would develop that would progressively influence a positive atmosphere in their school district: “Teachers planning and sharing together is key in creating a positive climate”. When asked to describe how collaborative planning time is provided to teachers the superintendent explained how the school year calendar was developed to ensure that collaborative planning days were included.

#### *b. Principals’ Perspectives*

Principals described that it was important for them to lead by example and be a significant part of any change processes that were occurring in their school. In this manner principals were seen as a proactive member of their school community and as a resource that teachers could consult with for guidance and assistance. For this role to be

meaningful and successful for principals they needed to regularly and constantly seek out new ideas, keep up with the latest research, and share these items with teachers.

Principals who involved themselves in these activities were seen as being credible and had real life experiences to share with teachers: “If I am going to ask my teachers to be risk takers and innovative I better be as well if I am going to have any clout with them” (Korby Interview, p. 6).

Almost all principals discussed the significance of encouraging all teachers to try new things in their classrooms and how this focus assisted in creating a positive atmosphere in their schools. For example, most principals summarized this point by stating: “It is important to be the facilitator or attempt to motivate staff to seek out new professional development so that they stay fresh and their classroom instruction is current” (Ben Interview, p. 6). Principals described how a staff of teachers that saw themselves as risk takers or were willing to regularly try new things was very invigorating and created an enthusiastic and stimulating work environment. This was seen as the ultimate benefit in encouraging teachers to try new teaching strategies in their classrooms.

An unexpected and interesting component of most principals’ feedback to the notion of creating a positive atmosphere was the value of taking time to celebrate teacher successes. The rationale given for this view by principals was that if teachers were encouraged to seek out and try new things in their classrooms it was equally important to acknowledge them for these efforts. This process was seen as a simple but effective means to continue to motivate teachers and recognize them for their dedication: “Our

administration team has found that if we are asking staff to be innovative it is important for us to collectively celebrate these successes” (Korby Interview, p. 7). For example, in one particular school they have a hard hat painted green with a variety of educationally focused stickers on it that was given out at their monthly staff meeting to the teacher who has tried something new in their classroom. This unpretentious gesture has become a significant part of this school’s culture and teachers wear the green hard hat with pride and looked forward to knowing who would be receiving it at the next staff meeting.

When principals were asked to further explain how they created and fostered a community of learners most responded that it was again important to lead by example in this regard. Most principals mentioned items such as “walking your talk” or “credibility by example” or “be a part of the change process” as examples of their desire and actions in striving to develop a community of learners that would supportively influence the establishment of a positive atmosphere.

Principals were also invited to describe how they encouraged staff to be innovative and create a variety of learning environments in their schools. Most principals commented that it was important to give teachers permission to try new things in their classrooms, to explore alternative teaching strategies, and to stretch themselves as professionals. Principals did not want to be seen as stifling teacher enthusiasm or motivation in this area. However, principals quickly stated that while having this permissive philosophy to seek out and try new things was valuable, some principals called this approach as having a “share fair” where teachers regularly revealed what new

and innovative strategies they had either recently read about or had implemented in their classroom.

Providing opportunities for teachers to plan and share together was seen as an important element in creating a positive environment in their schools by principals. Almost all principals were able to provide collaborative planning time for teachers by being creative with their school timetable and scheduling common preparation time for teachers. Most schools were able to “align teacher preparation periods to encourage common planning and professional discussions among these teachers” (Dean Interview, p. 5) so that a more productive setting could be created among teachers. The school year calendar was also mentioned as a mechanism that provided preparation and planning time for teachers both within and between schools.

### *c. Teachers' Perspectives*

To facilitate the establishment of a positive atmosphere in schools, teachers commented how they strongly felt the need to have collaborative planning time as a part of their day: “I know that teachers on our staff really appreciate the efforts that go into providing common preparation time for them” (Ashley Interview, p. 6). Teachers viewed this collaborative planning time as a means to engage in professional dialogue with colleagues, learn more about the curriculum, and glean teaching ideas and strategies from others. Teachers regularly commented that their principals encouraged them to participate in a variety of professional development opportunities: “Our principal regularly pushes us to try new professional development” (Megan Interview, p. 5). Lastly, teachers saw it as being very important that the superintendent and their principals



were role models and engaged in professional development activities as well: “Our staff likes to see our administrators walking the talk. They sign up for various professional development sessions as they ask us to do” (Paulette Interview, p. 6).

Teachers were further prompted to describe how their principal attempted to create a community of learners in their school. Most teachers discussed how their principal had structured the school timetable so that teachers would have common preparation time. For example, in one particular middle school all the grade eight and nine Math teachers had common preparation time. During this common preparation time teachers involved themselves in discussions about the curriculum and how to teach specific concepts. Another component of principals striving to develop a community of learners was their insistence that teachers engage in a diversity of professional development opportunities. Teachers were encouraged to participate in these professional development opportunities with colleagues from their school so that a common experience could be shared with one another and brought back to the rest of the staff for examination and reflection. Staff meetings were also mentioned by some teachers as an opportunity to come together as a community of learners and share best practices with one another. These teachers also stated how these chances would unfortunately usually fall to the bottom of the staff meeting agenda and only occurred if time allowed.

An examination of the school district’s three year education plan, annual education results report, and school improvement plans suggested that creating and actively implementing a positive atmosphere was a significant component of this school

district's and schools' desire to improve student achievement. These documents outlined the necessity of the superintendent and principals to be learners themselves and of the importance of implementing processes to streamline the responsibilities of teachers as being the most significant strategies mentioned in this regard. The documents also indicated that encouraging teachers to seek out and try new techniques in their classrooms, principals being seen proactive in their implementation of new initiatives, and providing opportunities for teachers to plan and engage in professional discussions were most often mentioned in these documents.

For this study the theme of positive atmosphere described the ability of the superintendent and principals to motivate teachers to improve. Ultimately, in this area, the superintendent and principals were attempting to create a climate where teachers were motivated to do what needs to be done in order to meet the needs of students and where learning is exciting for students and teachers. Teachers are to be supported and acknowledged for their achievements and encouraged to be innovative.

This section described the findings from participant interviews. These finds were organized into five broad themes of instructional leadership: vision/mission; teaching and planning time; managing classroom instruction; student success/progress; and positive atmosphere. The next section outlines the challenges that the superintendent and principals experienced as they attempted to be effective instructional leaders.

## **Challenges to Instructional Leadership**

The research question used to guide this study determined that a qualitative approach was more appropriate since the study sought to understand the lived experience of the participants, how meaning is constructed, and the connection between instructional leadership and its challenges. Using an exploratory case study approach greatly assisted in understanding the complex social phenomena of superintendent and principal instructional leadership and the challenges that impact these practices. The next section describes the findings of all of the respondents as they described the challenges to the themes identified as instructional leadership practices.

### **1. Vision/Mission Challenges**

For the purpose of this study the theme of vision/mission is the ability of a superintendent or principal to articulate the objective, reasons, and purposes of the school district or school in an explicit manner.

#### *a. Superintendent Perspectives*

Even though the superintendent was appreciative of the feedback contributed by stakeholders as it pertained to the school district's vision/mission, they also described a number of significant challenges in this regard.

For the superintendent the initial challenge for the development of the vision/mission was the lengthy process implemented to collect input from all stakeholders. In this particular school district a series of evening open forums were organized where stakeholders were invited to attend a "world café" event that solicited feedback to several educational prompts. For example, one educational prompt used to

gather input was “If you were superintendent for a day what would you do to improve our educational system?” After the responses had been collated they were then voted on by the participants to determine significant areas of focus. These “world café” events occurred over several months and culminated with the superintendent analyzing this data for common themes that were then used to influence the development of the school district’s three year education plan. While considered thorough and necessary to gather responses from stakeholders the superintendent did comment that this process was daunting: “It took considerable time and energy and many staff members to collect and analyze feedback from stakeholders”.

The superintendent went on to further describe that by following the consultation process outlined above exposed the school district to a broad range of ideas that were difficult to bring together into a coherent manner. The superintendent articulated this observation by stating: “It was interesting to note that while many people contributed to the development of our vision, it was extremely difficult to align these ideas”. Although seen as worthwhile it was also “risky” allowing an extensive spectrum of stakeholders to provide input into the development of the school district’s vision/mission because it was challenging to determine if these ideas were representative of the overall educational community or simply issues for an isolated group.

#### *b. Principals’ Perspectives*

For principals the process of bringing together multiple perspectives of stakeholders into a coherent vision/mission was difficult and time consuming as well: “Although I am committed to hearing and understanding what my community has to

suggest, it takes a lot of my time to process this information” (Lisa Interview, p. 2).

Attempting to align and understand the feedback provided by stakeholders was seen by principals as being essential but arduous.

Another challenge described by principals as it related to their school vision/mission and their instructional leadership skills was that people on their staff had varying levels of commitment to the vision/mission. Most principals discussed this point in this fashion: “I see that different people have different ideas of what exactly the mission means or is” (Dean Interview, p. 1). This discrepancy of understanding of the school’s vision/mission led to confusion and undermined its priorities.

A large number of principals also indicated that they saw the development of the vision/mission statement process as being passé and struggled with the value of a vision/mission for their school. For example, one principal who was particularly critical of time being spent discussing vision/mission stated: “I get frustrated with discussions related to mission or vision. Time needs to be better spent in more important and demanding areas” (Kevin Interview, p. 1). These principals expressed that while a vision/mission had some value to provide for the achievement of school objectives, the time and energy it took to develop these ideas were too intensive and detracted from other priority areas.

Lastly principals articulated that the time needed to develop, review, and refine a vision/mission for their school was often set aside to deal with more emergent items: “With so many other competing duties discussion of mission usually gets tabled at staff meetings” (Jason Interview, p. 1). Principals frequently saw that the creation and

modification of their school's vision/mission was something that competed with other pertinent issues to be addressed with staff and was regularly postponed or delayed.

*c. Teachers' Perspectives*

For teachers, the challenges they saw for the superintendent and principals being able to solidify a comprehensive vision/mission centered on divergent perspectives and attempting to unify these viewpoints in a coherent manner. Surprisingly several teachers noted that a significant number of their colleagues possessed a negative attitude to the school's vision/mission that adversely impacted its assimilation and acceptance: "Naysayers on staff significantly influence the meaning of our mission" (James Interview, p. 1). Some teachers also described how some of their colleagues did not want to hear or engage in discussion about a vision/mission: "People are too busy to consider this important" (Pat Interview, p. 1). Lastly, personality conflicts between the superintendent, principals, and teachers were seen as detracting from this instructional leadership area. For example, one teacher described this type of teacher-administrator dynamic by expressing: "Baggage between administration and some teachers gets in the way of us moving forward with this" (Shelia Interview, p. 1).

As it related to the theme of vision/mission, the superintendent and principals in this study expressed several challenges to their instructional leadership practices in this area. The superintendent and principals described the process to collect stakeholder input for the development of their vision/mission as being lengthy and cumbersome. Once feedback had been collected from stakeholders it also took considerable effort to synthesize these ideas in a comprehensive and meaningful manner. Some principals also

expressed that it was difficult to achieve a consistent and unified commitment to the vision/mission among teachers. Lastly, teachers also described “nay-sayers” as significantly impacting the acceptance of the vision/mission.

## **2. Teaching and Planning Time Challenges**

For the purpose of this study the theme of teaching and planning time describes the ability of a superintendent or principal to support teachers so that they have a better understanding of the curriculum.

### *a. Superintendent Perspectives*

Although the superintendent recognized the importance of providing teaching and planning time as a benefit in creating a culture where students and teachers were encouraged to incorporate new ideas and strategies, organizational tasks and responsibilities distracted the superintendent from these instructional leadership duties: “It is difficult to be an effective instructional leader in this area when there are so many competing and important responsibilities”. The superintendent outlined that the variety of obligations demanded of them by their board of trustees and Alberta Education greatly reduced the amount of time that they could focus on this instructional leadership area.

### *b. Principals' Perspectives*

For principals there were four challenges described as it related to teaching and planning time. Almost all principals expressed how the managerial duties of their jobs greatly detracted from their ability to be an effective instructional leader in this area: “I find that the paperwork is overwhelming and takes me away from what I really want to

be focusing on” (Breagh Interview, p. 3). The accountability responsibilities were seen by all principals as being time intensive and mostly unnecessary.

Principals also mentioned that it was difficult to balance the needs of the school district with the priorities of their schools. This was seen as an ongoing struggle for principals as it was problematic to be a strong advocate for the school district and still maintain their role as an instructional leader of their school.

A majority of principals also struggled with the responsibilities of teaching and planning time because they had several teachers on their staff that were reluctant to leave their classrooms to participate in professional development. One principal summarized this point by expressing: “We find that our teachers would rather not miss teaching their students then attend professional development events” (Michelle Interview, p. 2). This was seen as awkward for principals as they wanted to respect the desire of teachers to be present for their students but they also wanted to encourage their teachers to be involved with current professional development and the positive impact it could have.

Lastly, principals also described the ongoing difficulty they had with providing enough financial resources to satisfy the professional development needs and requests of teachers. While seen as extremely worthwhile, the costs associated with the professional development related to teaching and planning time was a burden for most principals.

### *c. Teachers’ Perspectives*

When teachers were asked to describe the challenges impacting the superintendent’s or principals’ ability to focus on providing teaching and planning time for teachers, they all noted that their principals simply had too many administrative



demands that lessened their ability to adequately focus on this instructional leadership area. Teachers further identified that these administrative demands interrupted or precluded principals from being aware of their teaching needs as a staff: “My principal struggles to understand the diverse teaching needs of our staff” (James Interview, p. 3).

Study participants indicated several challenges to accomplishing the theme of teaching and planning time. It was largely observed by all participants that managerial duties and tasks significantly impacted the instructional leadership practices of the superintendent and principals in this theme. Principals further commented that it was difficult to balance the sometimes competing needs of the school district with the priorities of their school.

### **3. Managing Classroom Instruction Challenges**

For the purpose of this study the theme of managing classroom instruction describes the ability of a superintendent or principal to provide feedback and information to teachers that encourages them to further develop their skills.

#### *a. Superintendent Perspectives*

As it related to describing the challenges for the superintendent in maintaining a focus on managing classroom instruction, they were able to spotlight their comments in one particular area. For the superintendent it was difficult to differentiate between the needs of the school district while respecting the individual needs of teachers: “We struggle with the tug and pull contest between central priorities and specific teacher priorities”. In a school district with over five hundred teachers the superintendent

expressed the ongoing effort of moving the school district forward in a cohesive manner while at the same time respecting the individual classroom instruction needs of teachers.

*b. Principals' Perspectives*

For principals the challenges of managing classroom instruction were similar to one another. Principals grappled with having enough time to support teachers in this area. Competing demands and emergent responsibilities detracted principals from spending enough time managing classroom instruction. Principals also described that working with teachers who did not see the need to continue to professionally develop was a challenge in this area of instructional leadership. These types of teachers did not or would not engage in professional development in order to refine their teaching techniques: "Some of our staff who have experienced success in the past are reluctant to continue to improve" (Peter Interview, p. 4). Lastly, principals once again mentioned the effort of ensuring that adequate financial resources were available to meet the multiple managing classroom instruction needs of teachers.

*c. Teachers' Perspectives*

For teachers the challenges for the superintendent and principals that impacted their ability to manage classroom instruction once again focused on the other administrative or managerial duties that they are required to complete: "Our administrators seem to be busy with high needs students and parents a lot" (Matthew Interview, p. 5). It was evident from teachers that they empathized with the diversity and depth of tasks principals were required to complete on a daily basis. However, teachers also expressed a level of frustration in this regard as their needs and those of their

students were not being adequately met by their principal as a result of these competing demands. Lastly, teachers identified a lack of resources being available in this area for principals to access and utilize to meet their professional development needs.

As it related to the theme of managing classroom instruction, study participants articulated several challenges. For the superintendent, the primary challenge was attempting to maintain and respect the needs of the school district with individual teacher needs. However, principals grappled with having enough time to support teachers in this area. This lack of time was largely created by the necessity to complete managerial duties and tasks. Lastly, teachers saw that managerial duties and tasks hindered the superintendent's and principals' ability to effectively perform these instructional leadership skills.

#### **4. Student Success/Progress Challenges**

For the purpose of this study the theme of student success/progress describes the ability of a superintendent or principals to use student assessment results to help students and teachers to improve.

##### *a. Superintendent Perspectives*

In this area of instructional leadership the superintendent expressed the need to be aware of the variety of ways in which student progress could and should be assessed. Even more importantly the superintendent described the need to use assessment results in ways that assist teachers and students to develop and that help parents to understand where and why improvements are needed. The superintendent went on to further describe how in their school district "elements of trust" were required between them,

principals, and teachers in this instructional leadership area: “A bias or legacy of how data has been used in the past needs to be overcome”. Apparently the use of data in the past had been used punitively to gauge the performance of some teachers and this had created a sense of mistrust between the superintendent, principals, and teachers. This perspective held by teachers was seen as a significant challenge to the effective use of monitoring student success/progress to inform future classroom instruction.

*b. Principals' Perspectives*

For principals the lack of time was expressed as a challenge to adequately monitoring student success/progress. Principals were drawn into completing emergent tasks that negatively impacted the amount of time they could allocate in this area. Principals also described how some teachers would take the discussion or examination of student success/progress as a personal reflection of their teaching skills: “Some teachers see poor results as an attack on their teaching abilities” (Juanita Interview, p. 5). It was difficult for principals to engage in these types of discussions with teachers who could not envision how results could be used to discern areas of teaching strength and areas that needed further development. Lastly, some principals explained with frustration how some teachers would continually perceive or use the data to portray a situation that was largely different from what the principal saw as occurring. This method of confusion or deflection employed by these teachers was seen as a ploy to cloud the understanding of the data related to student success/progress and adversely limit discussion in the regard: “Some staff seem to have a built-in suspicion of what the data actually means. At times there seems to be an inherent suspicion of the data” (Juanita Interview, p. 5).

*c. Teachers' Perspectives*

The challenges that teachers saw that impacted their superintendent's and principal's abilities to monitor student success/progress were again focused on not having enough time to sufficiently complete these tasks: "We are all very busy and this leaves little time to review the results for analysis" (Marie Interview, p. 5). Some teachers conveyed that another challenge for principals to overcome in this area was how some teachers would misinterpret the data or results in order to avoid identifying an area of concern. Teachers also described how some of their colleagues were reluctant to hear any feedback especially if it was negative in nature: "Nobody wants to hear bad news especially when the results don't capture all of the dynamics of the class" (Rod Interview, p. 5). A majority of teachers also mentioned that they saw the monitoring of student/success as a reflection of their teaching skills and would see this as a challenge in this area that principals would have to work through. This observation was summarized by one teacher who stated: "Some teachers see the examination of the results as a commentary of their teaching abilities" (Kim Interview, p. 6).

For the theme of student success/progress, study participants generally commented about one particular challenge in this area. The superintendent and principals all felt that they were continually being drawn into completing emergent tasks that negatively impacted the amount of time that could be allocated to these instructional leadership duties. The superintendent also described how a legacy of mistrust as it related to the use of student data had to be overcome.

## 5. Positive Atmosphere Challenges

For the purpose of this student the theme of positive atmosphere describes the ability of a superintendent or principal to motivate teachers to improve.

### *a. Superintendent Perspectives*

For the superintendent, being aware of teacher workloads was seen as a challenge to establishing a positive atmosphere. Although the school district had gone through a significant process of refining the focus of its three year education plan, the superintendent was still cognizant as to how having three priorities in this plan could impact the climate of the school district and schools. For example, the superintendent noted that: “I am concerned about the high school biology teacher who is also asked to incorporate literacy strategies into their instruction”. While the superintendent recognized the desire to allow teachers to focus on meeting the curriculum needs of their students, they also labored with ensuring that their three priority areas did not become too daunting or distracting for teachers.

The superintendent also stated how as a central office they needed to be attentive of the demands their various departments were putting on schools and how these potentially negatively influenced the establishment of a positive atmosphere: “We sometimes forget or get into our individual silos and put schools into difficult situations when we as a central office are not aware of the various demands and requests that we ask of schools”. These uncoordinated and spontaneous requests from central office were seen as a challenge to the formation of a positive atmosphere in schools.

*b. Principals' Perspectives*

Most principals explained and understood that there are competing demands and opportunities available for students. The struggle in pursuing the establishment of a positive atmosphere in their school was trying to convince teachers to incorporate student areas of focus into their instruction so that school was more meaningful for students. Principals saw this process as being important to engaging the student but they also realized the difficult position this put teachers in: "How does a teacher link Math to Call of Duty?" (Jason Interview, p.6). It was a challenge for principals to make this request of teachers in developing a positive atmosphere and an ordeal to provide support and assistance for them as well.

It was also interesting to note that some principals described that trust between some teachers and parents was a challenge to creating a positive atmosphere in their school. Although many teachers were willing to engage in revising their teaching practices to better meet the needs of students, some parents actively questioned the necessity of these revisions. One principal articulated this point by stating: "Teachers find that they are spending a lot of time defending new approaches to teaching with parents" (Dean Interview, p. 7). Principals expressed that most teachers did not have the time or energy to continually engage in these discussions with parents and defend their teaching practices and as a result implemented classroom instruction that was "tried and true" and would not generate as much extraneous discussion.

Lastly, principals articulated that a small number of teachers were reluctant to change their teaching practices to supportively influence a positive atmosphere in their

school because of fear: “Teachers who have experienced success in the past are fearful of trying something new because they may not experience the same success they have enjoyed” (Peter Interview, p. 6). This was seen as a challenge for principals because it was difficult to convince these teachers to revise a teaching technique or method that had proven to be successful with students in the past. While principals were willing to engage in these discussions with teachers, these teachers were unwilling or fearful to explore alternative opportunities to create a more positive atmosphere.

*c. Teachers’ Perspectives*

Teachers were able to describe in detail the importance of having a positive atmosphere in their school and the role the superintendent and their principal played in this regard. However, the most significant challenge that the superintendent and principals had to overcome from the perspective of teachers in this area was staff reluctant to change: “Most of our staff see change as an unnecessary risk and they have become set in their ways” (Ryan Interview, p. 7). Staff workload was also identified by a large number of teachers as a challenge for their principal: “Staff feel overwhelmed and are not actively seeking out more to do” (Lisa Interview, p. 6). Lastly, some teachers identified that personality dynamics and conflicts on their staff stalled any improvement efforts implemented by their principal to improve the atmosphere of their school: “Because of conflicts on our staff they are hesitant to listen to each other” (Mike Interview, p. 5).

As it related to the theme of positive atmosphere, study participants described several challenges. For the superintendent, the primary challenge was attempting to



ensure that teacher workloads did not become too strenuous. Principals indicated that encouraging teachers to make the curriculum more engaging and meaningful for students was an ongoing challenge. Principals also commented that inspiring teachers to change or improve their teaching practices was troublesome and time consuming. Lastly, teachers also noted the significant challenge principals were confronted with by urging teachers to change their well established teaching practices.

This section described the findings of all of the respondents as they described the challenges to the themes identified as instructional leadership practices. While there was certain alignment among participant observations, there were also challenges described that were unique to specific individuals.

### **Chapter Summary**

Interview data from the superintendent, principals, and teachers involved in this study provided findings that focused on a superintendent and fifteen principals instructional leadership and the challenges that lessen their ability to be effective instructional leaders. The data collected from all of the respondent's interviews described the superintendent's and principals' practices as they attempted to perform their duties and responsibilities. These findings were categorized within Krug's (1992) dimensions of instructional leadership and organized into five broad themes of instructional leadership that emerged from the study data: vision/mission; teaching and planning time; managing classroom instruction; student success/progress; and positive atmosphere. The findings from the teacher interviews described whether teachers observed the same depth of instructional leadership that the superintendent and principals

declared to be demonstrating as they carried out their duties and responsibilities. The findings from the interviews are summarized in Appendix I.

The analysis of the school district's three year education plan, school improvement plans, and annual education results reports assisted in supporting what most of the respondents said was occurring in their school district and schools with regards to mission, vision, values, priority areas, and strategies to meet these priorities. The school district's three year education plan and school improvement plans also highlighted elements such as issues and trends which assisted in understanding the culture of this school district.

The following chapter, Chapter 5, provides a discussion of the findings that emerged from the participants.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Introduction**

The findings presented in Chapter Four will be discussed by addressing the four sub-questions that guided this study. These findings specifically describe how a superintendent and his or her principals demonstrated instructional leadership; whether there are any challenges to instructional leadership for these individuals; are the challenges to instructional leadership different for a superintendent and his or her principals; and what strategies were used to overcome any challenges to instructional leadership.

#### **Discussion**

##### **In What Ways Do a Superintendent and His or Her Principals Demonstrate Instructional Leadership?**

Following a thorough analysis of the data, the practices of the superintendent and principals were classified and sorted into five instructional leadership themes: vision/mission; teaching and planning time; managing classroom instruction; student success/progress; and positive atmosphere. These themes closely aligned with Krug's (1992) dimensions of effective instructional leadership: defining a mission; managing curriculum and instruction; supervising and supporting teachers; monitoring student progress; and promoting an instructional climate.

### *1. Defining a Mission Dimension*

According to Marzano and Waters (2009) and Peterson (1999) having a clearly defined mission is an essential instructional leadership practice for superintendents and principals to be proficient at. Both the superintendent and principals involved in this study expressed the importance of having a clear and concise mission as being vital for providing direction and clarity for the objectives, values, and commitments of the school district and schools. For the superintendent and principals the purpose of having a strongly articulated and understood mission acted as a “road map” of what was to be achieved, it prevented the random selection of priorities from occurring, and stopped the implementation of unnecessary initiatives.

The superintendent and principals also described the value of having a wide spectrum of stakeholders contribute to the formation and development of the mission. According to Leithwood (2007), when it comes to stakeholder input for defining a mission “it is the enactment that must be sensitive to context, not the core practices themselves” (p. 58). Stakeholder input was seen as important to ensure that they had been heard and a sense of consensus, involving many perspectives and voices, was achieved. While the process used to foster this stakeholder unity pertaining to defining a mission was arduous and time consuming it was also seen as necessary and beneficial.

The superintendent and all principals in this school district strongly emphasized the importance of articulating either the school district’s or individual school’s mission as often and in as many situations as possible. Actively sharing the school district’s or

schools' mission as often as possible is supported by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2002) as an important means to engage community support and create shared responsibility for student success. Both the superintendent and principals mentioned student handbooks, web sites, professional development sessions, morning announcements, staff meetings, student assemblies, public speaking events, parent council meetings, and newsletters as common places where they would mention, discuss or communicate their mission. The opportunity to state or accentuate the mission was seen as occasions not to be missed. These instances allowed the superintendent and principals to reiterate important themes and objectives that reflected the priorities of the school district or schools.

According to Hoy and Miskel (2001) and Kultgen (2010) defining a mission is an important component of instructional leadership that should not be ignored. Possessing a well-defined and understood mission communicated focus, parameters, priorities, and expectations to all stakeholders. It was evident that the superintendent and principal respondents in this study felt that having a clear and concise mission was an essential instructional leadership attribute that needed to be cultivated and developed. The superintendent and principals also explained that having a relevant and functional mission facilitated the creation of measurable goals for the school district and schools. By having the "destination" or "end game" established in the mission the superintendent and principals could then shift their focus to setting goals and developing strategies. The implementation of strategies and resources necessary for their success supported the achievement of goals and ultimately the realization of the mission. The connection

between mission, goals, and strategies was important for the superintendent and principals as it provided structure to their planning cycles and assisted them in their understanding of accountability expectations. This observation aligned with Leithwood (2004) who maintained that superintendents and principals must follow a model of instructional leadership that is effective and will allow them to accurately monitor accountability requirements.

Lastly, the superintendent and all principals felt that having a concise mission provided direction and a rationale for almost all significant decisions that needed to be made. The mission was seen as a “filter” and offered guidance so that the priorities of the school district or schools were well maintained and focused upon. Using the mission in this fashion prevented spontaneous or random initiatives from being implemented and distracting from the full achievement of the mission. Viewing the mission as a filter closely aligned with Hoy and Miskel’s (2001) findings. They articulated that having a mission had many advantages. One of which described the mission as a “screen” that helped to muster stakeholder commitment to student achievement and concentrate efforts on long-term goals.

With regards to defining and having a mission in place for the school district and schools, while there were some discrepancies or inconsistencies with the understanding and implementation of a concisely worded mission, that many stakeholders should contribute to its development, that the mission is communicated in multiple venues by various means, and that the mission facilitated the creation of measurable goals, overall

the superintendent and principals described themselves as being extensively involved in this instructional leadership area.

The feedback provided by teachers about the school district's and schools' missions generally supported the observations made by the superintendent and principals in this regard. Teachers described how the mission was communicated in multiple environments and by a variety of methods. However, it is important to also note that almost half of the teacher's interviewed felt that the mission was not articulated enough. Teachers also mentioned that the mission provided direction, rationale, and cohesion for actions and initiatives.

An analysis of the school district's three year education plan, school improvement plans, and annual education results reports prominently displayed a clear mission which reflected the beliefs and values of the school district and schools.

Marshall and Rossman (2006) defined triangulation as "the act of bringing more than one source of data to bear on a single point" (p. 202). As it pertained to the triangulation of the data, the views of the teachers and the school district and school documents aligned with the observations given by the superintendent and principals about the importance of defining a mission and being an effective instructional leader. Therefore, the superintendent and principals were effective instructional leaders in their understanding and utilization of this leadership dimension.

## *2. Managing Curriculum and Instruction Dimension*

According to Morgan and Peterson (2002), evaluating instructional effectiveness is an instructional leadership behaviour associated with high student achievement. This

observation would align with Krug's (1992) dimension of managing curriculum and instruction. The superintendent and most principals in this study had a solid understanding of what managing curriculum and instruction is and demonstrated this in a variety of ways. Probably the most pervasive methods used to support managing curriculum and instruction was the manipulation of the school year calendar and teacher timetables to provide collaborative teaching planning time both within and between schools. Providing teachers with collaborative planning time within the school day to better understand the curriculum, being able to engage in professional discussions about various methods of teaching outcomes, and developing assessment practices that aligned with instruction and the curriculum were seen as a unique and strategic approach used by the superintendent and principals to encourage professional dialogue about curriculum and instruction.

The residency model was also another example of how the superintendent and principals exhibited their ability of being an effective instructional leader as it related to managing curriculum and instruction. The residency model is a recently implemented initiative where for one week per year five curriculum coordinators work with teachers in one school exclusively on instructional strategies. This model has provided teachers with the supports and guidance they have asked for in order to "unpack" the curriculum and develop effective teaching strategies to convey this information to students. While some principals had been initially reluctant to utilize this model, most have actively pursued its implementation in their school and are enthusiastically working alongside teachers to assist in its acceptance.



Teachers readily identified and appreciated the effort and time that had been directed towards providing them with collaborative planning time that was embedded during the school day. Teachers saw this chance as a means to engage in professional discussions that likely would not have been possible if this opportunity did not exist. These observations aligned with Blase and Blase (2004) and Peterson's (1999) findings which described the importance of implementing new instructional techniques through collaborative professional development as being essential for teachers. Teachers also described common planning time as a mechanism that facilitated team building among colleagues. However, no teacher respondents discussed the value of the residency model. A possible reason for this is that the teachers interviewed for this study had not had the opportunity to participate in this initiative yet. Teachers further mentioned that although their principals were supportive of their instructional needs emergent and managerial duties greatly reduced the amount of time available for principals to assist teachers in this regard. From the perspective of teachers their principals had the best intentions of supporting them but their administrative responsibilities largely interfered with this adequately happening. This disconnect between the desire to support teachers and the actual ability to do so was also mentioned by the superintendent and most principals as a concern.

An examination of the school district's three year education plan, school improvement plans, and annual education results reports indicated the importance of managing curriculum and instruction for the superintendent and principals. This area of focus was seen as being central in the drive to improve student achievement.

When considering the triangulation of data and whether any consistencies and inconsistencies existed (Patton, 2002), it would appear that there was consistency between the observations given by the superintendent, principals, the documents examined, and to some extent teachers. However, a significant inconsistency was evident when one considered the amount of time that the superintendent and principals were able to allocate and what teachers were asking for as it related to managing curriculum and instruction. If the superintendent and principals were to become more effective instructional leaders they would need to find more time to direct towards this instructional leadership dimension and develop strategies to reduce their emergent and managerial duties.

### *3. Supervising and Supporting Teachers Dimension*

According to Watts (1992) supervising instruction was seen as a vital activity implemented by successful administrators in school districts and schools that have high student achievement. All administrators regardless of their position recognized the importance of supervising teaching and encouraging teachers to do their best to meet the needs of students. A significant focus for the superintendent and principals as it related to supervising teaching was the value of being oriented or “in tune” with teacher professional development needs. The superintendent and principals saw their responsibility as it pertained to teacher professional development as being considerable and should occupy a significant amount of their available time. Haglund (2009) also noted this observation and stressed the importance of administrator involvement in teacher professional development following a systematic examination of leadership

practices that improved student achievement in a large urban school district. By emphasizing and accentuating a variety of professional development options for teachers the superintendent and principals were attempting to provide timely support that would positively influence teachers and impact the teaching practices they utilized in their classrooms. Also, by stressing the importance of teacher professional development the superintendent and principals were endeavouring to develop and implement a culture in which teachers felt safe to try new initiatives, where teachers would not be penalized for trying something new even if it did not work out well, and where a community of learners would evolve that encouraged everyone to learn and grow together and also share best practices. These observations align with Marzano and Waters (2009) who described that being supportive of teachers trying new techniques and providing adequate resources in this regard was critical to improving student achievement.

As the superintendent and principals struggled to cultivate and employ a systemic focus on professional development and learning, and growing together as a community, all of them explained how it was fundamental for them to be a very active and a visible role model as it related to supervising teaching. Peterson (1999) also emphasized this point when he stated that a superintendent who is highly visible and is considered a strong role model significantly impacts the importance of teacher instruction. For the superintendent and principals in this study this meant, to varying degrees, communicating to stakeholders how they have been involved in professional development and how it had shaped their involvement relative to supervising teaching. This simple strategy was seen as necessary by the superintendent and principals as they felt all teachers appreciated

their leadership and efforts in setting a positive example of learning together as a community.

Teachers articulated that overall they saw the superintendent and their principals as being very encouraging in supporting them to continually improve their teaching practices. From the perspective of teachers, principals proactively informing them of a variety of professional development opportunities, and encouraging them to participate in these professional development options, was the primary method how their principals completed this task. Teachers also described their principals as, for the most part, setting aside their evaluative responsibilities to focus more on engaging in professional discussions with them and they were pleased with this transition. According to Leithwood (2008) principals who participated in more professional conversations with teachers was indicative of a high performing school. Lastly, most principals were seen by teachers as being an effective role model who were continually attempting to improve their skills. Teachers were appreciative of these efforts by principals and their stature “in the staffroom” rose as a result.

The analysis of the school district’s three year education plan, school improvement plans, and annual education results reports did not indicate or reflect that supervising teaching was a priority area for this school district.

In attempting to determine whether the superintendent and principals were effective instructional leaders as it related to supervising teaching and managing classroom instruction, in considering their findings, the findings of teachers, and the school district and school documentation in this regard, it would appear that the

superintendent and principals successfully practiced and employed these leadership skills. While the school district and school documents did not reflect supervising teaching was a priority instructional leadership area this may be due to the fact that the documentation had not evolved or been revised to capture these changes. Lastly, because the findings of teachers closely aligned with the responses of the superintendent and principals in this instructional leadership dimension the validity of the data is further enhanced.

#### *4. Monitoring Student Progress Dimension*

Of all the dimensions of effective instructional leadership described by Krug (1992), the element of monitoring student progress was almost unanimously poorly completed as an instructional leadership responsibility by the superintendent and all principals. This school district holds as an ideal that monitoring student progress is a fundamental approach for ensuring student success. However, all of the respondents clearly indicated that this was not happening to the degree that it should be. Fullan (2008) has maintained that team members sharing evidence of student learning by examining student assessment results creates positive pressure which is a powerful tool for improvement. The findings from all of the respondents clearly indicated that most data analysis relative to monitoring student progress that could positively impact teaching practices was not completed at a level that the superintendent and principals wished it to be at.

There were isolated incidents where the monitoring of student progress manifested itself in a coherent and coordinated manner. For example, the superintendent would regularly meet with principals to review and discuss their school's Alberta

Education Accountability Pillar results and asked how this information would be used to influence future school improvement plans. Data generated from the Accountability Pillar “is based on a set of common factors that measure outcomes in specific categories, giving a clear picture of how well learning goals are being achieved” (Alberta Education, 2010). A small minority of principals mentioned meeting with teachers following the distribution of report cards to discuss how these results would impact future activities in their classrooms. However, these isolated incidents were not systemic or completed in a comprehensive manner.

According to Peterson (1999) using student assessment results and evaluation data to determine if instructional expectations and goals are met is critical to positively impacting teaching practices. Although the superintendent and principals definitively described how monitoring and analyzing student results could help teachers and students to improve, very few reasons were given as to why this instructional leadership dimension could not be more thoroughly completed. The reasons that were given focused on not having enough time to complete this task, and not knowing how to take the available data and reduce it into meaningful and useful information. This last reason was surprising to hear as the analysis and use of data to inform teaching practices in order to better meet the needs of students has been an advertised practice in this school district for five years. It would seem appropriate to further investigate this reason to discern whether this advertised practice is actually occurring or if people are not capable of successfully completing it. Teachers also indicated that very little support was provided to them by their principals as it related to monitoring student progress. Teachers did

express that they were looking for assistance and guidance from their principals in this area. Reeves (2006) has maintained that leadership from administrators in helping teachers to evaluate student results so as to positively impact their teaching practices is necessary for improved student achievement.

Although not reflected by the superintendent and principals in their interactions with each other, or with teachers, when it came to the utilization of monitoring student progress as an instructional leadership skill, the school district's three year education plan, school improvement plans, and annual education results reports significantly focused on reporting and describing student results and data. It should be noted that much of the data included in these documents was provided by Alberta Education. It would appear that the monitoring of student progress for the purposes of these documents was a compliance requirement that was asked for by Alberta Education.

Of all the dimensions of instructional leadership described by Krug (1992), the dimension of monitoring student progress to gauge movement towards educational goals was largely not completed by the superintendent and principals. While a few examples of were given that exemplified this instructional leadership practice in action, this dimension of instructional leadership was not comprehensively utilized or implemented.

##### *5. Promoting an Instructional Climate Dimension*

According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2002) creating a culture of continuous teacher growth and learning was an important characteristic of administrator instructional leadership. Both the superintendent and principals in this study recognized the importance of striving to promote an instructional

climate where teachers are encouraged to do their best, in which learning is exciting, achievements are acknowledged, and where there is a shared sense of purpose. From the perspective of the superintendent and principals this type of climate would be created if they were seen as learners themselves. This observation also aligned with Peterson's (1999) description of the importance of the superintendent being an effective role model for teachers and how this positively influences teacher perceptions and practices. By actively involving themselves in professional development the superintendent and principals were also attempting to generate a dynamic community of learners. A community that encouraged teachers, the superintendent, and principals to try new initiatives and that sought out to continually grow and develop as professionals. Two specific examples were given as being indicative of illustrating instructional leadership in this regard. First, providing collaborative planning time for teachers enhanced the opportunity for professional dialogue among colleagues and boosted the likelihood of stronger teams being formed. Second, processes were established that streamlined the application procedures and availability of professional development opportunities. Both of these examples had the benefit of striving to establish a culture where life-long learning was accentuated and encouraged. Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) also supported these types of approaches to creating an instructional climate when they articulated that developing a culture where continual teacher growth and improvement is stressed was necessary to positively impact student achievement.

Teachers, when discussing the promotion of an instructional climate, were very appreciative of the collaborative planning time that was provided by the superintendent



and principals. They saw this time as a means to engage in professional dialogue with colleagues, learn more about the curriculum, and glean teaching ideas and strategies from others. Teachers also admirably described the efforts put forth by their superintendent and principals to help foster a community of learners and the positive influence this had on staff morale.

The analysis of the school district's three year education plan, school improvement plans, and annual education results reports supported the observation that promoting an instructional climate was a priority for this school district.

The importance of instructional leadership for the school district and schools has led to a closer examination of the superintendent's and principals' roles and a better understanding of what instructional leaders do (Blase & Blase, 2004; Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005). While consistent effective instructional leadership is widely believed to be a key variable in a school's and school district's success, the need for leadership to be instructionally focused has never been more prevalent (Florian, 2000). Krug (1992) has indicated that instructional leadership can be described in terms of five broad dimensions: defining a mission; managing curriculum and instruction; supervising teaching; monitoring student progress; and promoting an instructional climate.

In response to the first sub-question that guided this study: Using Krug's dimensions of effective instructional leadership taxonomy, in what ways do a superintendent and his or her principals demonstrate instructional leadership?, except for the dimension of monitoring student progress, the superintendent and principals, to varying degrees of effectiveness, understood and exhibited Krug's (1992) instructional

leadership dimensions on multiple occasions and in many different circumstances. The next section focuses on the second of the four sub-questions that guided this study.

### **Are There Any Challenges to Instructional Leadership for a Superintendent and His or Her Principals?**

As it related to the notion of whether any challenges existed that adversely impacted the ability of the superintendent and principals to complete their instructional leadership duties, without hesitation the superintendent and all principals indicated that challenges were present in almost every instructional situation they found themselves in.

#### *1. Defining a Mission Dimension*

According to Morgan and Peterson (2002) collaboratively developing a mission, goals, and expectations is closely associated with increasing student achievement. For the superintendent and principals the challenges to developing, articulating, and defining a mission spoke to their attempts to bring together diverse perspectives from multiple stakeholders and be able to create one coherent and comprehensive mission that was representative of the input received. This was seen by the superintendent and principals as a time consuming and arduous task with some principals openly questioning the need and value of defining a mission.

Another challenge for the superintendent and principals as it pertained to defining a mission was discerning the level of commitment to the mission from staff and determining if a saboteur or people who actively subverted the mission were present. The superintendent and principals expressed these types of individuals could be found in the school district or their school and their presence was frustrating because they would

never share what their concerns were or why they had an issue with the mission. As a result the superintendent and principals were left to reason for themselves why these individuals would not “buy-in” into the mission. Some principals speculated that “buy-in” was not forthcoming from these individuals because they either felt that their perspective had not been captured in the mission and they were upset with this, or, they had an issue with the principal and they had chosen to negatively influence any initiatives led by the principal.

Overall it appeared that the superintendent and principals recognized the challenges that impacted their ability to define a mission in the school district and in their schools. If a mission was not fully representative of its stakeholders the school district and schools lacked significant criteria in determining whether it was effectively meeting the needs of students or not. According to Peterson (1999) being able to create and communicate an instruction oriented vision was a behaviour regularly exhibited by superintendents and principals who were instructionally focused. It seemed that defining a mission and attempting to consolidate multiple stakeholder input into a coherent manner was a challenge that superintendents and principals contended with.

## *2. Managing Curriculum and Instruction Dimension*

For the superintendent and principals the challenges that were articulated that impacted their abilities to effectively manage curriculum and instruction were very evident and largely centered on the lack of availability of time to engage with teachers, and to some extent, the lack of financial resources. Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, and Glass (2005) also identified accountability requirements, paperwork, and addressing emergent

issues as being highly distractive for superintendents who wanted to focus more on instructional leadership responsibilities. Research supports that principals find it difficult to allocate time to get into classrooms (Elmore, 2000). The superintendent and all principals emphatically stated that the lack of time created by required paperwork, meetings, accountability requirements, and emergent issues greatly distracted them from focusing more on managing curriculum and instruction. Some of these distractions were self-imposed and the superintendent and principals expressed the desire of being more self-disciplined in trying to control or manage these types of situations better. For example, a topic being discussed by the superintendent and principals was did the school district need to host a monthly one day-long administrative meeting with all principals being present or could they have this meeting every second month and thus free-up more time that principals could spend in their buildings. Nonetheless, a high percentage of the distractions described by the superintendent and principals were emergent issues that needed to be quickly addressed or effective operation of the school district or school would be impacted. For example, when the furnace at a school does not work it is the principal's responsibility to ensure that this issue is swiftly resolved. Teachers cannot be asked to do this as they are needed to be in their classrooms with students.

Another challenge for the superintendent and principals that influenced their capacity to be an effective instructional leader in managing curriculum and instruction was having the financial resources to support initiatives in this area (McEwan, 2003). The availability of financial resources to adequately meet the needs of teachers was far

less than the demand in this area. This challenge for the superintendent and principals affected how and where resources would be allocated.

Teachers also recognized and expressed how their superintendent and principals were impacted by emergent items and how this influenced their capabilities to spend more time managing curriculum and instruction. However, to be fair to the superintendent and principals, most teachers do not understand or realize the importance of their administration being able to address emergent concerns so that they are effectively handled quickly and do not escalate from something relatively minor into something major. Overall, the superintendent and principals were very skilled in successfully addressing these concerns and keeping them in perspective. Being proficient at tackling emergent issues did detract from being an effective instructional leader for the superintendent and principals.

Overall it is evident that the superintendent and principals are aware of the challenges that influenced their ability to more adequately address the instructional leadership dimension of managing curriculum and instruction. If the time and resources required to efficiently address the management of curriculum and instruction needs of teachers is compromised, the superintendent and principals interviewed for this study indicated that they contend with this challenge on a regular basis.

### *3. Supervising and Supporting Teachers Dimension*

According to Leithwood and Riehl (2005) a core leadership practice is to convey high expectations of teaching performance. From the perspective of the superintendent and principals in this study, being an effective instructional leader in the dimension of

supervising teaching is impacted by a number of challenges. The challenges that were expressed were the availability of time and adequate financial resources, attempting to resolve competing priorities, and working with teachers reluctant to change. The characteristics of having enough time and adequate financial resources to be an effective instructional leader were discussed above. A discussion of the challenges as it related to attempting to resolve competing priorities and working with teachers reluctant to change follows below.

Marzano and Waters (2009) have described how creating alignment between stakeholders is important to improving student achievement. All administrators recognized, especially the superintendent, that it is difficult to differentiate and allocate enough time and resources to the competing priorities of the school district and schools while at the same time respecting the needs of teachers. This dynamic was described as being a “tug and pull” contest where there were few instances of “win-win-win” between the diverse needs of the school district, school, and teachers. This was a challenge for the superintendent and principals because once again they were put into a position where they wanted to be an effective instructional leader in this area of supervising teaching, but were adversely affected as a result of trying to align competing priorities while simultaneously respecting the needs of stakeholders. These types of situations led to difficult decisions being made that rarely satisfied all stakeholders.

According to Peterson (1999), the importance of improving instruction through professional development is a necessary instructional leadership behaviour for superintendents and principals. As it related to supervising teaching most principals

described working with reluctant teachers as being a challenge for them. From the principals' perspective these types of teachers did not or would not actively engage in professional development in order to improve their teaching strategies. Working with these types of teachers was time intensive and generally involved uncomfortable or confrontational conversations that needed to occur. Principals found these types of situations to be draining, stress filled, and negatively impacted the completion of other duties. Not having the energy or drive to more efficiently engage in this instructional leadership dimension as a result of experiencing these types of circumstances was obviously considered a challenge to effective instructional leadership for principals.

Generally it was apparent that the superintendent and principals were knowledgeable of the challenges that affected their ability to more sufficiently concentrate on the instructional leadership dimension of supervising teaching. The superintendent and principals indicated that they continually contended with these challenges on an ongoing basis and it was daunting to remain focused on being an effective instructional leader when these challenges arose.

#### *4. Monitoring Student Progress Dimension*

Morgan and Peterson (2002) have described how student assessment data and evaluation results are needed to determine if instructional expectations and goals are being met. For the superintendent and principals in this study the challenges that were described that impacted their capabilities to efficiently monitor student progress were abundantly evident and included such elements as there being a lack of trust with teachers being present, not enough time being available to reflect on what student assessment

results actually indicated and then being able to develop and implement plans necessary to adjust teaching strategies, teachers who see poor results as a reflection of their teaching abilities, and unresolvable differences as to what the student results data actually specified. This list of challenges was quite significant and was also largely expressed by teachers as well.

Of all the dimensions of effective instructional leadership described by Krug (1992), the dimension of monitoring student progress was almost unanimously poorly completed as an instructional leadership responsibility by the superintendent and principals, and it was the dimension that appeared to have the most challenges present. The challenges described by most of the respondents greatly affected the superintendent's and principals' abilities to successfully improve their skills in this area and it appeared evident that these challenges would not be reduced or eliminated soon. This apparent gap in instructional leadership practices is surprising because as Marzano and Waters (2009) have described monitoring student achievement and instructional goals is a pivotal administrative responsibility needed for improving student achievement.

The described challenges were very evident to the superintendent and principals as they attempted to effectively monitor student progress. Some of these challenges were self-imposed and some were generated from other stakeholders. The superintendent and principals described in detail how they have contended with these challenges for several years with very little success or progress. This has significantly affected how student assessment results are used in ways to help students and teachers improve and assist parents to understand where and why improvements are needed.



### *5. Promoting an Instructional Climate*

As described by Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004), being able to promote an instructional climate that fosters powerful teaching and learning for all students was seen as an aspect of administrators' practices that promoted improved teaching and student engagement. For the superintendent and principals the challenges to being an effective instructional leader who promoted an instructional climate were evident and diverse in nature. Specifically these challenges related to teacher workloads, coordination of requests from all departments so that schools did not become inundated with extraneous demands, lack of trust between teachers and parents, and fear on the part of teachers being asked to be creative and find new ways to actively engage students and better meet their needs.

According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2002), principals creating a culture of continuous learning for teachers tied to student learning is an important element of being an effective instructional leader. Many of these challenges were related to teachers not willing to try new strategies or techniques to better meet student needs. It appeared that these teachers preferred to work in silos, were resistant to share and collaborate with colleagues, were reluctant to change "tried and true" methods, were disinterested in trying their best, or were getting close to retirement and wanted to "coast" to the end of their teaching careers. Having this level of diversity of challenges being projected by teachers was daunting for the superintendent and principals to address. Many principals mentioned simply feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number and depth of issues that needed to be addressed in this regard. The superintendent and principals

considered these challenges as significantly impacting their ability to be a valuable instructional leader in this dimension and repeatedly indicated that they anticipated that these challenges would not be eliminated or reduced in the near future.

School district superintendents and school principals have always faced challenges that have affected their capacity to be a proficient instructional leader. These challenges generally reflect the growing needs of a more diverse society and the pressure it places on a school district and schools. Krug (1992) has described that instructional leadership can be expressed in terms of five broad dimensions: defining a mission; managing curriculum and instruction; supervising teaching; monitoring student progress; and promoting an instructional climate. When the researcher reflected on the findings for the second sub-question that helped to guide this study: Using Krug's dimension of effective instructional leadership taxonomy, are there any challenges to instructional leadership for a superintendent and his or her principals?, it is evident that a variety of challenges are present for the superintendent and principals who were interviewed for this study. These challenges are diverse in nature and number and the superintendent and principals find them daunting to successfully address. The next section focuses on the third of the four sub-questions that guided this study.

### **Are The Challenges to Instructional Leadership Different For a Superintendent as Opposed to His or Her Principals?**

Generally the superintendent and principals experienced similar challenges that affected their capacity to sufficiently implement instructional leadership practices and skills. Overall these challenges negatively impacted the amount of time and resources the

superintendent and principals had available to complete their instructional leadership duties. By and large these types of challenges to instructional leadership tended to align with those identified by Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, and Glass (2005) who indicated that interruptions that reduced the amount of time for instructional leadership duties were common and frustrating. However, there were three specific differences between superintendents and principals in this regard that were noted in the findings.

First, when it came to the efficient completion of defining mission responsibilities some principals noticed and were concerned by the increasing lack of flexibility that was related to this instructional leadership behaviour. All principals commented that there was a strong connection between their mission and how this was used to establish measurable goals in school improvement plans. Some principals did observe that Alberta Education and the school district's measurable goals significantly influenced their flexibility in the creation of their own goals. These principals were frustrated by the encroachment of Alberta Education and the school district into this area of instructional leadership responsibility. They explained that once the objectives and priorities of Alberta Education and the school district were addressed there was very little opportunity to fully articulate and implement their own objectives and priorities for their schools. Although it is significant to recall that "a cardinal principle of measurement states that it is more effective and accurate to measure a few things frequently rather than many things once a year" (Reeves, 2004, p. 59). However these principals further went on to describe that this was ironic from their perspective because they were being asked to be effective instructional leaders in this regard but were given little latitude to do so. A small

minority of principals also indicated that because of this concern and how it pertained to defining a mission, they felt more like a “servant” of Alberta Education and the school district instead of feeling like an instructional leader.

A second difference between the challenges for the superintendent and principals was noted in the instructional leadership dimension of supervising teaching. It was evident that principals described working with teachers who did not see the need to continue to professionally develop was a challenge to overcome more so than the superintendent. This challenge was likely caused by the principal’s position of responsibility in the school and how the superintendent was not generally called upon to address these types of issues. Nonetheless, principals did comment that attempting to encourage teachers to continue to grow and develop in the area of supervising teaching was not easily accomplished, assumed a significant amount of time and energy, and most instances was not successfully resolved.

The third difference noted between the challenges of being an effective instructional leader for the superintendent and principals was more evident from a global perspective rather than a specific instructional leadership dimension. This unique challenge existed for the superintendent and related to their need to be associated and responsible for putting the vision of the Board of Trustees into action. In Alberta, school district trustees only have one employee and this is the superintendent. The superintendent is required to strive to implement the vision of the Board and work with and advise the Board as it operates in the political arena (Bjork, 2001). The time required to successfully fulfill these responsibilities is exceedingly difficult for the superintendent

and greatly affects the time they have available to utilize and develop their instructional leadership skills.

When considering the findings to the third sub-question that helped guide this study: Using Krug's dimensions of effective instructional leadership taxonomy, are the challenges to instructional leadership different for a superintendent, as opposed to his or her principals?, the findings indicated that there were three differences noted: principals felt limited by the encroachment of Alberta Education's and the school district's goals on their ability to establish their own goals; principals experienced more challenges as they attempted to encourage reluctant teachers to continue to professionally grow and evolve; and the superintendent experienced a unique challenge in being asked to work directly with a Board of Trustees who often had a different agenda than being focused on instructional leadership matters. The next section focuses on the fourth of the four sub-questions that guided this study.

### **What Strategies Are Used by the Superintendent and His or Her Principals to Overcome Instructional Leadership Challenges?**

The findings pertaining to the fourth sub-question that helped to guide this study: What strategies are used by the superintendent and his or her principals to overcome instructional leadership challenge?, identified a number of different strategies used by the superintendent and principals to create more opportunities to implement and improve their instructional leadership skills.

According to Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, and Glass (2005) for most superintendents and principals the responsibilities of being an effective instructional leader necessitated

them becoming much better at their time management skills. This strategy was also described by the superintendent and principals who participated in this study. The superintendent and principals regularly commented that if they had any work that was not related to working with students or their staff they would attempt to delegate this task to someone else. For example, several principals mentioned that they had young teachers on their staff who were aspiring to become administrators in the future and these principals would “empower” these potential administrators with some of these additional tasks or projects. Although these principals considered themselves “delegators”, they would provide support and assistance to these teachers so that they would not get “into too much hot water”. These principals also reasoned that by employing this time management skill these young teachers were given the opportunity to develop their own instructional leadership skills and had at their disposal specific leadership examples that could be useful for them in future interview situations. Lastly, the superintendent and most principals recognized the value and importance of having a skilled assistant or secretary to assist with time management practices. These “angels” were invaluable in ensuring that the superintendent and principals were on top of their responsibilities and kept as many extraneous requests to a minimum. This support greatly assisted them and created more time to focus on priority tasks.

Another strategy that the superintendent and most principals implemented to overcome the challenges to instructional leadership was to hire more support. Borba (2002) also recognized the hiring of more staff as a viable strategy in creating more time for administrator instructional leadership practices. These additional supports came in

many forms and included contracting out extra work to retired teachers, allocating more administrative time for vice-principals, increasing the number of directors or coordinators in central office, and hiring more secretarial assistance. When these types of decisions were made the superintendent and principals were cognizant that extra cost would occur and that they would need to justify their actions to their stakeholders. Very often the rationale given by the superintendent and principals for these actions were that too many important duties and deadlines were being dropped and missed and these additional supports were needed if the current level of performance or output was to be maintained.

A slightly different strategy used by the superintendent and some principals to overcome the challenges to instructional leadership that did not have any additional financial expenses associated with it was to purposefully schedule their calendar so that a percentage of their day was spent in classrooms and away from their desks. Glass, Bjork, and Brunner (2000) also described and recognized the value of this strategy. The scheduling of this time in classrooms was seen as an appointment for the superintendent and these principals that had to be kept. The superintendent and principals attempted to schedule approximately 50% of their day in classrooms. However emergent issues quickly impacted this possibility but these individuals felt it was significant to make this effort. The superintendent and these principals described this approach as learning to discipline themselves to put the paperwork aside so that they could be and work with people.

An unwelcomed but necessary strategy used by the superintendent and principals to overcome the challenges to instructional leadership was to take work home with them

in the evenings and on weekends. To lessen the impact of how this strategy influenced their home life, some principals would work in the evenings and on weekends but would only do this at their offices rather than bring this material home with them. The rationale given for this approach was that these individuals wanted to compartmentalize their home and work life and did what they could to keep these components distinct and separate.

The superintendent and some principals often had to get creative with their scheduling of events and used this strategy to overcome the challenges to instructional leadership. For example, the superintendent and these principals would always schedule lunch or breakfast meetings to attempt to generate more time to address instructional leadership priorities. These individuals reasoned that they all needed to have a meal break anyway so why not make this a working break and thus increase what could be accomplished as it related to instructional leadership priorities in a more manageable timeframe. Malishan (1990) also explained that this strategy was a viable approach used by superintendents and principals in order to be more productive and allowed them to focus more on instructional leadership duties but it should be used cautiously and judiciously.

Probably one of the most difficult strategies used by the superintendent and some principals to overcome the challenges of instructional leadership was to prioritize demands, either on a daily or weekly basis, and then strive to stay focused on their list of priorities to be completed. This was a difficult strategy for the superintendent and principals because it necessitated being aware of their environmental needs and demands and then making the decisions about which demands would get their attention either for



that day or week (Carter, Glass, & Hord, 1993). While emergent issues sometimes distracted these individuals from completing the tasks they had assigned for themselves, this process empowered them to some degree. Some principals commented that it allowed them “to pick their battles” and to take more control of how they spent their time.

Lastly, a strategy specifically mentioned by the superintendent to weaken some of the obstacles they saw that impacted their ability to be an effective instructional leader, in particular as it related to working with Alberta Education, was simply not to complete some of the tasks assigned to them by Alberta Education. The superintendent explained that their school district received multiple requests for additional information or assistance from Alberta Education on a monthly basis. Rather than simply ask their already overworked personnel to assume another responsibility on behalf of Alberta Education, and if the superintendent could determine and indicate that Alberta Education already had the requested information, the superintendent would advise Alberta Education that their school district would not be complying with their wish and they could find the requested information via alternative means. While the superintendent did mention that it was important to be cautious with this approach and it should not be used for major items, they did utilize this method in order to create more time for themselves and their central office colleagues to be instructional leaders.

While the superintendent and principals were constantly bombarded with challenges that influenced the amount of time they have available to be an effective instructional leader, these participants also employed a number of different strategies to

create more opportunities to implement and improve their instructional leadership skills. The strategies used by the superintendent and principals can generally be described as them attempting to take more control of the scheduling of their daily activities and how this approach can be manipulated in order to allow them to spend more time as leaders as opposed to being managers.

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to examine the findings by addressing the four sub-questions that guided this study. Identifying instructionally focused superintendents and principals is not an easy task since the abundance of managerial duties often detracts superintendents and principals from focusing on instructional leadership practices. The following chapter, Chapter Six, provides a brief summary of this study and a discussion of the conclusions drawn from the research. This discussion is followed by the researcher's recommendations for future changes and suggestions for future research.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore whether any challenges to instructional leadership practices existed for a superintendent and principals. Following is a brief summary of this study and a discussion of the conclusions drawn from the research. Recommendations for policy-makers, superintendents and principals, trustees and community stakeholders, and superintendent and principal preparation programs are also provided. The suggested courses of action are designed to benefit superintendents and principals and allow for more opportunities to focus on instructional leadership duties. Lastly, suggestions for future research are summarized.

#### **Overview of Major Findings and Recommendations**

Growing demand for accountability regarding student achievement has changed the environment in which school system and school leaders exert leadership, establishing consequential ties between the superintendent's and principal's duties, responsibilities, and student performance (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). There is much to be learned in this era of accountability that superintendents and principals currently work in and how they are best prepared for leveraging the various dimensions of reform toward improving the academic achievement of students. School system and school leaders must navigate systemic realities to initiate change strategies aimed at positively impacting student achievement. Despite the complexity of these jobs, research does show that

superintendents and principals do have a positive influence on student achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Leithwood, 2007; Leithwood, 2008). It is important to understand what superintendents and principals do to become effective instructional leaders and the challenges that must be overcome to do so.

This study focused on the instructional leadership practices of a superintendent and fifteen principals as perceived by themselves and by sixteen teachers in their school district. However, more importantly this study focused on the challenges to instructional leadership as recognized by a superintendent and principals, and also the observations of the challenges to superintendent and principal instructional leadership as discerned by teachers in their school district. Lastly strategies used by the superintendent and principals to overcome these challenges were outlined.

The overarching research question for this study was: *What, if any, challenges to the instructional leadership practices of a superintendent and their principals exist?* Overall, this study contributed to the knowledge of instructional leadership, but more specifically it described what challenges impeded the ability of a superintendent and principals to engage in effective instructional leadership practices and the approaches used to prevail over these impediments. Using Krug's (1992) five dimensions of instructional leadership as a basis for investigation, the findings of this study indicated that there were significant challenges to instructional leadership for the superintendent and fifteen principals. These challenges significantly limited the amount of time and energy that could be directed towards instructional leadership.

As explained in Chapter 3, this exploratory case study employed qualitative methods to secure rich descriptors and grounded explanations of the processes in place within a localized environment (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Discerning the challenges to superintendent and principal instructional leadership practices was a complex issue. The exploratory case study approach generated a rich description of each component under study (Patton, 2002). It provided a means for investigating the complexities of instructional leadership by incorporating the explicit lived experiences of participants and supported evaluation rooted in a localized context (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). This familiarity assisted the researcher in compiling information.

From a qualitative perspective, the intent of this study was to examine and understand a real-life phenomenon in depth, seek to know the lived experienced of the respondents, and through a process of inquiry come to grasp how meaning was constructed (Creswell, 2009). This information was then used to determine the challenges to superintendent and principal instructional leadership and how these impacted their abilities to be an effective instructional leader. This exploratory case study relied on interviews and document analysis.

Data collection occurred over a three month period. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the key data gathering tool. The superintendent, fifteen principals, and sixteen teachers were interviewed for this study. Data collection also consisted of examining the school district's three year education plan, school improvement plans, and annual education results reports.

The available research that pertains to instructional leadership, although more fully developed for principals than superintendents, is wide and has produced a richness and depth of findings that outlines the effects of instructional leadership at the school system and school levels (Carr, 2005; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; Grogan, 2000). DuFour (1999) supported the importance of the principal as an instructional leader when he stated “where principals are effective instructional leaders, student achievement escalates” (p. 15). Peterson and Barnett (2003) espoused the significance of the superintendent as an instructional leader when they stated “the superintendent’s role as an instructional leader is crucial for the success of school reform” (p. 1). Obviously the instructional leadership capabilities of the superintendent and principal are vital for improving student achievement. Overall, this study has added to the knowledge of instructional leadership and purposefully identified the challenges that impeded it.

The following sections discuss the major findings drawn from this study as related to superintendent instructional leadership practices and educational accountability.

### **Superintendent Instructional Leadership Practices**

Superintendents have many roles and serve as managerial supervisors, educational mentors, political leaders, change agents, as well as primary communicators in the school district (Kowalski, 2003). The relative emphasis placed on each role varies according to social, economic, and political circumstances of their communities. For example, during the 1960s and 1970s demands for the superintendent to engage with the public and with interest groups required them to expand their political leadership role at the community level (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005). Although changing conditions heightened

the importance of different dimensions of their roles, the nature of the superintendent's and principals' work required mastery of all. Superintendents placed considerable emphasis on management duties, but their role as an instructional leader is vital for the success of the school district. Research findings indicated that superintendents of effective school districts exhibited high levels of involvement in instructional leadership matters and use managerial levers at their disposal to influence the practices of principals and teachers who are more directly involved in improving classroom teaching and student learning (Hoyle, 2002).

A significant conclusion that was gleaned from this study's findings was the focus and desire that the superintendent had in being an effective instructional leader. The superintendent expressed on several occasions their wish to exhibit and thoroughly carry out instructional leadership duties that were very similar to Krug's (1992) five dimensions of instructional leadership: defining a mission; managing curriculum and instruction; supervising teaching; monitoring student progress; and promoting an instructional climate. The superintendent was exceedingly reflective of their own practices and actions in this regard and constantly attempted to balance instructional leadership practices with managerial tasks.

In Alberta, superintendents are dually accountable the Ministry of Education and Board of Trustees (Alberta School Act, Sec. 113). The expectations and demands of both the Ministry and the Board greatly impacted the amount of time available for instructional leadership duties (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). The superintendent in this study found it most difficult when their demands were in conflict with one another.

For example, the superintendent articulated a recent situation where the Minister of Education had demanded action on the placement of a special education student. The Board of Trustees were opposed to this placement decision as they did not see it as being in the best interest of the student and it would be a costly, unfunded, and an unplanned allocation of resources. Ultimately the superintendent spent a considerable amount of time attempting to successfully resolve this matter which involved many meetings, several additional personnel being pulled from other matters to help address this situation, and untold frustration for the student and parents. Being dually responsible to the Ministry and the Board can be confusing for anyone let alone a superintendent who is responsible for a thriving school district. Rectifying and eliminating this unique circumstance that the superintendent found themselves in was an unexpected conclusion garnered during this study.

During the mid-1990s interest in reform in education drew more attention to the notion of building the capacity of individuals. Fullan (1998) characterized the time period from 1992 to the present as the “change capacity era”. During this study it was evident that the superintendent went to significant lengths to encourage teachers to consider what they can do to enhance their effectiveness in the classroom and thus improve their capacity as a teacher. The superintendent emphasized the importance of individuals learning about themselves, enhancing their knowledge and skills, and committing to continuous learning and development. The superintendent also stressed the desire to create and establish a type of environment where teachers felt safe and secure to be innovative and attempt new strategies in their classrooms to better engage



students. According to Chappuis, Chappuis, and Stiggins (2009), these areas of emphasis aligned with their notion that supporting teachers and creating dynamic learning teams is necessary for improving student achievement. Ultimately it was the hope of the superintendent to generate a community of learners among principals and teachers who would actively collaborate, share best practices, and support and encourage one another to become better at the craft of teaching. It is interesting to conclude that the goal the superintendent was attempting to achieve as a vision for their school district aligned with Sergiovanni's (1992) focus on the moral purpose of schooling. As Sergiovanni indicated, creating schools as communities of learners enables groups within the schools to focus on encouraging the learning and well-being of students.

To use data effectively any superintendent must develop in themselves and in their staff members the capacity to analyze, interpret, and apply these results strategically in district and school planning and make them an integral part of learning. When data use becomes an essential part of the work and culture of schooling, data can be transformed from abstract numbers to useful information and can add to knowledge and effectiveness (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005). According to Hoyle et al (2005) the use of data to inform decision-making processes presents several challenges to school districts and schools that must be addressed as they enhance their capacity to effectively use data, including:

- . . . demonstrating how data can help improve classroom instruction; developing the capacity to analyze data; providing opportunities to use data and apply knowledge to improving practice; reflecting on the process of data-decision

making; and engaging collaboratively in reiterative cycles of data collection, analysis, and improvement. (p. 14)

An interesting conclusion gleaned from the findings of this study was the observation that data analysis for the purpose of improving student and teacher learning was poorly completed and inadequately applied. One is left to question if the superintendent, and principals, possessed the instructional skills needed to work with teachers to build their capacity in this area. Another question worth considering is whether the superintendent avoided these instructional duties because the teachers knew more than they did about curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, and differentiation of instruction. It is apparent from the results of this study that the superintendent, and principals, had more difficulty fulfilling the instructional leadership duties related to monitoring student progress to the same level of effectiveness as their other areas of instructional leadership duties and managerial tasks.

Overcoming resistance to change and building the capacity of teachers and principals to develop communities of learners to collectively solve problems is a primary concern of superintendents (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). Prevailing norms, values, beliefs, and accepted ways of doing things, teacher isolation, and general unfamiliarity with notions of learning communities often inhibit school and school district improvement efforts (Bjork & Richardson, 1997). One of the most crucial dimensions of professional development is the process or the “how” of staff development. Research suggests that changing practices takes time, conventional “one-shot” workshops are ineffective, and individuals are more likely to acquire knowledge and transfer new skills

if they learn them in work contexts and are supported by a mentor (Bjork & Keedy, 2001). A significant conclusion that was observed from the findings of this study was the realization of the superintendent that their school district's process of professional development had to change if it was to better meet the needs of teachers. The "one-shot" workshop or professional development sessions used as "information downloads" provided little time or opportunity for engaging teachers in the concepts or practices being discussed. The superintendent noted that the school district and schools needed to alter their culture towards effective professional development. It was evident that widespread, sustained implementation of new practices in classrooms required a new form of professional development. It was interesting for the researcher to observe how a new perspective regarding the importance of professional development was relatively easy to deploy in this school district and took only subtle, but important, changes in their professional development processes for it to have positive effects. For example, providing time during professional development sessions to allow teachers to discuss and practice the concepts or strategies being presented had a tremendously positive impact on teachers' attitudes towards professional development sessions and workshops. Gone were the days of teachers being passive recipients of information. These were eagerly replaced by dynamic opportunities for teachers to better learn and hone their teaching skills simply by providing time for them to more fully absorb the materials and processes being shown. Once teachers had an opportunity to experience these professional development revisions it did not take long before all professional development sessions, in particular those occurring at schools, aligned and became consistent with the

procedures used by professional development sessions that were planned by central office. One can discern that the superintendent genuinely saw an opportunity for improvement based on altering their professional development processes and procedures and this had a positive impact on fostering a stronger community of collaborative learners. These outcomes from the findings should be noteworthy for other superintendents or principals who are considering how they approach and potentially revise professional development procedures in their school districts and schools.

When student learning is the primary focus of a school district's activities, capable superintendents understand how the whole system works, play a central role in ensuring coherence, and use their managerial levers to sustain the mission (Hoyle, 2002). However, these aspirations do not occur in a vacuum. A skilled superintendent is also keenly aware of the importance of securing and distributing scarce resources to ensure that they have the greatest impact in supporting student achievement. The school district budget development and allocation processes determine who gets what, when, how, and reflects the goals of the school district. Thus the budget and allocation processes must reflect a singular focus on learning and cohesion between the school district's and schools' goals and priorities (Hoyle, English, & Steffy, 1998). Another noteworthy conclusion gathered from this study were the frequent references to inadequate resources being available to meet the diversity and number of professional development requests that teachers had. It appeared that a dissonance between the various needs of the school district with the availability of sufficient resources to meet the professional development demands of teachers existed in this school district. Why did this school district find itself

in this particular situation? One plausible reason for this dissonance was that the budgeting skills of the superintendent were not a well-developed area of his or her managerial skills. Another plausible reason is that the budgeting processes were not refined enough to recognize the changing dynamics of professional development in this school district. Nonetheless, when significant systemic changes are being considered or implemented, being aware how budgeting processes should be revised in order to reflect these transitions is an important attribute to be included in the decision-making process for any superintendent.

According to Bjork and Gurley (2005) superintendents cannot increase student achievement for all students alone, they must provide vision of change for stakeholders and serve as activists for this change. Walters and Marzano (2006) reported that Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) conducted a meta-analysis of research on school district leaders on student performance. The meta-analysis included 27 studies “. . . resulting in what McREL research believed to be the largest-ever quantitative examination of research on superintendents” (p. 3). Four major findings emerged from their study:

. . . district leadership matters; effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts; superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement; and they set clear, non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction, yet provide school leadership teams with the responsibility and authority for determining how to meet those goals. (p. 4)

Many of the findings of this study affirm the findings of Walters and Marzano's study. School district leadership being focused on specific goals and striving to improve teaching and learning were conclusions associated with the superintendent involved in this study.

Instructional leadership has changed dramatically over the past decade, moving away from highly directive managerial perspectives towards more collegial engagement characteristics of communities of learners (DuFour & Marzano, 2009). The desire to create more effective learning environments is heightening interest in many variables as part of a process that is central to becoming a community of learners. As is evident, the findings of this study support the conclusion that superintendent instructional leadership when focused on the right work, without challenges, matters and enhances student achievement. The next section discusses the conclusions of this study as it related to accountability in education.

### **Educational Accountability**

In order to understand the social and political atmosphere in which superintendents are asked to exhibit and demonstrate instructional leadership it is necessary to be aware and comprehend the processes they are expected to implement in order to meet the accountability standards established in Alberta. The rigors of these expectations, as outlined by Alberta Education (2010), are very well defined and significantly impact how superintendents approach the establishment and execution of goals and priorities for their school district. It is not surprising to note that many of the

challenges to superintendent and principal instructional practices are influenced by the accountability measures of Alberta Education.

The characteristics that superintendents are being held accountable for was determined by Alberta Education through the 1995 *Alberta Government Accountability Act*. This Act created a new model of accountability focusing on increased planning and reporting from school districts and schools to Alberta Education. In the province of Alberta, educators are held responsible for more than test scores. The accountability model used by the Ministry of Education is a student-centered model that focuses on the following elements: safe and caring schools; student learning opportunities; student learning achievement; preparation for lifelong learning, world of work, citizenship; parental involvement; and continuous improvement. This accountability model stipulates that: “Open, complete and understandable information must be available about all aspects of the education system including policies, funding, results achieved and all the various factors that affect student achievement” (Alberta Learning, 2003, p. 38). This philosophical perspective has manifested itself into an accountability instrument called the Accountability Pillar in Alberta. The purpose of the Accountability Pillar is to “provide a new way for school authorities to measure their success, and assess their progress towards meeting their learning goals” (Alberta Education, 2010). One of the driving factors for implementing the Accountability Pillar was to ensure that continuous improvement is supported and maintained. With the Accountability Pillar, all school jurisdictions measure the same factors in the same way at the same time, creating timely and consistent data that are publicly evaluated and reported.

All school districts in Alberta are expected to complete a three year education plan with all schools required to develop a yearly improvement plan. These documents are then followed by an annual education results report that articulates the results of the school district or school relative to targets of improvement established in their three year education plan or school improvement plan. It is an expectation of Alberta Education (2010) that all requirements of these plans and reporting documents will be met and complied with. In this study all planning and reporting documents conformed to these requirements. The superintendent and principals know what is demanded of them in this regard and various mechanisms or strategies have been developed to facilitate and ease these processes (e.g. school improvement plan templates).

Accountability systems have been criticized for a number of reasons. Accountability systems that reward or sanction on the basis of average student scores creates incentives for schools to boost scores by manipulating the population of students taking these tests. For example, schools have been found to label large numbers of low-scoring students for special education placement so that their test scores are not factored into school accountability ratings (Helig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). What was interesting to conclude about the findings of the school district examined for this study was the observation that the superintendent, principals, or teachers did not see the need to “play these types of games”. While there was some resentment indicated from some respondents as to how accountability data had been used in the past, under the current leadership structure most respondents saw the accountability process as an opportunity to improve teaching, learning, and advance student achievement. For example, in this



school district one of their current priorities within their three year education plan was to improve high school completion rates. Under the current Alberta Education accountability system, high school graduation rates in this school district have been identified as a “concern” and as a result specific strategies needed to be developed and implemented to rectify this “concern”. Rather than shirk away from these results the school district saw this as an opportunity to actively improve their current practices and processes so as to attempt to ensure that more students “walked across the stage on graduation day”. The school district saw these results as a challenge that needed to be addressed rather than spend energy trying to convince stakeholders the accountability system was flawed.

Accountability systems have also been criticized for creating incentives for pushing out students that are deemed low functioning or at-risk so that these students’ test scores do not negatively impact the school districts’ overall results (Helig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). Once again an interesting conclusion about the findings of this study was that this school district chose not to view accountability results as a negative representation of who they were. Instead they simply set out to implement various strategies to create a “safety net” to provide the supports or pyramids of interventions needed to promote student success. It is interesting to note that while this school district does have a lower than provincial average high school graduation rate, it also has a lower than provincial average drop-out rate. Although enhancements are still needed to improve high school graduation rates, the measures implemented as a “safety net” to ensure that low functioning or at-risk students do not drop-out are working well.

Lastly, a conclusion gathered that may explain a rationale for the acceptance by this school district of the accountability system used in Alberta, is the observation that people were being held accountable for elements beyond exclusively focusing on test scores (Alberta Education, 2010). The superintendent, principals, and teachers were accepting and open to discussing their accountability results because most of these results pertained to the “humanity” of education rather than simply relying on test results in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 12. For example, the superintendent, principals, and teachers took great pride in their safe and caring environment of schools results. They saw this as a tremendous indicator that students wanted to come to school and felt safe doing so. Another example of an accountability measure that this school district saw as very encouraging was their continuous improvement results. School district staff saw these results as being indicative that the steps they were taking to better meet the needs of students were being noticed and were being seen as successful.

Accountability can come in many forms and information about achievement can come from a variety of sources (Bracey, 2003). The current contextual climate necessitates that the public has a right to know and to be satisfied that their educational system is operating effectively and efficiently and that students are learning what they are expected to learn. It would appear from the findings and conclusions of this study that the superintendent, principals, and teachers did not mind being held accountable for ensuring that all students reach their potential. They saw meeting the needs of students as being their ultimate responsibility and they were endeavoring to accomplish this

objective to the best of their abilities, which included not shying away from accountability results.

This section of Chapter Six discussed the conclusions of this study as it related to educational accountability. The next section outlines recommendations for future changes.

### **Recommendations**

This study has generated four recommendations about instructional leadership. These recommendations are specifically related to policy-makers, superintendents and principals, school district trustees and community stakeholders, and superintendent and principal preparation programs.

#### **Recommendations for Policy-makers**

DuFour and Eaker (1998) articulated that principals have the most significant impact when teachers are inspired to become more proficient at their skills and techniques through structured collaboration and principals understand their role to be that of a facilitator of leading and learning rather than imposing and calculating. DuFour and Eaker described this concept as the principal being a “learning leader”. DuFour and Marzano (2009) further supported this concept when they stated that principals should move beyond working with individual teachers and work with teams of teachers to expand their capacity to function as members of high performing collaborative teams. Chappuis, Chappuis, and Stiggins (2009) added support to this idea by stating “collaborative learning teams can change day-to-day teaching by giving teachers the

ongoing opportunity to learn together, apply learning to the classroom, and reflect what works and why” (p. 60). The importance of the principal cannot be underestimated in relation to being an effective instructional leader in this regard. Instructional leadership research corroborates that student achievement escalates when principals are proficient instructional leaders (Hallinger, 2007; Leithwood, 2007; McEwan, 2003).

According to Leithwood (2005) superintendent leadership effects on student achievement have “been considered too indirect and complex to sort out” (p. 2). Morgan and Peterson (2002) also criticized the view that understanding multifaceted roles and responsibilities of the superintendent as an instructional leader has proven to be hard to pin down. However, Leithwood (2008) later claimed that superintendents in high performing school districts do invest in instructional leadership at the principal and central office level and have changed their role from organizational manager to instructional leader. More recent research has supported this and indicated that sound jurisdictional leadership practices are instrumental in creating the conditions for students and teachers to succeed. For example, the Wallace Foundation (2006) maintains that “behind excellent teaching and excellent schools is excellent leadership” (p. 1). This observation is further supported by a recent OECD (2008) study of education systems in 22 countries that concluded “leadership is essential to improve efficiency and equity of schooling” (p. 9).

#### *Recommendation One*

Policy-makers have a role to play in strengthening the ability of superintendents and principals to be more effective instructional leaders. Related to hiring, institutions

such as Alberta Education and the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) as it pertains to superintendents, and Alberta Education and the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) as it concerns principals, should develop joint statements of "best practices" that would be endorsed by these institutions. These best practice agreements could then be used to influence the hiring criterion that is implemented to select superintendents and principals and in particular better define their roles as it pertains to evaluation purposes. For example, CASS has recently allocated time and resources to develop a research based framework of instructional leadership dimensions, *CASS Framework for School System Success*, which articulated the skills that successful superintendents should possess, exhibit or be developing. The *CASS Framework for School Success* should be endorsed by Alberta Education and used by all school districts as it relates to the hiring and evaluation of superintendents. For principals, Alberta Education and the ATA have already endorsed a document called the Principal Quality Practice Guidelines which describes the instructional leadership skills they should possess and be demonstrating. However, this document has not currently made its way into systemic use within Alberta yet.

#### *Recommendation Two*

In this study both the superintendent and principals frequently referenced the lack of available time, largely created by administrative duties and accountability reporting, as a significant challenge that adversely impacted their abilities to be effective instructional leaders. Both the superintendent and principals described that if they had more time that they could devote to becoming a stronger instructional leader they would use this time to

create a more robust community of learners that would collaboratively strive to improve their teaching skills and as a result improve student achievement. Therefore, the challenge for policy-makers is to endeavor to provide time during each school day where teachers, principals, and the superintendent can actively engage in professional discussions that examines evidence of student learning and develops strategies for improving teaching.

#### *Recommendation Three*

Although most of the recent research has described that the role of the superintendent and principal has changed considerably in recent years, the superintendent and principal are still responsible for overseeing personnel, academics, finances, and community involvement duties (Berman, 2005). Increased accountability in education has also shifted the role of the superintendent and principal. Superintendents and principals are asked to be exceedingly skillful instructional leaders yet the accountability requirements drastically impacts the time available for them to fulfill these tasks (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005). Policy-makers should examine accountability requirements and strive to achieve a better balance between the reporting of progress as it relates to education in Alberta with the time required to be effective instructional leaders for superintendents and principals.

### **Recommendation for Superintendents and Principals**

#### *Recommendation Four*

At several instances throughout this study principals commented that at times their instructional leadership duties were encroached upon by Alberta Education and the

superintendent in particular in the area of developing measurable goals. Principals described that after formulating strategies to address Alberta Education and school district priorities there was not much flexibility left for them to address their own school priorities. The recommendation that was gleaned from these findings relates to the suggestion that a well-developed and comprehensive school district strategic plan be developed following thorough consultation between schools and central office (Morgan & Peterson, 2002). This strategic plan would increase the level of coherency within the school district and ensure a stronger alignment of actions and resources would be achieved. This strategic plan should be research driven, support systemic reform, be sustainable over time, and use agreed upon data to determine whether progress has been made and objectives have been achieved.

Effective instructional leadership reform requires a continuous improvement model this is supported by the strong alignment between school district and school priorities (Leithwood, 2008). The efficient use of a comprehensive strategic plan would facilitate useful instructional leadership reform.

### **Recommendations for Trustees and Community Stakeholders**

#### *Recommendation Five*

One of the unique relationships that exist in a school district is the one between the trustees and superintendent. As the trustee's only employee, superintendents are asked to put the vision of the trustees into action which at times can detrimentally impact their role as an instructional leader (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005). Trustees are extremely active in the political arena and the superintendent is very often asked or

directed to accompany trustees to these events and meetings to offer background information and advice on educational matters. As a result the relationship with trustees demands a large amount of the superintendent's time each week. Another recommendation of the findings of this study is for trustees to receive training to assist them to understand their role in the school district and focus their efforts where it will be most effective in supporting the school district's mission and goals. This training could improve the quality and functionality of trustee-superintendent relations and provide large dividends for many years.

*Recommendation Six*

As the findings of this study indicated, community stakeholders play an important role in moving the school district mission forward. The involvement of stakeholder groups in the development of the school district's mission does increase the likelihood of community support when difficult decisions (e.g. school closures, new boundaries) need to be made (Morgan & Peterson, 2002). Successful school-community partnerships provide opportunities for cross-pollination by which important goals can be pursued to mutual benefit. A recommendation of the findings of this study, in light of the arduous and time consuming process the superintendent and principals described when soliciting community feedback, would be to develop and implement a consultation process that is streamlined yet still captures the ideas and concerns of stakeholders. An outside facilitator could be contracted to confer with community and school district stakeholders to develop and propose a more efficient consultation process. It would then fall to the



community stakeholders and school district to decide upon a consultation process that works best for them and then apply it.

### **Recommendations for Superintendent and Principal Preparation Programs**

#### *Recommendation Seven*

Because the job of the superintendent and principal is rapidly changing from a managerial focus to that of an instructional leader, it is imperative that candidates aspiring to these positions experience the world of being a school district or school leader prior to assuming the role themselves (Bjork, 1993). Another recommendation of the findings of this study would be that the preparation programs for superintendents and principals provide practicum experiences and allow time to develop collaborative solutions for problems of practice. Being able to analyze student assessment results and reduce it into meaningful and useful information would be a suggested topic for these preparation programs (Morgan & Peterson, 2002). This type of approach supports the development of critical skill sets required of new system and school leaders.

#### *Recommendation Eight*

The role of the superintendent and principal can be isolating, thus increasing the importance of maintaining access to professional coaches and mentors and continued training opportunities through which sitting superintendents and principals can collaborate and glean from the experience of other leaders (Fullan, 2008). Another recommendation in the area of superintendent and principal preparation programs urges that the supports and services described above be routinely scheduled during the first 24

months of employment in order to support the transition and increase the likelihood of being in contact with external assistance structures.

As the superintendent and principal positions transition from a managerial focused position to being more responsible for instructional leadership, it is critical that system and school leaders have both the skills and knowledge necessary to direct multi-dimensional action towards a single objective: improving student achievement (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005). The findings from this study can provide instructive guidance to those responsible for student achievement, as well as those who are vested in the outcomes of public education. The recommendations listed above were presented as they related to specific areas of responsibility, including policy-makers, superintendents and principals, trustees and community stakeholders, and superintendent and principal preparation programs.

This section of Chapter Six discussed recommendations for future changes for various stakeholders. The final section outlines suggestions for future research.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Given the fact that superintendent and principal instructional leadership is critical for student growth and improved achievement, a great deal remains to be researched regarding the instructional leadership practices of these individuals during this era of educational accountability and reform (Leithwood, 2008). Since this study may be of interest to superintendents, school principals, central office administrators, vice-principals, school board trustees, and other researchers who are interested in effective

instructional leadership, the following recommendations are provided for these audiences.

The limited scope of this study should be expanded. A more indepth qualitative examination of the instructional leadership practices, and challenges to these behaviours, of more superintendents and principals should be designed and implemented. It would be important to replicate this study to verify whether these specific findings are representative of other superintendents and principals.

It is the researcher's contention that superintendents and principals can only survive and manage challenges to their instructional leadership for a limited period of time before it begins to adversely affect student achievement. Follow-up studies should be conducted to determine the long-term impact of challenges to administrator instructional leadership on student achievement.

This qualitative study examined the challenges that impacted the instructional leadership practices of a superintendent and principals in one school district. Further examination of this topic with a quantitative review of student achievement data in relation to challenges to administrator instructional leadership would establish a statistical relationship between instructional leadership challenges and student learning.

Future research would be enhanced by concentrating on fewer instructional leadership dimensions. By reducing the number of instructional leadership characteristics to be studied more indepth analysis could be provided. The instructional leadership characteristics described in the College of Alberta School Superintendents'

*Framework for School System Success* are suggested as the dimensions to be more thoroughly examined.

If the leadership focus of a superintendent is not instructionally based then it needs to change (Leithwood, 2008). Future research should be conducted to review the processes or procedures superintendents use and implement to transition from being managerially fixated to being instructionally driven.

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### APPENDIX A: Draft Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Administrators

Parameter: Defining a Mission.
1. Describe how and why you articulate a clear mission that reflects the goals and purposes of your school community?
2. How often do you articulate the mission of your school district?
3. In what types of environments do you articulate the mission of your school district?
4. Can you give an example of how you tie the daily operations of the school district to its mission?
5. Can you describe what you see as strengths to developing and articulating a mission for your school district?
6. Can you describe what you see as barriers to developing and articulating a mission for your school district?
Parameter: Managing Curriculum and Instruction.
7. Describe how information is provided to teachers so that they can plan their classes effectively?
8. What are the key instructional needs of staff and how do you support the instructional needs of staff?
9. What portion of your day is directed towards instructional and managerial duties?
10. Are there any barriers, and if so, what do you see as the barriers to being able to focus more on the instructional needs of staff?
Parameter: Supervising Teaching.
11. With regard to staff development what do you see as your role?
12. How do you encourage staff to continually improve their professional practices?
13. How do you coach and advise staff in a supportive manner?
14. Can you describe what you see as the strengths to supporting staff in their professional growth and development?



15. Can you describe what you see as the barriers to supporting staff in their professional growth and development?
Parameter: Monitoring Student Progress.
16. How often do you assist staff to review and analyze student work to determine that student growth is occurring?
17. Describe how you use data with staff as a tool to design strategies for improvement?
18. How do you link theory, practice and data and encourage leaders and/or teachers to embrace all three as they advance their work with/for students?
19. How do you encourage staff to use a variety of instructional techniques and assessment strategies?
20. How do you provide teachers with timely access to student assessment information?
21. What do you see as the strengths to using assessment results in ways that help staff and students to improve?
22. What do you see as the barriers to using assessment results in ways that help staff and students to improve?
Parameter: Promoting an Instructional Climate.
23. How and why do you create and foster a community of learners?
24. What classroom practices do you observe that show you all students are meaningfully engaged in active learning?
25. How do you encourage staff to be innovative and create a variety of engaging learning environments?
26. How do you provide opportunities for staff to plan together?

27. Can you describe what you see as the strengths to being able motivate staff to be creative to meet the needs of students?

28. Can you describe what you see as the barriers to being able to motivate staff to be creative to meet the needs of students?

### APPENDIX B: Draft Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Teachers

Parameter: Defining a Mission.
1. Describe how and why a clear mission that reflects the goals and purposes of your school community is articulate to you by Administration?
2. How often is the mission of your school district articulated to you by Administration?
3. In what types of environments is the mission of your school district articulated to you by Administration?
4. Can you give an example of how the daily operations of the school district are tied to its mission by Administration?
5. Can you describe what you see as strengths to Administration developing and articulating a mission in your school district?
6. Can you describe what you see as barriers to Administration developing and articulating a mission in your school district?
Parameter: Managing Curriculum and Instruction.
7. Describe how information is provided by Administration to teachers so that they can plan their classes effectively?
8. What are the conditions that Administration is able to create/develop that allow teachers to perform at their best?
9. What are the key instructional needs of staff and how does Administration support the instructional needs of staff?
10. What portion of Administration's day is directed towards instructional and managerial duties?
11. Are there any, and if so, what do you see as the barriers to Administration being able to focus more on the instructional needs of staff?

Parameter: Supervising Teaching.
12. With regard to staff development what do you see as the role of Administration?
13. How does Administration encourage staff to continually improve their professional practices?
14. How does Administration coach and advise staff in a supportive manner?
15. Can you describe what you see as the strengths to Administration supporting staff in their professional growth and development?
16. Can you describe what you see as the barriers to Administration supporting staff in their professional growth and development?
Parameter: Monitoring Student Progress.
17. How often does Administration assist staff to review and analyze student work to determine that student growth is occurring?
18. Describe how Administration uses data with staff as a tool to design strategies for improvement?
19. How does Administration encourage staff to use a variety of instructional techniques and assessment strategies?
20. How does Administration provide teachers with timely access to student assessment information?
21. What do you see as the strengths to Administration using assessment results in ways that help staff and students to improve?
22. What do you see as the barriers to Administration using assessment results in ways that help staff and students to improve?
Parameter: Promoting an Instructional Climate.
23. How and why does Administration create and foster a community of learners?
24. What classroom practices does Administration observe to ensure that all students are meaningfully engaged in active learning?

26. How does Administration provide opportunities for staff to plan together?
27. Can you describe what you see as the strengths to Administration being able to motivate staff to be creative to meet the needs of students?
28. Can you describe what you see as the barriers to Administration being able to motivate staff to be creative to meet the needs of students?

### **APPENDIX C: Superintendent Recruitment Notice**

Audience: Superintendents of schools of high performing school jurisdiction.

Purpose: To seek permission from the superintendent to conduct the study in his/her school district. The researcher will ask the superintendent and participating principals to forward the recruitment notice to prospective principals and teacher participants, respectively. Prospective participants will then be free to contact the researcher on their own. The researcher will choose the superintendent, fifteen principals and sixteen teachers from the prospective participants that respond to the recruitment notice.

As well, the researcher is seeking permission to review relevant school accountability documents.

Hello \_\_\_\_\_

I am Paul Mason and I am conducting a study as part of the requirement to attain a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. The purpose of this study is to: add to the research as it relates to one school districts superintendent's and principals instructional leadership; and investigate the barriers, if any, that a superintendent and principals experience when involved in instructional leadership.

I have chosen your district as it is recognized as a high performing school district. I am seeking permission to conduct research in your jurisdiction and to review accountability documents such as improvement plans, annual results reports, and achievement results analyses.

I will be sending recruitment letters directly to principals. Prospective principal participants will then be free to contact the researcher at their own discretion. The

researcher will choose fifteen principals to interview. The participating principals will be asked to forward the recruitment notice to prospective teacher participants. The researcher will choose sixteen teachers to interview from the prospective participants that respond to the recruitment notice. Participants will be selected on a first come first responded basis. Once the case study participants have been selected, and have formally consented to participate, all other potential participants will be notified by email that the required number of participants have been obtained.

Participation in this study is voluntary and participants will be free to refuse to answer any questions and may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty (and only data collected to the point of withdrawal will be used). All information gathered will be held in strict confidence and pseudonyms for people and places will be used in the writing of this research thesis so as to ensure anonymity of participants. No identifying information will be used in the writing of the thesis. The data will be kept in a locked cabinet in a secure location at the researcher's home. The raw data on the digital recorder and transcripts will be destroyed two years after the completion of the researcher's degree. All electronic files will be deleted and all hand written notes will be shredded. Participants will be interviewed in a location that is private and convenient for them. As well, I will comply with your jurisdiction's research permission and approval process. As well, I will comply with your jurisdiction research permission and approval process. The purpose of these interviews is to gather data to paint a picture of the current reality of how one school district superintendent's and principals' instructional leadership are impacted by any barriers that may be present.

The data gathered from participants will remain confidential and anonymity will be sought in that all information will void any identifiers. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved the research project.

I would like to send you the University of Calgary Certificate of Institutional Ethics Review and Ethics Consent Form for your review. I will ask you to complete two Ethics Consent Forms, one for your records and one that I will retain for my records. I would like to confirm your email address as \_\_\_\_\_.

I can be reached at 403-343-1055 if you have further questions. I will contact you in one week to ask if you will give consent for your school district to participate in this opportunity.

Thank you for considering my request.



### **APPENDIX D: Principal Recruitment Notice**

Audience: Fifteen principals of a high performing school district.

Purpose: To seek the participation of principals in this study. The researcher will ask the principal to forward the recruitment notice to prospective teacher participants.

Prospective teacher participants will then be free to contact the researcher at their own discretion. The researcher will choose sixteen teachers to interview from the prospective participants that respond to the recruitment notice.

Hello \_\_\_\_\_

I am Paul Mason and I am conducting a study as part of the requirement to attain a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. The purpose of this study is to: add to the research as it relates to one school districts superintendent's and principals' instructional leadership; and investigate the barriers that a superintendent and principals experience when involved in instructional leadership.

You have responded to a recruitment notice sent directly to you to participate in this study. Therefore, I am seeking permission to conduct research in your school by interviewing you and to review accountability documents at the school level such as school improvement plans, annual education results reports, and achievement results analyses.

I will also ask you to forward the recruitment notice to all prospective teacher participants without adding any additional information to this document. Prospective teacher participants will then be free to contact the researcher at their own discretion. The researcher will choose sixteen teachers to interview from the prospective participants that

respond to the recruitment notice. Participants will be selected on a first come first responded basis. Once the case study participants have been selected, and have formally consented to participate, all other potential participants will be notified by email that the required number of participants have been obtained.

The data gathered from participants will remain confidential and anonymity will be sought in that all information will void any identifiers. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved the research project.

Participation in this study is voluntary and participants will be free to refuse to answer any questions and may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty (and only data collected to the point of withdrawal will be used). All information gathered will be held in strict confidence and pseudonyms for people and places will be used in the writing of this research thesis so as to ensure anonymity of participants. No identifying information will be used in the writing of the thesis. The data will be kept in a secure location at the researcher's home in a locked cabinet. The raw data on the digital recorder and transcripts will be destroyed two years after the completion of the researcher's degree. All electronic files will be deleted and all hand written notes will be shredded.

Participants will be interviewed in a location that is private and convenient for them.

I would like to send you the University of Calgary Certificate of Institutional Ethics Review and Ethics Consent Form for your review. At the time of the interview, I will ask you to complete two Ethics Consent Forms, one for your records and one that I will retain for my records. I would like to confirm your email address as \_\_\_\_\_.

I would like to schedule an hour-long face to face interview with you for some time in \_\_\_\_\_ 2012. I look forward to hearing your comments regarding instructional leadership. I can be reached at 403-343-1055 if you have further questions. I will contact you by phone to schedule your interview if you consent to participate in this opportunity. Thank you for considering my request

### **APPENDIX E: Teacher Recruitment Notice**

Audience: Superintendents of schools of high performing school jurisdiction.

Purpose: To seek the participation of the teachers in the study.

Hello \_\_\_\_\_

I am Paul Mason and I am conducting a study as part of the requirement to attain a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. The purpose of this study is to: add to the research as it relates to one school districts superintendent's and principals' instructional leadership; and investigate the barriers that a superintendent and principals experience when involved in instructional leadership.

I have interviewed the superintendent, fifteen principals in the district, and reviewed accountability documents at the district and school level such as improvement plans, annual education results reports, and achievement results analyses. You have responded, directly to the researcher, to a recruitment notice sent out by your principal to participate in this study. I am seeking permission to interview you. Participants will be selected on a first come first responded basis. Once the case study participants have been selected, and have formally consented to participate, all other potential participants will be notified by email that the required number of participants have been obtained. The data gathered from participants will remain confidential and anonymity will be sought in that all information will void any identifiers. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved the research project.

Participation in this study is voluntary and participants will be free to refuse to answer any questions and may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty (and only

data collected to the point of withdrawal will be used). All information gathered will be held in strict confidence and pseudonyms for people and places will be used in the writing of this research thesis so as to ensure anonymity of participants. No identifying information will be used in the writing of the thesis. The data will be kept in a secure location at the researcher's home in a locked cabinet. The raw data on the digital recorder and transcripts will be destroyed two years after the completion of the researcher's degree. All electronic files will be deleted and all hand written notes will be shredded. Participants will be interviewed in a location that is private and convenient for them.

I would like to send you the University of Calgary Certificate of Institutional Ethics Review and Ethics Consent Form for your review. At the time of the interview, I will ask you to complete two Ethics Consent Forms, one for your records and one that I will retain for my records.

I would like to schedule an hour-long face to face interview with you for some time in \_\_\_\_\_ 2012. I look forward to hearing your comments regarding instructional leadership. I can be reached at 403-343-1055 if you have further questions. I will contact you by phone to schedule your interview if you consent to participate in this opportunity.

Thank you for considering my request.

**APPENDIX F: Follow-up Letter - Superintendent**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

This letter is further to our recent phone conversation. As you know, I am Paul Mason and I am conducting a study as part of the requirement to attain a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. The purpose of this study is to: add to the research as it relates to one school districts superintendent's and principals' instructional leadership; and investigate the barriers, if any, that a superintendent and principals experience when involved in instructional leadership.

I have chosen your district as it is recognized as a high performing district. I am seeking permission to conduct research in your jurisdiction and to review accountability documents such as improvement plans, annual results reports, and achievement results analyses.

I will be sending recruitment letters directly to principals. Prospective principal participants will then be free to contact the researcher at their own discretion. The researcher will choose fifteen principals to interview. The participating principals will be asked to forward the recruitment notice to prospective teacher participants. The researcher will choose sixteen teachers to interview from the prospective participants that respond to the recruitment notice. Participants will be selected on a first come first responded basis. Once the case study participants have been selected, and have formally consented to participate, all other potential participants will be notified by email that the required number of participants have been obtained.

Participation in this study is voluntary and participants will be free to refuse to answer any questions and may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty (and only data collected to the point of withdrawal will be used). All information gathered will be held in strict confidence and pseudonyms for people and places will be used in the writing of this research thesis so as to ensure anonymity of participants. No identifying information will be used in the writing of the thesis. The data will be kept in a secure location at the researcher's home in a locked cabinet. The raw data on the digital recorder and transcripts will be destroyed two years after the completion of the researcher's degree. All electronic files will be deleted and all hand written notes will be shredded. Participants will be interviewed in a location that is private and convenient for them. As well, I will comply with your jurisdiction research permission and approval process. As well, I will comply with your jurisdiction research permission and approval process. The purpose of these interviews is to gather data to paint a picture of the current reality of how one school district superintendent's and principals' instructional leadership are impacted by any barriers that may be present. The data gathered from participants will remain confidential and anonymity will be sought in that all information will void any identifiers. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved the research project. I have attached the University of Calgary Certificate of Institutional Ethics Review and Ethics Consent Form for your review. Please complete two Ethics Consent Forms, one for your records and one that I will retain for my records. Please mail one of the Ethics Consent Forms to my address at 8 Ackerman Cr., Red Deer, Alberta, T4R 3A8.

I can be reached at 403-343-1055 if you have further questions.

Thank you for considering my request.

Regards,

V. Paul Mason



**APPENDIX G: Follow-up Letter - Principal**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

This letter is further to our recent phone conversation. As you know, I am Paul Mason and I am conducting a study as part of the requirement to attain a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. The purpose of this study is to: add to the research as it relates to one school districts superintendent's and principals' instructional leadership; and investigate the barriers that a superintendent and principals experience when involved in instructional leadership.

You have responded to a recruitment notice sent directly to you to participate in this study. Therefore, I am seeking permission to conduct research in your school by interviewing you and to review accountability documents at the school level such as school improvement plans, annual education results reports, and achievement results analyses.

I will also ask you to forward the recruitment notice to all prospective teacher participants without adding any additional information to this document. Prospective teacher participants will then be free to contact the researcher at their own discretion. The researcher will choose sixteen teachers to interview from the prospective participants that respond to the recruitment notice. Participants will be selected on a first come first responded basis. Once the case study participants have been selected, and have formally consented to participate, all other potential participants will be notified by email that the required number of participants have been obtained.

The data gathered from participants will remain confidential and anonymity will be sought in that all information will void any identifiers. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved the research project.

Participation in this study is voluntary and participants will be free to refuse to answer any questions and may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty (and only data collected to the point of withdrawal will be used). All information gathered will be held in strict confidence and pseudonyms for people and places will be used in the writing of this research thesis so as to ensure anonymity of participants. No identifying information will be used in the writing of the thesis. The data will be kept in a secure location at the researcher's home in a locked cabinet. The raw data on the digital recorder and transcripts will be destroyed two years after the completion of the researcher's degree. All electronic files will be deleted and all hand written notes will be shredded. Participants will be interviewed in a location that is private and convenient for them. I would like to send you the University of Calgary Certificate of Institutional Ethics Review and Ethics Consent Form for your review. At the time of the interview, I will ask you to complete two Ethics Consent Forms, one for your records and one that I will retain for my records. I would like to confirm your email address as \_\_\_\_\_.

I would like to schedule an hour-long face to face interview with you for some time in \_\_\_\_\_ 2012. I look forward to hearing your comments regarding instructional leadership. I can be reached at 403-343-1055 if you have further questions. I will contact you by phone to schedule your interview if you consent to participate in this opportunity. Thank you for considering my request.

**APPENDIX H: Follow-up letter - Teacher**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

This letter is further to our recent phone conversation. As you know, I am Paul Mason and I am conducting a study as part of the requirement to attain a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. The purpose of this study is to: add to the research as it relates to one school districts superintendent's and principals' instructional leadership; and investigate the barriers that a superintendent and principals experience when involved in instructional leadership.

I have interviewed the superintendent, fifteen principals in the district, and reviewed accountability documents at the district and school level such as improvement plans, annual education results reports, and achievement results analyses. You have responded, directly to the researcher, to a recruitment notice sent out by your principal to participate in this study. I am seeking permission to interview you. Participants will be selected on a first come first responded basis. Once the case study participants have been selected, and have formally consented to participate, all other potential participants will be notified by email that the required number of participants have been obtained.

The data gathered from participants will remain confidential and anonymity will be sought in that all information will void any identifiers. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved the research project.

Participation in this study is voluntary and participants will be free to refuse to answer any questions and may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty (and only data collected to the point of withdrawal will be used). All information gathered will be

held in strict confidence and pseudonyms for people and places will be used in the writing of this research thesis so as to ensure anonymity of participants. No identifying information will be used in the writing of the thesis. The data will be kept in a secure location at the researcher's home in a locked cabinet. The raw data on the digital recorder and transcripts will be destroyed two years after the completion of the researcher's degree. All electronic files will be deleted and all hand written notes will be shredded. Participants will be interviewed in a location that is private and convenient for them. I would like to send you the University of Calgary Certificate of Institutional Ethics Review and Ethics Consent Form for your review. At the time of the interview, I will ask you to complete two Ethics Consent Forms, one for your records and one that I will retain for my records.

I would like to schedule an hour-long face to face interview with you for sometime in \_\_\_\_\_ 2012. I look forward to hearing your comments regarding instructional leadership. I can be reached at 403-343-1055 if you have further questions. I will contact you by phone to schedule your interview if you consent to participate in this opportunity. Thank you for considering my request.

Regards,

V. Paul Mason

### APPENDIX I: Summary of Responses

Theme	Superintendent	Principals	Teachers
Vision/Mission	<p>- Collaborative process used to develop a mission that is communicated like a broken record – over &amp; over again – in as many different environments as possible: “Need to hear the mission repeated back from people on a daily basis in order to affirm that it is understood beyond central office” (Paul Interview, p. 1)</p> <p>- Found that mission provides direction and cohesion for district initiatives</p> <p><b><u>Barriers/Challenges:</u></b></p> <p>- Lengthy process ensuring grass roots input is collected: “It took considerable time and energy and many staff members to collect and analyze feedback from stakeholders” (Paul Interview, p. 1)</p> <p>- Risky allowing a broad spectrum of stakeholders to provide input</p>	<p>- Provides purpose, direction and cohesion</p> <p>- Sometimes school district goals are taken and morphed into school priorities: “To encourage alignment our school took the district priorities and amended them to fit our community better” (Jim Interview, p. 1)</p> <p>- Mission is done more by what we do rather than by what we say</p> <p>- Mission provides the context for all decisions: “Whenever our administration team is dealing with an issue or topic we refer back to the mission statement to provide the rationale” (Cathy Interview, p. 1)</p> <p>- Mission does come up in a variety of environments</p> <p>- Important to have a clear vision: “It is interesting to reflect how much our mission, when clearly articulated, provides direction” (Sean Interview, p. 1)</p> <p><b><u>Barriers/Challenges:</u></b></p>	<p>- Feel that the mission is not articulated word for word every day: “I know that we have one but I only hear it a couple of times a year” (Shelia Interview, p. 1)</p> <p>- There is a general good understanding of the school district and school mission</p> <p>- The mission is used to keep people on the same page, gives direction and provide cohesion</p> <p>- The mission acts as a filter that influences decision making and provides a rationale for decisions: “Our staff views the mission as an instrument that helps us to make decisions” (Kim Interview, p. 1)</p> <p>- Reiterating it regularly: “Our mission is usually mentioned in morning announcements, web site, newsletters, and different types of meetings: “ (Rhonda Interview, p. 1)</p> <p><b><u>Barriers/Challenges:</u></b></p> <p>- Negative attitudes that impact buy-in to the mission: “Nee-sayers on staff significantly influence the meaning of our</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Perspectives not able to come together</li> <li>- Different people with different levels of commitment: “I see that different people have different ideas of what exactly the mission means or is” (Dean Interview, p. 1)</li> <li>- Mission statement process is passé. Does the mission statement actually mean anything? Everyone’s is pretty much the same anyway: “I get frustrated with discussions related to mission or vision. Time needs to be better spent in more important and demanding areas” (Kevin Interview, p. 1)</li> <li>- Time to meaningfully develop a mission that is well done: “With so many other competing duties discussion of mission usually gets tabled at staff meetings” (Jason Interview, p. 1)</li> </ul>	<p>mission” (James Interview, p. 1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Some people just don’t want to hear it: “People are too busy to consider this as important” (Pat Interview, p. 1)</li> <li>- Personality conflicts between administration and staff: “Baggage between administration and some teachers gets in the way of us moving forward with this” (Shelia Interview, p. 1)</li> </ul>
Teaching and Planning Time	<p>- School district needs to provide time and resources to support these priorities: “If we identify priorities we need to ensure that we support them adequately” (Paul Interview, p. 2)</p> <p><b>Barriers/Challenges:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Common planning time among teams both within and across schools: “Collaborative planning time has quickly become part of our culture” (Tim Interview, p. 2)</li> <li>- Collaborative planning time is provided in the</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- While administrators do provide time for teachers to plan and collaborate there is little direction given and even less follow-up provided</li> <li>- Teachers are appreciative of the common collaboration time:</li> </ul>

	<p>- Organizational tasks and responsibilities significantly distract from instructional leadership duties</p>	<p>timetable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Assist in breaking down the curriculum into manageable chunks: “One of my primary roles is to assist teachers in being to break down the curriculum so that it is not so overwhelming” (Ben Interview, p. 2)</li> <li>- Need to focus on meeting the different teaching needs of teachers</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Barriers/Challenges:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Getting wrapped up in the administravia of the job leaves not enough time for coaching role in classrooms: “I find that the paperwork is overwhelming and takes me away from what I really want to be focusing on” (Breagh Interview, p. 3)</li> <li>- District perspective take away from school priorities</li> <li>- Teachers reluctant to leave their classrooms for professional development: “We find that our teachers would rather not miss teaching their students then attend professional development events” (Michelle Interview, p.2)</li> <li>- Resources to pay for staff professional development</li> </ul>	<p>“Common planning time has greatly assisted our grade pod in collaborative planning” (Crystal Interview, p. 2)</p> <p><b><u>Barriers/Challenges:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Too many administrative demands</li> <li>- Administrators not aware of teaching needs of staff: “My principal struggles to understand the diverse teaching needs of our staff” (James Interview, p. 3)</li> </ul>
<p>Managing Classroom</p>	<p>- Strive to achieve a</p>	<p>- See my role as being that</p>	<p>- Feel that administrators</p>

<p>Instruction</p>	<p>climate of staff growing together with resources to support this</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Create a learning environment where it is safe to make mistakes: “Teachers should feel confident and assured to try new things without worrying exclusively about outcomes” (Paul Interview, p. 3)</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Barriers/Challenges:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Difficult to differentiate between the needs of the district with the needs of teachers: “We struggle with the tug and pull contest between central priorities and specific teacher priorities” (Paul Interview, p. 4)</li> </ul>	<p>of a mentor and provider of information: “We see that teachers need a colleague to bounce ideas off of” (Sean Interview, p. 4)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Role model and coach of necessary skills</li> <li>- Ensure teachers are in position to succeed: “If my teachers have what they need to meet the needs of students we all will be successful” (Peter Interview, p. 3)</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Barriers/Challenges:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Time to support staff</li> <li>- Teachers who do not see that they skills should be evolving: “Some of our staff who have experienced success in the past are reluctant to continue to improve” (Peter Interview, p. 4)</li> <li>- Having the resources to meet the multiple needs of staff</li> </ul>	<p>have a pretty good sense of their professional development needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Administrators are supportive and encourage a diversity of professional development options: “My principal is amazing at encouraging professional development opportunities” (Shelia Interview, p. 4)</li> <li>- Prefer to see that principals are also actively involved in professional development themselves</li> <li>- Willingness to engage in collaborative discussions after classroom walk throughs: “I have not had any real evaluations since my first year of teaching. I like when my principal gives me feedback about my teaching” (Shelia Interview, p. 4)</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Barriers/Challenges:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Principals are occupied with managerial duties: “Our administration seems to be busy with high needs students and parents a lot” (Matthew Interview, p. 5)</li> <li>- Resources for professional development are lacking</li> </ul>
<p>Student Success/Progress</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Very supportive of the use of data, theory and practice in conjunction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Data analysis is not done enough – not currently where we need to be:</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unsure how to analyze the data: “I know I should know how to examine</li> </ul>



	<p>- Multiple sources of data should be used to gauge if student progress/improvement is being made: “Data needs to be used in a constructive and not punitive manner to measure student development: (Paul Interview, p. 5)</p> <p><b><u>Barriers/Challenges:</u></b> - Elements of trust need to be established between administrators and teachers: “A bias or legacy of how data has been used in the past needs to be overcome” (Paul Interview, p. 6)</p>	<p>“Overall data is not used well to help staff design strategies for student improvement. People talk a good game but very little follow through is done: (Hannah Interview, p. 5)</p> <p>- Celebrate new ideas and encourage staff to share: “As a team we encourage staff to try and share new ideas. It then becomes important to celebrate these new strategies” (Cathy Interview, p. 6)</p> <p>- Instances of common planning time used to examine student progress</p> <p><b><u>Barriers/Challenges:</u></b> - Lack of time</p> <p>- Taking results personally: “Some teachers see poor results as an attack on their teaching abilities” (Juanita Interview, p. 5)</p> <p>- Differences of what the data actually indicates: “Some staff seem to have a built-in suspicion of what the data actually means. At times there seems to be an inherent suspicion of data” (Juanita Interview, p. 5)</p>	<p>student results to help future instruction, but I don’t know how to effectively do this” (Carol Interview, p. 6)</p> <p>- Looking to administration for assistance with improving student progress</p> <p>- Very little follow-up occurs in this area: “Other than looking at provincial achievement test results when they come out, we rarely look at or discuss how results can be used to improve student progress” (Marie Interview, p. 5)</p> <p><b><u>Barriers/Challenges:</u></b> - Lack of time to pull together data: “We are all very busy and this leaves little time to review the results for analysis” (Marie Interview, p. 5)</p> <p>- Results misinterpreted</p> <p>- Reluctance to hear feedback: “Nobody wants to hear bad news especially when the results don’t capture all of the dynamics of the class” (Rod Interview, p. 5)</p> <p>- Personalization of results: “Some teachers see the examination of the results as a commentary of their teaching abilities” (Kim Interview, p. 6)</p>
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<p>Positive Atmosphere</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Be a learner yourself: “Important to set an example or be a role model and always strive to be learning new things” (Paul Interview, p. 6)</li> <li>- Create processes and/or mechanisms to move the organization forward – by doing this will be able to positively touch more students: “One of my roles is to establish processes that allow others to more effectively complete their jobs” (Paul Interview, p. 6)</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Barriers/Challenges:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Need to be aware of staff workloads: “Concerned about the high school biology teacher who is also asked to incorporate literacy strategies into their instruction” (Paul Interview, p. 7)</li> <li>- Coordination of demands among departments: “We sometimes forget or get into our individual silos and put schools into difficult situations when we as a central office are not aware of the various demands and requests that we ask of schools” (Paul Interview, p. 7)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Seek out new ideas or trends</li> <li>- Lead by example and be a part of the change process</li> <li>- Encourage staff to try new things: “It is important to be the facilitator or attempt to motivate staff to seek out new professional development so that they stay fresh and their classroom instruction is current” (Joe Interview, p. 6)</li> <li>- Celebrate successes: “Our administration team has found that if we are asking staff to be innovative it is important for us to collectively celebrate these successes” (Korby Interview, p. 7)</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Barriers/Challenges:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Keeping in touch with what students are exposed to: “How does a teacher link Math to Call of Duty?” (Jason Interview, p. 6)</li> <li>- Trust: “Teachers find that they are spending a lot of time defending new approaches to teaching with parents” (Dean Interview, p. 7).</li> <li>- Fear: “Teachers who have experienced success in the past are fearful of trying</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Need for collaborative planning time: “I know teachers on our staff really appreciate the efforts that go into providing common preparation time” (Ashley Interview, p. 6)</li> <li>- Encouragement to participate in professional development: “Our principal regularly pushes us to try new professional development” (Megan Interview, p. 5)</li> <li>- Sharing of ideas and strategies</li> <li>- Administrators as role models: “Our staff like to see our administrators walking the talk. They sign-up for various professional development sessions as they ask us to do” (Paulette Interview, p. 6)</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Barriers/Challenges:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reluctant to change: “Most of our staff see change as an unnecessary risk and they have become set in their ways” (Ryan Interview, p. 7)</li> <li>- Workload: “Staff feel overworked and are not actively seeking out more to do” (Lisa Interview, p. 6)</li> </ul>
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