Leading in Place: A Case Study of the Role of Public School Principals in Facilitating Place-Based Learning

A dissertation presented to
the faculty of
The Patton College of Education of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Education

Shannon D. Hankins
December 2015

© 2015 Shannon D. Hankins. All Rights Reserved.
This dissertation titled
Leading in Place: A Case Study of the Role of Public School Principals in
Facilitating Place-Based Learning

by

SHANNON D. HANKINS

has been approved for
the Department of Educational Studies
and The Patton College of Education by

Krisanna L. Machtmes
Associate Professor of Educational Studies

Renée A. Middleton
Dean, The Patton College of Education
Abstract

HANKINS, SHANNON, D., Ed.D., December 2015, Educational Administration

Leading in Place: A Case Study of the Role of Public School Principals in Facilitating Place-Based Learning

Director of Dissertation: Krisanna L. Machmtes

Place-based learning has the potential to positively impact student engagement and achievement, as well as promote an involved citizenry. The role of principals in facilitating the approach, however, has received little attention. A collective case study was used to explore the role of public school principals in the implementation of place-based learning. A qualitative data set was collected via semi-structured interviews with current or former principals of schools implementing the approach. The findings reflected principals willing to support teachers as they implement the approach have educational beliefs that align with place-based learning. They employ servant, instructional, and transformational leadership styles. The principals are willing to establish connections with stakeholders, build relationships, and foster a school culture that embraces place-based learning. Additionally, they provide professional learning opportunities for their staff and remove obstacles that could prohibit the implementation of place-based learning projects.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my loving husband, Joe.
Acknowledgments

Many individuals have walked this journey with me over the past several years. Their on-going support and encouragement is sincerely appreciated. Their guidance, patience, and love are unforgettable. I would like to express a general thank you to all the teachers, friends, and family who have blessed my life.

Specifically, I would like to express my appreciation for my dissertation committee, Dr. Krisanna Machtmes, Dr. William Larson, Dr. Dwan Robinson, and Dr. Ginger Weade. Thank you to Dr. Krisanna Machtmes for keeping me on schedule, answering my many questions, and providing valuable feedback. She sacrificed her personal time to support me along this journey. The many hours she spent discussing methodology and ensuring paperwork was completed are cherished. Much thankfulness goes to Dr. William Larson for encouraging me to begin this process and seeing me through to the end. His patience and guidance will not be forgotten. His phone calls to “check in” and attention to detail are valued. Thank you to Dr. Dwan Robinson for providing quality feedback and insight to enhance this work. The fresh perspective shared by Dr. Ginger Weade is appreciated.

I would also like to recognize Dr. Jerry Johnson. He started as my high school principal and then became my advisor when I started my doctoral work. Dr. Jerry Johnson first formally introduced me to place-based learning and
helped me frame my research questions. His insight and guidance are appreciated.

My appreciation goes to Nancy McHenry and Janice Ledford. Nancy’s encouragement and inspiration are cherished. Janice’s tireless review of manuscript drafts and mini-grammar lessons are invaluable.

Ken Gowin has provided much appreciated spiritual guidance for many years. He is a valued mentor, leader, and friend. His insights have proved timeless in moments when the end seemed out of reach.

I would like to thank my “Uncle Jim” for his encouragement to begin this journey. He planted the seed in my mind that I could pursue this degree. His wisdom from decades of experience in the field of education helped shape my goal to complete this degree.

My parents, Jim and Sherry Potter, also deserve my recognition. They have always supported my dreams and reminded me that with hard work my dreams could be achieved. My parents modeled a strong work ethic and conviction. They provided me with the solid foundation needed to pursue this degree. They instilled in me the belief that I could succeed and never stopped reminding me that my dream could be achieved.

I sincerely thank my husband, Joseph Hankins, for his unwavering support. He has encouraged me to persevere with love and conviction in my ability to succeed. Whether it was riding with me to class or driving countless
hours to collect data, he held my hand throughout this process. His inspiration and support are treasured beyond measure.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Introduction</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose Statement</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Lens</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Literature Review</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place-Based Learning</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place-based learning described.</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrarian pedagogy</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place-based learning is grounded in the past</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale for place-based learning</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School level leadership and place-based learning</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational and Leadership Theory</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Theory</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open or closed</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy or unhealthy</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Professional school structure ................................................................. 46
Enabling school structure ........................................................................ 50
Leadership Theory .................................................................................... 54
Transformational leadership ................................................................. 54
Instructional leadership ........................................................................... 57
Servant leadership .................................................................................. 60
Summary .................................................................................................. 61
Chapter 3: Methodology .............................................................................. 63
Introduction ............................................................................................. 63
Research Purpose .................................................................................. 64
Research Design .................................................................................... 64
Participants ........................................................................................... 65
Researcher’s Role ................................................................................ 67
Researcher’s Lens ............................................................................... 69
Access and Rapport ............................................................................ 70
Access .................................................................................................... 70
Rapport .................................................................................................. 71
Establishing and maintaining rapport ................................................. 71
Impacting rapport ............................................................................. 71
Cautions related to rapport ................................................................. 72
Reciprocity ............................................................................................. 72
Ethical Considerations .......................................................................... 72
Respect for persons ............................................................................ 73
Beneficence ......................................................................................... 74
Justice .................................................................................................. 74
Trustworthiness .................................................................................... 74
Credibility .............................................................................................. 74
Dependability ...................................................................................... 76
Transferability ..................................................................................... 77
Confirmability ....................................................................................... 77
Data Collection Method ........................................................................ 77
Initial introduction to place-based learning .................................................. 97
Explanations of place-based learning ............................................................ 98
Experiences with place-based learning ......................................................... 98
  As a teacher ............................................................................................... 99
  As a principal ............................................................................................ 101
Participants’ Views of Relevant Professional Learning .................................... 106
Participants’ Views of the Benefits of Place-Based Learning .......................... 108
Core Beliefs Embraced .................................................................................. 110
School Culture .............................................................................................. 111
  Participant’s perceived role ........................................................................ 112
Role in the Learning Process .......................................................................... 113
  Teachers .................................................................................................... 113
  Students .................................................................................................... 114
Protection from External Pressures ............................................................... 115
Instructional Decision-Making Process ........................................................ 116
  Communication ......................................................................................... 116
  With students ........................................................................................... 116
  With teachers ............................................................................................ 117
  With families ............................................................................................. 118
  With community members ....................................................................... 118
Support Implementation of Place-Based Learning ........................................ 119
  Support implementation among teachers ............................................... 119
  Support implementation beyond the school ............................................ 120
  Support students’ academic success ......................................................... 122
Themes and Patterns: Introduction ............................................................... 123
Leadership Approaches Utilized to Support Implementation ....................... 123
  Servant leadership ..................................................................................... 123
  Instructional leadership ............................................................................ 124
  Collaboration ............................................................................................ 124
  Transformational leadership ..................................................................... 125
  Establishment of connections .................................................................. 126
Building relationships.......................................................................................... 126
An engrained part of the culture. ....................................................................... 127
Teacher Empowerment to Embrace Place-Based Learning ............................ 128
Provision of professional learning opportunities. ............................................. 128
Enablement via removal of obstacles. ............................................................... 129
Principals’ Introduction to Place-Based Learning ............................................ 130
Instinctual. .......................................................................................................... 130
Chapter 5: Summary, Outcomes, and Implications ......................................... 132
Summary ........................................................................................................... 132
Outcomes .......................................................................................................... 135
Leadership Approaches Utilized to Support Implementation .......................... 135
Servant leadership............................................................................................. 135
Instructional leadership....................................................................................... 135
Collaboration. .................................................................................................. 136
Transformational leadership. ........................................................................... 136
Establishment of connections. ........................................................................ 137
Building relationships....................................................................................... 138
An engrained part of the culture. ...................................................................... 138
Teacher Empowerment to Embrace Place-Based Learning ............................ 139
Provision of professional learning opportunities. ............................................. 139
Enablement via removal of obstacles. ............................................................... 139
Principals’ Introduction to Place-Based Learning ............................................ 140
Instinctual. .......................................................................................................... 140
Implications for the Field .................................................................................. 140
Recommendations for the Field ....................................................................... 141
For teachers. ...................................................................................................... 141
For principals..................................................................................................... 142
For community partners. .................................................................................. 142
Recommendations for Future Research ............................................................ 143
Final Thoughts .................................................................................................. 145
References .......................................................................................................... 146
Appendix A: IRB Approval ................................................................. 156
Appendix B: Statement of Informed Consent .................................. 157
Appendix C: Interview Guide ......................................................... 159
Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Traditional pedagogy is typically not fully meeting the needs of young learners (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011a; NCES, 2011b; NCES, 2013; NCES, 2015). The goal of most schools is to support all learners as they progress toward their personal best academically, physically, and emotionally. However, low academic achievement, engagement in learning, and self-esteem are common concerns in elementary school environments. W. Edwards Deming declared, “If you continue to do what you have always done, you will continue to get the same results” (Covey, 2008, p. 280). Place-based learning (PBL) has the potential to change the results. It has been shown to increase student achievement, engagement in learning, and self-esteem (Long, 2009; Powers, 2004; Promise of Place, 2015; Smith, 2002; Smith, 2007; Smith & Sobel, 2010b; Sobel, 2005). The role of leadership, though, in facilitating place-based learning has not been given significant attention in current literature on the approach. For this reason, the role of public school principals in the implementation of place-based learning deserves investigation.

Simply defined, place-based learning is a pedagogical approach that connects classroom learning to authentic community applications. It grounds learning in place and has the potential to produce many positive outcomes for students including but not limited to increased academic achievement and
engagement. Understanding the role of principals in the implementation of the approach is critical due to their many other administrative responsibilities.

Public school principals must make certain that the teaching and learning process is successfully preparing students for their futures, ensuring college and/or career readiness. Additionally, they are charged with guaranteeing the school environment is clean, safe, and nurturing. Therefore, public school principals are instructional leaders as well as managers of the day-to-day operations of the school.

As instructional leaders, public school principals are involved in teacher observations and evaluations, conducting data analysis, facilitating professional learning communities (PLCs), and engaging in their own professional learning. Through formal and informal observations, public school principals learn how effectively teachers facilitate the learning process. Teacher evaluations provide an opportunity for the public school principal and teacher to discuss individual strengths and areas for improvement. Data analysis is also an important responsibility of an instructional leader. Data related to the teaching and learning process must be analyzed and intentionally shared. A public school principal can share the results of data analysis, as well as new instructional ideas through PLCs. In addition to facilitating the teaching and learning process of the students and staff, instructional leaders presumably engage in their own professional learning related to the integral parts of their role (data analysis, instructional approaches, etc.).
The potential benefits of place-based learning, the current concerns of schools, and the responsibilities of principals underpins the purpose of this study. Through the study, the researcher specifically explores the leadership approaches public school principals use as they support teachers in the implementation of place-based learning.

**Purpose Statement**

Although researchers have shown place-based learning positively impacts student learning and engagement (Long, 2009; Powers, 2004; Promise of Place, 2015; Smith, 2002; Smith & Sobel, 2010b; Sobel, 2005), little attention has been paid to the role of public school principals in the implementation of place-based learning. The lack of focus on these leaders needs addressed to help others gain an understanding of their vital role in the implementation of this innovative approach to teaching and learning. In the words of John Maxwell and Lee Roberson, “Everything rises and falls on leadership” (Borek, Lovett, & Towns, p. 5, 2005). Consequently their role in supporting the implementation of place-based learning is a fundamental piece of the research base supporting its utilization in schools as they strive to prepare students to be college and career ready.

In this study, the researcher examines public school principals of schools that have implemented place-based learning. This focus allows the researcher to contribute to the literature base of PBL as well as to focus on the missing line of inquiry within the literature – leadership.
Significance of the Study

By examining the leadership in schools, specifically public school principals, whose teachers have implemented place-based learning, this case study contributes to the research base behind PBL. An in-depth case study of public school principals who support the implementation of place-based learning is a necessary, but currently insufficiently addressed piece of the puzzle. Principals, curriculum directors, teacher leaders, and other school leaders will be able to learn from the practice of public school principals who are successfully supporting their teachers as they implement PBL.

The contribution to the research base behind PBL that this case study provides is beneficial. It is important for public school principals to know approaches that can be employed to support teachers in the implementation of innovative teaching and learning approaches such as place-based learning. The instructional leadership role of these leaders is not their only responsibility. Public school principals, as previously mentioned, are responsible for establishing and maintaining a clean, safe, and nurturing environment. Due to their many roles and responsibilities, it is vital that successful approaches be shared that are proven to support the implementation of innovative teaching and learning approaches, such as place-based learning.

Theoretical Lens

Constructivism is the theoretical lens used to focus the researcher of this case study. In general, constructivism “refers to constructing knowledge about
reality” (Shadish, 1995, p. 67). It values an individual’s approach for understanding the world (Crotty, 1998). Through the lens of constructivism, a researcher can “generate or inductively develop theory or pattern of meaning” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). This theoretical lens enables the researcher to construct knowledge about the strategies public school principals utilize to support the implementation of place-based learning.

Researchers employing this theoretical lens typically “study the multiple realities constructed by people and the implications of those constructions for their lives and interactions with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 96). In addition, they rely on the active construction of knowledge or personal experience as advocated by the learning theorists Piaget, Dewey, Bruner, and Kamii (Crain, 2000; Newman & Newman, 2003). Through social interactions, the researcher of this case study actively constructs answers to the driving questions of the study.

Participants in this case study, each bring different experiences and perceptions of their role as leaders of place-based learning. They each lead in a different school, in different towns, with different staff members, etc. Patton (2002), shared by capturing and examining these varying experiences and perceptions; a researcher can identify commonalities between each participant despite the inherent variations in their lived experiences.

For this reason, Creswell (2007) suggested the participants’ point of view should be relied upon to the fullest extent when constructivism is the theoretical lens. Therefore, the researcher utilized open-ended questions to gather data.
Creswell (2007) also shared that questions should be “broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation” (p. 21). In collaboration with the participants, the researcher of this case study sought to construct knowledge about successful approaches that support the implementation of place-based learning.

Research Questions

The central research question guiding the study is:

1. What leadership approaches do public school principals utilize that support teachers in implementing place-based learning?

The sub-questions addressed by the study are:

2. How do public school principals empower teachers to embrace place-based learning?

3. How did the public school principals learn about place-based learning?

Definition of Terms

Based upon the research questions of this case study, the following terms need to be clearly defined: case study, public school principal, place-based learning, instructional leadership, and Reggio Emilia.

- **Case study**: a qualitative study focused on a specific issue within a specific context (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2014). It enables a researcher to examine the specific issue and context in various locations (Creswell, 2007).
• **Public school principal**: someone employed or previously employed in a public school (preschool-12th grade), holding the title of principal.

• **Place-based learning**: a teaching and learning strategy rooted in constructivism that moves learning beyond the classroom walls and strives to authentically connect learning to the local community.

• **Instructional Leadership**: leadership that focuses on the teaching and learning happening within a given context.

• **Reggio Emilia**: an approach to teaching and learning that fosters children’s intellectual development through a systematic focus on symbolic representation. Young children are encouraged to explore their environment and express themselves through all their available “expressive, communicative, and cognitive languages,” whether they be words, movement, drawing, painting, building, sculpture, shadow play, collage, dramatic play, or music, to name a few. (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998, p. 7)

**Limitations**

The methodology of this case study has limitations. “Limitations are those restrictions created by your methodology” (Bryant, 2003, p. 58). They deal with the inherent limits of the selected data collection methods (Bryant, 2003). Purposeful, snowball sampling and interviews are the main components of the methodology for this case study. It is important, therefore, to review the limitations of purposeful, snowball sampling as well as interviews.
Purposeful, snowball sampling was used in this case study to identify information-rich cases (principals whose schools are implementing place-based learning). Patton (2002) shared that “purposeful sampling strategies provide a limited number of cases for examination” (p. 563). This makes generalizing the findings to other situations difficult. When considering the limitations of purposeful, snowball sampling, it is important to understand the central issue. It is “not one of dealing with a distorted or biased sample, but rather one of clearly delineating the purpose and limitations of the sample studied – and therefore being careful about extrapolating…the findings to other situations (Patton, 2002, p. 563).

The use of interviews alone, for data collection, further limits this case study. Patton (2002) shared that “no single source of information can be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective” (p. 306). Observations and document analysis could have supported the conclusions drawn from the interview data.

Interview, as a data collection method itself, has limitations. “Interview data limitations include possible 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” (Patton, 2002, p. 306). Due to the topic of study, the researcher of this case study believes these limitations are minimal. Patton (2002) also cautioned “interview data are also subject to recall error, reactivity of the interviewee to the interviewer, and self-serving purposes” (p. 306). Due to the personal investment
in place-based learning of the participants, the researcher acknowledges the potential impact of the participants' personal bias towards the topic.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations are present within this case study. “Delimitations are the factors that prevent you from claiming that your findings are true for all people in all times and places” (Bryant, 2003, p. 57). The characteristics of the schools served by the participants of this study are likely delimitations. The schools served communities classified as rural. All but one of the schools served only elementary students (PK-6th). These factors place delimitations upon the study.

**Summary**

The implementation of place-based learning has the potential to render positive benefits for students. School leaders, therefore, need to understand how they can support teachers as they implement the approach. Current literature on place-based learning does not clearly indicate the role of public school principals in supporting its implementation. This case study adds to the literature base of place-based learning, specifically related to the role of leadership in successful implementation.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Who leads in place-based learning? To be able to answer this question, consideration must be given to the literature surrounding place-based learning as well as traditional organizational and leadership theory. The following shares current, relevant knowledge about such literature.

Introduction

Place-based learning is a pedagogical approach that intentionally connects required learning with the life of the student. Learning is grounded in authentic classroom, school, and/or community needs. Components of organizational and leadership theory intersect with place-based learning (PBL). Culture, climate, a professional school structure, and an enabling school structure are relevant aspects of organizational theory. Transformational, instructional, and servant leadership theory have significant intersections with PBL. Other theories have connections as well but do not seem to be as salient. These include transactional leadership theory, democratic leadership theory, and organizational change theory. The components of organizational and leadership theory, which have obvious connections to PBL will be given consideration.

The central research question of this study is: what leadership approaches do public school principals utilize that support teachers in implementing place-based learning? Two sub-questions are also addressed. How do public school principals empower teachers to embrace place-based learning? How did the public school principals learn about place-based learning? These questions are
being researched because of a current gap in the research surrounding PBL. At this time, there is research concerning the impact on academic achievement of students participating in PBL but very little research concerning the leadership needed to support the approach.

The following sections define place-based learning, share its rich history, and explain the benefits of the approach. In addition, the relevant components of organizational and leadership theory are shared.

**Place-Based Learning**

Place-based learning (PBL) is an approach to teaching and learning that has the power to connect children to their local communities while actively engaging them in the learning required by the local, state, and federal government (Gruenewald, 2008; Smith, 2002; Smith, 2010b; Sobel, 2005). For example, district-level writing policies that specify timelines and minimum requirements K-12, state adopted standards, and student achievement expectations as set forth in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Place-based learning “offers cognitively demanding tasks that stimulate student engagement and achievement” (Smith, 2002, p. 33). By actively engaging students in real-life problem solving in their communities, educators are able to link classroom learning with authentic, meaningful applications.

**Place-based learning described.** Place-based learning has emerged within the past decade. It is a term most recently used to describe a curricular and instructional approach designed to help students learn by incorporating their
immediate surroundings and lived experiences throughout their school experience (Fly, n.d.; Gliner, 2013; Gruenewald, 2008; Hugg, 2012; Knapp, 2005; Long, 2009; Place-based Education Evaluation Collaborative [PEEC], 2010; Place-Based Learning, 2011; Promise of Place, 2015; Smith, 2002; Smith & Sobel, 2010a; Smith & Sobel, 2010b; Sobel, 2005). Though it approaches learning differently, it intersects with such instructional approaches as experiential learning, contextual learning, environmental education, problem-based learning, project-based education, community-based learning, constructivism, critical pedagogy, and service learning (Gruenewald, 2008; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Theobald & Curtiss, 2000; Rural Schools and Community Trust, 2000). Place-based learning also contrasts with approaches to teaching and learning, such as the behaviorist approaches of direct instruction and mastery learning.

David Sobel provided an in-depth definition of place-based learning. He stated PBL is the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum. Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students’ appreciation for the natural world, and
creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens. (Sobel, 2005, p. 7)

PBL diligently works to bridge the gap between schools and communities (Ebersole & Worster, 2007; Gliner, 2012; PEEC, 2010; Powers, 2004; Smith & Sobel, 2010b; Sobel, 2005; Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000). It contextualizes the curriculum (or core academic standards) into the learners’ local culture and ecology (Ebersole & Worster, 2007; Fly, n.d.; Gliner, 2012; Gruenewald, 2008; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Hugg, 2012; Long, 2009; PEEC, 2010; Place-Based Learning, 2011; Promise of Place, 2015; Rural Schools and Community Trust, 2000; Smith, 2002; Smith, 2007; Smith & Sobel, 2010a; Smith & Sobel, 2010b; Sobel, 2005; Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000). Smith and Sobel (2010b) described a variety of examples of core content coverage via the implementation of place-based learning. For example, the creation of a book of mathematical story problems directly connecting the required learning to the local ecology of the community served. Another example is of a teacher who “structures nearly all of her third-grade writing assignments around experiences that students have shared outside the classroom” (Smith & Sobel, 2010b, p.69).

In addition to contextualizing the curriculum, place-based learning entices students to apply what they are learning in tasks that will probably have an authentic audience within the school and/or community (Bishop, 2004; Gliner, 2012; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Smith & Sobel, 2010b; Sobel, 2005). An example is students and teachers working collaboratively to transform “stories
learned from informal sharing and interviews into dramatic productions” (Smith & Sobel, 2010b, p. 70). Smith and Sobel (2010b) shared how such activities led to a student written, produced, and performed play attended by approximately 400 community members. In schools and classrooms where PBL is authentically implemented “inquiry into local concerns and problem-solving shape teaching and learning activities more than a standardized curriculum, and teachers and students function more as collaborative team members than as bosses and employees” (Smith, 2007, p. 190). Students and teachers alike embrace the role of learner.

Schools implementing place-based learning begin to change their view of the community they serve. The community “becomes an essential place for learning; it ties education to civic life through collaborative public problem-solving” (Longo, 2007, p. 5). Smith and Sobel (2010b) were careful to acknowledge that not all PBL experiences must involve problem solving or action, but the experiences that combine learning, problem solving, and action typically enhance the impact of the learning on the student. Education, through place-based learning, becomes less abstract. It becomes concrete, applicable, meaningful, and real to the learners.

Place-based learning strives to provide an integrated, meaningful, and holistic education (Ebersole & Worster, 2007; Fly, n.d.; Gliner, 2012; Gruenewald, 2003; Gruenewald, 2008; Place-Based Learning, 2011; Semken & Freeman, 2008; Smith & Sobel, 2010b; Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000). It “alerts
young people to their own capacities, the assets and needs of their communities, and the importance of their willingness to become involved in the shaping of both individual and collective responses to the demands of the future” (Smith & Sobel, 2010b, p. 41). PBL is a way to approach teaching and learning, which could be utilized by educators to the benefit of the children in their classrooms as well as the communities in which they serve.

Simply stated, place-based learning unpacks learning goals and, in the process, makes required learning more real and connected to daily life. The life of the community is brought into the school and becomes the foundation for learning. The very walls of the school likely reflect the community in which it is situated. Smith and Sobel (2010b) stated it this way: “What is on the bulletin boards in Oregon should be different from what a visitor would see in Alaska or New Jersey” (p. 114). The learning environment reflects the living environment.

Contrarian pedagogy. Place-based learning embraces a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. Supporters of a behaviorist approach would presumably not support place-based learning. Behaviorism, as supported by Skinner and Watson, contrasts with constructivism, as supported by Piaget and Vygotsky. Behaviorism relies on external stimuli to motivate learning and focuses on learning as it relates to changes in behavior (Bush, 2006; Crain, 2000). Constructivism, on the other hand, focuses on learning as a search for meaning (Bush, 2006). It approaches learning from the viewpoint that the learner...
through personal experiences with the content constructs knowledge (Bush, 2006; Crain, 2000).

**Place-based learning is grounded in the past.** Place-based learning is not a new concept. It has a rich historical and theoretical background. “Some of the most pivotal educational theory,” according to Powers, “is inextricably linked to the underpinnings of place-based education” (2004, p. 18). Theorists such as Thorndike, Skinner, and Pavlov do not support PBL. Instead, they support a more behaviorist approach that decontextualizes learning. Place-based learning can be connected to the ideas of such educational leaders as John Amos Comenius, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget.

Place-based learning borrows from the wisdom passed on through generations of community members.

Even as late as the 1970s, Tlingit residents of Sitka, Alaska encouraged their children to visit adults in their villages to learn about the activities they performed. Children would spend time with the fisherman, the bentwood box maker, the cook, the storyteller, the herbalist. If a child came back a number of times to the same person, the adult would give him or her simple tasks to complete. As the child continued to return, he or she would gradually acquire the knowledge base and skills that gave the adult his or her unique position in the community. (Smith & Sobel, 2010b, p. 25)
Children learn how to be contributing members of their society through hands-on, authentic experiences in their communities.

John Amos Comenius (1592-1671), an educational reformer, was an advocate for experiential learning. He explained, “We should learn…as much as possible, not from books, but from the great book of nature, from heaven and earth, from oaks and beeches” (Quick, 1885, p.60). Many of Comenius’ ideas are connected to the big ideas of PBL. He contended that content should be taught “thoroughly…as to lead to true knowledge” (Comenius & Keatinge, 1896, p. 157). He was an advocate for learning taking place in an authentic environment where real-life problems could be addressed. Additionally, Comenius stated, “Knowledge of the nearest things should be acquired first, then that of those farther and farther off” (Calkins, 1868, p. 242). He advocated for learning taking place in the local environment and then proceeding to those things more abstract in nature.

John Dewey explicated the importance of experiences in place as a vital component for learning. Experiences and learning are intertwined (Dewey, 1897; Dewey, 1997). Specifically, Dewey (1900) explained

From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in the school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning at school. That is the isolation of the school---its isolation from life. When the child gets into the
schoolroom he has to put out of his mind a large part of the ideas, interests, and activities that pre-dominate in his home and neighborhood.

(Dewey, 1900, p. 67)

Clearly, Dewey believed the connections between a student’s school and community life should be made evident. Such intersections between school life and home life help students learn by engaging them in authentic and connected learning experiences (Dewey, 1897; Dewey, 1900; Dewey, 1997). Place-based educators have addressed Dewey’s concern about 19th century approaches to teaching and learning; with an indication that

The lack of connection between formal schooling and students’ lives, a disconnect that makes learning an imposed chore rather than an opportunity to explore questions that arise from students’ innate curiosity and desire to become competent and contributing members of their families and communities. (Smith, 2002, p. 30)

Schools implementing PBL are likely to agree that real-life application and problem solving lead to student learning (Neill, 2005). In addition to seeing the need to connect school and home life to increase learning, Dewey also recognized the need to connect schools with the communities they serve as a necessary method for connecting students to their civic and democratic responsibilities (Smith, 2007). PBL provides an outlet for living out the ideas advocated by John Dewey.
The work of Jean Piaget, a developmental theorist, provides much support for PBL. According to Piaget, development “is an active construction process, in which children, through their own activities, build increasingly differentiated and comprehensive cognitive structures” (Crain, 2000, p. 114). PBL provides students with a learning environment conducive to the “active construction process” advocated by Piaget (Crain, 2000, p. 114). In addition, Piaget stressed the importance of a student’s intrinsic motivation to engage in learning. Place-based educators believe that by “grounding education in the local community, students can see the relevance of what they are learning and therefore become more engaged in the learning process” (Powers, 2004, p. 18). The local community becomes the place for applying previous learning and leads to new learning sparked by questions from the field.

**Rationale for place-based learning.** Place-based learning is currently being implemented in classrooms across the nation. For example, in Vinalhaven, ME; Baldwin City, KS; Richmond, VA; Hemlock, OH; Westminister, VT; Casselberry, FL; Tonalea, AZ; Cortez, CO; Tocoma, WA; San Francisco, CA; and many more (Promise of Place, 2015; Smith & Sobel, 2010b). Why are teachers and schools choosing to implement this approach?

Place-based learning has compelling reasons supporting its implementation. It has the potential to develop an involved citizenry, make learning applicable, and increase student engagement. In addition, PBL has the potential to increase student achievement.
An involved citizenry is nurtured through place-based learning (Gliner, 2012, Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Place-Based Learning, 2011; Smith, 2002; Smith & Sobel, 2010b; Sobel, 2005; Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000). In fact, Woodhouse and Knapp, asserted that one of the most compelling reasons to implement PBL “is to provide students with the knowledge and experiences needed to actively participate in the democratic process” (2000, p. 4). Through the implementation of place-based learning, students learn they can authentically contribute to the betterment of their community. For example, students might collaborate with local government leaders to boost the economy of their town or work with community elders to document their town’s history.

Beyond nurturing the development of active, democratic citizens, place-based learning can make learning applicable to students. Due to the overt connection between classroom learning and authentic applications within the school and community, students come to understand learning has value outside the school walls. Gregory Smith shared that “when PBL is implemented students no longer have to ask why they have to learn something; instead they know why” (Gliner, 2012). PBL utilizes authentic outlets for the application of classroom learning (Bishop, 2004; Fly, n.d.; Gliner, 2012; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Hugg, 2012; Long, 2009; PEEC, 2010; Rural Schools and Community Trust, 2000; Smith, 2007; Smith & Sobel, 2010b; Sobel, 2005). For example, students apply their writing skills as they create a book to publish concerning their locally grown
foods or generate data related to the health of a nearby stream to be used by local environmentalists.

Sobel stated, “State-mandated curriculum and high-stakes tests put everyone on the same page on the same day and discourage an attention to significant nearby learning opportunities” (2005, p. 5). Conversely, through engagement in PBL, students study core content areas while immersed in “local heritage, cultures, landscapes, opportunities, and experiences” (Promise of Place, 2015). Educators who utilize place-based educational experiences “provide opportunities for the young to engage in the common life of older and more experienced people” (Smith & Sobel, 2010b, p. 25). Required learning becomes meaningful and worthwhile to students as they come to discover the real-life applications of the classroom learning goals.

Place-based learning also has the potential to engage students in learning. The engagement is stimulated as students begin to value learning because it is important to them; learning becomes personally relevant (Powers 2004; Wadsworth, 1978). Students begin to realize they have a voice in the life of their community as well as in their school experience (Gliner, 2012; Rural Schools and Community Trust, 2000; Smith, 2002; Smith & Sobel, 2010b, Sobel, 2005). This understanding gives students a reason to take learning seriously. Students are no longer passive recipients of knowledge. Instead, they are actively constructing knowledge through real-life experiences. Students begin to
be more engaged in learning (Fly, n.d.; Gliner, 2012; Long, 2009; Powers, 2004; Promise of Place, 2015).

The article, “An Evaluation of Four Place-Based Education Programs,” described the findings of an external evaluation team, which analyzed the impact of four place-based education programs (Powers, 2004). The design of the evaluation was mixed-methods, but semi-structured interviews were the main source of data. Powers (2004) reported one of the emergent findings was the connection between PBL and increased student engagement.

“Several…teachers said that the students paid more attention to their studies and tried harder because they knew the community was involved and cared” (Powers, 2004, p. 27). In addition, students shared they learned better while engaged in place-based projects. After being a part of a classroom that was “creating a series of maps for the town-planning commission” a student shared,

When you get to create your own map, it’s a lot more interesting than just creating something from a book. A book is kind of interesting, and you are learning, but when you are doing it, you learn more and you can remember it. (Powers, 2004, p. 27)

Student learning and community engagement are positively impacted by place-based learning (Long, 2009; Powers, 2004; Promise of Place, 2015; Smith, 2002; Smith & Sobel, 2010b; Sobel, 2005). “The opportunity to participate in learning activities that focus on real-world problem-solving can impart to children a sense of their own agency and collective capacity to alter their neighborhoods
or communities for the better” (Smith, 2007, p. 192). It helps students see themselves as competent, contributing members of their community. “Students’ own curiosity and desire for purposeful activity, social membership, and the experience of competence become the central motivators for learning” (Smith & Sobel, 2010b, p. 35). Learning becomes a personal decision, based upon the knowledge that it can have a powerful impact on the individual as well as the community in which the individual lives.

The increased engagement in learning intersects with another potential benefit of place-based learning, increased student achievement. When PBL is implemented, increased student achievement is a likely benefit (Fly, n.d.; Gliner, 2012; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Hugg, 2012; Place-Based Learning, 2011; Powers, 2004; Promise of Place, 2015; Smith, 2002; Smith & Sobel, 2010b; Sobel, 2005). Studies have shown increased student achievement based upon standardized assessments (Emekauwa, 2004a; Emekauwa, 2004b; Lieberman & Hoody, 1998; PEEC, 2010). Dr. Emeka Emekauwa (2004b) cited a decrease of 18.4 percentage points of students performing unsatisfactory on a state English/Language Arts test within two years of implementing place-based learning. State test scores for the same student population reflected similar improvements in mathematics, science, and social studies.

Written and oral communication skills are also enhanced through the implementation of place-based learning. Place-based learning “can do much to extend and solidify young people’s ability to communicate through print as well
as oral expression” (Smith & Sobel, 2010b, p. 69). Through place-based learning, students get to use written and oral communication to authentically contribute to their world. Writing becomes a vehicle for telling others about something a child has directly encountered, a form of communication that is much closer to the kind of talk that kids engage in otherwise, making the process of putting pen to paper less intimidating and more likely to be successful. (Smith & Sobel, 2010b, p. 70)

These skills become an important part of their lives because they can see how the mastery of the skills impacts their ability to communicate with others. Children begin to see how such learning has relevance and therefore place value on acquiring such skills.

Smith (2002) described a study of 40 U.S. schools conducted by Lieberman and Hoody. Data was collected through site visits to each school; “interviews with more than 400 students, and 250 teachers and administrators; four different surveys of the educators; and, a comparative studies of standardized test scores, GPAs, and attitudinal measures” (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998, p. 2). The study revealed that schools which contextualize learning within local environments report students acting more independently and responsibly, displaying pride in and ownership of their accomplishments, exhibiting improved discipline and self-control, and academically outperforming their traditionally
instructed peers (Smith, 2002). Place-based learning shows positive gains in areas of current concern – student citizenship, engagement, and achievement.

Place-based learning experiences are invaluable to the learning process. By providing students with experiences, teachers are helping the children create frameworks to build upon as they mature as learners.

Cognitive psychologists point to the way people fit new information into already existing schematic frameworks built upon earlier experiences of the world. In the absence of those frameworks, what teachers say or what is encountered in textbooks finds no purchase in the student’s mind. Teaching in such circumstances is as effective as throwing Velcro against a smooth surface. (Smith & Sobel, 2010b, p. 75)

Simply stated, the experiences children have through participating in place-based learning projects provide them with the necessary “stickies” onto which new learning can cling.

**School level leadership and place-based learning.** The connection between school-level leadership and place-based learning has received minimal attention in the literature. Smith (2007) discussed briefly the characteristics of principals in two schools, Greater Egleston Community High School and the Kualapu’u School, which supported PBL in their schools. Smith (2007) shared principals were supportive of teacher’s work, committed to solving local issues, buffered controversy, allowed teachers to engage in innovative teaching and learning strategies, and had courage to rely on “forms of understanding and
knowledge that arise more organically through real-life investigations and problem-solving” (p. 204). The principals were committed to PBL and fully supported their teachers through the implementation process.

Smith and Sobel (2010) also briefly examined the role of the school leader in relation to place-based learning. Six school leaders were interviewed by Smith who had successfully supported teachers in implementing place-based learning in the Pacific Northwest (Smith & Sobel, 2010b). An analysis of the data collected uncovered six themes: “philosophy, approach to school change, staff development, structural supports and curricular frameworks, organizational details, and partners and resources” (Smith & Sobel, 2010b, p. 114). An underlying premise within each of these six themes was support. For example, the leader articulating their support of a non-traditional approach to teaching and learning, helping teachers begin to understand what embracing place-based learning will require of them, providing the needed support for teachers to engage in professional learning related to place-based learning, jumpstarting the development of community partnerships, and much more (Smith & Sobel, 2010b).

**Organizational and Leadership Theory**

Due to the limited research concerning leadership in place-based learning, it is helpful to consider traditional organizational and leadership theory. For the purpose of this study, attention is given only to the elements that seem to significantly intersect with PBL. To determine such salient elements of
organizational and leadership theory, a graphic organizer was created listing the big ideas of PBL and showing how each intersected with traditional organizational and/or leadership theory. Traditional theory that did not seem to be as relevant to place-based learning was omitted from the graphic and therefore will not be given attention within this section.

**Organizational Theory**

Organizational theory has relevant connections to the implementation of place-based learning. These connections include culture, climate, professional school structure, and enabling school structure.

**Culture.** Effective schools have strong, distinctive, and stable cultures (Hoy, 1990; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Schein, 2004; Sergiovanni, 2006). This form of identity is cultivated through shared orientations, including but not limited to norms, values, and assumptions (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Kilmann, Saxton, & Serpa, 1985; Sergiovanni, 1984; Sergiovanni, 2005b; Sergiovanni, 2006). Collectively, these interconnected orientations work together to form a school’s culture.

Nearly all schools have a unique culture (Hoy, 1990; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Kilmann, Saxton, & Serpa, 1985, Schein, 2004; Sergiovanni, 1984; Sergiovanni, 2006). The culture of a school gives it a distinct identity. The identity of a school is reflected in its everyday actions. For example, it shows how teaching and learning are approached on a day-to-day basis. According to Schein (2004), culture “is a stabilizer, a conservative force, a way of making things meaningful and predictable” (p. 393). Daily it permeates every aspect of the school.
The culture of a school utilizing traditional pedagogy is presumably different than the culture of a school that has embraced place-based learning. The identity of a PBL school typically epitomizes the core beliefs of the approach which are composed of integrated learning, collaborative learning, engagement of all stakeholders, and authentic application of learning (Fry, n.d.; Hugg, 2012; Place-Based Learning, 2011; Promise of Place, 2015; Smith, 2002; Smith, 2007).

In addition to embracing the core beliefs of PBL, a school implementing this approach likely holds specific values. These include increasing student achievement and engagement; equipping students with the skills necessary to become active, contributing members of a democratic society; and achieving student learning through real-life application and problem solving (Fry, n.d.; Hugg, 2012; Long, 2009 Place-Based Learning, 2011; Powers, 2004; Promise of Place, 2015; Smith, 2002; Smith, 2007; Smith & Sobel, 2010b; Sobel, 2005).

A school implementing PBL most probably celebrates and encourages the application of classroom learning. It is the necessary support needed for successful application of new knowledge in locally based projects. For students, classroom learning is the bridge that leads to the immediate use of the new knowledge to the benefit of their classroom, school, and/or local community. This focus is the stabilizing force that enables the school to stay focused on student learning. The people within the school presumably have
shared philosophies of education that lean more towards a constructivist approach to teaching and learning.

Place-based educators likely believe to know something one must experience it. This intersects with the Hebrew model of education as well as with the beliefs of theorists Jean Piaget, John Dewey, Jerome Bruner, and Constance Kamii. Historically, the Hebrew model of education contends that a personal encounter is required to learn the truth (Exodus 6:2-8 New American Standard Bible; Exodus 14:1-4; Exodus 16:11; Hebrews 5:8; Virkler, 2011). The Hebrew view proposes that to know something one must experience it. The purpose is to guide the student to develop a deep understanding of the topic being taught. The theories of Piaget, Dewey, Bruner, and Kamii also advocate for active construction of knowledge, or personal experience (Crain, 2000; Newman & Newman, 2003).

In addition to valuing personal experiences with the construction of knowledge, PBL educators believe that learning should include experiences inside and outside the school walls. This intersects with the philosophy of John Dewey, that learning should reflect daily life and immerse learners in society (Dewey, 1897; Dewey, 1916; Long, 2009; Neill, 2005; Smith, 2007).

In a school implementing PBL, not only is learning supported for the students, but also for the adults. They experience trust and acceptance within their relationships as colleagues (Senge, Roberts, Ross, Smith & Kleiner, 1994; Sergiovanni, 2005b). The adults involved in the school are probably willing to
learn, adapt, and change to meet the needs of their students, communities, and nation. The members of the learning culture believe that learning is a worthwhile endeavor (Schein, 2004; Sergiovanni, 2005a). The adults within the school, or learning organization, are likely focused on faithfully implementing place-based learning, actively reflecting on their pedagogy, and seeing the organizational picture as a whole (Schein, 1992; Schein, 2004; Senge, 1990; Senge, et al., 1994). The stakeholders of the organization cherish learning. They are engaged because they value it, not because someone has mandated it.

**Leadership.** The culture of a school is greatly impacted by the leaders. In fact, one of the basic functions of leaders is to shape the culture of a school (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Schein, 1992; Schein, 2004; Sergiovanni, 1984; Sergiovanni, 2005b). Leaders need to be able to analyze the culture to determine what assumptions encumber and support the school’s mission as well as be able to adjust assumptions as needed (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Kotter, 1996; Schein, 1992; Schein, 2004). Schein (2004) shared that leaders of a school must hold in their mind the vision of the school and “be able both to impose it and to evolve it…as external circumstances change” (p. 407). Leaders must know the culture of their school and understand what changes need to be made in order to facilitate continuous improvement.

Leaders are vital contributors to the culture of a school. They must demonstrate personal commitment toward the school’s vision as well as be actively involved in facilitating the learning of the stakeholders (Deal & Peterson,
Kotter; 1996; Schein, 1992; Schein, 2004; Senge, 1990; Senge, 1996; Sergiovanni, 1984). In a school implementing place-based learning, it might be expected that the leader genuinely support the core beliefs and shared values of the approach and be actively involved in the implementation and continuous improvement process.

**Climate.** School climate can be compared to the personality of a person (Halpin & Croft, 1963; Hoy, 1990; Hoy & Clover, 1986; Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2002). It can be described as open or closed, and healthy or unhealthy. Climate is “a broad term that refers to teachers’ perceptions of their general work environment; it is influenced by the formal organization, informal organization, personalities of participants, and the leadership of the school” (Hoy, 1990, p. 151). The climate of a school implementing PBL is apt to be distinct due to its unique focus on “place” as the foundation for learning.

**Personality.** The climate, or “personality,” of a school implementing place-based learning would not be expected to be like that of schools embracing a traditional approach to teaching and learning. Teachers and students will potentially have different roles and attitudes toward learning. Teachers will rarely be the “talking heads,” instead they will embrace the role of facilitator. Students will not be passive recipients of information; they will be active participants in the learning process.

**Open or closed.** An open climate is signified by cooperation, respect, and authenticity in the relationships among stakeholders (Hoy, 1990; Hoy &
Miskel, 2005). Conversely, a lack of cooperation and respect between stakeholders indicates a closed climate. Within a school implementing PBL, cooperation and respect will almost certainly be evident. It is likely the principal leads by example, teachers are engaged, and burdensome paperwork is minimal (Hoy, 1990; Hoy & Miskel, 2005). A school implementing PBL presumably offers the community a plethora of opportunities to collaborate, problem-solve, and contribute to student learning (Longo, 2007; PEEC, 2010; “Place-Based Learning,” 2011; Smith, 2002; Smith, 2007; Smith & Sobel, 2010a; Smith & Sobel, 2010b; Sobel, 2005).

**Healthy or unhealthy.** A healthy school climate is protected from unreasonable outside pressures (Hoy, 1990; Hoy & Miskel, 2005). Outside pressures might include special interest groups, parental pressures, and constraining guidelines within the school district. An unhealthy school climate is vulnerable to such pressures.

A school implementing PBL probably epitomizes a healthy school climate. It is probable that it directs its focus intently towards its goals and objectives of helping every child grow academically, socially, emotionally, and physically (Emekauwa, 2004b; Long, 2009; Longo, 2007; PEEC, 2010; Powers, 2004; Promise of Place, 2015; Smith, 2002; Smith, 2007; Smith & Sobel, 2010a; Smith & Sobel, 2010b; Sobel, 2005; Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000). Such a focus is possible in a school with a healthy climate because of the strong trust relationship between the school and community; a relationship that is likely
paramount to a school implementing PBL. The PBL leaders and teachers are presumably able to focus on the education of the children without significant distractions from unwarranted outside influences due to the strong collaborative manner in which teaching and learning are approached (Longo, 2007). For example, a school is likely protected from constraining guidelines from the local school district because of the relationship between the school and district personnel.

*Connection to student achievement.* A positive correlation is identified between healthy school climates and student achievement (Doll, 2010; Hoy, 1990; Hoy & Miskel, 2005). Research on PBL identifies a positive correlation between the implementation of PBL and increased student achievement (Emekauwa, 2004b; Long, 2009; PEEC, 2010; Powers, 2004; Promise of Place, 2015; Smith, 2002; Smith & Sobel, 2010b; Sobel, 2005).

*Professional school structure.* A professional school structure balances standardization and decentralization (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Isherwood & Hoy, 1973; Mintzberg, 1979; Mintzberg, 1980; Mintzberg, 1989; Scott, 1998). It fosters professionalism, collaboration, shared decision-making, and stakeholder empowerment (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Isherwood & Hoy, 1972; Marks & Printy, 2003; Mintzberg, 1979; Mintzberg, 1980; Mintzberg, 1989; Scott, 1998; Tschannen-Moran, Uline, Hoy, & Mackley, 2000). The school leader holds a pivotal role in facilitating a professional school structure. It is anticipated that a school implementing PBL would exhibit a professional school structure.
Standardization and decentralization are balanced in a professional school structure (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Isherwood & Hoy, 1973; Mintzberg, 1979; Mintzberg, 1980; Mintzberg, 1989). Standardization cannot be excluded in a public school. One example would be the minimum standards which students are expected to master prior to proceeding to the next grade level. Consequently, public schools implementing place-based learning are not exempt from such standardization. However, this does not mean that teaching and learning must be approached in a standardized format. The decentralization exhibited in a professional structure, empowers professionals to approach teaching and learning innovatively. It fosters the professionalism of the operating core, or the professionals working with the students.

A professional school structure is founded upon the mutual respect among stakeholders. A school implementing place-based learning necessitates respect among stakeholders as they join together to enhance student learning. A professional school structure also shifts the way rules and procedures are viewed. Rules and procedures become guides, instead of strict mandates to be explicitly followed. Stakeholders with the necessary skills are given the responsibility and respect to adjust rules as necessary and to complete standardized tasks (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Mintzberg, 1979; Mintzberg, 1980; Mintzberg, 1989). For example, administrators do not micromanage teachers as they engage in the teaching and learning process. In fact, Hoy and Miskel (2005) described administrators as “subordinate to teachers in the sense that their
primary role is to serve teachers and facilitate the teaching-learning process” (p. 101). Due to this shift in the role of both administrators and teachers, a professional school structure will rank low on a bureaucracy scale, but exhibit high levels of professionalism.

The high levels of professionalism are made explicit within a professional school structure as decisions concerning teaching, learning, and other issues related to the school are shared among the professionals (teachers, administrators, etc.) with the expertise to make the decisions (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Isherwood & Hoy, 1973; Mintzberg, 1979; Mintzberg, 1989; Scott, 1998; Tschannen-Moran, Uline, Hoy, & Mackley, 2000). The professionalism of the operating core, the teachers, is key to the structure (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Isherwood & Hoy, 1973; Mintzberg, 1979; Mintzberg, 1980; Mintzberg, 1989). Their professional judgment is used to determine how to best meet the standardization requirements, while engaging students in effective learning experiences. This is likely evident in schools implementing PBL as teachers engage students in learning grounded in their local community.

Shared decision-making and collaboration are fostered in a professional school structure together with trust and professionalism. Decisions concerning teaching and learning are shared among the stakeholders with the necessary expertise. Schools implementing PBL likely share decision-making among stakeholders. The staff presumably functions as a collaborative team, making decisions together, as needed, to enhance the learning process (Gliner, 2012;
Such collaborative efforts reflect the knowledge that team members are highly competent individuals capable of making informed instructional decisions and sharing leadership among various stakeholders (Marks & Printy, 2003; Scott, 1998; Tschannen-Moran et al. 2000). This authentic involvement in collaborative undertakings empowers stakeholders.

School leaders nurture this collaborative spirit by facilitating a professional school structure. Tschannen-Moran, Uline, Hoy, and Mackley (1999) shared that as administrators grow in their understanding of the need to cultivate a professional school structure, they intentionally begin to enact procedures that foster and honor decision-making through collaborative efforts. Examples of explicit structures to foster shared decision-making include but are not limited to administrative advisory groups, cognitive apprenticeships, and school improvement committees (Tschannen-Moran, et al., 1999). Leaders of schools implementing PBL are apt to utilize similar structures to intentionally promote the needed shared decision-making and collaborative mindset.

Within a professional school structure, stakeholders, including but not limited to teachers, community members, and students are empowered (Isherwood & Hoy, 1973; Hoy & Miskel, 2005). School leaders empower teachers to make instructional decisions based on their professional judgment. Community members are considered genuine contributors to the school’s mission. The school leader likely personally reaches out to them to request they share their expertise related to specific place-based learning projects. Students
are inspired to engage in classroom learning. The school leaders cultivate this inspiration as they encourage and support their teachers to embark on an innovative teaching and learning journey.

In a school implementing PBL, empowerment of stakeholders is a vital component. Teachers, community partners, and students are empowered to apply classroom learning to authentic projects inside and outside the school walls.

**Enabling school structure.** An enabling school structure empowers individuals, without concern of title or position, to problem-solve collaboratively and strive for the betterment of the school (Adler & Borys, 1996; Hoy, 2003; Hoy & Sweetland, 2001; Sinden, Hoy, & Sweetland, 2004; Wu, Hoy, & Tarter, 2013). It fosters open communication, collaboration, professional judgment, trust, innovation, and collegial leadership (Adler & Borys, 1996; Hoy, 2003; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Hoy & Sweetland, 2001; Sinden et al., 2004; Wu et al., 2013). A school implementing PBL, presumably exhibits such characteristics. The overt usage of parents and community members as expert resources throughout the teaching and learning process is just one example.

A school with an enabling school structure values open communication between stakeholders (Adler & Borys, 1996; Hoy, 2003). It is encouraged as a valuable tool for solving problems and achieving the common goals of the school. A school implementing PBL must rely on open and honest communication between various stakeholders. As students leave the walls of the classroom to
learn and apply required core content, communication between teachers, administrators, parents, and the community partners is vital. All must clearly understand the purpose of the project as it relates to the learning of the students.

Collaboration is necessary for an enabling school structure (Hoy, 2003; Wu et al., 2013). The stakeholders of the school focus on the common goal of educating the future of their communities. Such collaboration is utilized in schools implementing PBL. The schools encourage the involvement of the community in problem solving and supporting their students (Place-Based Learning, 2011). Principals and teachers collaborate to advance the proficiency of students while retaining their role within the process (Wu et al., 2013).

The open communication exhibited within an enabling school structure presumably leads to collaboration among stakeholders beyond the planning stage. Such is the case in schools implementing PBL. Stakeholders are involved in a collaborative, reflective cycle throughout the learning process (Promise of Place, 2015). This continual effort aims to accurately assess the students’ mastery of content as well as their contribution to the community.

Professional judgment is respected and utilized in a school with an enabling school structure (Adler & Borys, 1996; Hoy, 2003; Sinden, 2004; Wu et al., 2013). The encouraged use of professional judgment is reflected in the stand taken toward rules. Within an enabling school structure, rules and regulations guide problem solving instead of punishing failure; they are viewed as guidelines, not rigid constraints (Hoy, 2003; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Hoy & Sweetland, 2001;
Wu et al., 2013). This view of rules and regulations intersects with the views of stakeholders within a professional school structure. Professionals engaged in PBL probably embrace this interpretation of rules and regulations. It empowers them to make decisions concerning teaching and learning that is in the best interest of their students, not just in compliance with arbitrary rules.

The overarching principle of an enabling school structure is trust (Hoy & Sweetland, 2001). This is also true for schools implementing PBL. A study related to enabling school structures was conducted by Hoy and Sweetland (2001). It found that trust is one of the hallmarks of an enabling school structure (Hoy & Sweetland, 2001).

Trust is, therefore, a key component for both an enabling school structure and the implementation of place-based learning. It is evidenced among stakeholders within an enabling school structure by the open communication, collaboration, and valued use of professional judgment. The exhibited trust is built through the characteristics of the structure as well as the level of teacher commitment to the mission of the school (Hoy, 2003). Faculty and administrators of a school implementing PBL must trust one another completely. They must be willing to lean upon each other as they implement an innovative approach to teaching and learning. Such trust is found within an enabling school structure.

Within an enabling school structure, trust is required as stakeholders work together to implement innovative solutions to mutual problems. Staff within a school implementing PBL, must trust each other as well as the community
stakeholders involved in the learning process as they collaborate to benefit the students and community. It is important to remember, though, that the results of the innovative approach rest “at least as much on the content of the program as the structure used to implement it” (Sinden et al., 2004, p. 207). An enabling structure alone does not lead to increased levels of proficiency for students.

Leaders play an important role in a school with an enabling structure (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Sinden et al., 2004). They foster innovation, build stakeholder commitment, and are attentive to organizational and individual needs.

Leaders foster innovation through open communication with stakeholders as well as through their trust in the professional judgment of the teachers within the school (Sinden et al., 2004). Throughout the implementation process, they find “ways to help teachers succeed rather than monitoring teacher behavior to ensure compliance” (Hoy & Miskel, 2005, p. 104). Therefore, it is plausible that innovative teaching and learning strategies, like PBL, are utilized more within an enabling school structure because teachers are less likely to fear failure and consequently punishment.

Through this supportive relationship, leaders within an enabling school structure also build commitment to the mission of the school. The commitment developed “is not simply loyalty or compliance but rather a wholehearted support of the school’s goals and values” (Sinden, Hoy & Sweetland, 2004, p. 200).

Leaders nurture the commitment to the mission of the school in an enabling school structure (Sinden et al., 2004). By being attentive to the needs
of the stakeholders and the organization, they ensure everyone involved stays committed to the common goal of increasing student proficiency as well as helping students become contributing members of a democratic society.

**Leadership Theory**

Leadership theory has relevant connections to the implementation of place-based learning. Transformational, instructional, and servant leadership theories seem to have direction connections.

**Transformational leadership.** Transformational leadership is utilized to shift the vision of an organization or school. Transformational leadership relies on the leader’s ability to guide followers in new directions, such as new views on place as a context for learning. There are four major components of this type of leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Avolio, Waldman, & Yammarino, 1991; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Hoy & Miskel, 2005).

Idealized influence is leadership behavior that followers desire to emulate. Simply stated, the leader influences followers as a role model. High standards of moral and ethical conduct are demonstrated (Burns, 1979; Hoy & Miskel, 2005). The trust and respect of the followers is earned by this leadership behavior. The leader gives the needs of others highest priority (Burns, 1979; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Sergiovanni, 2007). Transformational leaders guide followers to identify problems, or the need for change (Bass 1985; Hallinger, 1992; Hoy & Miskel,
This influential leadership behavior is connected to inspirational motivation.

Inspirational motivation is leadership behavior that motivates followers to do more than they believed possible. For example, motivating staff members to implement a new approach to teaching and learning like PBL that connects learning with the local community. This motivation is created by the actions of the individual leader. A transformational leader communicates a new vision for the school based upon the identified areas of concern. The leader questions the past assumptions, traditions, and beliefs as the shift in the organization’s culture is initiated (Bass, 1985; Hoy & Miskel, 2005). The transformational leader conceptualizes and communicates a new vision to the followers (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Woods, 2005). In addition, the leader cultivates the necessary commitment to the newly formed vision (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Hallinger, 1992; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Woods, 2005). With a new vision, comes new organizational goals aligned with the vision and strategically selected to address the identified areas of concern. A transformational leader demonstrates optimism toward reaching such goals with others. Inspirational motivation is cultivated through a shared vision between the leader and the followers which both find to be attainable and worthy of their time and effort.

Transformational leadership does not neglect intellectual stimulation. The leader recognizes the benefit of intellectual stimulation for the benefit of its stakeholders both in and out of the organization. Followers are encouraged to
generate innovative and creative solutions to the identified problems and to set implementation goals aimed at monitoring successful enactment of the solution (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Hallinger, 1992; Hoy & Miskel, 2005). PBL provides an excellent outlet for such intellectual stimulation. Innovative solutions likely require new learning for stakeholders. A leader of PBL, according to Smith and Sobel (2010), must understand the importance of being a facilitator of learning for the staff and community. Such capacity building is a characteristic of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Hoy & Miskel, 2005). A transformational leader must be willing to help stakeholders implement innovative solutions, such as PBL.

Transformational leadership also involves individualized consideration. A transformational leader is attentive to the needs of individual stakeholders (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Burns, 1979; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Sergiovanni, 2007; Woods, 2005). Time and energy is spent developing the potential of individual stakeholders. As previously stated, a component of transformational leadership is capacity building. This is group capacity, as well as individual. A transformational leader encourages individual stakeholders to strive for higher-order goals, moving beyond self-interests to the betterment of the whole (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Sergiovanni, 2007). PBL intersects with this type of capacity building. A school implementing PBL desires for all stakeholders to grow individually as well as to benefit the entire community.
**Instructional leadership.** Instructional leadership brings attention to the technical core, or the teaching and learning occurring within a school. An instructional leader is actively involved in the technical core, acts as a resource, and is a learner. PBL and instructional leadership are interconnected. The leader of a school implementing PBL is likely an instructional leader fostering a constructivist approach to teaching and learning.

The technical core is a priority to an instructional leader. Such leadership requires active involvement in teaching and learning (Blase & Blase, 2000; Jenkins, 2009; National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], 2008; Sergiovanni, 2006; Woods, 2005). Modeling instructional strategies and setting clear instructional goals are actions assumedly taken by an instructional leader. (Blase & Blase, 2000; Jenkins, 2009; McEwan, 2003). Such a leader is intently focused on student learning (DuFour, 2002, Jenkins, 2009; NAESP, 2008). A leader facilitating the implementation of PBL also presumably exhibits a focus on student learning. For example, classroom formative and summative assessments are likely utilized to ensure students are mastering the required learning. The instructional leader within the school is intimately involved in the on-going analysis of student learning.

The literature surrounding PBL makes it clear that learning within the classroom is not sufficient to help learners acquire and internalize learning. Learners must actively engage with or experience the content to really “learn” the material. PBL links traditional classroom learning with authentic applications that
impact the lives of the learners and potentially their communities immediately (Smith, 2002; Place-Based Learning, 2011). Such authentic learning opportunities, linked closely with effective instructional strategies, are the goal of true instructional leaders.

To achieve this goal, an instructional leader needs the support of all stakeholders. This requires the leader to communicate what is of value in the school (McEwan, 2003; NAESP, 2008). The leader must help those involved embrace the vision of the school. Instructional leaders of schools implementing PBL must be proactive in ensuring all stakeholders understand the instructional approach being implemented within their schools and in gaining their support (Smith & Sobel, 2010b). Such leaders are the catalysts for building support for PBL with their staff, colleagues, parents, and the community.

Building and maintaining a new vision necessitates that an instructional leader be a primary source of knowledge for stakeholders. For teachers, the instructional leader is an invaluable pedagogical resource (Hallinger, 1992; Marks & Printy, 2003; McEwan, 2003; Whitaker, 1997). Being such a resource requires that the leader be knowledgeable about curriculum and instruction (Hallinger, 1992; McEwan, 2003; NAESP, 2008). In a school implementing PBL, this type of leadership is needed to ensure students are learning all the required content through strategic unit planning (assessments, community connections, cross-curricular connections, etc.). An instructional leader is actively involved in the planning and implementation of instructional units of study.
Through this planning process, an instructional leader recognizes and utilizes the expertise of stakeholders (teachers, parent, community members, etc.). The instructional leader is open to sharing the instructional leadership role (Blase & Blase, 2000; Marks & Printy, 2003; McEwan, 2003; NAESP, 2008). For example, in a school implementing PBL, such stakeholders might be involved in framing the community-based applications of a specific unit of study.

Through shared leadership, the instructional leader models being a learner. Such a leader focuses not only on student learning, but also adult learning and the increased instructional capacity of teachers (Brandt, 1992; Jenkins, 2009; McEwan, 2003; Sergiovanni, 2006; Whitaker, 1997). To facilitate adult learning, an instructional leader “integrates collaboration, peer coaching, inquiry, collegial study groups, and reflective discussion into a holistic approach to promote professional dialog among educators” (Blase & Blase, 2000, p. 137).

Instructional leaders must be willing to support teachers as they develop PBL lessons, which incorporate the standards expected for students to master as well as an authentic application for the content. Instructional leaders must set aside time to develop partnerships with people in their community who will be priceless to the work of PBL. Instructional leaders within schools utilizing PBL play a major role in building awareness about the learning possibilities in their community and region.
Servant leadership. In 1970, Robert K. Greenleaf generated the idea of servant leadership after reading Hermann Hesse’s *Journey to the East*. In this story a band of men are on a mythical journey.

The central figure of the story is Leo, who accompanies the party as the *servant* who does their menial chores, but who also sustains them with his spirit and his song. He is a person of extraordinary presence. All goes well until Leo disappears. Then group falls into disarray and the journey is abandoned. They cannot make it without the servant Leo. The narrator, one of the party, after some years of wandering, finds Leo and is taken into the Order that had sponsored the journey. There he discovers that Leo, whom he had known first as *servant*, was in fact the titular head of the Order, its guiding spirit, a great and noble *leader*. (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 21)

This story clearly revealed a truth to Greenleaf. “The great leader is seen as servant first” (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 21).

A servant leader’s primary motivation for leading is to serve others (Ebener, 2011; Greenleaf, 1970; Greenleaf, 2002; Matthew 23:11-12; Mark 9:35; Mark 10:43-45; Smith, 2005). The leader of a school implementing PBL must be willing to attend to the needs of the stakeholders served. For example, the leader likely serves as an instructional resource, community liaison, etc. Greenleaf (2002), in describing a servant leader shared
The best test, and difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived. (p. 27)

A servant leader focuses on the elevation of others, not themselves. Leaders of schools implementing PBL, assumedly are focused on the achievement of the school’s stakeholders, not themselves.

According to Spears (2009), a servant leader has 10 basic characteristics: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. The leader attends to the needs of the stakeholders impacted by the organization. Servant leaders “know and focus on what is important, care deeply about their work, learn from their successes and failures, take calculated risks, and are trustworthy people” (Sergiovanni, 2005b, p. 112). These characteristics are probably evident in a leader of a school implementing PBL. By empowering teachers to engage in the approach, the leader is taking a risk and likely engages in reflective practices that help the leader learn from the positive and negative experiences.

**Summary**

Place-based learning is an innovative approach to teaching and learning that is grounded in a rich history. It authentically connects required content
standards with real-life applicability. Through the utilization of PBL, educators can positively impact their students’ likelihood of being involved citizens, their engagement in learning, and their academic achievement. When considering the role of leadership in the implementation of place-based learning, components of traditional organizational (culture, climate, professional school structure, and enabling school structure) and leadership theory (transformational, instructional, and servant leadership) naturally intersect.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

By employing a qualitative approach, the role of the public school principal in supporting teachers as they implement place-based learning was explored. Through a constructivist lens, the researcher conducted a collective, case study. Participants were identified through purposeful, snowball sampling. Data was collected through interviews. Consideration was given to rapport, access, reciprocity, ethics, and trustworthiness.

Qualitative methodology was the preferred approach for this case study. This type of research allows one to investigate the meaning a group of people place on the questions guiding the study (Creswell, 2007). The use of qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to gather in-depth information from a specific, small group of people (Patton, 2002). In addition, qualitative methodology enabled the researcher “to understand some social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved” (Glesne, 2006, p. 4). The approach highlighted the “voices of the participants…and a complex description and interpretation” of the research questions guiding the study (Creswell, 2007, p. 37). Simply stated, the usage of qualitative methodology enabled the researcher to learn from the lived experiences of the participants and then to share those experiences with others.
**Research Purpose**

The purpose of this case study was to discover the leadership strategies public school principals employ to support teachers implementing place-based learning. Although researchers have shown place-based learning positively impacts student learning and engagement (Fly, n.d.; Gliner, 2012; Long, 2009; Powers, 2004; Promise of Place, 2015; Smith, 2002; Smith & Sobel, 2010b; Sobel, 2005), little attention has been paid to the leadership of the schools implementing place-based learning. In this case study, the researcher examined public school principals who support teachers as they implement place-based learning. This focus allowed the researcher to contribute to the literature base on place-based learning as well as to focus on the missing line of inquiry within the literature – leadership.

**Research Design**

Qualitative methodology was used to answer the research questions guiding this study. This methodology allowed the researcher to develop a deep understanding of the phenomena selected for study; public school principals who empower their teachers to embrace and implement place-based learning. By using a qualitative research design, the researcher was able to conduct an in-depth exploration of how public school principals empower teachers to embrace place-based learning.

Case study was the qualitative research strategy used in this research. Case studies, in general, are studies intent on exploring a specific issue in a
specific context; for example, leadership within a public school utilizing place-based learning (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2014). More specifically, a collective case study design was employed. The collective case study design enabled the researcher to examine multiple cases on the same issue; for example, multiple examples of leadership within public schools implementing place-based learning (Creswell, 2007). Through the use of the collective case study, the researcher developed a detailed description of the leadership approaches utilized by the selected public school principals, which met the criteria for the study.

**Participants**

The participants of this study were public school principals whose schools implemented place-based learning. To identify this population of public school principals, the researcher utilized purposeful, snowball sampling.

During the participant identification stage of the study, the researcher first contacted a former professor who was a strong advocate for place-based learning. Through this contact, one participant was identified as well as one organization, which led to the identification of the remaining participants. The identified organization listed the contact information for schools currently implementing place-based learning on their organization’s website. From this list, the researcher verified that the schools were public, not private schools, by comparing the list from the organization to a list of public schools pulled from the state’s department of education website. Next, the researcher began making
phone calls to establish contact with the participants. Through subsequent
phone calls and email conversations, interview dates and times were established
with each participant.

The above process enabled the researcher to identify information-rich
cases (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2002). According to
Patton (2002), “Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a
great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (p.
230). In total, seven information-rich cases, public school principals of schools
implementing place-based learning, were selected for this study. The number of
selected participants was based upon the guidance from Creswell (2007) and
Mason (2010).

Interview sites were identified in collaboration with the selected
participants. Sites included but were not limited to the school where the
participant served as principal, the place the participant first learned about place-
based learning, and the location of a current leadership retreat.

The researcher of this case study gave consideration to data saturation.
“Data saturation entails bringing new participants continually into the study until
the data set is complete, as indicated by data replication or redundancy” (Bowen,
2008, p. 140). Simply stated, data saturation is achieved when new information
is no longer being generated (Bowen, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Fusch & Ness,
2015; Patton, 2002). “If one has reached the point of no new data, one has also
most likely reached the point of no new themes; therefore, one has reached data
saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015, p. 1409). Mason (2010) suggested that data saturation can occur at any point during a study. “Interviews are one method by which one’s study results reach data saturation” (Fusch & Ness, 2015, p. 1409). However, there is not a set number of interviews that ensures data saturation (Fusch & Hess, 2015). Instead, the researcher must determine if data saturation has occurred by critically reflecting upon the data collected.

**Researcher’s Role**

The researcher of this case study had multiple roles. The researcher acted as a researcher, as an instrument, and as a learner. Each role had a distinct purpose and responsibility.

As a researcher, the role was that of “a curious student who comes to learn from and with research participants…not as an expert or authority” (Glesne, 2006, p. 46). Within this role, the researcher addressed the levels of participantness, revealedness, and intensiveness/extensiveness. Participantness is “the degree of actual participation in daily life” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 113). The researcher of this case study only participated in the life of the participants as it related to the interview process (gaining access, scheduling, conducting the interviews, etc.). Revealedness is “extent to which the participants know that there is a study going on” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 113). The participants of this case study knew they are part of a research study. This understanding was acknowledged through the use of a statement of informed consent (see Appendix B). Role intensiveness and extensiveness is
“the amount of time spent daily in the setting and the duration of the study” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 113). Again, this was very limited. The researcher of this case study spent time with participants only as it related to the interview process as previously shared.

Embedded within the role of researcher, the role of the instrument is also implied in a qualitative study (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). Through the use of interview as the data collection method, “a real, live person…asks interview questions, and interprets responses” (Patton, 2002, p. 64). This level of involvement from the researcher during data collection and interpretation highlights the importance of the role of instrument. Due to this role, the credibility of the work relies significantly on the researcher (Patton, 2002). A researcher should embrace the role and take precautions to ensure the “instrument” does not negatively impact the study. The researcher of this study embraced the role of the instrument and took precautions to ensure the “instrument” did not negatively impact the study.

The researcher of this case study also embraced the role of learner. This role allowed the researcher “to reflect on all aspects of research procedures and findings” (Glesne, 2006, p. 46). It also enhanced the researcher’s need to be a good listener (Glesne, 2006). As a learner, the researcher took seriously the need to listen to the verbal and nonverbal messages of the participants. This was invaluable during the interview process.
**Researcher’s Lens**

Most of the researcher’s educational experiences took place within the parameters of a public school building. She recalls few, but memorable learning experiences taking place outside of the classroom walls. Her first experience in a public school was as a kindergartener in a Montessori-inspired classroom. As a young learner, the researcher remembers venturing to the playground to locate tadpoles. As the teacher helped the students catch a few, the researcher vividly remembers her talking about what the students would have to do to ensure the safety of the new classroom pets. Watching the life cycle of the tadpoles unfold was of great interest to the researcher. Unfortunately, such engaging learning experiences were the exception, not the rule for her. Traditional teaching and learning approaches dominated the remainder of her public school education.

As the researcher began her journey as an educator, she had the distinct pleasure of student teaching in a Reggio-Emilia inspired preschool program. During this experience she shadowed teachers engaging young children in learning through this innovative approach. Then, with the support of her supervising teacher, she was able to facilitate student learning through the Reggio-Emilia approach. Children within the classrooms of this program were engaged in real-world problem solving. They often ventured out into the community to engage in their local ecology and to further their learning.

As the researcher embarked upon her journey as a classroom teacher, she often desired to model her classroom environment after that of her
kindergarten classroom experience and preschool, student-teaching experience. However, administrators were not supportive. They encouraged the researcher to adhere to more traditional approaches to teaching and learning.

Since that time, she has been very interested in learning the manner in which school administrators can support teachers in implementing innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Administrators, in her opinion, set the tone for their schools. If they embrace active learning grounded in place, then teachers will follow and children will benefit.

Access and Rapport

The researcher of this case study addressed access and rapport. Access refers to the researcher's ability to connect with participants and recruit volunteers to participate in a study. Rapport is described as “a distance-reducing, anxiety-quieting, trust-building mechanism that primarily serves the interest of the researcher” (Glesne, 2006, p. 110). Access and rapport were sought with the selected participants of this study to aid in the collection of quality data during the interview process.

Access. The researcher of this case study, first sought access to participants by actively recruiting volunteers for the study through purposeful, snowball sampling. Participant recruitment was pursued through phone calls and emails with potential participants. These individuals were asked to participate in the study, and therefore provide access to their life experiences as it related to the purpose of this study. It is important to note that participants were notified
that participation in the study was voluntarily and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Once preliminary access was achieved, the researcher began addressing the issue of rapport.

**Rapport.** Rapport is signified in a relationship in which confidence and trust exists between the parties (Glesne, 2006; Patton 2002). In the context of this case study, rapport is relevant as it relates to the relationship between the researcher and participant. The researcher of this study sought to establish and maintain rapport with the selected participants throughout the data collection process.

**Establishing and maintaining rapport.** The initial establishment of rapport was accomplished through professional communications with participants that were sensitive to their personal and professional needs. For example, the researcher returned phone calls at the times requested by the participants. The researcher of this study was diligent to maintain rapport with the participants. The researcher arrived for interviews on time and followed-up with participants as promised. The need to maintain rapport with participants was taken seriously by the researcher of this study. For this reason, consideration was given to factors that could impact rapport on behalf of the researcher throughout the data collection process.

**Impacting rapport.** Rapport between a researcher and participants can be impacted by a variety of factors. The appearance, speech, and behavior of the researcher can alter the participants' willingness to participate and their
openness throughout the process (Glesne, 2006). Therefore, the researcher of this study was especially cognizant of the norms associated with the targeted population of the study, public school principals. The researcher was intentional about decisions impacting timeliness, professional dress, confidentiality, etc.

**Cautions related to rapport.** During this study, the researcher took precautions not to develop friendships with the participants. Friendships can lead to a loss of objectivity in data analysis (Glesne, 2006). Instead, the researcher's goal was to develop professional relationships grounded in mutual trust and respect.

**Reciprocity**

Reciprocity, or giving back, is an important consideration for a researcher. It is also an important aspect of the research process (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2006). The researcher must consider how a participant will be reimbursed for the gift they are giving, their lived experience. The researcher of this study did not present the participants with a monetary gift. However, the participants were graciously thanked for their contribution to the study as well as for their time.

**Ethical Considerations**

The ethical considerations relevant to this study were given significant attention. The participants were treated in accordance to the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Ohio University Institutional Review Board (IRB). IRB approval was obtained (see Appendix A).
The researcher was sensitive to issues surrounding respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

**Respect for persons.** Respect for persons was given significant consideration by the researcher of this study. According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), respect for persons means the researcher does not use the participants within the study for personal benefit, participants’ confidentiality is protected, and participants understand inclusion in the study is voluntary and may end any time they choose.

Confidentiality was a major consideration for the researcher of this study. For this reason, pseudonyms were used for all names and locations identified during data collection; including the names of the participants. Only the researcher, methodologist, and transcriptionist were given access to the identifiable data.

A statement of informed consent is a tool used by researchers to document a participant’s willingness to participate in the study. Specifically, a statement of informed consent shares the purpose of the study, states participation in the study is voluntary, highlights potential benefits and risks associated with participation in the study, and promises confidentiality to the fullest extent possible (Glesne, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2005; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). A statement of informed consent was obtained for each participant of this study (see Appendix B).
**Beneficence.** The researcher of this study gave consideration to beneficence. Actions, to the extent possible, were taken to ensure no harm would come to the participants by participating in the study. The researcher did not anticipate or foresee any potential risks or discomforts on the part of the participants.

**Justice.** The researcher of this study also gave consideration to justice. Marshall and Rossman (2011), defined justice as “considerations of who benefits and who does not from the study” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 47). To the knowledge of the researcher, there were no identified concerns related to justice.

**Trustworthiness**

Marshall and Rossman (2011) shared “the potential trustworthiness and goodness of a study should be judged not only by how competently it is designed…but also by how ethically the researcher is likely to be during the study’s conduct” (p. 44). Trustworthiness is how the researcher ensures a study’s findings are significant, truthful, and of value to the intended audience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The review of four criteria – credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability – impacts the level of trustworthiness for a given study. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The overall trustworthiness of this study was of utmost importance to the researcher.

**Credibility.** In qualitative research, credibility is dependent upon three aspects of the research: rigorous methods, the researcher, and a philosophical
belief in the value of qualitative research (Patton, 2002). Qualitative researchers, therefore, suggest employing specific strategies to construct a credible study.

Member checks, peer debriefing, triangulation, and rich description are a few strategies, which can be used to ensure a qualitative research study has credibility (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). It is suggested by Creswell (2007), that at least two strategies be used during a research study. The researcher of this study selected the following strategies: member checks and analyst triangulation.

Member checks were used to verify the accuracy of the participants’ messages (Cho & Trent, 2006). Lincoln and Guba (1985) considered member checks to be the most important strategy for the establishment of a study’s credibility. During member checks, the researcher shares data and interpretations with participants (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This is completed to ensure that the participants deem their messages to have been accurately articulated (Shenton, 2004).

The use of multiple data analysts is known as analyst triangulation (Patton, 1999). Analyst triangulation is used to verify and fact check across the data (Cho & Trent, 2006). “Having two or more researchers independently analyze the same qualitative data set and then compare their findings provides an important check on selective perception and blind interpretive bias” (Patton, 1999, p. 1195). This type of triangulation directly relates to the credibility and
dependability of the collected data (Patton, 1999). Analyst triangulation was the second strategy employed in this study for developing credibility.

**Dependability.** In addition to ensuring the credibility of this case study, the researcher also took steps to warrant its dependability. Dependability refers to the consistency of the study’s findings as well as the likelihood that the findings could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The dependability of this study can be judged based upon two criteria: inter-coder agreement and transparency.

In qualitative research, Creswell (2007) shared that dependability often relates to the consistency of analysis between multiple coders, or analysts, of data. Two analysts coded the collected data (transcriptions of interviews) during this case study. This intersects with the use of multiple analysts as described above.

Transparency, as it relates to the data collection and analysis process, was a goal of the researcher of this study. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), transparency indicates the data collection and analysis process is evident to the reader of the study. “A good guideline for doing case studies is…to conduct the research so that an auditor could in principle repeat the procedures and hopefully arrive at the same results” (Yin, 2014, p. 49). By following this guideline, the researcher attempted to make the data collection and analysis process clear to reviewers. This level of transparency is vital to providing an opportunity for future
researchers to repeat the work and for others to judge the quality of the study (Patton, 1999; Shenton, 2004).

**Transferability.** Transferability refers to the possibility that a study’s findings will be germane in other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thick description is used to ensure transferability. It is the clarity by which the researcher paints the context of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The researcher of this case study strived to unveil the role of public school principals in supporting the implementation of place-based learning. Therefore the transferability of the study was a goal of the researcher. The transferability of this case study may be helpful to public school principals whose teachers are implementing other innovative approaches to teaching and learning.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability refers to the level of neutrality of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It evaluates how much the findings are a result of the actual data collected, as opposed to the biases of the researcher. Analyst triangulation, as previously described, was a strategy used to establish the confirmability of this study.

**Data Collection Method**

Case studies, according to Marshall and Rossman (2011), can utilize multiple data collection methods, such as interviews, observations, historical and document analysis, and surveys. The researcher of this study utilized interviews as the data collection method.
Interviews. Interviews are often used to collect data in qualitative research. Through qualitative research interviews, “knowledge is produced socially in the interaction of interviewer and interviewee” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 82). Interviews provide a face-to-face interaction between the researcher and individuals with the lived experience of the topic being studied. The purpose of a qualitative interview is to learn from the lived experience of another person (Brady, 1976; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2006; Weiss, 1994). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) shared,

The research interview is based on the conversations of daily life and is a professional conversation; it is an inter-view, where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee. An interview is literally an inter view, an inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest. (p. 2)

Interviews are a tool for collecting the words of real people who have lived real experiences. It provides a vehicle for interviewers to put into context people’s behavior and lay a foundation for building an understanding of their actions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2006).

The researcher utilized a semi-structured interview format in the research study (see Appendix C). In semi-structured interviews, “interviewers refer to a prepared interview guide that includes a number of questions” (Roulston, 2010,
An interview guide lists the topics to be covered during the interview as well as possible questions to ask (Weis, 1994). The questions in a semi-structured interview “are usually open-ended, and after posing each question to the research participant, the interviewer follows up with probes seeking further detail and description about what has been said” (Roulston, 2010, p. 15). Questions are prepared in advance but can be used as a guide rather than a script. The questions may be asked in different sequences with different interviewees.

The data of a qualitative research interview are the words spoken by the interviewee. During the interview, the purpose is to “record as fully and fairly as possible that particular interviewee’s perspective” (Patton, 2002, p. 380). For this reason, it is imperative for the interviewer to capture the verbatim quotes of the interviewee. It is often suggested that a digital voice recorder be used for this tedious task. A digital voice recorder provides a tool for accurately recording the words spoken during the interview, the interviewer’s original data, and allows the interviewer to focus more intently upon the interviewee (Brady, 1976; Glesne, 2006; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2006; Weiss, 1994). The researcher of this study used a digital voice recorder to capture the words of the participants.

The use of a digital voice recorder, though, does not negate the need for note taking. Instead, it allows the interviewer “to concentrate on taking strategic and focused notes, rather than attempting verbatim notes” (Patton, 2002, p. 383).
Note taking enables the interviewer to “listen carefully enough to get down the main points, and also provides backup in case a machine fails” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 111). It also provides a method for the interviewer to jot down potential follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Notes on body language can also be captured through note taking, which would be lost if the interviewer used only a digital voice recorder. Notes were taken by the researcher of this study to enhance listening, record follow-up questions, and write general notes during each interview.

Data Collection Process

The data collection process was completed as follows:

- Identified potential participants.
- Conducted an initial contact with the potential participants.
- Set interview dates, times, and locations with participants.
- Reminded the participants approximately 2 days prior to the agreed upon date.
- Conducted the interviews.
- Sent follow-up thank you notes.
- Sent transcripts for member checks. Participants were given two weeks to review the transcripts and share any clarifications or additional thoughts.
- Sent initial summaries for review by the participants.

Pilot study. A pilot study was conducted. It followed the same procedures as outlined above. The data collected during the pilot was included
in the findings due to the intersections observed between the data collected during both segments of the research.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

The data collected during this case study, was coded for analysis. A code can be defined as “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing” attribute to qualitative data (Saldaña, 2013, p. 3). It is “a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, theory building, and other analytic processes” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 4).

First Cycle and Second Cycle coding were completed. First Cycle coding is the preliminary coding of the data (Saldaña, 2013). A holistic coding method was used during the First Cycle. During this initial coding, a researcher focuses on key issues, or analysis of themes, “not for generalizing beyond the case, but for understanding the complexity of the case” (Creswell, 2007, p. 75).

Thematic analysis, according to Glesne, is “a process that involves coding and then segregating the data by codes into data clumps for further analysis and description” (2006, p. 147). Such an analytic strategy helps to identify issues within each case and common themes between cases. As the researcher’s data and experience increase, relevant files are created to organize the data accordingly (Glesne, 2006). This preliminary coding enables the researcher to
complete “a more detailed coding or categorization process” during the Second Cycle coding (Saldaña, 2013, p. 142).

The purpose of Second Cycle coding “is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization” for the First Cycle codes (Saldaña, 2013, p. 207). Second Cycle coding methods “are advanced ways of reorganizing and reanalyzing data coded through First Cycle” coding methods (Saldaña, 2013, p. 207). During this second analysis, the First Cycle codes are “reorganized and reconfigured” to develop a more succinct list of codes (Saldaña, 2013).

Pattern coding was used as the Second Cycle coding method for this case study. It develops the “category label that identifies similarly coded data” and attempts “to attribute meaning” to the newly conceptualized categories (Saldaña, 2013, p. 209). This coding method is used to “collect similarly coded passages from the data corpus” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 212). In addition, it acts “as a stimulus to develop a statement that describes a major theme, a pattern of action, a network of interrelationships, or a theoretical construct from the data” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 212).

Conclusion

The role of the public school principal in facilitating place-based learning was explored by the researcher through a qualitative, collective case study. Student achievement and engagement in learning have been proven to increase through the implementation of place-based learning (Fly, n.d.; Gliner, 2012;
Long, 2009; Powers, 2004; Promise of Place, 2015; Smith, 2002; Smith & Sobel, 2010b; Sobel, 2005). This study used interviews to gather data to answer the central research question: What leadership approaches do public school principals utilize that support teachers in implementing place-based learning?
Chapter 4: Organizing, Analyzing, and Synthesizing Data

The data collected by the researcher of this case study is organized, analyzed, and synthesized. The participants are introduced. A general description is provided including the participant’s educational beliefs and a personal description of each as a leader. An analysis of the interviews is provided. The themes and patterns that emerged through the data analysis are introduced.

Introduction of Participants

Identification of the participants required significant time and effort. Though organizations dedicated to the support of place-based learning exist, not all are eager to volunteer members for participation in a research study. They are protective of their members’ time. Additionally, gatekeepers of local schools can make direct contact with school leaders difficult to achieve.

The interviewees identified for this study were purposely selected for participation based upon established criteria. They had to be current or former principals of schools implementing place-based learning during their administration. To protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms were assigned. Other identifying information was also changed, such as the name of their school, district, community, etc. Their general description, however, is factual.
General Description of Participants

The participants of this case study served small, rural schools. Most of them served as a principal in an elementary school (Pre-K-6th grade), with one as a high school principal (9th-12th grade). The student body of the schools ranged from 55-250 students. The participants’ years of experience in a leadership role varied from three to twenty years. Most of the participants had served in their current position for less than five years. Specifics about each participant are explicated below.

Edmond. Edmond has an educational background in anthropology and psychology, as well as a degree in early childhood education. He has worked as a professor of early childhood education, a toddler provider, child researcher, classroom teacher, early childhood coordinator, assistant principal, and teacher supervisor. He has served about 4 years as a classroom teacher and about 20 years as a principal or leader (program coordinator, assistant principal, etc.). He has always been very strongly attracted to small, rural schools. When given the opportunity to work in such a setting, Edmond gladly accepted the position. He worked as an assistant principal for two years in a small, rural school before accepting the position of principal in his current school (also a small, rural school). He has served in his current school for two years.

Edmond’s educational beliefs. Edmond explained he strongly believes in the need to focus on the whole child. He described the ideal classroom
environment as supportive, aligned, individualized, and as having high expectations.

Edmond explained the need for a supportive relationship between the child, the teacher, and the family. Specifically, children need to feel “emotionally secure and safe” in their relationship with the teacher. The role of administrators and teachers, according to Edmond, is to help children feel emotionally safe, supported, and cared about. He discussed his belief that children can only flourish academically within a classroom environment that is emotionally safe. According to Edmond, unless children have a strong emotional foundation they will not be able to achieve to their fullest potential.

Edmond shared the need for alignment related to goals and interests between school and home. He explained his belief that children need to know their families and teachers share common goals. These goals are related to the importance of learning, future careers, etc.

Edmond explained children need to have a voice in their education. Children should be given choices in what they want to learn and in how they engage in the learning process. He stated children learn best, “If you can find a way to spark the inherent curiosity that children have… build off their interests…their curiosity…what they hope to achieve, what they want, [and] are interested in.”
Edmond stated his belief that children need to know their teachers and principals have high expectations for them. This is not “pressure;” instead high expectations means “confidence” that they can achieve.

**Edmond’s description of self as a leader.** When asked to describe himself as a leader, Edmond used words such as facilitative, problem solving, and focused. He stated, “My focus and my goal is beyond just the school…I really think about focusing…on the whole child, not just the individual curriculum areas.”

**Louisa.** Louisa has served in the field of education for thirty-one years. She started her career in a small, rural district where she taught physical education to students in grades 3-8, as well as science to students in grades 5-8. During this time, Louisa observed middle school students struggling tremendously with grade-level reading and writing. This inspired her to earn a Master’s Degree in reading. She later taught literacy and intervention to elementary and middle school students within her original school district. She also was trained in Reading Recovery. Louisa served as a teacher for nineteen years. Then she became a principal. She has been in a leadership role (principal and literacy coordinator) for twelve years. Louisa has served as principal in her current position for three years.

**Louisa’s educational beliefs.** Louisa embraced a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. She described the ideal classroom environment as warm and inviting. She shared “there would be no…opportunity for… belittling or
the attitude that a child cannot succeed…because of their parents and…generational…poverty.”

Louisa explained her belief that teachers need to know their students socially as well as academically. She advocated for a “workshop model” or “guided practice.” According to Louisa, this approach enables students to “attain real world practice and support.” Louisa also shared that skills previously mastered should be reviewed periodically. She stated “There may be opportunities for pencil and paper, [but they have]…to be purposeful opportunities.”

An educator, according to Louisa, must “have a firm grasp on the content.” In addition, teachers should use all available resources including but not limited to those in the classroom, school building, and “the broader community.” Louisa shared that utilizing all available resources enables educators to expose students to all that is available to them.

**Louisa’s description of self as a leader.** Louisa described herself as always learning, reflective, mindful of student and community needs, and likely too cautious. She explained she researches and investigates proposals from staff members to determine feasibility; sometimes protecting the staff from hidden obstacles. Louisa also shared she is actively involved in supporting student achievement by helping to identify how each child learns best and what interests them.
Lexie. Lexie has enjoyed a plethora of experiences in the field of education. She has been involved in teaching, school development, curriculum development, and administration. Lexie started her career in the area of early childhood education. She has been a preschool teacher, started a parent cooperative preschool, and worked in a lab preschool specializing in newborn, preschool, and kindergarten programming. Lexie has also worked as a math and science curriculum coordinator. She has served as a teacher for twenty-five years and a principal for three years. Lexie has been in her current position for two years.

Lexie’s educational beliefs. Lexie described her educational beliefs by stating, “Education is an opportunity for children and adults to understand the world in a way that makes sense to them.” She further defined education as how educators “help kids become competent citizens in their local community and the larger community of our country and our world.” She specified that through shared experiences learning occurs.

According to Lexie, children “learn best when they’re doing something that they’re interested in” or that they understand the reasoning behind. She shared learning must be “authentic.” She defined authentic as “relevant in some way to what their everyday life is.” Learning should not occur in isolation; instead it should be integrated, according to Lexie. She explained math and science should be integrated. Furthermore, language arts should be a common thread connecting all learning.
Lexie stated education has to be “supported by people who are really excited about working with children, who really genuinely like children, and see the potential for what can be accomplished beyond a traditional model of the simple core content topics in a school.” Involvement by all stakeholders, according to Lexie is a vital ingredient in the education of children. She shared “all the stakeholders have to really be connected” to a common vision.

Lexie described the ideal classroom as active, vibrant, and enthusiastic. She envisioned “kids discussing things that are being…guided by a teacher, but sometimes…being guided by the kids themselves.” She stated the classrooms should be “filled with student work on display.” Teachers, in collaboration with students, should determine what is displayed based on agreed-upon criteria.

Lastly, Lexie affirmed children should be happy to attend school. Their teachers should know them on a personal level.

**Lexie’s description of self as a leader.** Humane, compassionate, positive, risk-taker, and optimistic are words Lexie used to describe herself. She shared, “I would be willing to take a pretty good calculated risk if I thought it was going to benefit…our program.” Additionally, she stated, “My goal…it’s to lead a joyful learning community.”

**Katrina.** Katrina’s journey to the field of education was unique. Her background was, in her words, “very eclectic.” She studied social ecology, historical preservation, economics, and resource economics. Through her coursework, she engaged in learning about and experiencing community
gardening, wind power, waterpower, and creating sustainable communities. She also completed an apprenticeship as a plumber and worked for an electrical company. Katrina, after completing her degree in education, worked on a farm facilitating educational field trips. She has taught in private and public schools. She served seven years as a classroom teacher and eight years as a health educator. She has been an administrator for eight years. Katrina has served in her current position for four years.

**Katrina’s educational beliefs.** “Children need to be joyful and engaged learners” according to Katrina. She contended it is the responsibility of educators to ensure children are “engaged” and “joyful.” Additionally, it is the educator’s responsibility to cultivate a love for learning within children. She shared she believes children should love learning, not because they will all become authors or mathematicians, but because “they’re all going to be community members.”

Katrina also explained children need to “know that...everything [and everyone] is connected.” She shared her belief that educators need to instill in children that “their future is in their hands.”

Katrina visualized a genuine classroom community when contemplating the ideal classroom. She envisioned children authentically interacting with one another and being supported through a variety of learning opportunities connected to the standards. She was a proponent for a workshop model, where child-direct learning occurs that is strongly connected to the standards.
**Katrina’s description of self as a leader.** Katrina described herself as a servant leader. She stated, “I have ideas and I’m going to try to guide you to that, and I will support you as you move along in your journey, as long as you stay within the guardrails.” She shared that some people perceive her leadership style as a weakness. She, though, clarified it is more difficult to serve and support educators than to dictate to them.

**Martin.** Martin spent the first two years of his career in education in southern Texas teaching on the Mexican border. He taught there for two years. He taught 6th grade remedial reading to students unable to read. Many of his students spoke Spanish, and he only spoke English. He also taught special education for kindergarten through 3rd grade. For personal reasons, he moved to a small, rural area. There he taught 1st-5th grade. Martin has been in the field of education for twenty years – eight as a teacher and twelve as a principal. He has served in his current position for six years.

**Martin’s educational beliefs.** Martin stated, “Every student should come to school every day and feel like they are wanted and important and valuable and have just as much to offer as any of the adults.” He contended that educators “should all have to pass the nice test.” If these two conditions are met, then he explained everything else will fall into place. According to Martin, if children “feel like they’re valued and that they are important and they’re a key participant, [they] will do anything you ask of them, at any time, no matter how hard it is.”
Martin asserted active engagement is a key ingredient to effective teaching and learning. In fact, he shared “If kids are doing and active and moving, then they’re learning.” He implied an essential part of the learning environment is having “lots of opportunities to play with things, to make mistakes, and figure out how to fix those mistakes.” He shared children need multiple occasions to engage in collaborative tasks. Additionally, he asserted, “A lot of the doing time needs to be without pencils and without computers and just kids doing what kids do.” It is then the teacher’s responsibility to help the children make sense of what they are learning, transfer the knowledge, and apply it to other contexts.

“Big” was Martin’s description of the ideal classroom. He shared it has “some places out in the woods where kids can gather some data and do some reflection and spend some time with nature, but it has some time in the classroom where they can apply what they are doing and use technology and learn…that life is about both.” He explained, “People need to remember that kids are little and they naturally would not be inside.”

**Martin’s description of self as a leader.** Patient, calm, flexible, and supportive are words Martin used to describe himself as a leader. He also shared that he is willing to take needed actions when staff members do things that are harmful to students. He stated,

I think people would say that if they’re doing what’s best for kids and they are passing the niceness test and they are inspiring kids to work hard and
have that mentality that all kids can learn; then, I am patient, flexible and very supportive. But if there is somebody in my building that is doing harm to kids emotionally or physically; then, I would think they would say that there is really zero tolerance, that I would use every ounce of resource that I have to move that person out.

**Benton.** Benton has taught kindergarten, second grade, and sixth grade. He has been a junior-senior high school and elementary school principal. He has worked as an assistant professor in educational leadership and the dean of core studies. Benton has served four years as a classroom teacher and about twenty years as a principal or leader in a public school. He spent seven years as principal of a school implementing place-based learning.

**Benton’s educational beliefs.** Benton affirmed educators are charged with ensuring children learn and achieve success. However, he explained the professionals do not define "success", but instead the child and family define it. It is the responsibility of the teachers to remove as many barriers as possible to support each child on his journey toward success. He also described the need for community engagement as an integral part of the teaching and learning process.

Benton was a strong advocate for developing leaders within the classroom. According to him, leadership skills are fostered as the teacher cultivates each child’s strengths.
The ideal classroom, according to Benton, is “organized chaos,” structured around authentic learning tasks. For example, “instead of just having students do 100 problems on the formula for speed…actually design a speed trap…design…tickets…[and] issue them to parents or the policemen driving through.”

**Benton’s description of self as a leader.** Benton described himself as ethical. He explained that at times he embraced the premises of shared leadership, while at other times he alone made the decisions. He shared examples where he had to take an ethical stand in the best interests of children. Benton stated that sometimes his kindness is mistaken for weakness.

They’re like, “Oh, you can’t give away all this control.” And I was like, “No…the title of leader is still there and the buck still stops with me, and I have to say…we gotta climb this hill. I want your input. We gotta climb up this hill and take this hill…that’s our mission.

He shared that he is the keeper of the vision. He has to ensure that the decisions being made are true to the mission and vision of the school and are best for all involved.

**Duncan.** Duncan’s life experiences are unique. He has worked in Canada, Alaska, Maine, and Vermont. He has traveled around the world and enjoys farming and music. He has been in public education for about 24 years. The last 10 years have been spent in a leadership role (special education
director, high school principal, and elementary principal). Duncan has been in his current position for four years.

**Duncan’s educational beliefs.** Duncan explained “education is an…entity or institution…that provides equity for young people.” Additionally, the role of schools is to provide the foundation for molding “informed citizens who can really be…active member[s] in a democracy.” He explained he values student voice and learning grounded in “rigor, relevance, and relationships.”

Duncan described the ideal classroom environment as “hands-on, minds-on.” He shared his belief in providing a variety of “independent and individualized learning opportunities. He portrayed the “classroom as being very dynamic” and catered to the students’ interests to generate engagement. High expectations are non-negotiable. He explained he expects there to be rigorous teaching and learning occurring “around transferable skills.”

**Duncan’s description of self as a leader.** When asked to describe himself as a leader, Duncan stated, “I know that I really don’t know.” He shared that knowing he doesn’t have all the answers allows him to approach situations with curiosity. Additionally, he stated, “I do have my opinions and…get a little bit stubborn if I think something…is good in a certain way.”

**Interview Analysis: Introduction**

The interviews completed with each of the seven participants – Edmond, Louisa, Lexie, Katrina, Martin, Benton, and Duncan – are analyzed below. The analysis is organized by the study’s guiding questions. Following this initial
Participants Knowledge of Place-Based Learning

The participants shared their knowledge of place-based learning. They discussed how they were first introduced to PBL. The participants explained how they would define place-based learning. Furthermore, the participants described their experiences with place-based learning as teachers and principals.

Initial introduction to place-based learning. Most of the participants described instinctually implementing place-based learning prior to being formally introduced to the term. Duncan stated, “I think placed-based learning was something I always did and I didn’t really know what it was called… I always found it to be more relevant and more… engaging for kids.” Several others echoed this sentiment.

Katrina was the only participant that described experiencing place-based learning as a student. She discussed a summer camp, which transformed her view of history. She shared “I had a whole summer where I lived at Gettysburg National Park…I was able to live history.” She expressed how much she disliked the subject prior to that experience. Afterward, though, she had a zeal for learning about history.

The only participant that did not describe engaging in place-based learning prior to being formally introduced to the approach was Martin. His
introduction to PBL occurred after he accepted a teaching position at a school implementing the approach.

**Explanations of place-based learning.** Each participant described place-based learning in a unique way, but all shared threads of commonality. These included community engagement, active learning, authentic application, integrated learning, and student-centeredness. A few illustrations are below.

- Edmond described place-based learning as the “Sesame Street approach.” He shared it is about learning about yourself, your family, and your neighborhood.

- Lexie eloquently explained place-based learning. She described it as “using your location as a lab for bringing the concepts you have to teach to life…it’s literally looking at the concepts from the standards and saying, ‘Well, what does that mean to us as we’re sitting here?’”

- Martin succinctly defined place-based learning as “using your place to make meaning and to help kids…engage in their learning through what’s around them.”

- Duncan emphasized the approach as student-centered.

**Experiences with place-based learning.** The participants’ experiences with place-based learning as a teacher and principal are summarized below. Additionally, their thoughts on the role of the principal in the implementation of place-based learning are made evident.
**As a teacher.** The participants described a plethora of anecdotes explaining their experiences with place-based learning as a classroom teacher. Below are the stories of a few of the participants.

- **Edmond:** Edmond described a project conducted by one of his colleagues at a preschool lab school. His colleague introduced the idea of “research” to a group of preschool students. She invited the students to share what they wanted to learn and to brainstorm how they could learn it. “The kids decided they wanted to know whether people like apples...more than bananas...So they developed a little graph, they took their clipboards and they went to every single professor.” He shared how his colleague helped the preschool students analyze their data and report their findings.

- **Katrina:** One of the schools in which Katrina taught did not have a hot lunch program. Collaboratively, she and the students decided to address this issue. The students chose to start their own business. They “created menus, went shopping...prepared the food, served the food, and then made sure they made enough money to go back out and buy” more supplies. The students engaged in this process once a week. Katrina directly tied the weekly project into the required curriculum.

- **Martin:** While teaching first grade, Martin and his colleague developed a place-based unit about insects. The two classes worked with a local expert from a museum to find insects in a lot next to the school. Martin shared, “We planted a butterfly garden and we observed insects. We
went to the town common and we looked at…a vegetable garden and…at insects.” He described talking with the children about what they knew about insects and posing the question, “What can we teach our community?” This question led the students to “interviewing people in the community about what…[they] do with insects.” The students learned some community members killed all the insects. Therefore, the students decided to author a “pamphlet about which insects are beneficial and how you can help them and how you can get rid” of the others. Martin summarized by saying the insect project “turned out to be a great place-based unit that was a part of our community and got our kids outside.”

- **Benton:** He shared when he taught kindergarten, he would “take a big chunk of wood and have a box of nails, and some safety glasses, and let them pound nails. I’d let them build it, break it, stack it, make it. We’d take walks…and explore.”

*Perceived role of principal as a teacher.* The participants described their perception of the role of their principal in the implementation of place-based learning while they were classrooms teachers. Some shared they viewed the principal as having no role. Others explained they viewed the role of their principal as supportive, allowing them to engage in an “out-of-the-box” approach to teaching and learning. Louisa shared, “The principal understanding that it [the project] was an outgrowth of the content area…And having that [the principal’s] support” to implement the project in the community was crucial. Lexie described
her principal as supportive of her to do whatever was needed to help the children learn. For example, if Lexie went to her principal and said, “We want to go out in the brook,” her principal would respond, “Great. Go. Just make sure that everybody brings a change of clothing and you…tie…it to the curriculum.”

As a principal. Each participant humbly shared examples of place-based learning being implemented under their leadership. Their perceived role in facilitating the implementation of place-based learning is shared in relation to the project they described. A few of the descriptions are shared below.

Louisa’s example and perceived role. Louisa described the history and use of a bread oven at her school, Washington Elementary.

The bread oven was originally designed as a community building...The community really wanted to do something to bring all students and family members and the community at large together. But, they also wanted something that would help to extend learning at Washington. She shared the idea behind the bread oven and the building of the corresponding structures occurred prior to her accepting the position of principal. The bread oven, until last year, had been utilized minimally for educational purposes, but that changed. She explained, “Last year, as a result of failed budgets...we wanted to heal the community, so we made a conscious effort to have a monthly event...that was open to the community and celebrated food in some way, using the bread oven.” This monthly event started as a rotating assignment between classes, with each class taking the lead approximately twice during the school
year. “The beauty that became an outgrowth” of this project is how each class intentionally incorporated the monthly bread oven event into their learning. For example, one class used the bread oven to make maple sugar while learning about early colonialism. She also shared an unexpected outcome—a few of the 7th and 8th grade students were able to mentor new staff members on the proper usage of the bread oven. Louisa stated it was an empowering experience for the students and a welcomed learning opportunity for the staff.

When asked to discuss her role in facilitating the yearlong implementation of the bread oven, Louisa stated, “It’s not only [being] the cheerleader of the group, but [also] making sure that folks had donated the supplies.” She discussed handling the scheduling and organizational aspects of each event. For example, she advertised the event, had quality recipes available for the staff to use, and helped the staff decide how to authentically tie the bread oven event into their curriculum.

**Martin’s example and perceived role.** Martin described a “chicken coop” project. Collaboratively he and his staff wrote a grant to fund the building of a chicken coop. This project was initiated for a few reasons. He only shared one reason; it being that many of their students had not had the experience of taking care of an animal. Martin and his staff viewed this as an important part of growing up, and therefore, sought to provide the experience through the school.

Each class at Martin’s school “picked a country, and they did research on which chicken breeds originated in their country.” Then the staff researched, in
collaboration with Martin, where to locate the identified breeds of chickens. Each classroom was able to purchase two chickens of its choice.

Martin and his staff looked for ways to build student leadership through the on-going chicken coop project. “It may be identifying a few kids who we think really need to learn how to be responsible and giving them a job that’s an important job and tying it into the social skills curriculum.” Another example is a kindergarten teacher using the chicken coop to authentically teach math skills. For example, the students collected the eggs, sorted the eggs, and tallied the number of eggs collected each day.

Martin described his role in the chicken coop project as a facilitator. He stated,

I see myself as the person telling the teachers, it’s okay to go outside or it’s okay that you’ve done all this work today and you don’t have a paper and pencil product or it’s okay that you tried it and it bombed.

He further shared that his role is to ensure his staff know they are trusted to make the right decisions for their students. Additionally, he viewed himself as a necessary support and resource. He also recognized the knowledge and expertise of his staff members. Martin shared how he directed staff members to the best resource, which isn’t always him.

Martin described a second project – the composting project. In the state where Martin worked, a law recently changed. It requires all schools to compost. Martin and his staff viewed this new requirement as an opportunity to have their
students engage in real-life problem solving. The teachers engaged the students in researching topics such as reusing, recycling, and composting. They thought through the problem with the students and generated possible solutions for the current school year. Martin shared, “The kids came up with some great ideas.” One group of students specifically investigated the following question: “What are the best ways to get our school community to not take the easy route of throwing everything in the trash?” In collaboration with the custodian, the students created a “table that has cutouts in it and drawings of what goes where and it has bins that sit into it so that when kids…go through the line and you can’t help but compost and recycle and put your silverware in the right place.” Another group brainstormed ways to cut down on the amount of trash. They posed the question, “Why do we need milk cartons?” Martin shared the students conducted some research and learned that a local dairy would deliver gallon jugs of milk. Additionally, the students learned that “washing cups is a much more environmentally sound practice and it cuts the trash way down.” A third group of students brainstormed ways to compost. Initially this group though they could compost all their scraps or feed them to their chickens. Martin explained the students did “some research about what are the guidelines [concerning composting] and…how much will they [the chickens] eat.” Towards the end of the school year, the students began thinking about what could be done with this project the following year. “Next year, the…teachers will be able to take that
same place-based unit,” according to Martin, and “have the same feel of taking a problem and making it into a solution and moving it forward.”

When asked about his role in the composting project, Martin shared his role is to “constantly be supporting people’s choices unless they’re unsafe.” For example,

When kids come to me and say, “Mr. Martin, we want to dump all of our food waste out on the circle for the chickens to eat.” I think my job is to say, “Okay, you can dump your food waste out on the circle for the chickens to eat and we can see what happens”…letting those kids try what they feel is going to work.

Martin shared when teachers approach him and share an idea generated by their students, he feels it is his responsibility to honor the request and provide an opportunity for the students to present their proposal to the staff.

*Duncan’s example and perceived role.* Duncan described a geo-cache project his students and teachers engaged in. The project was initiated due to a tragic event that impacted the entire community. He explained that on the first day as principal at his current school a tropical storm flooded the school. He stated, “The school was shut down for about four weeks. We had school out in tents on our field that wasn’t flooded.” He further described the devastation experienced by the entire community and how he and his staff used this tragedy to engage the community. He explained, “The geo-cache project got our students out to different community partners and really engaged them…as part of
our work.” He shared that the students created a geo-cache link on their school website. The students, according to Duncan, also wrote the code that connects the “geo-cacher” to the history and background of the selected town sites.

When asked about his role in the geo-caching project, Duncan explained, “It was horrific here and it was something the students felt deeply about and my role was to facilitate their passion and their desire to make sure people knew that we were still on the map.” Martin shared that there was a possibility that the school would be shut down. With all this in mind, he brought together his staff and worked collaboratively to facilitate the project. He shared, “We just facilitated conversations with people that were in the community and we all had different connections and we all connected with those individuals. It was like building bridges.”

**Participants’ Views of Relevant Professional Learning**

The participants had varying views on the need for professional learning related to place-based learning. One participant believed it is not need at all, while others believed strongly in the need for job-embedded professional learning to help support teachers in the implementation of place-based learning.

Edmond stated, “I don’t think it, place-based learning, is one of those things…you need to be trained [on] how to do it. You either, as a teacher, do it instinctually, or you learn how to do it after a while.”

Duncan, though, discussed participating in professional learning as a way to fine-tune the process for implementing place-based learning, as well as
learning how to authentically connect assessment to the projects to ensure student learning occurs.

Both Duncan and Martin shared about joining an organization which provides professional learning and technical assistance to schools committed to the implementation of place-based learning. They suggested the learning that comes from being a part of a community of professionals all utilizing place-based learning provides invaluable support for their teachers, and therefore enhances student learning.

Martin explained he engages in his own professional learning through a self-directed process using a variety of on-line resources. He also stated, “I see my school as a big professional learning community.” Martin shared how he and his staff learn from each other through formal and informal structures.

Louisa described the “beauty” of job-embedded professional learning. She shared through the utilization of the bread oven for the monthly community events; the teachers’ knowledge grew concerning how to authentically incorporate it into their curriculum.

Katrina advocated for peer support and resource utilization as the best forms of professional learning related to place-based learning. She shared how peers helped her first learn how to incorporate place-based learning into her classroom. She also discussed the benefits of using project guides directly connected to her state standards created by organizations supportive of place-based learning.
Lexie discussed professional learning as it related to grant-funded projects. She and two of her teachers spent a day learning about resources available through a variety of organizations that would support their grant work. She stated that she and her staff “continue to get professional development for place-based because…it helps us understand” the process and be aware of possible partnerships.

**Participants’ Views of the Benefits of Place-Based Learning**

The participants explained the benefits they believe are derived from implementing place-based learning. Some of the benefits they described include increased community connections, self-confidence, and academic achievement.

An increased community connection on behalf of the students is a benefit most of the participants described. In fact, Martin considered this benefit to be the most important. He shared, “It helps with behavior because kids who are part of a community are going to act in a way that makes that community thrive.” Edmond shared place-based learning, “Gets them [the students] to know their community. It helps them feel more bonded to their community.” He described scenarios where students took their knowledge of place home and shared it with their families. For example, Edmond explained when students are in the community with their families, “they can take the role of teacher to their parent, and say, ‘Hey, we went to this farm, they have really good yogurt there, can we go there and buy some yogurt?’” Lexie also richly described the connection or ownership students develop concerning their “place.” She stated, “It’s making
kids feel as if…this their place…It belongs to them, it belongs to their families and their community, and they’re responsible for it.”

Benton, Katrina, and Duncan agreed that place-based learning leads to increased community connections on behalf of the staff and community members as well. Benton stated, “The teachers, I think, gained a true appreciation of what our community and kids could bring to the table.” Duncan also described the importance of maintaining the community connections formed. He explained how a staff member changing positions or community members relocating or retiring impacts the connections available to the students and school. He shared that over the 10 years he has been a part of his current school community, at least two connections have been lost due to a various circumstances.

Louisa discussed at length the benefits of place-based learning on the self-confidence of the students. She shared a story about a student with significant difficulties taking a leadership role through their most recent bread oven project. The student was able to teach new staff members how to properly use the bread oven. Louisa explained,

When you’re that student who has had so many challenges and you’re the person who is teaching the teacher…Words can’t describe the impact that that student had; you can physically see the difference in the gait…After that experience, where they are now an expert at something that confidence soars.
Increased student achievement is a benefit most participants alluded to, but did not describe in-depth. However, Benton did share how his students’ academic achievement was impacted while place-based learning was being implemented. He explained the graduation rate increased from 67 percent to 97-98 percent (which meant one student did not graduate). Additionally, he stated that his overall test scores also increased, though he did not share specifics.

Core Beliefs Embraced

The participants described the core beliefs embraced by their school. Commonalities among the participants included the recognition of community assets, the cultivation of a supportive environment, and the belief that all students can learn. A few descriptions are below.

- **Lexie**: “We’re a school of excellence and…have incredibly high expectations for our kids, for all of our kids…The connection to the community is also a very important value that we hold here because the community is what keeps us alive.”

- **Martin**: “I would think above all that our first belief is that all of our kids can or will learn. That’s at the very center. I think stemming from that is…a belief that it’s the responsibility of the staff member to help kids figure out how they do that best.”

- **Benton**: “I think it was respecting local knowledge. “

- **Duncan**: “I think a core belief that we have is that…all students can learn…I would say that…learning needs to be based…on the three
R’s…rigor, relevance, [and] relationships…I’d also say humor…you have to take…a mindset that we’ll figure it out and you have to laugh at yourself a little bit."

School Culture

The participants described their school’s culture in distinct ways. Some descriptors included joyful, engaged, relational, collaborative, and committed to place-based learning. The participants’ descriptions did not intersect often, however, commonalities were evident.

Both Lexie and Katrina described a joyful learning environment. Lexie explained that her school embraces a culture that celebrates flexibility and creativity that leads to joy.

Katrina discussed engagement. She shared her school embraces a culture that cultivates engaged learners.

Edmond explained the importance of relationships between students and staff members. He stated, “One of the things we try to do is identify which kids bond with which faculty, and continue those relationships for all seven years that they’re here.”

In addition to relationships between students and staff, Edmond described the open door policy embraced by his school culture that fosters community relationships. These relationships, in turn, support the school’s commitment to place-based learning.
Edmond further explained that a commitment to place-based learning is a part of the school’s culture. He described the commitment, as “so deeply entrenched, people don’t even know they’re doing it.”

Duncan eloquently shared that the culture of his school is “defined by how…we serve our students.” He also indicated, when describing the culture of his school, that the staff act as a team, with “everybody trying to help everybody else.” He shared that a tenant of the school’s culture is “respect and value [for] everybody as learners including the teachers, students, and community members.”

**Participant’s perceived role.** All of the participants explained their perceived role in establishing and maintaining the culture they described as supportive. “Support” was used in a variety of ways – financially, emotionally, educationally, and professionally. Edmond made it clear he has to support the culture of commitment to place-based learning financially by providing money for buses and needed supplies. Edmond, Benton, and Katrina each described ways they provided emotional support. For example, Katrina discussed showing the staff and students they are cared about as individuals by providing lunch or surprising the students with an unexpected trip. Lexie, Katrina, and Edmond described how they support their staffs professionally. Edmond stated his first “instinct is to build really warm, supportive relationships around people to recognize what their talents and skills are, and give them lots of opportunities to use that, and help them grow in areas where they might need some support.”
Lexie and Katrina each explained the role of shared leadership and decision making as important strategies they use to maintain their schools’ culture.

Martin and Louisa also discussed supporting their staff professionally, although with a slightly different slant. They shared helping staff members understand the vision of the school and then encouraging them to embrace the vision. Edmond shared his role “is helping people that can’t do the job well to gracefully exit and then finding people who can do the job well and that fit the beliefs of my school.”

**Role in the Learning Process**

The role of the teachers and students in the learning process is explored through the lenses of the participants. They described the teachers and students as having distinct roles. Those roles are discussed below.

**Teachers.** Duncan nicely summarized what all the participants outlined as the role of the teachers in the learning process. When asked about their role in the learning process, he explained

I think we’re all learners and I think that sums it up…they are facilitators and…planners…but I think if we see ourselves as learners…there’s a lot more opportunities for…genuine student engagement to occur.

Duncan clearly indicated that teachers must be learners themselves, facilitators of learning, and planners of learning opportunities. Additionally, teachers need to know their students. Other participants provided greater detail about these roles.
Martin described the teachers’ role as a learner in detail. He stated, “Their job is to model for our students that everybody is always learning.” For example, a student knows how to do something required for a project and is allowed to impart to the teacher the skill.

The teacher’s role of facilitator was also described. Edmond explained that every teacher has a “center,” or subject from which they teach all content. He shared their role is to use “that center as a way of getting kids interested and enthusiastic about what they’re doing.” Lexie and Martin added to this role. Lexie shared that it is the teacher’s responsibility to facilitate learning in a way that will engage students. Martin stated teachers have to be “flexible…and skilled enough to make it always look like the kids are in charge…but also guiding them” to ensure the standards are addressed.

As planners, teachers must carefully structure learning opportunities for their students. Louisa explained that teachers must carefully frame learning opportunities to ensure their implementation benefits students. Benton and Katrina both added to this role by explaining that teachers must be willing to be innovative and take risks to meet the needs of their students.

Louisa made it clear that teachers must know their students. She shared that teachers should know their students academically and socially.

Students. The participants described the role of students in the learning process as being active and engaged participants. Louisa and Lexie explained that students have to be active participants. Louisa and Martin shared the
students’ responsibility is to question, probe, and be true to themselves. Lexie explained that students have to put forth effort. Katrina and Lexie clearly described the students’ role – it is to learn. Lexie stated, “It’s the kids’ job to do the learning.” They must be engaged learners. Edmond affirmed the students’ role in the learning process is to be “as engaged as they can in their learning process, given their capacity.”

**Protection from External Pressures**

Every participant recognized the existence of external pressures. Some shared they struggle to protect their teachers and students from external pressures to return to more traditional approaches to teaching and learning. Louisa, Katrina, and Lexie shared they protect their staff, but there are some requirements that are non-negotiable. They try to help their staff see how they can implement the non-negotiable requirements and still provide place-based learning opportunities. Martin described himself as a buffer. For example, if the superintendent comes to him with many new initiatives, he negotiates to adopt the 1-2 that will most impact student learning and lead to the least amount of teacher burnout. Benton described providing supports to decrease the pressures from the outside and being open to requests for help from staff members. Duncan shared, “I focus on good teaching and good teaching practices as the…way to continue…to do what we think is in the best interests of the kids.”
Instructional Decision-Making Process

The participants each described the instructional decision-making process as a collaborative effort. Lexie and Edmond both explained the classroom teachers make many instructional decisions while in the classroom. For example, a teacher adjusts lessons to meet the immediate needs of their students. Lexie shared teachers “decide, ultimately, how the instruction looks in their classroom…with…input from our curriculum documents.” Edmond stated, “I am the first person to claim I am not a curriculum expert…the goal is to find people who are…and cultivate that leadership.” Katrina and Martin referenced the utilization of professional learning communities (PLCs) as an integral part the instructional decision-making process.

Communication

The participants discussed how they facilitate communication with a variety of audiences. Some explained fostering positive communications with students. A few focused on how they communicate with their staff. Others shared how they maintain open communications with other stakeholders. Their thoughts are below.

With students. Edmond, Lexie, Benton, and Martin emphasized the importance of building relationships with students as a way to open communication lines. Edmond stated, “I believe…strongly in knowing all of my kids.” Lexie shared more about having an open door policy and ensuring students feel comfortable stopping by to share achievements and struggles.
Martin and his guidance counselor greet their students every morning and follow-up with any students they notice having a rough morning.

Additionally, Martin shared students request that he review projects and classroom assignments they are working on via GoogleDocs. He explained, “It’s not unusual to get 6 or 8 a day, just little requests with, ‘I’m writing this opinion argument piece about why we should not have a rooster in our chicken coop. Can you read it and give me some comments,’ or things like that.”

**With teachers.** When asked about facilitating communication with staff members, Edmond explained,

I check in with teachers as best as I can every day…I use the same approach with the teachers that I do with the kids. I want to know about them. I want to know about their families. I want to know about what they hope to do in their job, what their skills and talents are, what really bugs them, what they get upset about, what they’re frustrated by.

He also shared he utilizes staff members to carry messages and tries to maintain a good sense of humor.

Katrina explained she facilitates communication with her teachers by visiting their classrooms and participating in PLCs. Additionally, she empowers her school leadership team to take responsibility for keeping the staff informed about upcoming events, instructional decisions, etc.

Martin shared his best tool for facilitating communication with staff members is a candy jar full of Hershey kisses in his office. He explained, “I think
people tend to eat the Hershey kisses when their day is not going as well. It gives me the opportunity to just have some chats with people.”

**With families.** The participants discussed various ways they communicate with families. Duncan, Lexie, and Martin send home newsletters. Katrina shared she communicates with families at least once a week. She added she is learning to leverage social media as a communication tool. Martin was already utilizing social media. He specifically mentioned using Facebook. Martin also shared he hosts “Chat with the Principal” nights monthly or bi-monthly. Duncan described a similar event he hosts about three times a year. Martin also made it clear that he is accessible to families via email, phone calls, or face-to-face conversations.

Both Martin and Lexie have an open-door policy. Edmond explained he makes a conscious effort to communicate with families about the positive things their children do. Benton and Louisa stressed the importance of relationships and recognizing the strengths of families.

**With community members.** All the participants recognized the need to communicate and build relationships with the community. Benton illustrated this clearly. He stated, “It’s about relationships.”

Edmond stressed the importance of communicating honestly with the community. He also shared the importance he places on going to the community to discuss the vision of the school and how they can support the school’s efforts. Katrina shared the value she places on attending community meetings and
events. Martin and Duncan also commented on the value of attending community meetings. Martin expanded on the idea by sharing that he collects the email addresses of the people in attendance. He then uses these contacts to invite the community members to special events.

Lexie reflected on her communication style. She explained she communicates with community members formally and informally. She stressed the importance of being available when people want to talk.

Support Implementation of Place-Based Learning

The participants discussed how they support the implementation of place-based learning. Support strategies were discussed as they relate to encouraging implementation among teachers and with the larger community. Additionally, the participants discussed how they support the academic success of their students.

Support implementation among teachers. Advocating for place-based learning to school officials, facilitating effective planning, offering professional development, removing obstacles, reminding stakeholders of the core beliefs adopted by the school, and remaining positive are all ways the participants described supporting their teachers as they implement place-based learning. Benton described an example of his advocating for the continued implementation of place-based learning to his superintendent. He used data indicating increased student achievement and higher attendance rates as evidence to support his argument. He also encouraged students to advocate for the approach themselves. Benton arranged meetings between the students and
superintendent so they could voice the benefits they derive from participating in place-based learning initiatives. Louisa and Edmond both shared they support teachers by facilitating effective planning. Louisa explained she asks her teachers probing questions to help them make the best decisions possible. For example, she inquiries about the cost associated with a particular project and its connection to the curriculum. Edmond stated, “Sometimes teachers come with loosely connected ideas that they might need some glue” to strongly connect. For example, he discussed helping teachers think through the best times to schedule a site visit. Duncan and Katrina both mentioned providing the teachers with relevant professional learning opportunities, including journal articles to review and organizing professional development sessions facilitated by an organization dedicated to place-based learning. Duncan shared removing obstacles as a support strategy. He explained he believes it to be the number one way he supports his teachers. Edmond clarified his role in supporting teachers. He described himself as being the “rudder;” the one that keeps everyone focused on the core beliefs embraced by the school and community. Martin and Lexie both agreed they support their teachers by being their biggest cheerleaders and encouraging them to take calculated instructional risks.

**Support implementation beyond the school.** The participants’ responses varied when asked how they demonstrate their support for place-based learning beyond the school. Some shared how they communicate the
value of place-based learning with families, while others focused on other stakeholders.

Edmond, Duncan, and Martin each discussed presenting successes to their school boards. Edmond explained he finds “lots of ways to communicate…either in person or in my board report.” Katrina shared her school board already supports the approach to teaching and learning; therefore, her focus is to maintain the support. Martin stated, “I make sure in our monthly school board meetings that part of my reports to the school board is information about what we’re doing that’s place-based and that our school board understands that there’s a reason why we take them [the students] outside.”

Katrina, Duncan, Edmond, Lexie, and Louisa each explained how they generate support for place-based learning among families. Katrina stated, “The parents…love it. They really like…seeing their kids happy…involved, and connected with community.” Duncan shared that parents want to hear from their children. Therefore, his staff hosts student-led conferences and uses them as a tool for fostering support for place-based learning. Edmond focused on how the personal relationships he strives to develop help to leverage support for place-based learning. Lexie shared support for place-based learning is generated with families due to their level of involvement in projects within the school. Louisa explained she utilizes student arrival and departure as a valuable time to foster support for place-based learning among families.
Benton’s response was more generalized. He succinctly summarized the other participants’ thoughts. He stated, “You have to be passionate about it...they [all stakeholders] have to see you engaged and buying in.”

Support students’ academic success. Mentoring, using data, and celebrating students’ successes are strategies the participants explained they use to support the academic achievement of their students. Benton discussed the value he places on mentoring as a strategy for supporting student success. He explained that every student has a self-selected mentor. He holds the adult mentor accountable for ensuring the student is successful. Edmond explained he uses data to help him understand the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process within his school. He also shared ensuring discipline is being addressed consistently throughout the school. Benton, Lexie, and Louisa each explained that they support students by recognizing and celebrating their successes. Benton made it clear that all students have successes that deserve celebration, not just the top few. Katrina stated she is a student advocate. She views her role in supporting students’ academic success as helping teachers meet each students’ individual needs. Martin shared he supports the academic success of his students by working with staff members to host events for students to display their learning for authentic purposes. For example, Martin’s staff hosts a STEM night. He explained,

Everything that was done collected some sort of information. So there was a group of kids that are going to be starting a business with our bread
oven…they used it as an opportunity for some recipe testing. So people were testing the foods that they were going to be marketing.

Additionally, Martin shared his commitment to “honoring and appreciating what they [the students] are doing…in their classrooms.”

**Themes and Patterns: Introduction**

After summarizing each interview based upon the study’s guiding questions, the interviews were reviewed again. The second review focused on identifying themes and patterns among the responses of each participant. Each of the themes and patterns shared below are important to understanding what makes the participants successful in supporting their teachers as they implement place-based learning. Each theme or pattern is identified below, followed by a brief explanation from the researcher based upon the participants’ responses.

**Leadership Approaches Utilized to Support Implementation**

**Servant leadership.** Many of the participants described how they serve their teachers. Brief examples are below:

- **Benton:** “I took a back seat…I said, ‘What do you want me to shovel, where do you want me to dig, what do you need me to do?’”
- **Lexie:** When asked how she supports her teacher in the implementation of place-based learning, Lexie stated, “Making phone calls to try to get resources to come into the school…As a leader what I can do is connect the dots.”
• **Katrina**: “I feel like a cruise director; what do you need?…getting funds, find grants…connecting with…state agencies and calling people up.”

**Instructional leadership.** Several participants shared descriptions of the utilization of instructional leadership. Brief examples are below:

• **Edmond**: “I’m the first person to claim I am not a curriculum expert…So, the goal is to find…teachers who really want to take that leadership role and cultivate that leadership.”

• **Louisa**: “I need a knowledge base of what they [the teachers] want to do, as well as, what their plan [is] and what cost is associated…Is it connected to our school? Is it connected to our curriculum?”

• **Lexie**: “I ask my teachers…‘What are you already comfortable teaching?’ ‘What do you think you might need some help with?’…If you’re a classroom teacher and you’re all by yourself, it’s hard to be motivated to take a risk.”

• **Duncan**: “I try to really make sure that the process for place-based learning…[is] rigorous and there…[is] an assessment component.”

**Collaboration.** Participants described the role of collaboration in supporting the implementation of place-based learning. Brief examples are below:

• **Edmond**: “I really believe in building teams of highly qualified teachers to make those decision that help guide the school.”
Lexie: “I’m not a big top down person. I really engage…my staff to be a collaborative staff; to share the decision making…I think each one of them is an incredible professional.”

Duncan: When talking about how a project was successfully implemented, Duncan stated, “We worked together as a team. We have a very tight-knit group here at our school. We just facilitated conversations with people that were in the community and we all had different connections.”

Transformational leadership. Participants explained engaging in transformational leadership as they cultivate and maintain support for the implementation of place-based learning. A few brief examples are below:

Lexie: “I think the biggest thing that I can do is to get people to see beyond what their previous experience might have been and to help them see realistic opportunities.”

Katrina: Katrina described her experience transforming a school. She shared how she encouraged the staff to embrace place-based learning and the benefits that were derived from the change.

Katrina: “Our school has a reputation for not being the best, and it’s changed. It’s changed a lot…I’m getting people back. I’m getting kids back.”

Martin: “I think part of my role is helping people that can’t do the job well to gracefully exit and then finding people who can do the job well and that fit the beliefs of my school.”
Benton: “There was a saying when I arrived at the high school that said, what do you expect…this is Stoneybrook…I said we’re gonna use that same saying but it’s gonna take on a new meaning…It’s gonna mean something good.”

Establishment of connections. Participants described establishing community connections as a way to support the implementation of place-based learning. Brief examples are below:

- Edmond: My role in facilitating place-based learning as the principal is “building those relationships with community members that have something to offer…and those have to be…maintained.”
- Lexie: “My first years here were spent on reaching out and getting to know as many different people in the town as possible.”
- Lexie: “Creating the network of support and then access that network to support the work the teachers want to do.”
- Katrina: “When I first got there [a new school], I went to the sheriff, I went to the library, and I went to…the rotary. I went [and] I introduced myself. And said, here I am; I’m the new principal, how can we be part of this community?”

Building relationships. Participants stressed the importance of building relationships as a method to support the implementation of place-based learning. A few brief examples are below.
• **Edmond:** “My first...instinct is to build really warm, supportive relationships around people [teachers] to recognize what their talents and skills are, and give them lots of opportunities to use that, and help them grow in areas where they might need some support.”

• **Lexie:** “Anything that you’re going to do in education or anywhere else depends on healthy, trusting relationships.”

• **Benton:** “It’s about relationships...when I went to the county fair, I just didn’t sit...I got out there and I talked to the kids...and the parents saw that.”

• **Benton:** “Letting people know it’s okay to take risks.” Telling teachers, “Listen, I trust you here. This is your wheelhouse.”

**An engrained part of the culture.** Participants explained the support for implementing place-based learning is promoted, as it becomes an integral part of the school culture. They described examples of place-based learning projects that are continued year after year, as well as strategies they employ to cultivate a commitment to place-based learning. A few brief examples are below:

• **Edmond:** Place-based learning “is a long term commitment; it has to be something that grows and grows, and responds, and changes.”

• **Edmond:** “There’s a strong commitment to...place-based learning...it's so deeply entrenched, people don’t even know they’re doing it.”

• **Lexie:** “Our kids participate in the local farmers market on Thursday’s with stuff that they’ve grown...or recipes they’ve baked.”
• **Duncan:** “I try to support the... amazing work that the teachers are doing with their community partners... I value the... energy and the work that the staff put into this building.”

• **Martin:** “I remember... the first fall I was there, one of the teachers was studying monarch butterflies and just outside our building we have a whole bank of milkweed... I went in her room and she was reading books about monarch butterflies... And I said to her, ‘Do you go outside? Do you mark a plot off and look for the number of monarchs and maybe do something with that?’ And she said, ‘No, we used to do that...’ So I think part of my role was trying to breathe some life back into my staff.”

• **Martin:** “I think part of my role is... finding people who can do the job well and that fit the beliefs of my school and then maintaining those people.”

**Teacher Empowerment to Embrace Place-Based Learning**

**Provision of professional learning opportunities.** The participants, as it relates to the implementation of place-based learning, shared the role of professional learning. Below are a few brief examples:

• **Louisa:** When discussing a recent project, Louisa stated, “The beauty that becomes an outgrowth is how others saw that they could incorporate it [the bread oven] within the class structure that they were learning... developing the depth of teacher knowledge.”

• **Lexie:** Lexie explained that she and two colleagues (a classroom teacher and the afterschool program coordinator) spent a day attending
professional development connected to a grant they had written. The grant provides an on-site coach to help the school develop a farm-to-school program.

- **Katrina:** “I send them [the teachers] journal articles. I provide books for group book studies…I offer any professional development that they’re interested in.”

- **Martin:** “I see my school as a big professional learning community and I am no more important than anyone else…I learn from them and then when I’m doing something and I see information, I’ll bring it to them.”

- **Duncan:** Duncan shared his school joined an organization dedicated to the implementation of place-based learning. The organization “provides professional development and professional assistance to create…projects and really engage the community.”

**Enablement via removal of obstacles.** Participants expressed that the removal of obstacles is their responsibility as they support the implementation of place-based learning. A few brief examples are below:

- **Edmond:** “You have to have community agencies that you pull in, who help break down those barriers” because “teachers are overwhelmed with the expectations of the job.”

- **Edmond:** “I find really good people who can do it [implement place-based learning] and…I clear things out of the way so they can do it.”
• **Louisa**: When asked about her role in facilitating PBL, Louisa stated, “It’s not only [being] the cheerleader of the group, but making sure that folks had donated the supplies.”

• **Martin**: Martin shared how he acts as a “buffer” between his superintendent and staff; protecting them from as many new initiatives as possible.

• **Benton**: My role “was providing the resources and connecting people with the assets that they needed to make it successful.”

• **Duncan**: When asked how he supports teachers as they implement place-based learning, Duncan shared, “Removing any obstacles that might be in its place…any operational issue.”

**Principals’ Introduction to Place-Based Learning**

**Instinctual.** Six of the seven participants described implementing place-based learning prior to being formally introduced to the approach. Martin is the only participant that did not describe implementing place-based learning prior to being formally introduced. He shared his first introduction to PBL was through a teaching position in a school embracing the approach. The responses from the other participants are briefly shared below:

• **Duncan**: “I think place-based learning was something I always did and I didn’t really know what it was called….I always found it to be more relevant and more….engaging for kids.”
• **Edmond**: “I used it a lot in my early childhood classrooms before I knew what it was.”

• **Katrina**: “I learned about it in…ninth grade…because I had a science teacher who” implemented place-based learning.

• **Benton**: “The first year I taught…I was using some place-based strategies.”

• **Lexie**: “I think it was what I did just instinctually when I was a classroom teacher---using my classroom, using my school.”

• **Louisa**: “We didn’t know it was called that [place-based learning] a long time ago…We were doing a lot of that in my former district when…I taught middle school science, health, and PE. I created simulations. I didn’t realize those were called simulations and then they actually became more purposeful in using the actual setting…kids were more engaged in their actual content area because they saw the value.”
Chapter 5: Summary, Outcomes, and Implications

A summary of the research and a brief review of the content of chapters one through four is presented in this chapter. The intersections between the research discussed in the literature review and the findings of this study are also explicated. To conclude, this chapter shares implications for the field, recommendations for the field, and recommendations for future research.

Summary

The purpose of this study has been to add to the research base behind place-based learning. Specially, this study has helped to fill a gap in the literature – the role of public school principals in supporting the implementation of place-based learning. Data was gathered via semi-structured interviews with current or former public school principals of schools implementing place-based learning until data saturation was reached.

In chapter one, the purpose of the study was made explicit. Currently, there is a strong literature base indicating the benefits of implementing place-based learning including increased student engagement and achievement. However, the role of leaders in supporting teachers as they engage in the approach has not been given significant attention in the research at this time. The quote by John Maxwell and Lee Roberson, “Everything rises and falls on leadership” was used to indicate the importance of leadership in the implementation of place-based learning (Borek, Lovett, & Towns, p. 5, 2005). The theoretical lens, research questions, definition of terms, limitations, and
delimitations were also shared in chapter one. The researcher used this chapter to illuminate the “So what?” factor of this study.

The literature base behind place-based learning, as well as, the relevant components of traditional organizational and leadership theory were thoroughly explicated in chapter two. The chapter began with a detailed description of place-based learning, its connections to the past, and its rationale. Then relevant aspects of traditional organization theory – culture, climate, professional school structure, and enabling school structure – were shared. Next the applicable aspects of traditional leadership theory – transformational, instructional, and servant leadership – were shared. Throughout the discussion of organizational and leadership theory, the researcher clearly applied and connected the salient components of place-based learning.

Chapter three focused on the methodology of the study. It began with an explanation of why the researcher selected a qualitative approach, which was followed by a restating of the purpose of the research – to uncover approaches public school principals use to support their teachers in the implementation of place-based learning. The role of the researcher was explored. Criteria surrounding the trustworthiness of the study was shared. Lastly, chapter three explained the data collection and analysis processes selected by the researcher.

The organization, analysis, and synthesis of the collected data were explained in chapter four. The themes and patterns that were prevalent through the coding process were discussed. The researcher of this study and the
triangulating analyst agreed that the patterns and themes identified were common amongst the participants of the study. Additionally, the triangulating analyst approved the patterns and themes as properly identified and explained. The primary themes and patterns were the utilization of servant leadership, instructional leadership, collaboration, transformational leadership, the establishment of connections, building of relationships, establishing place-based learning as an integral component of the schools’ culture, provision of professional learning opportunities, removal of obstacles, and instinctual. The data collected was summarized based upon guiding questions, then synthesized via common themes and patterns. The findings from the data analysis are summarized below.

The findings indicated that public school principals whose schools implement place-based learning utilize transformational, servant, and instructional leadership. They foster a collaborative atmosphere. These leaders actively cultivate connections and relationships. They ensure place-based learning is an engrained part of the school culture. They provide their staff with the needed professional learning opportunities to support their work. They actively work to remove obstacles from the implementation of place-based learning. The principals, also, find place-based learning to be a natural way to approach teaching and learning.
Outcomes

The connections from the literature review and findings from this study are shared below. Specifically, the intersections between traditional organizational and leadership theory and the findings of the study are highlighted. A comparison between the themes and patterns that emerged while analyzing the data and literature is explicated.

Leadership Approaches Utilized to Support Implementation

Servant leadership. The theme of servant leadership emerged during the data analysis. In fact, some of the participants clearly described themselves as servant leaders. Servant leaders, as described in chapter two, are focused on serving others (Ebener, 2011; Greenleaf, 1970; Greenleaf, 2002; Matthew 23:11-12; Mark 9:35; Mark 10:43-45; Smith, 2005). The participants explained serving their staff through a variety of venues, including but not limited to ensuring they had the needed supplies, providing the needed financial resources, and helping to set up for the demonstration of student learning through various community events.

Instructional leadership. Instructional leadership was a theme that emerged during data analysis. This approach to leadership was highlighted in chapter two. Many of the participants in the study described acting as a resource for their teachers. For example, they helped them to consider how to strongly connect place-based projects with state-mandated content standards.
The role of the instructional leader in facilitating adult learning was shared in chapter two. Examples of such facilitation included collaboration, peer coaching, and professional dialog. The participants of this study described engaging their staff in such professional learning.

**Collaboration.** Collaboration emerged as a pattern during data analysis. It was considered in the literature review but not as an independent topic. It was embedded in the literature surrounding a professional school structure and an enabling school structure.

Collaboration is fostered within a professional school structure. It was conjectured in chapter two that a school implementing place-based learning would have a professional school structure, which would enable the teachers to approach learning in a non-standardized method. The data analysis confirmed this conjecture.

Collaboration is also fostered within an enabling school structure. The participants of the study often shared how collaborative efforts between the school and outside entities, including museums, privately owned farms, skilled community members, and other organizations make place-based learning initiatives successful.

**Transformational leadership.** A common thread amongst the participants was their utilization of transformational leadership to ensure stakeholders hold a common vision that embraces the implementation of place-based learning. Transformational leadership, as shared in chapter two, relies on
the leader’s ability to cultivate a commitment to a new vision. The participants described helping stakeholders understand the value of place-based learning, as well as, being willing to help them see beyond themselves and comprehend the benefits of place-based learning.

**Establishment of connections.** Another theme that emerged during data analysis was the establishment of connections. The participants described making connections with local stakeholders, community organizations, and organizations that support the implementation of place-based learning. Their willingness to intentionally make such connections intersected with a theme previously shared – servant leadership. The participants indicated they were willing to make the effort to connect with needed stakeholders on behalf of their students and staff.

The establishment of connections within the community also intersected with the general literature base behind place-based learning. To successfully engage in a place-based learning project, connections must be made with the larger community life experienced by students outside of school. In chapter 2, it was discussed how place-based learning is grounded in the past. The connections to the work of John Dewey were made explicit; specifically, the idea that life experiences and student learning are linked (Dewey, 1897; Dewey, 1997). The connections made by teachers between the students’ school and community life through the implementation of place-based learning directly relates to the educational beliefs held by John Dewey. For example, the insect
project described by Martin relied upon the involvement of a local expert as a resource and the local community as a research lab. The students connected their school life and community life as they helped their neighbors learn how to distinguish between beneficial and non-beneficial insects, and how to appropriately deal with both types of insects.

**Building relationships.** Building relationships emerged as a theme during data analysis. The literature review addressed this, though, not independently. The building of relationships was discussed in the section on school climate.

In chapter two, it was suggested that a school embracing place-based learning would have an open climate. It was shared that authentic relationships amongst stakeholders are an indicator of an open climate within a school. Many of the participants described fostering quality relationships with their students, staff, and larger community.

**An engrained part of the culture.** Place-based learning as an engrained part of the school culture emerged as a theme during data analysis. This intersected with the literature on transformational leadership and school culture.

Transformational leaders, as previously mentioned, strive to unite all stakeholders around a common vision. The leaders in this study shared working to connect all stakeholders through a common vision supportive of place-based learning.
Additionally, school culture literature shares all schools have a unique culture (Hoy, 1990; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Kilmann, Saxton, & Serpa, 1985, Schein, 2004; Sergiovanni, 1984; Sergiovanni, 2006). This unique identity is nurtured through shared beliefs including but not limited to common beliefs about the teaching and learning process. The data revealed commitment was cultivated for the implementation of place-based learning by the principals.

**Teacher Empowerment to Embrace Place-Based Learning**

**Provision of professional learning opportunities.** The provision of professional learning opportunities was a theme that emerged during data analysis. Though it was not separately addressed in the literature review, the provision of professional learning opportunities was discussed in the literature surrounding school culture. It was conjectured in chapter two that a school implementing place-based learning would exhibit a learning culture; the adults would model being lifelong learners and understand the benefits of engaging in professional learning. The data revealed the participants engage in professional learning for themselves and provide it for their staff. For example, participants described helping teachers find coaches to support them as they engage in specific place-based projects.

**Enablement via removal of obstacles.** Staff enablement via the removal of obstacles emerged as a theme during data analysis. Again, this was not independently described in chapter two. However, it intersected with the underpinnings of servant leadership. The participants described removing
barriers to the implementation of place-based learning for their teachers. For example, they make the needed phone calls to connect with the identified community partners for specific projects when the teachers did not have the time or protecting them from outside pressures that would not enhance their work with students.

**Principals’ Introduction to Place-Based Learning**

*Instinctual.* Instinctual was a powerful theme that emerged during data analysis. As previously shared, most of the participants described instinctually utilizing place-based learning prior to being formally introduced to the approach. Each participant described educational beliefs that embrace constructivist pedagogy. Place-based learning is a constructivist approach to teaching and learning that utilizes the students’ immediate surroundings as an authentic tool for engagement in and application of learning. The findings reflected that the participants’ personal beliefs about education greatly impact their support for place-based learning.

**Implications for the Field**

Educators in leadership roles interested in implementing place-based learning within their schools can utilize the findings of this study to support their work. The findings can be used to make informed decisions about factors related to leadership that need to be present to successfully implement the approach. It is unlikely that a principal whose educational beliefs align more with the behaviorist approach to teaching and learning will support the implementation of
place-based learning. All of the participants of this study explained embracing constructivism as part of their philosophy of education. Principals who are not willing to serve their teachers are apt to hinder utilization of the approach. The findings of this study indicated that principals supportive of place-based learning are willing to embrace a servant leadership style. Additionally, principals who are interested in supporting the implementation of place-based learning within their schools should consider how to intentionally shape the culture of their school to embrace the core components of the approach.

**Recommendations for the Field**

The researcher reflected upon the findings of this study to formulate recommendations for the field related to the implementation of place-based learning. The recommendations are separated by stakeholder groups. The groups are teachers, principals, and community partners.

**For teachers.** Though this study did not focus on teachers, the data collected indicated teachers must consider certain factors if they desire to implement place-based learning. Teachers who desire to utilize place-based learning in their classrooms must contemplate if the principal of the school will support the approach. For example, do the principal’s educational beliefs align with the core components of place-based learning? Teachers should also consider the level of instructional leadership available to support the design of place-based projects congruent to state-mandated content standards. Teachers should also reflect upon the availability of professional learning opportunities
(conferences, organizations promoting the approach, available grants, job-embedded professional development, etc.) related to place-based learning.

**For principals.** The focus of this study was on the approaches principals use to support teachers implementing place-based learning. The findings indicated leaders who support place-based learning have a philosophy of education that aligns with the core components of the approach – active engagement, authentic learning tasks, etc. They utilize servant, instructional, and transformational leadership styles to support their teachers. They diligently work to shape the culture of their school to include a commitment to place-based learning. Leaders who support the implementation of place-based learning also work to develop relationships and connections with all stakeholders. They collaborate with stakeholders in a variety of ways. They provide professional learning opportunities for their staff and work to remove obstacles from the implementation of place-based learning. Therefore, if leaders wish to support teachers in the implementation of place-based learning, they should attempt to embrace these leadership approaches.

**For community partners.** Though this study did not focus on community partners (parents, community members, business owners, and other community partners), the data collected suggested they play an important role in the implementation of place-based learning. This group of stakeholders must be willing to invest time, money, and energy into the local schools. They are needed to implement projects connected to the community. For example, in the geo-
cache project described by Duncan, students interviewed community partners to complete the project. Additionally, the participants of this study discussed the need to connect with community partners to open communications between the school and community and to brainstorm ways the school and community could work together to benefit the students. Without involvement from community partners, schools will likely have limited success in implementing place-based learning.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Throughout this study, the researcher noted interesting ideas for future research related to place-based learning. Thoughts were generated from statements made by participants, questions that arose during interviews, and general wonderings on behalf of the researcher. Some ideas relate to further study of the role of principals in facilitating place-based learning. Other ideas are more general in nature.

Benefits for the field would likely be derived from additional research into the approaches public school principals use to support teachers in the implementation of place-based learning. A replication of this case study with principals serving urban schools implementing place-based learning would add valuable insight into the approaches used by principals to support teachers implementing the approach. A study comparing the approaches used by principals serving rural or urban schools might highlight similarities and differences of approaches used based upon the settings.
Qualitative research that includes observation, document analysis, and interview data from teachers about their perceptions of how their principals support them as they implement place-based learning would benefit the field. It would provide additional insight into how the principals are supporting their teachers.

Valuable information would be gained from research into community perceptions of schools implementing place-based learning. For example, conducting a study concerning the perceptions of community members of the school’s success. Research designed to uncover changes in community participation (changes in budget support, volunteerism in the school, etc.) within the school since the use of place-based learning would also be beneficial.

Additionally, the field would benefit from investigating the impact on the implementation of place-based learning when a principal transfers away from the school. It would also be interesting to research the impact a new principal who supports place-based learning has on a school that has never implemented the approach.

During interviews, many of the participants indicated they instinctually implemented place-based learning prior to being formally introduced to the term. They naturally integrated “place” into the curriculum. Research into the backgrounds of principals serving schools implementing the approach might uncover interesting findings.
Final Thoughts

Place-based learning is an educational approach that engages students in the learning required by state-mandated standards in a meaningful way. It connects to the ideas of educational leaders such as John Amos Comenius, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget. An involved citizenry, increased student achievement, and improved student engagement are all potential benefits derived from implementing the approach. Educational leaders who are interested in leveraging the potential benefits of the approach by supporting their teachers as they implement place-based learning should consider if they can utilize the leadership approaches this study indicated needs to be present. The participants of this study clearly revealed that a willingness to serve, provide instructional leadership, collaborate, make community connections, build relationships, shape the school culture, facilitate professional learning, and remove obstacles are needed to support the implementation of place-based learning. Therefore, educational leaders interested in beginning this journey need to engage in self-reflection and ensure they are willing to accept the challenge.
References


Dewey, J. (1900). The School and Society (Rev. ed.). Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press. Retrieved from https://books.google.com/books?id=GWYWAAAAIAAJ&pg=PA68-IA1&lpg=PA68-IA1&dq=From+the+standpoint+of+the+child,+the+great+and+waste+in+the+school+comes+from+his+inability+to+utilize+the+experiences+he+gets+outside+the+school+in+any+complete+and+free+way+within+the+school+itself;+while+on+the+other+hand,+he+is+unable+to+apply+in+daily+life+what+he+is+learning+at+school.&source=bl&ots=4nit-iQnfK&sig=0fbptpJLz_EVBzGRvBNtC0Pk26M&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CB8Q6AEwAGoVChMlgZnGwtjxxwIVwol-Ch0s1A1k#v=onepage&q&f=false


Appendix A: IRB Approval

A determination has been made that the following research study meets the criteria for exemption under the following category(-ies):

Project Title: Leading in Place: A Case Study of the Role of Elementary Principals in Facilitating Place-Based Learning

Primary Investigator: Shannon Desiree Hankins

Co-Investigator(s):

Advisor: Krisanna Machtimes

Department: Educational Studies

Office of Research Compliance Staff
Rebecca Calo, AAB, CIP
Robin Stack, CIP
Shelly Rex, BS

Date: June 1, 2015

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your approved application. Any additions or modifications to the project must be reviewed and approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.

IRB approval does not supersede other regulatory requirements, such as HIPAA, FERPA, PPRA, etc.

Adverse events/unanticipated problems must be reported to the IRB promptly.
Appendix B: Statement of Informed Consent

Ohio University Adult Consent Form Without Signature

Title of Research: Leading in place: A case study of the role of public school principals in facilitating place-based learning

Researcher: Shannon Hankins

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to participate in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study
This study is being done in partial fulfillment of the doctoral degree in Educational Administration.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview with the researcher.

You should not participate in this study if have not acted as a leader in a school implementing place-based learning.

Your participation in the study will last approximately 1.5 hours.

Risks and Discomforts
No risks or discomforts are anticipated.

Benefits
This study is important to science/society because it has the potential to increase the level of knowledge of strategies utilized by public schools principals/leaders as they support place-based learning within their schools.

Individually, you may benefit through networking and exchanging of information.
Confidentiality and Records
Your study information will be kept confidential by the use of a password-protected computer.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:
* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU

Compensation
No compensation will be provided.

Contact Information
If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the investigator (Shannon Hankins, sp279800@ohio.edu, 606-836-0794) or the advisor (Dr. Krisanna Machtmes, mactmes@ohio.edu; 740-597-1323).

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Chris Hayhow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664 or hayhow@ohio.edu.

By agreeing to participate in this study, you are agreeing that:
- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered;
- you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction;
- you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study;
- you are 18 years of age or older;
- your participation in this research is completely voluntary;
- you may leave the study at any time; if you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Version Date: May 29, 2015
Appendix C: Interview Guide

General Questions:

1. Tell me about yourself.

2. How many years have you been in education as a teacher? As a principal/leader?

3. How many years have you been in this current leadership position?

4. How many years have you been a principal/leader? How many years have you been or were a principal/leader in this school*?

5. What is your philosophy of education?

6. How many years have you been or were you a part of the community you now or did serve as principal/leader?

7. What does the community in which your school* is/was located mean to you personally?

Place-Based Learning Questions:

8. How did you first learn about place-based learning?

9. Have you continued to engage in professional learning related to place-based learning? If so, tell me about how you have continued your professional learning about place-based learning. Have you shared this learning with your staff/colleagues? If yes, what did you share about place-based learning? Also, why did you share?

10. How would you explain place-based learning to a colleague?

11. Did you use place-based learning when you were a teacher or before becoming a leader? If so, please tell me about your experiences implementing place-based learning as a teacher or prior to becoming a leader.

12. What project(s) did you do where you implemented place-based learning?

13. Please share with me several examples of place-based learning projects your teachers and students have engaged in.
14. What has been the most meaningful project to you? Tell me about it? How did it start? What was your role?

15. Explain to me the benefits (learning and/or community based) you observe/observed within your school* for teachers and students participating in place-based learning?

**Organizational Questions:**

16. Tell me how your staff/colleagues who implement(ed) place-based learning use or used guest speakers.

17. Tell me how your staff/colleagues who implement(ed) use or used field trips/site visits.

18. Tell me about the core beliefs embraced by your school*.

19. Tell me about the culture of your school*. Explain your role in establishing and maintaining the culture.

20. Explain to me the role your teachers/colleagues play in the learning process.

21. Explain to me the role your students play in the learning process.

22. How do you balance the pressures from the outside (mandates of curriculum, testing, etc.) with the need to protect your teachers/colleagues and students so they can implement this place-based learning approach?

23. How are instructional decisions made within your school**? How are problems solved?

24. How do you facilitate communication? With students? With teachers? With parents? With the community? With other stakeholders (anyone else who has a stake in your school*)?

**Leadership Questions:**

25. How would you describe yourself as a leader?

26. Explain how you intentionally support your teachers/colleagues in implementing place-based learning?
27. How have you demonstrated your support for this place-based learning approach to teaching and learning within the larger community? To the school board? To parents? To other principals/leaders within your school district?

28. How do you support the academic success of your students?

*the school where place-based learning was implemented