THE TRANSITION EXPERIENCE:
THE FIRST 100 DAYS OF THE MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALSHIP

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THE TRANSITION EXPERIENCE: THE FIRST 100 DAYS OF THE MIDDLE
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Incorporating the concept of *the first 100 days*, referenced mainly when discussing government and business leaders, this study aimed to understand the transition experience of middle school principals, during their first 100 days, in public schools in Ohio who have led their current schools to improvement. Research centered on the experiences of these principals, actions implemented by these principals, external and internal circumstances and individuals that influenced those actions, their perceptions of how those actions influenced their schools' future improvement, and the perceptions of the principals regarding effective transitions.

Participants for the study were 10 middle school principals who had been in their current position for less than four full years and whose schools had shown improvement on the state report card based on an increased designation during their leadership. The study was informed by grounded theory methodology regarding data collection and analysis, in order to develop a framework of the transition into the middle school principalship that was grounded in the data.

The data revealed a *transformation process*: positioning self *into* the new principal role, establishing self *in* the new principal role, and transforming self from the *new* principal to *the* principal. Within each phase of the transformation process, these

principals' experiences included their *transformation focus*, as they reflected on and

attended to themselves, others, and the middle school.

This transition framework may prove useful in informing practice and policy

regarding leadership transitions for current and future middle school principals, as well as

schools, districts, and administrative organizations.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The transition period into a leadership position is an opportunity to make a positive impression on the organization while setting the tone for the remainder of one's tenure. It is the time when a leader learns about, makes decisions about, and performs actions that influence the organization's employees, customers, culture, and vision for the future. Unfortunately, this transition period also comes with increased risks for leaders and the organizations in which they serve. An alarming statistic, for new leaders as well as organizations, is that "around 40% of new senior executives fail" during the early part of their leadership role (Davis, 2006, p. 2). For organizations (and those served by organizations), Adams (2004), warned that the increased number of leadership transitions and the negative outcomes associated with leadership transitions often result in high costs for the organization. These ideas suggest that the transition into a leadership position is a critical time, requiring a significant plan, for the leader as well as the organization.

Often, leadership transitions are defined as the first 100 days of the position, especially in reference to presidential transitions and CEO transitions. Presidential historian Richard Norton Smith explained that the concept of the first 100 days began in 1933 with the presidential transition of Franklin Roosevelt, due to the "great wave of reform" he implemented that helped transform the nation's "psychological mood" (Winslow, 2001, para 5). Incorporating this time frame into their leadership study, Neff and Citrin (2005) reported on research of over 100 leadership transitions, mainly CEOs working in a variety of organizations, seeking to discover what those leaders did during

their first 100 days in their position. From the study, the authors developed a leadership transition framework based on themes uncovered in their research that highlighted key actions, communications, thoughts, and decisions that leaders implemented during their leadership transitions. In addition to the study by Neff and Citrin (2005), other studies also sought to create such frameworks depicting the transitions of business leaders (Bradt, Check, & Pedraza, 2006; Ciampa & Watkins, 1999; Watkins, 2003).

What does this transition time frame—the first 100 days—look like in educational settings? While our nation's schools share many similarities to corporate structures, they also possess unique characteristics that may influence the type of leaders they require, the responsibilities of those leaders, and the transitional actions of their leaders. Complementing the aforementioned studies of leadership transitions, studies specific to building-level leadership in education highlighted the distinctive responsibilities of the principalship especially pertaining to instructional leadership and student outcomes (Chirichello, 2004; St. Germain & Quinn, 2005; Reeves & Burt, 2006; Zepeda, 2004), and some focused on the initial transition into the principalship, an individual's first experience in a leadership role (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006; Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Hobson et al., 2003; McDonald, 2006; Talbot, 2000; Weindling, 2004). The study by Hobson et al., for the National College for School Leadership, cautioned that if beginning school principals are not provided with intensive support through their transition to help them manage educational issues and problems, "then their ability to facilitate school improvement and to contribute to raising standards will be impaired" (2003, p. 1).

Within the educational system, middle schools are even more unique, given the social, emotional, and academic needs of the young adolescents whom they serve. While theories and studies on middle school characteristics and middle school leaders have been published (Erb, 2001; Israel & Kasper, 2004; Zepeda & Mayers, 2002), research specific to the transition into the middle school principalship is lacking. The issue at hand is to determine how school leaders (more specifically, middle school principals) can transition effectively into their leadership positions, in order to provide the best possible education for our students.

Transition Terminology

One common term used in discussion of the transition period is *induction*. Often in reference to the transition of teachers into their first jobs, induction encompasses the multiple layers of "support, guidance, and orientation programs" (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004, p. 28) that "[seek] to support … entry into their new organization and enable them to become … productive and longstanding [members]" of that organization (Staniforth & Harland, 2006, p. 186). Stirzaker (2004) offered that induction does not relate solely to new teachers; rather, "anyone taking up a new post (i.e., even a promotion within the same school) needs time to adjust to an unfamiliar context, and that this necessary process of redefining their expertise to be more appropriate to their new situation could be assisted with a properly planned" induction program (p. 32). The induction process, per Stirzaker, is a process of several months aimed to "hasten and ease the transition by providing assistance" (p. 33). The components of induction programs often include "classes, workshops, orientations, seminars, and especially mentoring" and are designed

to serve as a bridge from pre-service training to the ongoing experiences of the new

position (Ingersoll & Smith, p. 29).

Another term used to describe the transition period for a new employee, or new

leader, is *socialization*. Crow (2007) defined socialization simply as "the process of

learning a new role" (p. 52). Greenfield (1985) discussed 2 types of socialization,

technical and moral, which Crow referred to as professional and organizational.

Professional socialization describes the "knowledge, skills and values that an individual

will need to carry out the headship regardless of the school," while *organizational*

socialization "focuses on the specific context where the role is being performed" (Crow,

p. 52). Further, organizational socialization "emphasizes 'how things are done here' and

includes the particular values, norms and requirements of the school where the individual

becomes a [principal]" (Crow, p. 52).

Framework for This Study

Crow (2007) suggested that, today, socialization occurs in a "more complex

environment" than ever before in that "new [principals] learn and perform their jobs in a

context of school reform" (p. 66). Admitting that school reform is not a new concept,

Crow argued that the unique characteristics of today's educational reform are: the "type"

(a "focus on learning for all students"), the "visibility", and the "high stakes nature" of

the reform efforts (p. 66). These challenging factors mean that principals today must

focus on student learning within an era of testing, standards, accountability, and

heightened public awareness. Concluding with a challenge for further research, Crow

stated, "In the process of understanding and implementing reforms that contribute to the

learning of all students … the conversation about socializing new leaders of these schools needs national and local attention. This conversation can be enriched with … thoughtful research that describes new leaders' experiences and assesses the effectiveness of their socialization" (p. 69).

To study this issue, I proposed to learn about the transition period, the first 100 days, from middle school principals who have recently transitioned into their current position, within the past four full school years. Further, I proposed to learn from principals whose schools have improved in the years under their leadership. To clarify, I do not presume that a school leader can improve his/her school within those first 100 days; however, these principals may have initiated the improvement process, or began preparing for the improvement process, during those first 100 days, depending on the academic state of the schools when they began their roles, the type of school districts within which they were hired, or other external or internal factors. For these reasons, I proposed to learn about the transition period from principals whose schools have improved over the course of their leadership tenure, to determine what they did during those first 100 days, what factors influenced their actions, their perceptions of how those actions prepared the foundation for future reform (school improvement), and their perceptions of effective transitions. In the sections that follow, I discuss one state's approach to supporting leadership transitions and its focus on measuring leadership effectiveness and school improvement.

Ohio's Focus on Leadership Transitions and Improvement/Effectiveness

Weindling's (2004) report on school leadership induction, which he stated is the least supported of the phases of school leadership, highlighted various states' and countries' induction approaches throughout the world, including the two-tiered administrative licensure program in the state of Ohio. Further review of Ohio's programming found that the transition into the principalship, at all levels, is addressed, supported, and measured through two program areas: Ohio's administrative licensure program, which is related to *leadership transitions* (more specifically*, the induction of beginning principals*), and Ohio's academic standards and reporting programs, which are related to *school improvement* and the *effectiveness of leaders and schools*. Through these programs, it is made apparent that school leaders in Ohio are responsible for and are expected to improve student achievement.

Leadership Transitions

The transition period for beginning educational leaders is a primary focus of the state of Ohio's administrative licensure program. Acknowledging that principals are instructional leaders whose primary role is ensuring student success, Ohio revised its licensure system for administrators to include the Ohio Entry Year Principal Program, which originated in 2002 and was redesigned in 2007. Participants in this program, Entry Year Principals (EYPs), are "principals or assistant principals who hold two-year provisional principal licenses and are employed full time in the same assignment in their area of licensure for a minimum of 120 school days in an academic year" (Ohio Department of Education [ODE], 2007a). Upon successful completion of the program,

administrators are eligible to apply for a five-year professional administrative license (ODE, 2007a).

ODE (2007a) identified four anticipated outcomes for the Entry Year Program: 1) encourage new principals to remain in the profession, 2) provide standards-based professional development that allows administrators reflection and improvement opportunities, 3) enhance new principals' knowledge of "theory, research, and models of effective practice" based on the state standards, and 4) affect change at the local and state level that supports administrative learning and performance of the standards. In accord with these outcomes, the overall purpose of the Entry Year Program is to "promote the successful transition of the entry year principal from provisional to professional standing by empowering the educator to function as an instructional leader" (p. 14).

To meet these goals, the program is two years in length, beginning in the fall of the first year of eligibility and ending in the spring of the second year, and it consists of two components: induction and mentoring (ODE, 2007a). The induction component includes face-to-face institutes, a legal seminar, an observation/evaluation seminar, a professional conference (through the Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators [OASSA] or the Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators [OAESA]), online professional development, leadership feedback tools, and a performance assessment. The mentoring component includes a local formal mentor, assigned by the administrator's school district, for one-on-one collaboration as well as ongoing cohort meetings to communicate with other new administrators and their mentors.

A collaborative effort by ODE, OASSA, and OAESA, this Entry Year Program is aligned with the Ohio Standards for Principals: Continuous Improvement; Instruction; School Operations, Resources and Learning Environment; Collaboration; and Parents and Community Engagement (Ohio State Board of Education and ODE, 2005). These standards provide clear direction for principals as they focus on impacting student academic achievement and progress.

School Improvement and School and Leader Effectiveness

Collins (2005) clarified that organizations in the social sector, including schools, should not strive to be more like businesses, but that an organization, in any sector, should strive to be a "great organization…that delivers superior performance and makes a distinctive impact…relative to [their] mission" (p. 5). The "outputs of greatness" (Collins, 2005, p. 8) that schools measure themselves by is the academic achievement of the students they serve. The school leader, then, is ultimately responsible for student achievement and has the opportunity to influence and lead the school community toward this focus.

Arguing that talented leaders exist in all types of schools and communities (e.g., rural, urban, suburban, high socio-economic status, low socio-economic status, high-performing, low-performing), some may question if the school leader should be evaluated based on the students' performance. In response to that argument, as the instructional leader, it is the responsibility of the principal to focus on student learning in all aspects of his/her position (Wilmore, 2002). This responsibility and its effects on student learning were demonstrated in a study by Battelle for Kids (2006), in which principals in schools

of improvement were found to be implementing "intentional" reform efforts that were focused on "constructing coherency" within the school and that "managed the intersection of internal and external demands," while principals in schools with "negative turnarounds" displayed a lack of these intentional efforts (p. 4).

As part of Ohio's schools' overall focus on student learning (their mission), a comprehensive Report Card system has been developed to measure the effectiveness of each building and district in the state regarding student achievement and student progress (their "outputs of greatness"). Based on a variety of measures, this designation system is reported to the public in the form of a *report card*. The District Report Card, identifying the name of the superintendent, provides data related to the entire district, while the School Report Card, identifying the name of the school principal, provides data related to the school. This state reporting system publicly links the school leader to the performance of the school's students. In fact, when a school fails to meet certain requirements of the system, consequences may include replacing the principal and/or reorganizing the administrative structure of the building (ODE, 2008). This again affirms the state of Ohio's expectation that the building leader is the instructional leader, responsible for the education, achievement, and progress of the students of the school.

The Report Card system in Ohio includes the following elements: multiple measures (state indicators, performance index score, value-added data, and adequate yearly progress); multiple designations (Excellent with Distinction [new for the 2007-2008 school year], Excellent, Effective, Continuous Improvement, Academic Watch, and Academic Emergency); consequences for schools based on improvement or non-

improvement; and accountability for progress and achievement of various student groups

(ODE, 2008). Because this study is specific to building principals, the School Report

Card, hereafter referred to as the Report Card, will be referenced.

With the four measures used in this system, the evaluation of each school is

comprehensive and detailed, focusing on both student achievement and student progress.

The ODE (2008) *state indicators measure* refers to the statewide testing results (the Ohio

Achievement Test [OAT] in grades 3 through 8 and the Ohio Graduation Test [OGT] in

grades 10 and 11), the graduation rate, and the attendance rate. Only the state indicators

that pertain to that school are reported on the Report Card; therefore, for a middle school,

the number of state indicators would include some or all of the following, as listed in

Table 1, depending on the grade levels within that building.

Table 1

Possible Middle School State Indicators

Indicator	Goal
5th grade OAT reading	Meet or exceed 75% proficient or above
5th grade OAT mathematics	Meet or exceed 75% proficient or above
5th grade OAT science	Meet or exceed 75% proficient or above
5th grade OAT social studies	Meet or exceed 75% proficient or above
6th grade OAT reading	Meet or exceed 75% proficient or above
6th grade OAT mathematics	Meet or exceed 75% proficient or above
7th grade OAT reading	Meet or exceed 75% proficient or above
7th grade OAT mathematics	Meet or exceed 75% proficient or above
7th grade OAT writing	Meet or exceed 75% proficient or above
8th grade OAT reading	Meet or exceed 75% proficient or above
8th grade OAT mathematics	Meet or exceed 75% proficient or above
8th grade OAT science	Meet or exceed 75% proficient or above
8th grade OAT social studies	Meet or exceed 75% proficient or above
Attendance rate	Meet or exceed 93% attendance

While this information is useful, the state indicators measure provides feedback only on the number of students who scored at the proficient level or higher. To understand how the entire student population performed, the ODE (2008) *performance index measure* is used. With this measure, students' performance levels on the state tests are weighted and averaged. The possible performance levels students can earn on each statewide test and their weighted scores are: advanced (1.2), accelerated (1.1), proficient (1.0), basic (0.6), and limited (0.3). These weighted scores and the percentage of student scores at each performance level are multiplied to provide a school's performance index.

In addition to understanding how students performed on the statewide tests, it is also beneficial to note how each student performed in relationship to his/her own past performance. For this, the ODE (2008) *value-added measure* depicts how much, or if, a student has progressed over the past school year, even if the score itself falls below proficient level. Currently, this information is measured for grades 4 through 8 in reading and mathematics, as those are the only tests that are given at consecutive grade levels, thus providing a comparison score from the previous year (ODE, 2009). Beginning in 2006-2007, this data was reported; however, it was not a part of schools' designations until the 2007-2008 school year. This new measure provides the opportunity to quantify progress rather than just achievement. Again, this addresses the question of whether or not to evaluate a school leader, or even a school, based on student results on statewide tests: students can learn and show progress regardless if they are meeting a statewide standard of achievement or not.

Based on the progress of its students, a school earns one of the following composite value-added scores: a plus sign ("+") indicates that the school "has achieved more than one year of expected growth for [its] students over the past year", a checkmark sign ("✓") indicates achievement of one year of expected growth, or a minus sign ("–") indicates achievement of less than one year of expected growth (ODE, 2009, p. 3). Beginning in 2007-2008, two consecutive years of earning a "+" result in a school increasing its designation by one category. Due to the possibility of increasing a designation through the value-added measure, the "Excellent with Distinction" designation was created in 2007-2008; schools that earn the designation "Excellent" and also show two consecutive years of above-expected-growth are reported as having a designation of "Excellent with Distinction." Additionally, beginning in 2008-2009, three consecutive years of earning a "–" result in a school decreasing its designation by one category (ODE, 2009).

The final ODE (2008) measure, the *adequate yearly progress (AYP) measure*, required by federal law, assesses the attendance rate, graduation rate, and test participation of all students, and the reading and mathematics achievement of students within the following 10 subgroups: All Students; Native American; Hispanic; White, Non-Hispanic; Limited English Proficient; Black, Non-Hispanic; Asian/Pacific Islander; Multi-Racial; Economically Disadvantaged; and Students with Disabilities. To meet AYP, schools must meet or exceed the achievement percentage set by federal law, which increases each year based on a federal formula. Because this can be challenging for some schools and districts, there are 4 possible calculations to meet AYP per ODE (2008):

current-year results (meeting achievement percentages for each subgroup using the current year's scores); two-year combined results (meeting achievement percentages for each subgroup after averaging the current year's and previous year's scores), safe harbor (decreasing non-proficient student percentage by 10% or more in the given subgroup when compared to the previous year), and growth model (considering a student proficient for current year if, based on the value-added measure, he/she is projected to be proficient within two years).

Incorporating the performance within these four measures, the state of Ohio has developed criteria for each overall state designation. This designation, as a simple label, represents the in-depth statistics from the measures, providing the public with straightforward information about the effectiveness of the school. Table 2 illustrates the ODE (2008) formula, for 2007-2008, based on criteria from each measure, used to determine the state designation for schools and districts. Due to the timing of my study, the 2007-2008 formula is most relevant to include here because that school year's designations were a part of the research design. In addition, the 2007-2008 school year was the first year that the value-added score was a component of the school and district designation; prior to that year, value-added scores were not a part of the calculation. As mentioned previously, beginning in 2008-2009, an additional component was included regarding value-added, in that schools with 3 consecutive years of growth below that which was expected receive a decreased designation.

Table 2

Formula for State Designations for Schools and Districts, 2007-2008

					State designation with 2-year value-added score	
Indicators met	And /or	Performance measure	And /or	AYP status	≤1 year of "+"	2 years of "+"
94% - 100%	Or	100 to 120	And	Met or not met	Excellent	Excellent with distinction
75% - 93.9%	Or	90 to 99.9	And	Met or not met	Effective	Excellent
0% - 74.9%	Or	0 to 89.9	And	Met	Continuous improvement	Effective
50% - 74.9%	Or	80 to 89.9	And	Not met	Continuous improvement	Effective
31% - 49.9%	Or	70 to 79.9	And	Not met	Academic watch	Continuous improvement
0% - 30.9%	And	0 to 69.9	And	Not met	Academic emergency	Academic watch

With the significant detail in the state reporting system, the structure may seem cumbersome and confusing; it is this detail, however, that provides a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of a school, including school leader, school staff, and educational programs. By measuring and reporting not just proficiency levels on statewide tests, but also proficiency levels of subgroups and individual student improvement, each school has the opportunity to demonstrate how its students are performing through achievement and progress results. As the school leader, the principal is directly linked to the Report Card; it is his/her responsibility to ensure that the students are learning and to continuously improve upon the outcomes of the school as measured by the Report Card. It is the principal's name that heads the Report Card, and it is that principal who faces consequences if the school does not perform up to the state standards. Because of this, school principals must be aware of the state expectations, understand how they are measured, and have support through their transition and beyond in ensuring school effectiveness and improvement.

Research Goal

The goal for this study was to develop a transition framework based on the data that was collected from middle school principals regarding their transitions. Specific questions asked of the participants sought to determine their perceptions of their transitions, the actions implemented during their first 100 days, the factors (e.g., prior year's state designation, type of district) and individuals that influenced those actions, their perceptions of how those transitional actions influenced their schools' future

improvement, and suggestions for future middle school principals as well as buildings and districts in planning for transitions.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study, informed by grounded theory, was to understand the transition experience of middle school principals, during the first 100 days, in public schools in Ohio who have led their current schools to improvement.

Research Questions

The central questions and subquestions for my study were as follows:

1. What are the experiences of Ohio public middle school principals, in schools of improvement, during the first 100 days of the transition into their leadership position?

   a. What actions are implemented by these principals during the first 100 days of the transition into their leadership position?

   b. How do external and internal circumstances (e.g., prior year's state designation, type of school district) and individuals influence the transitional actions of these principals?

2. What perceptions are held by Ohio public middle school principals, in schools of improvement, regarding how their transitional actions influenced their schools' future improvement?

3. What perceptions are held by Ohio public middle school principals, in schools of improvement, regarding effective transitions into the middle school principalship?

Significance

The transition experiences of middle school principals who have led their schools to improvement provided data, organized into easily understandable and identifiable themes, which may serve as a transition framework to inform the practices of current and future middle school principals as they prepare for future transitions. Other individuals and groups that may find the study useful include school district central office administrators and school boards who are planning for transitions and providing support through transitions, middle school staff members, and even principals at other building levels. This transition framework may also be useful for principal organizations in supporting the transitions of future middle school principals, through both practice and policy. The study will also add to the body of research regarding middle level leadership transitions, and will hopefully fuel future research related to educational transitions.

CHAPTER II

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The underlying concept of my study, the transition into the middle school principalship, is situated within the larger concepts of the transition into a leadership position, the educational principalship, the transition into the principalship, and the middle school principalship. These larger concepts in literature and public discourse are abundant and continue to be researched in depth. Through this review of the literature, however, it was clear that little research had been conducted specific to middle school principals' transition experiences. Through this chapter, I plan to share with the reader a credible case for why my study was worthwhile and valuable, as well as how my study fits within the larger conceptual framework. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this relationship.

The Transition into a Leadership Position

A firm connection exists between leadership and organizational culture, as outlined by Schein (2010):

> What we end up calling a culture in…systems is usually the result of the embedding of what a founder or leader has imposed on a group that has worked out. In this sense, culture is ultimately created, embedded, evolved, and ultimately manipulated by leaders. At the same time, with group maturity, culture comes to constrain, stabilize, and provide structure and meaning to the group members even to the point of ultimately specifying what kind of leadership will be acceptable in the future (p. 3).

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Educational
Principalship

Transition into the
Principalship

Transition into
Leadership

Middle School
Principalship

My Study

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of this study: The relationship between the study and
the larger leadership, principalship, and transition discourses.

"When new leaders take over existing organizations, they find that the existing culture defines what kind of leadership style is expected and accepted, based on past history and the beliefs, values, and assumptions or earlier leaders" (Schein, 2009, p. 4). As part of the new leader's transition, in order to be an "accepted" and effective leader, careful consideration and thorough understanding of the existing organizational culture must occur. This understanding of the "cultural forces" is critical "not only because of their power but also because they help to explain many of our puzzling and frustrating experiences in social and organizational life" (Schein, 2010, p. 7). In addition, Schein (2010) cautioned, "The bottom line for leaders is that if they do not become conscious of the cultures in which they are embedded, those cultures will manage them" (p. 22). While new leaders appointed from within the organization will more easily "understand the culture well enough to know how to make [any] necessary changes," those appointed from the outside "may have the values and assumptions that are needed, but they almost always lack the cultural insight [initially] that would enable them to figure out how to implement [any] desired changes" (Schein, 2010, p. 280).

These critical issues point to a need for a "succession process" that incorporates a plan for understanding the organization's culture, takes the differences of internal and external leaders into account, and is "designed to enhance those parts of the culture that provide identity, distinctive competence, and protection from anxiety" (Schein, 2010, p. 281).

Organizational Culture

To deeply analyze and understand the culture of an organization, it is important to recognize what culture is. According to Schein (2010), culture has four main characteristics:

1. "Structural stability": Culture provides stability and a sense of group identity that "survives even when some members of the organization depart" (p. 16)

2. "Depth": The culture of a group "is the deepest, often unconscious part of a group and is therefore less tangible and less visible" (p. 16)

3. "Breadth": The organization's culture influences "all of a group's functioning" (p. 17)

4. "Patterning or Integration": "Culture implies that rituals, climate, values, and behaviors tie together into a coherent whole, and this pattern or integration is the essence of what we mean by 'culture'" (p. 17).

These characteristics were incorporated into Schein's formal definition of culture:

The culture of a group [is] defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (p. 18).

Stated another way, Schein offered a more informal definition of culture:

Culture ultimately reflects the group's effort to cope and learn; it is *the residue of that learning process* [emphasis added]. Culture thus not only fulfills the function of providing stability, meaning, and predictability in the present but also is the result of functionally effective decisions in the group's past (p. 91-92).

Once culture has been defined, to avoid "oversimplifying it," it is best to "realize that it exists at several 'levels,' and that we must understand and manage the deeper levels" (Schein, 2009, p. 21). These levels range from "very visible to the very tacit and invisible" (Schein, 2009, p. 21):

1. "Artifacts": When encountering an organization for the first time, all of the "visible and feelable structures and processes" as well as "observed behavior" are considered "artifacts" (Schein, 2010, p. 24).

2. "Espoused beliefs and values": These include the "ideals, goals, values, and aspirations" of the group (Schein, 2010, p. 24), which "often become embodied in an ideology or organizational philosophy" which is typically printed and vocalized to both insiders and outsiders (Schein, 2010, p. 27).

3. "Basic underlying assumptions": The "essence of culture" (Schein, 2010, p. 23), these are the "unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs and values…that determine behavior, perception, thought, and feeling" (Schein, 2010, p. 24).

Addressing these three levels, Schein (2010) delineated a plan for the analysis of an organization's culture:

In analyzing cultures, it is important to recognize that artifacts are easy to observe but difficult to decipher and that espoused beliefs and values may only reflect rationalizations or aspirations. To understand a group's culture, you must attempt to get at its shared basic assumptions and understand the learning process by which such basic assumptions evolve[d] (p. 32).

So, how does a new leader learn the culture of an organization, uncovering and understanding the basic assumptions that exist? As Schein (2010) explained, although "one of the major activities of any new member when she or he enters a new group is to decipher the operating norms and assumptions," these elements of culture may not be immediately apparent and may "not be revealed in the rules of behavior taught to newcomers" (p. 19). Because "culture is best revealed through interaction" (p. 179), Schein suggested trying to "understand the perceptions and feelings that arise in critical situations" as well as "observ[ing] and interview[ing] regular members or 'old timers' to get an accurate sense of the deeper-level assumptions that are shared" (p. 19). Maintaining a sense of inquiry is beneficial during these interactions, because, "if you display genuine puzzlement, you will elicit efforts on the part of insiders to help you understand" (p. 179).

In summary, six steps were outlined by Schein, based on his own observations and analyses of numerous organizations' cultures, to "decipher an organization" (p. 178):

1. Visit and observe.

2. Identify artifacts and processes that puzzle you.

3. Ask insiders why things are done that way.

4. Identify espoused values that appeal to you, and ask how they are implemented in the organization.

5. Look for inconsistencies, and ask about them.

6. Figure out from all you have heard what deeper assumptions actually determine the behavior you observe (p. 178).

A Transition Plan for Organizations and New Leaders

For both leaders and organizations, the transition period marks a time during which there is a potential for growth and strength, or risk and failure. Neff & Citrin (2004) cautioned that "the first 100 days is the timeframe that can make or break a new chief executive" (p. 3). Adams (2004) warned about the high costs associated with leadership transitions, including searches, relocations, additional necessary staff, decreased programming, periods of underperformance, business failure, and sometimes even closure. This knowledge of the potential risks associated with a poor transition obligates organizations and leaders to do everything possible to ensure a successful transition.

Adams (2004) related that "transitions are powerful—and under-realized— opportunities to strengthen [organizations]" (p. 5). Similarly, Teegarden (2004) highlighted the transition period as an opportunity in "building new capacity, strengthening the vision for the future, adding diversity to the organization's leadership, and addressing other organization challenges" (p. 2). For organizations, suggestions in helping them realize that positive potential included creation of a transition plan and policy (Davis, 2006), stronger procedures and roles prior to leadership departure to

ensure continuity during transition (Adams), selection of a leader who aligns with the organization's vision (Adams; Teegarden), ongoing support for the new leader through detailed job responsibilities (Adams), encouragement of peer networking, and provision of mentoring or executive coaching (Adams; Teegarden).

For the new leader, studies (Davis, 2006; Neff & Citrin, 2004) offered suggestions for maximizing success during the transition, beginning with the necessity of creating an individual transition plan. Gaining knowledge of the new culture, expectations, and past efforts that have succeeded or failed was advised, even before beginning the position. Securing personal supports (such as consultants or mentors) was advocated, as was building key relationships within the organization. Other recommendations included focusing on long-term goals (Davis; Neff & Citrin, 2004), following a communication plan (Neff & Citrin, 2004), and not speaking critically about past leadership (Neff & Citrin, 2004). Neff & Citrin (2004) summarized that a new leader must "act with integrity at all times, set the agenda for change publicly, and relate all decisions to that agenda" (p. 3). Similar recommendations were delineated in the "8 Point Plan" from a study by Neff & Citrin (2005), consisting of the following steps to lead a new leader from "building your foundation" (during the first 100 days) to "building on the momentum" (during the next 100 days and beyond):

1. Prepare yourself during the countdown

2. Align expectations

3. Shape your management team

4. Craft your strategic agenda

5. Start transforming culture

6. Manage your board/boss

7. Communicate

8. Avoid common pitfalls (p. 261)

Summary

These references provide discussions of the need for a thorough understanding of

the organizational culture and numerous frameworks for effective transitions into

leadership positions, referring mainly to positions in the business world and some in non-

profit organizations. Minimal aspects of these references involved education professions

and were lacking in detail regarding middle school principal positions. While leadership

transitions in general may help to assist a principal new to his/her position, it is very

likely that there are unique aspects to the transition into a principal position, and more

specifically, to the transition into a middle school principal position, that may not be a

part of a general leadership transition.

The Principalship: Effective Instructional and Educational Leader

While a principal is the leader of a school building, there are unique

responsibilities that principals hold that leaders in other organizations or companies do

not. Referencing the current era of school reform and accountability, Valentine et al.

(2004) acknowledged that the role of the principal has become more complex and public.

With an effective leader, however, regardless of the wide-range of and sometimes

disparate responsibilities, "the principal's leadership practices are key in forming an

organizational culture dedicated to improving school performance" (p. 15).

Many of these responsibilities and practices fall under the heading of principal as instructional and educational leader. To clarify these responsibilities, in the field of education there exist widely known standards for the role of school administrators created by the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC), through the joint effort of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) and the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Each ELCC standard begins with the phrase, "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by…" and continues by addressing a specific aspect of the principal position (Wilmore, 2002, p.13). These seven ELCC standards for school leaders include developing a school vision, fostering an instructional program and culture for student and staff learning, managing the organization and its resources to ensure a safe and efficient learning environment, collaborating with school stakeholders (staff, students, parents, community members), behaving ethically and morally, working within the societal context of politics, economics, and culture, and (prior to becoming an administrator) engaging in real-life standards-based experiences as part of the collegiate preparation. It is important to note again that each responsibility of the school leader position, then, has a primary goal of promoting student success given that each standard begins with this common clause. This demonstrates that the overall focus of a school principal is to ensure that all students learn and achieve.

In describing "high-quality principal leadership," Valentine et al. (2004) denoted that, in order for school reform to take place, the principal must be focused on student success (p. 20). Instructional leadership, which means continually ensuring that students

receive the best possible education tailored to their individual needs, requires a quality

leader who possesses knowledge about best practices for education and for the needs of

the students, an understanding of state and federal standards, intimate knowledge of what

takes place in the school's classrooms, and, with that information, a plan to provide staff

with the necessary resources and education to continually improve classroom instruction.

This constant focus on student achievement in all decision-making is the primary

responsibility of the effective principal (Clark & Clark, 2002).

From their study of 98 highly successful middle schools, Valentine et al. (2004)

intensely reviewed the leadership at those schools, noting: "Perhaps most importantly, the

leaders of the highly successful schools have worked more effectively with their faculties

and communities and collaboratively developed, maintained, and refined their exemplary

schools" (p. 53). In addition, these quality principals exhibited passion and commitment:

"They had the passion to provide a high-quality learning experience for all students and a

commitment to that goal that did not waiver" (p. 112). Valentine et al. summarized: "The

principal is probably the most essential element in a highly successful school…Without

high quality leadership, high quality schools cannot exist" (p. 112). An effective

principal has the capacity "to set change into motion, to establish the culture of change

and a learning organization, and to provide the support and energy to maintain the change

over time until it becomes a way of life in the school" (p. 112).

Johnston and Markle (1986) identified characteristics of effective instructional

leaders:

> The effective principal is a team leader who displays high levels of interpersonal
> skill and is especially adept at communicating with all levels both inside and
> outside of the school system. The principal must be available to all parties, must
> involve all members of the school in the educational process, and must seek
> meaningful input from all members of the community served by the school…The
> image that emerges is a principal who is less the busy manager than s/he is a
> nurturing, consultative communicator (p. 13).

In addition, they added that effective instructional leaders are "knowledgeable about the majority of key educational issues impinging on the schools…perceived as the leading change agents in the school…[and] regarded as highly effective facilitators" (p. 14).

In his study of effective principals, Whitaker (2003) highlighted the underlying component of instructional leadership: "Lead people to accomplish the important work of schools" (p. 5). As instructional leaders, "The principals are the architects. The teachers establish the foundation. The students move into the building and fill it with life and meaning" (p. 115). From his research, Whitaker provided a list of qualities of great principals, introducing it with the simple statement, "Effective principals do many things that other principals do not" (p. 5). These qualities consist of:

1. Know that people matter most, not programs

2. Understand that you are the variable in the situation that can affect its outcome

3. "Treat everyone with respect, every day, all the time"

4. Remember that you are the "filter" that affects how others perceive the information you present

5. Facilitate teacher improvement

6. "Hire great teachers"

7. Keep testing in perspective, while understanding "the importance of test results to others"

8. "Focus on behavior, then focus on beliefs"

9. Focus on what is best "for *all* the students"

10. "Base every decision on your best teachers"

11. "In every situation, ask who is most comfortable and who is least comfortable"

12. Be sensitive to the needs of high achievers and "maximize their ability"

13. "Make it cool to care"

14. Work hard to keep your relationships "in good repair"

15. "Set expectations at the start of the year" (p. vii-x)

As an instructional leader, the principal facilitates professional dialogue and organizational change efforts in order to improve student learning. A number of additional studies support the role of the principal as an instructional leader in the school (Beachum & Dentith, 2004; Chirichello, 2004); Haberman, 1999; Hackney, 1998; Hayden, 1997; Muchmore, Cooley, Marx, & Crowell, 2004; Schmuck, 1993; Slater et al., 2006; Walker & Dimmock, 2005; Zepeda, 2004). In the study by Zepeda, the focus was

on a principal who, as an instructional leader, organized student-centered professional development opportunities for the school's faculty members. The results indicated that the administrator was responsible for structuring a learning community by ensuring that certain conditions were met. Walker and Dimmock suggested that these necessary conditions include making data-driven decisions to determine areas of strengths and weaknesses in the instructional program, providing research-based, appropriate interventions, and providing leadership to encourage inclusion and equality so that all students can learn and have access to education.

When the principal supports a vision of improved instruction, his/her actions and decisions will demonstrate this focus and will further this goal. This would be evidenced by increased dialogue between teachers and administrators about student achievement (Muchmore et al., 2004), encouragement of teacher leadership and ownership (Beachum & Dentith, 2004), and an overall theme of innovation in order to affect change regarding instruction (Slater et al., 2006).

Because the administrator is not in the classroom interacting with the students on a daily basis, it becomes more challenging to detect the effect, if any, the principal has on student learning and instruction. Administrators in a study by Schmuck (1993) reported that they were focused on improving education in their own schools and helped facilitate instructional improvements. Further, in a study of female administrators who served in a variety of entry-level leadership positions, Hackney (1998) found that the participants were focused on instructional leadership in their own positions and viewed the superintendent as the highest instructional leader, even though that position is often

perceived as being the furthest from the classroom and having the least amount of impact on students' daily lives. These administrators viewed the role of leaders outside of the classroom as an advocate for their students' education through their ownership and vision of the schools' instructional programs.

Other studies, too, have begun to investigate if and how administrators can affect student learning. In a study on principals in multiethnic schools, Walker and Dimmock (2005) found common themes surrounding instructional leadership. In particular, the participants expressed a humble acknowledgement that they were responsible for the learning of the students in their schools and for creating a positive impact on those students. Administrators reported, in a study on the effectiveness of an educational administration program in Oregon, which focused on instructional leadership and school management, that their leadership included orchestrating a learning community centered on students and their learning (Schmuck, 1993). These studies suggest that school administrators believe they are positively impacting students and that this is one of their primary responsibilities.

In a study by Haberman (1999) with a comparable result, a "strong principal" (p. 2) was the response to a survey on what made a school in an impoverished area successful. In this particular school, the administrator was identified as affecting student learning positively in many ways. One specific example was that the principal helped the teachers focus on students and student learning by protecting them from local, state, and federal demands, increased paperwork, and bureaucracy. Another example was that the stakeholders' knowledge that the principal knew what was taking place in every

classroom motivated everyone to do their best and to focus on student learning. Similarly, Chirichello (2004) shared that the principal has a leadership and a management role, which, together, help focus the school on instruction. Principals "must be knowledgeable about students, curriculum, teacher performance, and the community they serve" while still being "expected to manage hectic day-to-day activities that include scheduling, building repairs, lunchrooms, and ordering, leaving little time to engage in reflective thinking and proactive planning" (Chirichello, p. 122). It is the principal's role to focus on both leading and managing, with the goal of providing the school community with everything needed to ensure quality instruction for the students.

Throughout the research, although not specifically correlated to student learning outcomes, studies demonstrated the perception that principals impact the quality of the learning environment and, thus, student learning. In fact, in one study (Muchmore et al., 2004), even though there was no increase in test scores as a result of a specific professional development program that was targeted at teacher leaders and administrators and that centered around the district's curriculum and student achievement, there was a belief and acceptance that educators strongly affect student learning. This sense of impact provided the school with the commitment to continue the program to determine if gains in student achievement would be evident in the future. Similarly, Hackney (1998), shared the perception of the administrators in her study—that they were able to make a difference for children and to see results in achievement. This view was clear from the participants even though no direct correlation to student learning was indicated.

It is apparent that effective leadership is a component in the improvement of school instruction. Administrators are challenged, through current literature, expectations of school stakeholders, and the ELCC standards for school leaders, to create a vision of student success in their school community, to facilitate change in their schools toward this vision, and to motivate their staff to continually seek to improve their instruction. Based on research, the administrator, as an instructional leader, is in a position to influence the instruction that takes place in a school. Studies show that the administrator can affect the learning environment, and that strong leadership will greatly impact the quality of education that students receive (Hayden, 1997).

These resources emphasized the school leader's responsibility for and impact on instruction and student learning, which provided the background for this study's focus on principals in schools of improvement. Knowing that it is the school leader who holds ultimate accountability for student achievement (as their instructional and educational leader), my study sought to learn from principals who are in buildings where student achievement improved. In the conceptual framework, however, while these resources would be beneficial for anyone pursuing a principal position as well as those who are in any stage of the principalship, what was lacking is a research-based approach to determining what effective transitions into the principalship look like and how to implement them.

The Transition into the Principalship

When discussing the transition into the principalship, much of the research centered on beginning principals, those who have not yet served as the head of a school.

Because of this, the focus of these studies was often on role socialization, referred to by

Merton (1968) as "the process needed to gain the skills and dispositions necessary to

learn a new role" (cited in Talbot, 2000, p. 6). As beginning principals learn how to

serve as school leaders, they proceed through stages of development in their transition.

O'Mahoney (2003, p. 15) proposed four stages of the principal's transition: "role

idealization (looking at the role), immersion (learning the ropes), establishment (defining

the role), and consolidation (feeling accepted)". Similarly, Browne-Ferrigno (2003)

listed four themes that influence growth in becoming a principal: role conceptualization,

initial socialization, role-identify transformation, and purposeful engagement.

Addressing the concept of role socialization, Parkay, Currie, and Rhodes (1992)

discussed five stages of socialization: survival, control, stability, educational leadership,

and professional actualization. These studies indicate that the transition into a principal

position is a process, made up of stages of learning, development, and action leading a

principal from "role-taking" to "role-making" (Talbot, 2000, p. 5).

School Culture

Consistent with the transition into a leadership position, the transition into a

principal position requires a thorough understanding of the culture of the organization –

the school culture. When defining school culture, scholars provided similar reflections to

those of scholars of organizational culture. As Sergiovanni (1984a) succinctly described,

school culture "governs what is of worth for a particular group and how group members

should think, feel, and behave" (p. viii). Barth (2001) elaborated that school culture is:

The complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies,

traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the

organization. [It] is the historically transmitted pattern of meaning that wields

astonishing power in shaping what people think and how they act (p. 8).

Other scholars of school culture went further by integrating ideas specific to

education within the definition, as Starratt (2011) did when submitting this education-

based and more figurative definition of school culture:

The patterns imbedded across relationships, various rituals, metaphorical ways of

talking about the work of students, slanted interpretations about events and

happenings around the school…The school culture is the spirit in the air people in

the school exhale and inhale (p. 61-62).

Drawing from these perspectives, it is clear that school culture is pervasive

throughout the entire environment and is the foundation of the daily and long-term

thoughts and actions of those within the school. Because of this, understanding the

culture becomes critical to the new principal. Sergiovanni (2000) noted this criticality by

relating the knowledge of school culture to quality leadership and school effectiveness,

using effectiveness as the rationale for learning and working with the individual school's

culture:

School effectiveness requires authentic leadership, leadership that is sensitive to

the unique values, beliefs, needs, and wishes of local professionals and citizens

who best know the conditions needed for a particular group of students in a

particular context. No 'one size fits all' will do (p. viii-ix).

Without an understanding of and sensitivity to the particular school culture, the

new principal's effectiveness may be diminished. Sergiovanni (2000), when discussing

quality leadership, advanced this theme of the necessity of understanding culture and

context:

> Context plays a key role in deciding whether certain approaches to leadership will
>
> be effective or not. Thus, what a leader says and does to be effective in one kind
>
> of enterprise may not lead to effectiveness in another kind of enterprise (p. 165).

Even if a new leader's "applied knowledge" of the job, the principal role, is substantial, it

is necessary that the new principal utilize observations and "intuition" to fit that

knowledge into the school's culture and context, as summarized by Sergiovanni (1984b):

"Intuition allows the artful application of knowledge in a setting where particulars of the

situation are taken into account" (p. 2). School leaders, therefore, must understand the

culture before inserting their own ideals, procedures, or solutions, which are often based

on their previous experiences and which may not be appropriate, or accepted, within the

new school's culture.

How, then, does a new principal decipher a school's culture? Greenfield (1984)

put forth that it is "best understood in context, from a sense of the concrete events and

personalities within [the school] rather than from a set of abstractions or general laws" (p.

143). To recognize and understand the school culture, therefore, the new principal must

observe the environment from multiple perspectives and depths, which was advised by

Barth (2001), who recommended "crafting and using wide-angle, microscopic, and

telescopic lenses" (p. 8). Continuing this theme, Starratt (2011) described the process of learning a school's culture as focused observation and listening to:

> The ways people in the school treat each other, the way they go about their work, the sensibilities that are respected and expressed in the many interactions among people throughout the school day. The culture enters into the vocabulary and imagery people use to describe significant events and activities in the school (p. 62).

During the observation process, gathering "valid and useful information" requires, as Sergiovanni (2000) recommended, "a commitment from leaders to be open and frank…in a way that helps others to be open and frank" (p. 177). Once this has been established, Barth (2001) offered a number of specific, practical questions the new leader should ask, to fully comprehend the school culture:

1. What do you see, hear and experience in the school?

2. What *don't* you see and hear?

3. What are the indicators, the clues that reveal the school's culture?

4. What behaviors get rewards and status here?

5. Which ones are greeted with reprimand?

6. Do the adults model the behavior they expect of youngsters?

7. How do leaders react to critical situations?

8. Who gets to make decisions?

9. Do parents experience welcome, suspicion, or rejection when they enter the school (p. 8-9)?

In summary, learning the school culture is a process, requiring strong listening and observation skills, and a new principal who recognizes what school culture entails and why such understanding of the culture is critical to both quality leadership and the future effectiveness of the school.

A Transition Plan for Schools and New Principals

Barnett (2006) reported that, throughout the world, preparation and support for future school administrators is becoming an area of focus, with variety among countries as to which organizations are responsible for each aspect. In the United States, Barnett noted that the universities are responsible for leadership preparation, and school districts and professional organizations are responsible for support. Weindling (2004) agreed, discussing three phases of a leader's career: pre-service, induction, and in-service. For the induction phase, he cautioned that the United States must not continue its historical practice of allowing its school leaders to "sink or swim", but that they must further their recent focus on supporting new leaders given the number of current administrators "nearing retirement and the apparent shortage of new candidates" (p. 10).

Support of the new leader must address both individual and position-specific needs. More specifically, Hobson et al. (2003) outlined common areas of need for beginning principals:

- Feelings of professional isolation and loneliness
- Dealing with the legacy, practice and style of the previous headteacher [school leader]
- Dealing with multiple tasks, managing time and priorities

- Dealing with the school budget

- Dealing with (e.g., supporting, warning, dismissing) ineffective staff

- Implementing new government initiatives, notably new curricula or school improvement projects

- Problems with school buildings and site management (p. 24).

To address this need for transitional support, and knowing that "a principal's eventual level of professional socialization is strongly indicated by the end of the first year" (Parkay et al., p. 61), it becomes critical for that principal and that school and district, with the assistance of professional organizations, to create and follow a plan for support and development that will assist in making the transition a success.

Numerous studies recommended the creation of a transition plan, often inclusive of a mentoring program (e.g., one-on-one relationships, online discussions, peer-coaching, networks of new and veteran leaders), to provide the necessary supports for the school and its new leader (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006; Chapman, 2005; McDonald, 2006; O'Mahoney, 2003; Parkay et al., 1992; Votey, 2005). As principals learn to "anticipate, organize, prioritize, and initiate actions when leading and managing" their staff (McDonald, 2006, p. 8), they may need to rely on the experience and advice of veteran school leaders through a mentor-protégé relationship or through an administrative network. Whether formal or informal, these mentor relationships must include an emphasis on role socialization, reflective conversation, and role clarification (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006) while also acknowledging that the needs of a beginning administrator will change throughout the first year and so must the mentoring relationship

(O'Mahoney, 2003). In the study from Alsbury and Hackmann, recommendations for quality mentorship were to establish mentor-protégé associations prior to the beginning of the school year and reflective of geographic proximity, provide separate skills training for mentors and protégés, but combined socialization development training and activities, and to include a component of professional reflection (while the method for doing so would be at the discretion of the participants).

In addition to mentoring programs, other aspects of induction programs should include a needs inventory specific to the new leader, comprehensive data and documentation related to the new role, summer conferences as well as visitation to the new school prior to the beginning of the position, specialized training in technical and context-oriented aspects of the position based on the new leader's needs, and visitations to other schools and districts (Chapman, 2005; Hobson et al., 2003; Office for Standards in Education [Ofsted], 2003). While new principals and their districts are most immediately responsible for transitional support, it can sometimes be challenging due to financial or personnel limitations. In these circumstances, and even within districts that already have a formal induction program, it can be helpful to be aware of and possibly incorporate the resources and materials available elsewhere in order to provide quality transitional support. For this, Lashway (2003) suggested relying on state organizations, universities, and professional organizations, which often have extensive resources and comprehensive development programs established.

In summary, a "key element of long-term leadership is to assure effective transitions to new leadership" (Votey, 2005, p. 7). A transition plan, then, must be in

place to provide the necessary training, networking, and coaching for the first year and beyond (Parkay et al., 1992). The plan serves as a communication tool for the school community as well as the new leader, so that all stakeholders are informed through the transition process about how to support the principal and how to continue providing the best possible education to ensure student achievement.

Summary

In all, studies were abundant relating to the transition into the principalship for beginning administrators, including the need for understanding and working within the school culture. Lacking in the literature was research of principals new to their current role, regardless of past administrative experiences. Research that includes veteran principals may provide valuable information about transitioning, given their extensive background knowledge and experiences as building principals in other settings. Also absent in the literature was research addressing the specific needs of middle schools and how the transition into a middle school principalship may differ from the general transition into a principal position.

<center>**The Middle School Principalship**</center>

Middle school principals, just as principals at any grade level, are defined as instructional leaders and are bound by the ELCC standards mandating that the primary focus is on student success. There are unique roles and responsibilities, however, that middle school principals must perform, given the diversity in student learning needs due to the "wide range of students' developmental, social, psychological, and cognitive needs, beliefs about school, and expectations for their learning experiences" (Hertberg-

Davis & Brighton, 2006, p. 90). As the young adolescents who attend middle schools are learning, growing, changing, and experiencing unique challenges and joys, it becomes the responsibility of middle school leaders, teachers, and staff to meet the needs of those students.

Historically, and even in some schools today, middle level students were not always educated in a middle school. Through the years, research on adolescents' needs and abilities, experience, and trial and error, have helped to evolve the middle school philosophy into what it is today. Though written two decades ago, the succinct and straightforward summary of the education of young adolescents by Lounsbury (1991) is worth including here:

- [In the 1910's] the idea of a junior high school was not yet clearly formed.

- [In the 1920's] it was just an infrequent experiment.

- [In the 1930's] the junior high school was the coming thing in American education.

- [In the 1940's] it had achieved considerable status and become a regular part of our educational system.

- [In the 1950's] criticism concerning the junior high began to mount. Most frequently cited was its tendency to merely mimic the high school in program and policies, to be simply a downward extension of secondary education.

- [In the 1960's] the middle school, composed of grades 6-8 or sometimes 5-8, was being touted as an alternative and solution to the failures of the junior high school.

- [In the 1970's] the first comparative studies and surveys revealed that new middle schools and old junior high schools were surprisingly alike in actual practice.

- [In the 1980's] after many needless rounds in the literature of junior high *vs* middle school, junior high and middle school proponents and practitioners began to coalesce into a single cause – the cause of improving early adolescent education.

- [In the 1990's] the phrase middle level education has gained acceptance as the best term to refer to a distinctive level in the continuum of public education (p. 67-68).

A discussion of the history of middle level education would be incomplete without the inclusion of the National Middle School Association [NMSA]. To address all aspects of middle level education, NMSA was established in 1973, as "the only national association dedicated exclusively to the education, development, and growth of young adolescents" (NMSA, 2003, p. 52). In 1982, it published *This We Believe* to provide a comprehensive document outlining best practices in middle level education. "Following its release, this paper had a far-reaching impact on middle level education. It quickly became the most frequently cited statement about the education of young adolescents" (NMSA, 2003, p. ix). NMSA revisited its position paper and rewrote it in 1995 and again

in 2003 to reflect changing knowledge and philosophies of education as well as societal

developments. The 2003 version, *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young*

Adolescents, "is offered to the profession and to the public as a guide to assist in creating

successful schools for young adolescents…[and] it is critical that [it] be read, understood,

and used by students, teachers, parents, policymakers, and other citizens concerned about

the education of young adolescents" (NMSA, 2003, p. xi). The introductory paragraph to

NMSA's document is worth including here for its compelling vision for middle level

education:

> Every day, twenty million diverse, rapidly changing 10- to 15-year-olds enrolled
>
> in our nation's middle level schools are making critical and complex life choices.
>
> They are forming the attitudes, values, and habits of mind that will largely direct
>
> their behavior as adults. They deserve schools that support them fully during this
>
> key phase of life. Therefore, National Middle School Association seeks to
>
> conceptualize and promote successful middle level schools that enhance the
>
> healthy growth of young adolescents as lifelong learners, ethical and democratic
>
> citizens, and increasingly competent, self-sufficient young people who are
>
> optimistic about the future (p. 1).

In summary, familiarity with the history of middle level schools and NMSA is vital for

the middle level leader, because "expanding the vision of middle level education is

dependent on educators who are not only knowledgeable of the past but who are

conversant with successful practice, [and] who understand what middle level schools can

be" (Clark & Clark, 1994, p. 29).

To delineate the distinctive characteristics, Clark and Clark (1994) proffered a definition of middle level education that incorporated five aspects:

1. Purpose: To be developmentally responsive to the special needs of young adolescents

2. Uniqueness: A unique, autonomous unit, separate from the elementary school that precedes it and the high school that follows it

3. Organization: The inclusion of the grade levels with the largest number of students who are beginning the process of becoming adolescents…

4. Curriculum and Instruction: Content that connects with the everyday lives of students and instruction that actively involves them in the learning process

5. Program: Programs that are developmentally appropriate and include but are not limited to interdisciplinary teaming, teacher advisories, cocurricular activities and youth service (p. 4).

Given that "young people undergo more rapid and profound personal changes between the ages 10 and 15 than at any other time in their lives" (NMSA, 2003, p. 3), Clark and Clark (1994) proposed that it is critical that the educators who serve in a middle school must have a "comprehensive knowledge base of the intellectual, physical, social, and emotional characteristics of the young adolescent learner" in order to create "developmentally responsive middle level schools" (p. 61). Correspondingly, NMSA conveyed that middle school success is dependent on student success, and student success

is dependent on the focus of the school's "organization, curriculum, pedagogy, and programs…[being] based upon the developmental readiness, needs, and interests of young adolescents. This concept is at the heart of middle level education" (2003, p. 1).

In conjunction with NMSA, Erb (2001) both warned and inspired middle school leaders by acknowledging that "the nature of the educational programs young adolescents experience during this formative period of [their lives] will, in large measure, determine the future for all of us" (p. 1). To address this, from its extensive research, collaboration, and focus on successful middle level education, NMSA (2003) outlined characteristics of successful middle schools that are "interdependent and must be implemented in concert" (p. 2); the first eight are related to the culture of the school and the final six are related to the programs and organization of the school:

1. Educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so

2. Courageous, collaborative leadership

3. A shared vision that guides decisions

4. An inviting, supportive, and safe environment

5. High expectations for every member of the learning community

6. Students and teachers engaged in active learning

7. An adult advocate for every student

8. School-initiated family and community partnerships

9. Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory

10.   Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their

diversity

11.   Assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning

12.   Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and

learning

13.   School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety

14.   Multifaceted guidance and support services (p. 7).

In order to provide a comprehensive education focused on the success of middle

school students, NMSA (2003) reported that the principal holds the primary role in

ensuring the presence of all of these fourteen characteristics. This student-focused

approach to middle level leadership, referred to as "developmentally responsive

leadership" by Anfara, Roney, Smarkola, DuCette, and Gross (2006), "is grounded in the

belief that schools should be organized and operated around the developmental

characteristics of the students they educate" (p. 21). While not named exactly the same,

this concept is carried throughout middle level literature, noting that effective middle

school principals provide curriculum, programming, and school services that meet the

needs of the young adolescent students (Anfara, 2003; Arnold, 2001; Erb, 2001; Flowers,

Mertens, & Mulhall, 2007; Johnston & Markle, 1986; Little & Little, 2001; McEwin &

Dickinson, 2001; McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 2003; NMSA, 2003; Payne, 2001;

Swaim, 2001).   Similarly, Clark and Clark (1994) delivered this call to action for middle

school principals:

Early adolescence is a time of tremendous change. While understanding the

reasons for and the ways that young adolescents change is an important first step

for middle level leaders, acting upon that knowledge is even more important.

Middle level programs must reflect what is known about young adolescents, their

physical growth patterns, their emerging intellect, their new social sophistication,

and their emotional vulnerability" (p. 80-81).

Summarizing the role of the middle school principal in ensuring that middle schools are

developmentally responsive and best able to address the uniqueness of this educational

level, Anfara et al. (2006) delineated the three main characteristics of a developmentally

responsive middle school principal: responsive to the developmental needs of middle

school students, responsive to the needs of the faculty who support middle level learning,

and responsive to the middle school itself "as a unique innovating entity" (p. 21).

Unfortunately, middle level leaders are rarely specifically prepared for middle

level leadership through their university coursework, resulting in "a well-designed reform

initiative, [the middle school concept], with few people properly prepared to take the

lead" (Anfara, 2003, p. 55). NMSA (2003) stated that, while "the importance of middle

level education can never be overestimated":

The public and many educators have a very limited understanding of the nature

and needs of young adolescents and the types of educational programs that are

best suited for them during the stage of life between the ages of 10 and 15 (p. 35).

Valentine et al. (2004) from their study of highly successful middle schools and

their principals reported that, because "the vast majority of...administrators currently in middle level schools have received preparation [only] to be elementary or high school educators," they must rely on "on-the-job training for the basic skills necessary to survive at the middle school" (p. 12). Interestingly, the findings of their study established that "the principals of the highly successful schools had taken more middle level education coursework and had experienced more-effective professional development focused on middle level education" than their counterparts in the sample of schools and principals nationwide (p. 53). They emphasized:

> The highly successful principals were knowledgeable of best educational
> practices, including curricular and instructional practices, change processes, and
> middle level programs. They shared that knowledge, and they articulated it in a
> manner that conveyed the expectation that everyone should understand it
> (Valentine et al., 2004, p. 112).

It then becomes the responsibility of middle school principals to learn and understand the philosophy behind middle school education, to be knowledgeable about the needs of the students they serve, and, even further, to share this information with others in order to establish a long-term community focus on middle level education (NMSA, 2003). Describing the unique attributes and skills that a middle school principal must possess, Anfara et al. (2006) summarized:

> There is no doubt that if middle grades principals are to promote quality middle
> schools they must possess basic skills and knowledge in school administration,
> but it is just as important that they also have a firm understanding of middle

school philosophy, curriculum, and instructional practices. In addition to dealing

with instructional leadership, participatory management/leadership, school

improvement planning, school-based budgeting and financial management, and a

host of other issues, middle grades principals must be knowledgeable about young

adolescents and what components or structures (e.g., teaming, advisory,

exploratories) have been deemed essential for the 'successful' middle school (p.

8).

Leaders who realize the importance of and undertake these developmentally responsive

efforts "are in the best position to help learners at this stage because they will deal with

students as they are at a time when recognition of their social, emotional and intellectual

needs is remarkably acute" (Anfara et al., 2006, p. 21).

Through this research, it was clear that middle school principals face a unique and

critical leadership role, given the unique needs of the students they serve. While these

resources focused on the specific needs of the middle school as well as the

administrator's role in leading middle schools, what was lacking was specific research

related to the transition into the leadership position at the middle school level.

Summary

In summary, the research about leadership transitions was vast. While

scholarship included educational leadership, and specifically middle school leadership, it

largely ignored the transition experiences of middle school principals. Therefore, while

there was a definite interest level in the conceptual framework within which this topic is

situated, there was limited study in this specific area. The goal of this study, then, was to

add insight into specific middle school principalship transitions.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Background

Purpose Statement

The review of literature around the subject of leadership and transitions into leadership positions demonstrated a scholarship gap related to the transition into the middle school principalship. Given this, as noted earlier, the purpose of this qualitative study, informed by grounded theory, was to understand the transition experience of middle school principals, during the first 100 days, in public schools in Ohio who have led their current schools to improvement.

Research Questions

Based on Creswell (2003), in which researchers were advised to limit the number of central questions and subquestions posed for a study, the central questions and subquestions for my study were as follows:

1. What are the experiences of Ohio public middle school principals, in schools of improvement, during the first 100 days of the transition into their leadership position?

   a. What actions are implemented by these principals during the first 100 days of the transition into their leadership position?

   b. How do external and internal circumstances (e.g., prior year's state designation, type of school district) and individuals influence the transitional actions of these principals?

2. What perceptions are held by Ohio public middle school principals, in schools of improvement, regarding how their transitional actions influenced their schools' future improvement?

3. What perceptions are held by Ohio public middle school principals, in schools of improvement, regarding effective transitions into the middle school principalship?

Definition of Key Terms

Because there may be differing perspectives on the definitions of the key terms used in the purpose statement and research questions, these definitions are provided for the reader so that each key term of the purpose statement, and thus the study, is clear.

Transition: The transition period for this study was generally defined as the first 100 business days of the current leadership position, which, in a school setting, translates approximately to the first semester of the school year.

Middle School: Middle schools serve adolescents between the ages of 10-15 years old and incorporate the middle school philosophy advocated by the National Middle School Association (Erb, 2001). This philosophy is evidenced by specific programming and support for these adolescents as defined in *This We Believe…And Now We Must Act* (Erb, 2001). For the purposes of this study, a middle school was generally defined as a school that serves any of grades 5 through 8 and that is listed via ODE as a middle school. The latter factor, per S. L. Hay of the ODE Office of Educational Reform (personal communication, September 23, 2008) is a distinction made locally by the school and reported to ODE.

Principal: A principal was defined as the administrator who leads the school, as the instructional leader and organizational leader. This definition did not include assistant principals nor assistant administrators. For this study, only principals who were in their current position for less than four full years were included. This time frame was selected so that the building principal might more easily recollect the transition period for his/her position, while still being a part of the school movement toward academic improvement.

School Improvement: In this study, school improvement was measured by an improved school designation on the state of Ohio school report card, with no decrease in designation at any time, while under the leadership of the principal participant. The most recent results used were from the 2007-2008 school year, information for which was released at the beginning of the subsequent school year.

Prior Year's State Designation: The prior year's state designation, hereafter referred to as the *initial state designation*, denoted the designation of the school building upon the new principal's appointment to the principal position. Because this designation was based on a year prior to the 2007-08 school year, there were only five possible designations that could be the school's initial state designation: Academic Emergency, Academic Watch, Continuous Improvement, Effective, or Excellent.

Type of School District: The state of Ohio categorizes its school districts into nine typologies, Group 0 through Group 8; however, only seven of these typologies "characterize the K-12 public school districts" (ODE, 2007b). The other two typologies, Group 0 and Group 8, were not relevant to this study. Group 0 comprises five "districts

that are extremely small and either geographically isolated (islands) or have special

circumstances;" with the limited number of students, the structure of these schools does

not include a middle school (ODE, 2007b, para 3). Group 8, comprising all Joint

Vocational School Districts, was not relevant based on the age range of its students in

that these districts provide career and technical education to secondary and adult students.

The seven remaining categories from ODE relevant to this study are depicted in Table 3.

To run the report on the ODE website that lists each school district in Ohio and its

corresponding typology, from the "Data" screen, "Typology of Ohio School Districts"

(ODE, 2007b) was selected.

Table 3

Typologies of Ohio School Districts

Category	Typology	Number of Districts
1	Rural/agricultural – high poverty, low median income	96
2	Rural/agricultural – small student population, low poverty, low to moderate median income	161
3	Rural/small town – moderate to high median income	81
4	Urban – low median income, high poverty	102
5	Major urban – very high poverty	15
6	Urban/suburban – high median income	107
7	Urban/suburban – very high median income, very low poverty	46

Research Methods

The purpose of this section is to delineate the research design of this study. I utilized a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of middle school principals who led their schools to improvement and the context surrounding the actions and decisions of these leaders. Noting that "educational practitioners rely heavily on informed tuition as they create knowledge through experience [and] intuition is informed both by theoretical knowledge and by interacting with the context of practice" (Anfara et al., 2006), qualitative research provided an avenue for including the rich description of context. It allowed me to depict the connection between the middle school principals' actions and their context of time, locale, and organization (Johnson, 1996). In what follows, I review the participant selection, data collection, and data analysis procedures used in this study.

Participant Selection

ODE maintains databases that include detailed information about every public school district, and every building within each district, in the state of Ohio. Through the Interactive Local Report Card (iLRC) database, the available data includes, among other information, principal names and state report card designation for the past several years.

For this study, I selected 10 principal participants who met the following criteria: (a) they occupied their current position for less than four full years, and (b) their schools demonstrated improvement on the state report card through an improved report card designation while under their leadership (per the Ilrc database). I further ensured that participants represented schools with initial state designations from across the five possible designation categories and represented schools within districts from across the

seven possible typologies of school districts (see Table 3). What follows is an elaboration of the multi-tiered process, based on given criteria, that I employed to identify participants for this investigation.

First tier.

For the 2007-2008 school year, the Ilrc included 581 self-reported middle schools in Ohio. Of those, 559 were in public school districts (identified as City, Exempted Village, or Local). The first tier of participant selection was to determine all public middle schools in Ohio, of the 559, that demonstrated improvement on their state report card designation over the past three years. To run this report, from the Ilrc screen, "Power User Reports" was selected and run for "Ratings", then for "Building Rating", then for four school years, 2007-2008, 2006-2007, 2005-2006, and 2004-2005. Information from 2004-2005 provided a point of reference when comparing information from 2005-2006. This list was further narrowed by selecting the building type of "Middle School". The resulting report was "drilled" to include district type. Sorting by district type allowed the middle schools in districts that were "Not a Public School District" to be deleted from the report, leaving only public middle school data which included district types of "City", "Exempted Village", and "Local". This review of the data provided a listing of all public middle schools in Ohio that improved their state report card designation at least once in the past three years.

Of the 559 public middle schools, two types of school improvement were noted:

1. There were 201 schools that earned a higher designation in 2007-08 compared to 2004-2005, with no decrease at any time during the past

three years. These schools stayed at the same designation or improved

each year, with at least one improved state designation.

2. There were 64 schools that experienced a decrease in designation at

some point after 2004-2005; however, the designation increased by

2007-2008.

In total, these 265 schools remained in the selection process to determine if the

improvement in designation coincided with a new principal. In all cases, Excellent with

Distinction, the new and highest possible designation for 2007-2008, was considered to

be an improved designation (47 middle schools earned this designation).

Second tier.

The second tier of selection to determine appropriate participants for the study

entailed further data from Ilrc that listed the name of the principal of each school in Ohio

for each of the past several years. To glean this information, from the Ilrc screen,

"Download Data" was selected. From the choices presented, "School Rating Data" was

selected for each of the same four school years. Again, information from 2004-2005

provided a point of reference when comparing information from 2005-2006. Schools that

met the criteria of the first tier were highlighted on these individual reports. The second

tier of selection, then, involved a comparison of the principal name for each of these

school years to determine schools that employed a new principal in the past three years

(less than four full school years). These two processes, together, garnered a listing of all

new middle school principals whose employment coincided with an improved state

designation, with no decrease in designation at any time of the new principal's

employment. In all, 77 principals met these criteria: they were in their current position for less than four full years, and they led their schools to improvement based on an improved state report card designation.

At this point in the selection process, a review of the grades serviced by each school and a review of each of the school titles were conducted. Because schools self-reported as middle schools, some schools did not fall within this study's definition of a middle school. For this study, schools serving any grades other than fifth through eighth or schools that were alternative or specialized, based on their school title, were eliminated from the selection group. Following this step, 71 schools remained in the selection process.

Information from each school's internet website was then reviewed to determine if the principal meeting the first two criteria was still currently in the same position in the same building. Possible participants who had begun a new transition in a new building, which might complicate his/her recollection of the transition into the position being studied, were removed from the selection process. The remaining number of possible participants was then 66.

Third tier.

After the number of middle school principals in Ohio was condensed into only those meeting the above criteria, a third tier of selection was implemented. My goal through this tier was to study a wide range of participants' experiences, based on the objective from Glaser & Strauss (1967) that the researcher must "look for groups that stretch the diversity of data as far as possible" (p. 61). To gain this diversity of data, this

study, as completely as possible, included middle schools that represented different initial

state designations (one of the five) upon the possible participants' appointment and that

represented different school district typologies (one of the seven) of ODE.

The goal was to select two participants from each of the five initial state

designations that also represented differing district typologies, if possible. Certain

parameters were planned for participant selection. If there were no principals in a given

typology, that typology would not be represented in the study. If there were several

principals to select from within these criteria, then an attempt would be made to select a

balanced number of males and females, with a goal of selecting 10 participants for the

study. If principals who were selected declined participation in the study, an attempt

would be made to select replacement participants using the same multi-tiered criteria. In

all, 10 participants were selected and willing to participate.

Because of the small number of individuals meeting these tiers of criteria, it is not

my intent to provide data regarding the specific combination of initial state designation

and district typology that each participant represented. To do so would allow readers to

potentially identify the identity of the participants. More generally, participants in the

study represented the seven district typologies as depicted in Table 4 and represented the

five initial state designations as depicted in Table 5. To clarify, with this group of 10

participants, each of the district typologies were represented, as were each of the possible

initial state designations. Finally, although it was my original goal, it was not possible to

select two principals per each of the initial state designations due to the small number of

individuals who represented certain designations.

Table 4

Tier Three Participant Selection Based on District Typology

Typology	Number of schools within each typology	Number of participants selected from each typology
1	7	1
2	11	1
3	5	1
4	11	1
5	10	2
6	14	2
7	8	2

Table 5

Tier Three Participant Selection Based on Initial State Designation

Initial state designation	Number of schools within each designation	Number of participants selected from each designation
AE	6	1
AW	4	2
CI	30	3
EF	14	2
EX	12	2

Note: AE = Academic Emergency, AW = Academic Watch, CI = Continuous Improvement, EF = Effective, EX = Excellent

This purposeful sampling provided viewpoints of principals who share common characteristics (in that they have recently transitioned into their principal positions and have led their schools to improvement based on an improved state report card designation); however, they represented a variety of initial state designations and a variety of school district types. While I drew from grounded theory methods, I want to be clear that my study was not fully a grounded theory study due to my sampling rationale. As opposed to ongoing sampling until reaching "theoretical saturation," which

means that "no additional data are being found" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61), I chose

instead to employ purposeful sampling—selecting middle school principals who have led

their schools to improvement, representative of different initial state designations and

different school district typologies delineated by ODE. The rationale behind this decision

was to hear from these individuals, given their similarities (in role and school success)

and their differences (in designation and type of district within which they serve), and to

build a framework of their transition experiences based on the data I obtained from them.

It was my goal to discover the themes that emerged from the data describing the

transition experiences and actions of *these* participants. It was not within the scope of

this study to perform further sampling in the development of theory.

Data Collection

Participants were selected in the fall and winter of 2008 using the most recent

state reporting data, which was from the 2007-2008 school year. Once the participants

were selected, I contacted them, via the postal service and via email, to explain the

purpose of the study and the reason for their selection. I informed them of a follow-up

telephone conference (of 10-15 minutes in length) with me during which I discussed their

potential involvement in the study. I also invited them to contact me via telephone or

email with any questions or concerns they may have had prior to the telephone

conference.

After obtaining their verbal consent via the telephone conference, I set up a time

to meet with the participants individually to conduct a face-to-face interview of

approximately one to two hours in length. I acknowledged that while meeting in their

office may be convenient for some participants and would provide me first-hand knowledge of their buildings and working environments, some individuals may not be comfortable meeting in their buildings. To provide a level of comfort for the participants, I asked to meet with them at a mutually agreeable location. In each case, the participant chose to meet with me in his/her school office. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in the spring of 2009 and were recorded, via a digital recorder, to ensure accurate recall of information. I also took notes throughout the interviews as a secondary source of information.

Following introductions, I explained the consent process, including the following from Creswell's 2002 guidelines (as cited in Creswell, 2003): the purpose of the study and the procedures that were to be used, the right to voluntary participation and withdrawal, the right to receive a copy of the study's results, and the benefits of the study to them and to the field of educational leadership. I then had the participants sign the consent forms necessary to participate in the study, and I provided them with a copy of the signed forms.

My aim throughout the introduction process, via telephone and via the face-to-face conversation, was to build rapport with the participants. As Schram (2006) advised, the researcher must understand the imbalanced nature of the researcher-participant relationship, in that the researcher is the one striving to build rapport. Even though this is the case, "trust increases as people see that you share a common background with them" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 93); therefore, I believe that our common experiences related to employment and education, given my current role as an assistant middle school principal,

served as a stage of rapport-building. My respectful nature and sincere gratitude for their participation also assisted in building rapport. I continued to focus on establishing and maintaining genuine rapport throughout the interview process through my statements, active listening skills, and follow-up questions and comments.

The interview approach I utilized was informed by the responsive interview method established by Rubin and Rubin (2005). Responsive interviewing indicates that the researcher and participants form relationships during their communications with a shared goal of "generat[ing] depth of understanding," and it emphasizes the flexible nature of the interview process (Rubin & Rubin, p. 30). In responsive interviewing, the participants are termed "conversational partners" in that they play an "active role … in shaping the discussion and in guiding what paths the research should take" (Rubin & Rubin, p. 14). Incorporating this interview approach, I welcomed the expertise and unique perspective of each participant and worked together with each to create a conversational partnership in which he/she was comfortable sharing his/her ideas and suggesting topics of interest and importance based on his/her experiences in leadership transitions.

During the interview, to guide the process, an interview protocol regarding the first 100 days of their leadership positions, was followed (see Appendix A). Based on Creswell's (2003) framework, the interview protocol included instructions for me as the interviewer (opening statements, transition statements, probes for further exploration of participants' responses), demographic and background questions, guiding research

questions, and space for recording the interview data (participant comments and researcher reflections).

For the demographic and background questions, a questionnaire was sent to participants prior to the meeting. Some chose to complete the questionnaire ahead of time and either emailed it to me or presented it to me when we met, while others chose to answer the questions during the face-to-face interview.

The guiding research questions, including follow-up questions, and probes were based on Rubin and Rubin's (2005) definitions and suggestions. The authors advocated that guiding questions be related to the study's research questions and be open-ended to allow the participants to share their experiences. Follow-up questions are to explore areas or topics shared by the participants and allow for depth and detail, requiring the researcher to "[listen] hard to hear the meaning of what the conversational partner has said and then [ask] additional questions" (Rubin & Rubin, p. 136). The authors defined probes as simple clarifying questions that encourage continued conversation and detail about participants' comments. I utilized these three types of questions throughout the interview to encourage detailed, clear responses and to thoroughly capture the participants' experiences and thoughts.

Following data collection, member-checking occurred "to determine the accuracy of the findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate" (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). This was done on two levels. First, I provided each participant with a copy of the interview transcript along with an opportunity to elaborate on any

concept or offer revision options via email or telephone. Second, I provided each

participant with a copy of the themes that emerged from the data of all participants. I

then solicited their feedback via email regarding how they felt these themes reflected

their own experiences. From all responses, the participants agreed that the transition

framework reflected their perspectives and experiences.

Data Analysis

Situating Self

As a researcher, I was continually mindful of how my background and

experiences might shape my lens. Rubin and Rubin (2005) cautioned that we not

"pretend that interviewers come into the situation with no biases and can listen to answers

without sifting them through their own experiences and cultural lenses" (p. 31).

Researchers, however, can overcome this by continual self-reflection to understand their

own perspectives and reactions to the data (Rubin & Rubin). Knowing this, my goal for

this section is to share with the reader the experiences I brought to the study and how I

attempted to compensate for potential researcher bias.

As a middle school assistant principal and a former high school assistant

principal, I am familiar with the roles and responsibilities of the middle school principal,

the middle school concept and curriculum, and the challenges and rewards of working

with young adolescents and their families. Through my graduate work to obtain both a

principal and superintendent licensure, I am also familiar with the required training and

coursework that middle school principals have experienced.

In addition, I have experienced the transition into a leadership role in two school districts and buildings as an assistant principal. I was offered my first administrative position, as an assistant principal for a large high school in which I was currently teaching, in the spring prior to beginning the position in the fall. I spent those several months (what Neff & Citrin refer to as the "countdown period") meeting individually with each central office administrator of the district and the office staff of the high school (2005, p. 19). From these colleagues, I learned how the district operated, their individual perspectives of the district, their expectations for me in my new position, and the procedural aspects of the assistant principalship. This preparatory period was not possible when I was offered my second administrative position, which is my current role, as an assistant principal for a large middle school in another district, because I accepted the position less than one month prior to beginning. Due to my previous administrative experience, I found that, in this second position, I was less focused on learning about the procedural responsibilities of the position and more focused on the bigger picture of the district and its students. In this role, I spent much of my first 100 days meeting with my administrative colleagues, teachers, office personnel, and parents, learning the values of the district and the challenges that we faced together.

Even with my background knowledge and experience, however, I realize that there are extensive differences between an assistant principalship and a principalship. While possessing the knowledge of what is required to become a principal and knowing what is expected procedurally, I have never been the principal of a building—the

individual who is responsible and accountable to the building's and district's stakeholders for the academic success of the students.

Though I am an administrative insider, my role in the study was that of a student of leadership, hoping to learn from individuals who are in the principal role. The common backgrounds I shared with the participants helped me to gain access and to build rapport; however, I also acknowledged the potential for assumptions or bias that existed based on these common backgrounds. Throughout the research process, I "constantly confront[ed] [my] own opinions and prejudices with the data," knowing that my primary goal was to "add to knowledge, not to pass judgment on a setting" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 33). Grounding my conclusions in the data helped ensure that my own past experiences and knowledge did not bias the results.

Clandinin & Connelly (2000) noted that being reflective about an experience helps "practitioners in any field maintain an educative sense of critique and growth," suggesting that researchers utilize "dual field texts" consisting of "field notes turned outward and … journal reflections turned inward" (p. 87). Before, during, and after each interview, I paused for self-reflection to document "speculation, feelings, problems, ideas, hunches, impressions, and prejudices" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 114). These "reflective fieldnotes" assisted in clarifying my "own relationship to the setting and of the evolution of the design and analysis" (Bogdan & Biklen, p. 114). As part of this reflection, I intensely reviewed my interview questions and the data I obtained to ensure I learned, and followed-up on, the participant's entire experience. This reflection process about my interview experiences and my thinking process during analysis also assisted in

the detection and evaluation of potential incidents of researcher bias, both during data collection and data analysis.

Data Management

Following each interview, I uploaded the digital recording onto my computer in a file labeled with the name of the participant. I also transcribed the interview into a Microsoft Word document titled with the name of the participant. A transcription service was not utilized; based on my recollection of each interview and my knowledge of the subject matter, I transcribed the interviews myself to ensure accuracy and to provide confidentiality to the participants. This also provided me with one additional interaction with the primary source data (the verbal interview).

In addition to the Word documents, I also utilized a qualitative research software program, *NVivo*, to assist with data analysis; therefore, a copy of each data set (each interview) was stored in this location as well on my computer. A hard copy of each transcribed interview was printed out and stored with my handwritten notes from each interview in individual files, one for each study participant. Both the paper files and the computer files were stored in my home office and accessed only by me.

Analysis Process

Within the field of qualitative research, my study sought to develop a framework (or theory) from the themes that emerged from the data. To do so, I incorporated an approach informed by the grounded theory methodology to analyze the data gathered from the participants. In *Discovering Grounded Theory*, Glaser and Strauss (1967) delineated how theory can be developed through a qualitative approach, using systematic

data collection and analytic procedures. This theory, grounded in the data, is referred to as "grounded theory." The purpose of the development of a grounded theory was explained by Strauss and Corbin (1998): "Grounded theories, because they are drawn from the data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action" (p. 12).

Since this methodology was introduced in 1967, Strauss and Corbin (1998) and others have outlined further practical procedures and techniques for the researcher. Charmaz (2006) did the same, while following a more constructivist view, emphasizing the researcher's role in working with the participant to determine the data. In all, a central feature of grounded theory is that "data collection, analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one other" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). Thus, theory is generated from the constant interplay of data collection, coding, and analysis.

Elaborating on the process of formulating a theoretical framework, Mills and Bettis (2006) echoed Charmaz's constructivist views:

The study involves both making sense of the research site and the participants' meanings in the context of larger theoretical ideas as well as making sense of the larger theoretical framework in light of the specific things learned in the research. Each perspective informs the other as the research brings both to bear in the interpretive process, and the multiple layers of the conversation make the research context speak to issues and in terms meaningful beyond its boundaries (p. 83).

Although for this study I did not incorporate grounded theory methodology in its entirety, I utilized key aspects of grounded theory to describe my research procedures

because they provided a clear, systematic way of conceptualizing my coding and analytic processes. Informed by grounded theory, the coding and analysis of the data began immediately and concurrently with data collection. Based on the constructivist approach discussed by Charmaz (2006), the research itself did not follow a linear model; it did, however, include initial coding, initial memos, focused coding, advanced memos, theoretical coding, and theoretical memos, all of which occured throughout the analytic process.

Coding began upon data collection and continued throughout the process, through the use of *NVivo*, computer software designed for qualitative data analysis. The analytic process included line-by-line coding, to fully ground my thinking in the participants' actual responses, and focused coding, to "separate, sort, and synthesize large amounts of data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 11). During coding, it became clear that certain themes were more analytical and more comprehensive than others. These became the basis for the theoretical codes that I used, as they "contain[ed] crucial properties that [made the] data meaningful and carr[ied] the analysis forward…[chosen for] their theoretical reach, incisiveness, generic power, and relation to other categories" (Charmaz, p. 139). The process of theoretical coding and, subsequently, theory development, was a challenging one; focusing my coding on actions rather than themes allowed me to more easily "[detect] sequences and [make] connections" (Charmaz, p. 136) and also assisted in moving beyond the "descriptive level…[into] explicating actions that constitute a process" (Charmaz, p. 137).

Data analysis was also enhanced by memo-writing and diagramming. Writing memos is the "pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers," as the researcher "constructs[s] analytic notes to explicate and fill out categories" and documents the connections between the data, codes, and concepts (Charmaz, 2006, p. 72). Creating diagrams combined the data, categories, and their relationships in a visual representation, assisting me in identifying connections, understanding relationships, and constructing analyses (Charmaz). These written and graphical representations helped me to explore ideas, to document my thinking about (and the constant comparison of) the data and the codes, to move along the continuum from "working with data to conceptualizing," and to make meaning of those concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 218). These features of the analysis became a cyclical process that led to a theory of the transition into the middle school principalship that was grounded in the data.

Ethical Considerations

Schram suggested treating those within the study as I would want to be treated, knowing that I "bear the responsibility to ensure that they are no worse off for having permitted [me] into their lives" (2006, p. 147). In all cases, I approached, spoke with, and regarded participants and those in their school environments with respect and gratitude, knowing that the participants "deposit a part of themselves, an image of who they are, into [my] safekeeping" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 83).

Given that, there were no physical or psychological risks associated with this study. Because the questions were not designed to solicit information of a deeply

personal nature about the participants or their colleagues, I did not expect any social risks

for the participants. Professional risks could have been present, however, depending on

the information that the participants chose to share regarding their work environment,

colleagues, and community. It was left to the discretion of the participants to determine

the content of their responses; to protect them professionally, I ensured confidentiality by

using pseudonyms for participants, school buildings, and school districts for all situations

in case anyone chose to disclose information that posed a risk in his/her profession. In

addition, all data was collected, analyzed, and stored by me, with only a review from a

doctoral colleague, in the role of peer debriefer, and my dissertation committee to ensure

confidentiality of participants' information.

Trustworthiness

The concept of trustworthiness (also termed "validity," "authenticity," or

"credibility") is "seen as a strength of qualitative research," referring to the accuracy of

the findings "from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an

account" (Creswell & Miller cited by Creswell, 2003, p. 195-6). To contribute to the

trustworthiness of the information gathered through the interview process, rapport-

building was vital to this study. I strived to build a positive relationship with each

participant in each aspect of our communication. Because of my current employment

position, I believe the participants were comfortable with me, knowing that we shared

similar educational backgrounds and experiences.

Throughout the data analysis process, I utilized peer debriefing from a doctoral

program colleague to provide me with feedback. This process "enhances[s] the accuracy

of the account" by involving a "peer debriefer who reviews and asks questions about the

… study so that the account will resonate with people other than the researcher"

(Creswell, 2003, p. 196). For the same reason, I also communicated regularly with

members of my dissertation committee. I further asked that they search for any potential

researcher bias, review coding and themes, and provide me with any other feedback and

insights.

Limitations of Research

The study is limited in generalizability due to non-randomized, yet purposeful,

sampling; however, I did not intend to generate generalizable conclusions from this

qualitative study. Instead, my goal was to develop a framework of the transition

experiences of the participants, grounded in the data.

Some readers may note that the designations used in this study were from 2007-

2008 or earlier and that more current report card data were not used. Even though the

designations were year-specific, those designations were used to calculate the more

general, non-time-bound, concept of school improvement. No matter in which year it

occurred, the participants in this study led their schools to improvement during their

transition period and beyond. This study should be viewed with a lens of school

improvement rather than focusing specifically on the specific school years the

improvement may have occurred.

Because this study is based on middle school principals who have led their

schools to improvement, there were no principal participants from middle schools that

have not shown improvement, or schools that have decreased in achievement. While the

focus on improvement was an integral component of this study, other researchers may

choose to extend the concept to study schools of varying degrees of improvement or non-

improvement, allowing for comparison between the transition experiences of the

principals at those schools.

A further limitation is that the potential for researcher bias existed in this study,

given that my background, experiences, and administrative role were similar to those of

the participants. As noted earlier, however, I incorporated a variety of strategies (self-

reflection, memo-writing, member checking, peer debriefing) to compensate for this

potential bias (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this chapter, a description of the background of the participants is presented to provide the reader with an understanding of the varying experiences of each middle school principal participant. In greater detail, the theory of the transition into the middle school principalship that was developed from the themes that emerged from the participants' experiences during their first 100 days of their current middle school principal positions is discussed. Further, an account is provided of these principals' perceptions of the factors that influenced their actions and decisions during their first 100 days, as well as their advice for new or current administrators to support future transitions into the middle school principalship.

Participant Demographics

All 10 participants were middle school principals who had been in their current position for less than four full years and had all led their current schools to improvement; yet, their backgrounds and experiences varied. Some of this difference was sought through purposeful sampling, with each of the 10 representing a different combination of initial state designation and district typology. A demographic questionnaire revealed the unique characteristics of each participant as he/she experienced the transition into his/her current middle school principal position.

Although it is important to document for the reader the varying characteristics represented in each demographic category, it is not my intent to depict the characteristics of each participant together with the characteristics of the school in which he/she served.

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When appropriate, either the initial state designation or the district typology, separately, may be included with the data to provide context; however, because of the limited number of schools with a specific initial state designation and in districts of a specific typology, to do so together in a table may allow readers to more easily identify an individual principal. Instead, to help to maintain the confidentiality of each participant, the responses of the 10 participants to the demographic questionnaire are presented in Table 6 without identifying school information. In addition, pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants.

Table 6

Participant Background Information

	Amy	Beth	Carl	Dan	Ed	Fred	Gary	Henry	Ian	Jack
Grades Served in Middle School	7-8	5-8	5-8	6-8	6-8	6-8	6-8	7-8	6-8	5-6
Degree Held	Master	Master	Master	Master	PhD	Master	Master	Master	Master	Master
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Age Range	40-49	50-59	30-39	40-49	30-39	50-59	40-49	30-39	40-49	30-39
Years of Education Experience[a]	16-20	26-30	11-15	21-25	6-10	30+	11-15	16-20	16-20	11-15
Years in Current Position[a]	3	2	4	3	2	3	2	2	4	4
Location Prior to Current Position:										
Same Building; Different Position		X							X	X
Same District; Different Building				X		X	X			
Same State; Different District	X		X		X			X		
Number of Principal Positions[b]	1	1	1	2	3	4	1	1	1	1
Years of Principal Experience[a]	3	2	4-5	4-5	6-10	16-20	2	2	4-5	4-5
Level of Principal Experience	Middle	Middle	Middle	Elem., Middle	All	Elem., Middle	Middle	Middle	Middle	Middle
Years of Assistant Principal Experience	2-5	2-5	2-5	2-5	0	2-5	6-10	2-5	1	2-5
Level of Assistant Experience	High	Middle	Elem., Middle	Elem.	N/A	Elem.	High	Middle	Middle	Middle
Years of Teacher Experience	6-10	16-20	2-5	11-15	2-5	11-15	6-10	11-15	6-10	2-5
Level of Teacher Experience	High	Elem., Middle	Altern. School	All	Middle	Elem.	High	High, Middle	Middle	Elem.
Other Experience	N/A	N/A	U.S. Navy	Adjunct Prof.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Admin. Intern	Curric. Teacher
EYP Program Participant	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

[a]Including current year. [b]Including current position.

In summary, the 10 participants in this study all shared common characteristics germane to this study, and they each possessed a particular combination of characteristics and experiences that made them distinct. Through purposeful sampling, using the multi-tier selection process described in Chapter III, the principals who participated in this study were each able to provide a unique perspective of their own experiences about a common concept, the transition into their current middle school principal positions.

Overview of Findings

After interviewing the 10 middle school principals regarding their transition experience, during the first 100 days of their middle school principalship, common themes emerged. These themes centered on a *transformation process*, commencing with positioning themselves *into* the new role, which often took place prior to even beginning the position, through establishing themselves *in* the new role, which took place during the first 100 days (approximately the first semester of the school year), and progressing to transforming themselves from the *new* principal to *the* principal, which followed the first 100 days and continued indefinitely. In each phase of this transformation process, these principals' experiences included their *transformation focus*, as they reflected on and attended to themselves, others, and the middle school building itself. Figure 2 depicts this theory of the transition into the middle school principalship that is based on the themes that emerged from the 10 principal participants.

Before First 100 Days	**Positioning Self *into* New Principal Role** Preparing Self Preparing Others Preparing Middle School

During First 100 Days	**Establishing Self *in* New Principal Role** Supporting Self Supporting Others Supporting Middle School

After First 100 Days	**Transforming Self from *New* Principal to *the* Principal** Enhancing Self Enhancing Others Enhancing Middle School

Figure 2. Theory of the transition into the middle school principalship, based on themes that emerged from 10 principal participants who have led their schools to improvement.

Description of Themes of Principals' Experiences during First 100 Days

In this section, the themes incorporated in the theory of the transition into the middle school principalship are provided in detail based on the interviews with the middle school principal participants of this study.

Positioning Self *into* New Principal Role

For each principal, the time period between when he/she first learned of the position and accepted the position and when he/she began the first day of work was markedly different. For some, they had the benefit of several months in between to prepare, while, for others, they began the position only a few days after acceptance. For all principals, however, this time was not spent idly; it was spent preparing in many ways, positioning themselves both mentally and physically into the new role.

Preparing self.

Because the principal role is intense and time-consuming, Henry, upon accepting the new position, went on vacation with his family and took time for himself before "getting into work mode." This pause, for him, was seen as critical so that, when he began his new role, he knew he was ready to devote the energy, time, and focus the position required. "I know I went on vacation after I found out, because I had to. For myself and my family. Then I came back early, and I started working here."

Other participants spent the initial days after accepting their new positions questioning if they had made the right decision. Beth had reluctantly applied after the former principal left unexpectedly; together, they had envisioned working as principal and assistant principal as a team until retirement. When the former principal left that

position, he strongly encouraged her to apply, even though she did not know if she was ready. She eventually agreed to apply, was offered the position, and now looks back with gratitude that her former supervisor motivated her to challenge herself in that way. Experiencing similar self-doubt, Ian shared, "I had a whole lot of questions in my mind. Was I really ready for this? It seemed to me that I was kind of rushing through the whole process of becoming an administrator."

Reflecting on how to know or how to determine *what to do*, Amy said she thought back to what she had done as an assistant principal, the activities and decisions that needed to be made to start prior school years, and then she mentally compared these actions with her new role to determine their appropriateness or necessity. Ian created a to-do list, thinking about "what was important" and documenting his personal reflections on what he would need to address "right off the bat to try and get our academics moving forward." Gary reflected on his strengths and weaknesses and how those pertained to his new position. He commented that one of his strengths was his knowledge of the high school in that same district and how he could use that to advance the superintendent's goal of improving the students' transition from middle school to high school; however, he recognized that his greatest weakness was that he had never been in a middle school before and that he would have to counter "what I knew I didn't know." He made it a priority to read about his new school and middle schools in general, to spend time in the building, and to spend time with staff, parents, and students as much as possible prior to beginning the school year.

Neither Gary nor Amy had taught in or been an administrator in a middle school before; therefore, they both spent time increasing their own knowledge of middle schools and middle level education, learning, as Amy stated, "what middle schools and middle school students are all about." Gary elaborated:

A huge transition for me was the fact that I'd never been in a middle school before, so I had to do a lot of reading. I spent July doing a lot of reading to discover what are major issues in middle schools across the country, what are trends. There were a lot of big surprises in everything I learned about middle school, as far as learning [about] middle schools in general…it was so different. So, I guess that was my big piece in July was just reading everything I could, starting with *This We Believe*. That's the foundation. I needed to have an understanding of that before we could address anything.

Preparing others.

Preparing: Staff. Before their positions even began, several participants were called upon to make staffing decisions in the summer (prior to their official start date) by interviewing and hiring instructional staff for their buildings. While this detracted from their personal time, they viewed it positively, in that they could begin affecting the composition of their building staff.

Depending on whether they were from outside the district or from inside the district, the participants' interactions with the established building staff differed accordingly. The four participants who were from a different district spent as much time as possible prior to starting their positions meeting with any building staff they could.

Amy, Carl, and Ed were introduced to staff members by the central office personnel whom they had met during the interview process, while Henry knew one staff member through an outside connection and contacted him upon acceptance of the principal position. For all four principals new to the district, they used these informal discussions to ask questions and to understand the perceptions of the staff regarding the building's strengths and weaknesses. Henry explained:

> I called a teacher who was at that point the PR spokesperson for the [teachers'
> union] association, but they are a teacher in the building, and they are somebody I
> had known through coaching. So there's a little bit of familiarity between us. I
> called him in and we had a conversation, just to kind of feel out what the mood of
> the staff was.

Ed telephoned each staff member to introduce himself and to hear their thoughts on the school. He took notes from these conversations:

> As you listen to that many people, you start to hear common themes. That really
> helps me, being new, to focus in on some areas where there's a very strong need,
> as evidenced by the people who work here, where there are some changes that
> need to occur. A lot of those things that come up are really small issues that can
> easily be fixed. When you go in and fix them, because they're real small and
> they're easy, then people start to feel like they're being heard. As people feel like
> they're being heard, then it starts to create a climate where people start to feel like
> they're part of the decisions that are being made.

The six participants who had previously been either in the same building or same district had prior relationships with and knowledge of staff members. They reflected on how knowing the staff made it easier to transition into the new role in that those relationships were already established. Beth commented:

> That made it a lot easier. I'm sure going into a setting where you're brand new to not only the building but to the district and everything else, I'm sure that could have been a lot more daunting than this. I had been here 5 years as an assistant. I know the staff, I know the district.

Correspondingly, other participants shared similar thoughts. Ian reported, "I already had worked here, too, so I wasn't coming in blind. It was a plus. I already knew the staff and I knew where to go." Dan said, "I had taught here, so I had some knowledge base of the building, and I knew most of the staff before I ever walked in."

After sharing how much he appreciated knowing many of the staff, since he had worked in the same district although not the same building, Gary discussed how he used his knowledge of the personnel to find out new information: "I talked to some people here at [the] middle school that I respected in different roles…I talked to them about what they perceived were the strengths and concerns, and what needed to be addressed."

While knowing the staff was seen as a benefit, Jack mentioned that he was also concerned that the staff would have a challenging time seeing him as the building principal, since that same staff had known him in a different position the previous year. He remarked that he used those conversations prior to actually starting the position to establish himself in his new role in the staff's view. Jack summarized:

The first part of that time was spent accepting all of the people who were coming

in to congratulate me, but me trying to use that as an opportunity with the staff

who were coming in, to get them to see me differently, seeing me not as the

assistant principal but as the principal.

In each case, regardless if the participant was new to the district and building, or

new to the building only, or had been in the building previously, they each shared how

important those initial relationships with staff were. They spent the time, prior to

beginning their new role, meeting and talking with as many staff members as they could,

not only to gather information about the building and about the staff's perceptions, but

also just to begin establishing the relationships that they knew would be important in the

future. As Fred explained, "We just kind of take a step back, watch…Get to know the

staff…There's a little bit of trust building that has to take place before we can all move

forward together."

Preparing: Administration. Because of the interview process and the fact that

many district administrators work on a year-round contract, administrators, per these

principal participants, were often the easiest group of individuals with whom to meet,

with whom to build or further relationships, and from whom to learn. During these initial

conversations, seven of the participants learned what the goals of the central office were

for the middle school building. This will be more fully described later in this chapter in

the section on external influences, specifically from the superintendent and central office

administration. In summary, Gary explained that, from the interview process and from

conversations with these administrators, he "had a pretty clear picture of what some of the needs were…I was aware of what I needed to address."

For those who were new to the district, these relationships were the first to be established. Ed met with the business manager, after meeting him during the interview process, for additional information about the district and the middle school. The business manager took him on a tour of the district and shared information about the community, the buildings, and his own perceptions. Also new to his district, Carl met with the superintendent, whom he had known previously from a former project they had worked on together: "I knew him coming in, and we…talked quite a bit."

Other participants shared that they sought out the former principal of the building as an information source, spending time, as Fred mentioned, "meeting with the person who was transitioning out." At the same time, they were also cognizant of that individual's feelings regarding leaving the building, depending on the situation that preempted it. Ian remarked that he asked himself:

> What are those things that [the] principal [who was] here before me, what are all those things that he does each and every year to get ready? And, so, one of the first things that I did was to sit down with him. We went over a whole bunch of things to make sure that I was getting things ready and I was going to be on the right page so, when it came to the first day of work, I could hit the ground running and know what I really needed to do.

He acknowledged, though, that, while the former principal was a strong source of information, he "didn't call him about everything [because] he felt bad about leaving

here…he didn't necessarily want to go to the other building." Similarly, Dan "tried not to overstep my bounds" even though the current principal at the time invited him, in April, when he knew he was going to be the new principal, to come to the building to meet with the staff and to meet with him. Dan conveyed that he did not feel comfortable appearing to want to "take over" while the principal was still there. "I waited until the timing was right because I didn't want to overstep my bounds." Then he met with the principal to learn about the building, and the principal introduced him to key staff members.

In some buildings, due to the larger size, there was an administrative team for the middle school, consisting of a principal and at least one assistant principal. Participants in buildings with assistants referenced the relationships they established with these individuals, noting how beneficial they were. Jack, who had been the previous assistant, was called upon immediately to hire his own new assistant principal. He was grateful for the opportunity to make this selection so he could ensure that they shared the same philosophy. Gary noted that he was comfortable accepting the principal role because he already knew well the two assistant principals with whom he'd be working. He commented that, because he had "a real trust level and a real working relationship with them," his conversations with them, upon his acceptance of the new position, helped him immensely as he learned about the school and set goals for the beginning of the school year. Gary also shared how helpful it was to have assistant principals with experience at both elementary and middle school, since his experience had been at the high school

level: "That was a neat dynamic…because now I was bringing a high school principal perspective and here we are meeting in the middle."

Preparing: Parents/community. Stressing how important relationships with parents and the community are, the participants in the study were able to meet some parents prior to beginning their position, although the opportunities to do so were more limited than they were when meeting administration and staff. "Reaching out to PTA leadership" was one strategy mentioned by Jack; finding the names of those individuals and initiating contact through a telephone call was Ed's method of accomplishing this. Carl had a daughter in a neighboring school system who played softball, so he had the opportunity to meet parents informally at sporting events during the summer. Beth, who had been in the building previously, pointed out that she had the benefit of already knowing the parents and, therefore, had informal conversations with them prior to beginning her position. When talking with parents, these participants hoped to introduce themselves as the new building principal, establish relationships, and learn about perceptions of the school.

Preparing: Students. Students, similar to parents and community members, were difficult for the participants to meet prior to the school year beginning, although some were able to do so. For those who were unable to meet directly with students at this time, some participants shared that they spent this time prior to beginning their positions reflecting on, as Amy stated, "how best to help students" and meet their needs, both academically and socially, when the school year began in the fall. Ian elaborated, "What stuck out to me right away was kids need to be in this building," based on his reflections

of how to improve education for the students in his school and noting the poor attendance rate from previous years.

Some of those who had previously worked in the building or district, or who lived in the community, were able to speak with students informally. Community events and sporting events were mentioned, by Gary, as convenient forums to accomplish this. When meeting with students, these participants established or furthered their relationships with them, and some asked questions of the students about what they, as Dan explained, "enjoyed most about the school and what they would like to see changed."

Preparing middle school.

Preparing: Data. Reviewing data during this time period prior to beginning the official position was discussed by each participant in some way. Whether it was to prepare for the interview process by gathering background information on a school's performance, or it was after being hired for the position to prepare for the upcoming school year, each principal spent time looking at data, especially the school's state report card. Ed also reviewed the school's website for additional information: "I pulled up their website, read over their demographics. I pulled up their report cards for the last two or three years and took a look at how they had been doing as a district and… as a school."

Those who were hired internally, from either the building or the district, had prior knowledge of the building data, but still spent time studying the information anew. Although he had been working in the same district, Dan was able to detect a weakness that he had not previously realized: "Our school was in continuous improvement year

one, we had not met AYP for two or three years. Math was a weakness. I sat with our

data, especially we were getting hit hard on our IEP students." Ian used the data to create

a to-do list for the year:

> The biggest to-do list was looking at test scores and seeing what the needs of the
>
> students were, why weren't we performing, and where were our gaps. And what
>
> was going to be addressed right off the bat to try and get our academics moving
>
> forward.

Because student achievement is the primary focus of an instructional leader, this

review of the data assisted the participants as they mentally prepared for the upcoming

school year and as they set priorities for the school.

Preparing: Logistics. Throughout each interview, the participants discussed the

aspects of the principal role that they began prior to officially starting their position that

they considered "management activities," per Fred; "'administrivia' stuff," per Jack; and

"the goofy, stupid stuff," per Henry. Understanding how things worked in the new

building, where things were, what was in place, and preparing for the school year were

discussed. Henry said he went to his new building, "moved my office around and just

tried to find stuff." He comically elaborated, "I'm here by myself, and I can't find

anything. I can't find paper. How do I use the copy machine? How do I print?" Amy

found a guidance counselor in the office one day during the summer and began asking

questions: "I asked, how does this work? I did this for everything, from a student calling

in absent at the beginning of the day to ending the day, IEPs, the processes. Just, what

were the processes? How were things operating?" During that conversation, she also

began planning in her mind what she might change and how she would do things differently.

Henry experienced concern when he learned that "both classified and certified unions had given strike notices. Both negotiations had reached an impasse." He spent his summer reading through the prior contracts and meeting with the administrative team in preparation for a strike in the fall, which, fortunately, did not occur. Others spent time reviewing and finalizing the building schedule and student schedules, reviewing student placement, reading the student handbook and teacher handbook, reading the union contracts, walking through the building, looking through IEPs and 504s, and making notes of any questions they had or changes they wished to make.

Preparing: Culture. Many participants mentioned that they were aware, or that they were made aware through their conversations with central office administration, staff members, parents, and/or students, that the school culture was an aspect they were expected to improve. They spent this time before officially beginning their principal positions learning about the school culture from others and planning for ways to address the needs.

The superintendent in one district specifically instructed the new principal, Carl, to focus on discipline in the middle school, to create a culture where there were clear standards and expectations for students, and where the teachers felt supported. Carl shared that the superintendent "knew that basically there wasn't a whole lot [I was] going to be able to do except observe, and do the discipline."

In another school, because Jack was the former assistant principal in the same building, he knew that he needed to change the school culture and the community's and staff's perception of that culture:

> I knew it going in. That was one of the things that I had seen in my two years as an assistant principal. I saw it my first year, and then I saw it even more my second year. And those were with two different principals. But, central office was very much in tune with the need. We were very much agreed with what needed to happen. So I would say it wasn't them telling me as much as it was us having a conversation. Me bringing my ideas forward, and them going, yeah, you're right, we need to do that.

Gary similarly described knowing from his own experience in that same district, and hearing from the central office administration, that school culture needed to be addressed. Because of this knowledge, he spent the summer talking with stakeholders, "getting their feedback on what their concerns were with [the] climate and culture of the building." He found those conversations and his own personal reflection valuable, because it gave him time to plan for the school year, knowing that school culture "was something that was immediate that I could impact, that I could do something about."

Summary: Positioning self into new principal role.

Prior to officially beginning the new position, some participants were able to spend much time preparing for their new role, while others had only a few short days to do so. In all cases, however, each participant took time to mentally prepare themselves for the principalship, to begin to build the necessary relationships with school

stakeholders, and to learn as much as possible about the middle school building. This

time period quickly proceeded to the official start date of the new principal role, which

began the first 100 days of the transition experience.

Establishing Self *in* New Principal Role

Principals, at all levels of K-12 education, begin their positions prior to the

teachers' and students' first day of school. This time period, for new and returning

principals, is spent preparing the building for the upcoming school year. Once the school

year begins, when teachers and students are in the classroom working through the

curriculum the school and state have set forth, principals are serving as instructional

leaders, ensuring that teachers have the resources they need to teach effectively.

During interviews with the 10 principal participants in this study, the initial focus

of their first 100 days was on establishing themselves as the new principal in a number of

ways: they spent time supporting themselves, others, and the school building.

Supporting self.

Supporting: Self. As they officially began their new principal positions, the

participants spent time increasing their own knowledge and self-awareness in order to

successfully establish themselves in the role of building principal.

Some participants shared their own personal revelations about the principal

position. Jack compared his new role to that of being an assistant principal: "That was

one thing that was probably most shocking for me was how different the positions really

are. You don't really know until you get there, I think." Beth said that she did not think

"about the distinction between being the assistant and being the principal" until staff

members started treating her differently and bringing different issues to her than they did before. Ian realized that he needed to rely more on his building administrative team and delegate certain responsibilities. Having only a leadership intern and a formerly retired administrator serving as a part-time assistant, he commented that "that really defined me as the administrator, the only administrator, the one who all staff came to;" however, he said, "I did a whole lot by myself. There were a lot of nights that I wasn't rolling out of here until 10:00 at night because I was taking on a whole lot more than I really even needed to." Fearful that the new position would take her "further from the students," Beth was pleasantly surprised: "I found out that actually that's a good transition, if you have those doubts about that contact with kids, you still do have a lot more of that contact with kids than you realize."

Understanding their own values and vision was an important component for some, and then sharing it with others became their focus. Having worked in the same building for two years previously, Jack spent his time forging renewed relationships with stakeholders because "they hadn't seen me in the role as principal yet. They needed to see and get a feel for what I believed and what my vision for the building and the different departments would be, and what my values are." Dan focused on his personal belief that all students can learn and that, if all students are expected to perform on the state tests, they should all be in the same curriculum. He furthered that with his teaching staff and made changes in the educational structure of the school based on that belief. Gary "wanted to model by example what my hopes and expectations were of all faculty."

Henry stated, "I just expected more; I expected better. I talked that and that was basically our attitude, that we can do better with this, and we did."

Many participants shared how they knew and learned *what to do* as a principal. Three had been principals before and so relied on that experience in their new role. Those who were new to the principalship described more thoroughly this process of establishing themselves as the principal when they had not yet been a principal before. Beth indicated that it "took that first year…to learn and observe." Gary reported that he "started reading and researching, conferences, and looking at what some other schools have done" to understand what he should expect and on what he should focus. Coming from a high school position, he "asked a lot of questions. This was all so new to me…I had never been in a middle school." Jack commented:

> I didn't have a whole lot of insight into what the principalship in this building was all about. Some of it was just on-the-job training, an entire year of firsts. It was the first time I did this; it was the first time I did that…It was a little bit of a learning process to figure out how to manage all that.

Amy elaborated on the process of learning:

> I asked a lot of questions. I had a lot to find out in a short amount of time, so I tried to find out before everything came up. If I didn't ask the questions, things never came up. If I didn't anticipate to say, how does this operate or how does that operate, what's coming up this month that I need to know about, they would just creep on me and I would be like, Oh! You're kind of caught off guard, and having to make up for lost time if it wasn't something that you had anticipated.

There was nobody who said, this is coming up and you have to get ready for it. It

was just, boom, there it is, so that was tough…It just kind of grew into whatever I

would think about I would ask about, and as I would get an answer, it would spur

another question from me. But, if I didn't think of another question, nobody

would fill in that gap…And knowing then, as you are finding out, oh my gosh,

I've got to do that differently just for my own sanity, for success while I'm here.

Appreciative of his past experience as an assistant principal in a different district,

working with a principal who had previously been retired, Henry relied on that working

knowledge when beginning his current position:

I got to do a lot of stuff as an assistant principal that most assistants don't get to

do. I ran the department meetings. I did all the special education. I had a lot of

opportunities for educational leadership as opposed to just discipline, so I was

fortunate.

Supporting: Mentors. Throughout the interviews with the 10 participants, the

theme of mentoring and collaboration was significant. While no participants spoke of

formal mentors, even though four had been assigned a formal mentor through the EYP

program, all participants spoke of individuals from whom they learned specifics about the

building and district and/or general advice about leadership. Clarifying why finding a

mentor is so critical for a principal, Jack conveyed: "It's easy to be on an island. They

are lonely positions… There is comfort in collaborating and being a team."

Not finding a mentor or a collaborative colleague in her own district, Amy created

her own network of administrators with whom she could discuss situations, receive and

provide advice, and "just talk things over." In a prior position in a different district, she had been a part of an administrative group, comprised of administrators from a variety of district and building levels in the same county, which met monthly. Because she had found that collaboration so beneficial, she recreated the same concept with an existing group she was a part of in her current position:

> So not only are you in the first 100 days trying to find out how everything operates, if you are lucky enough to have a mentor, that would be a huge help. There was no mentor. It was just, welcome…It would help tremendously in the first 100 days if there were somebody from the district that could say, be ready for this, this is coming up, or at least ask, have you prepared, or at least talk about it. Communication is just a huge piece of the puzzle, and, when it's missing, that just makes every day challenging…I found a group kind of like [a former administrative group I was a part of] but it's our athletic league, and we meet as league principals, and we really talk more about sports, but then I started to say, is there any way we can add to this agenda? I said, this is what we used to do in [my previous county]. They loved the idea, so we all started to do stuff like that. They were a huge help.

In contrast, many participants were able, and grateful, to find informal mentors within their own district. Some of these informal mentors were from the central office, while others were peers (principals in other buildings within the district), and still others were assistant principals on the middle school administrative team with whom the participant worked daily. In a high-performing district, Jack shared:

> I have close relationships with all the other administrators. The coordinator of
> pupil services, we talk all the time. And I have a great relationship with the
> superintendent. He's the kind of guy that I can call, and I can just ask, or I can
> just say, I don't know what to do in this situation, what advice do you have? And
> he'll offer it…I could call any of the K-4 principals and ask them for information
> or reach out to them. In recent years, I've really reached out to the [7-8] middle
> school principal, because we're now starting to deal with some of the same issues.
> I think it's just a combination of all those people in the district who've been
> supportive.

Beth named several individuals in the central office, as well as each of the building principals in the district, whom she calls regularly to ask questions, discuss situations, and seek advice. They spend time "bouncing ideas off of each other before we have to make a decision…It's not the kind of situation where you would feel uncomfortable asking for advice or help from somebody, which is a good position to be in."

Identifying one or two specific individuals in the district, several participants delineated their gratitude for the help and communication they had received. In a small, rural district, Dan often sought out the former principal, who was now in a central office position, and the superintendent:

> So, I would go to those two for help. Some things would go on, and I would ask
> them if it was normal. They would laugh and say…it's another day at the middle
> school. Another day of business. I said, I'm just making sure I'm on track.

In another small district, Ed, who had previously worked in a private school, specified the Director of Pupil Services as someone who had served in an informal mentoring role:

> I relied on her a lot. I called her up a lot and asked her different questions. I had a learning curve with a lot of the public sector type things, coming from the private schools, so she was a big help to me. She's left this year, we have somebody else, but she was definitely my biggest help last year.

After relying initially on the former principal for advice and information, Ian sought out a principal from the same district with whom he had already established a level of trust and camaraderie. Speaking of their collaborative rapport: "It just stuck. She's somebody who I always call." He continued by sharing some of the reasons he contacts her: "Have you ever had a student do this? What do you do? Some of those things come up…It just made sense to call her because she had dealt with, and she still does, some of the same families."

Two of the participants spoke highly of the relationships they had built with their assistant principals at the middle school, individuals who served as informal mentors and were valuable sources of information. Henry remarked that the assistant, who had been in the building for several years, may have been disappointed that he himself had not been offered the principal position; however, the assistant principal was extremely professional and supportive of Henry, and they became collegial and collaborative. Gary, who had close personal relationships with both of his assistant principals prior to even accepting the position, described how much he depended on them for mentoring, support, and information:

It was such a benefit of knowing, of having a relationship with both of them

already. I had faith and trust in them. If I was coming in with two strangers, I

don't know if I would have. And maybe that's not right, and maybe that's not

fair. But, let's face it, even if I would have worked with them but didn't have the

personal relationship, I would have listened to them and valued their professional

opinion, but I'm still just getting to know them… But I've known both of them

for four or five years outside of a professional relationship so I leaned on them

tremendously.

Supporting others.

Supporting: Staff. Supporting staff members by building relationships with

them, setting clear goals for them and with them, and by providing the necessary

resources to meet those goals were interconnected themes expressed by the 10

participants during our interviews.

Referencing the establishment of relationships with staff, participants were varied

in their approaches; some were renewing and/or furthering relationships that already

existed, because they had previously worked with the same individuals, while others were

building brand new relationships as they entered the building for the first time. Having

served as assistant principals in their current buildings, two participants expressed how

helpful it was to have already established a level of trust with the staff. Beth felt that her

"role with the staff did change slightly" in that they interacted with her for different

reasons as the principal versus the assistant principal; however, their level of familiarity

and trust remained the same. Jack shared:

I've been in the district my entire career…and I've developed a lot of

relationships throughout the district that seemed to help me. I've had the ability

to have close relationships with people who were in the building, and people who

were on that building leadership team, so we were able to work effectively there.

He continued by describing the positive reaction of the staff to the major decision he

made at the beginning of the year to return grant money because the grant included

components, one of which was merit pay, with which they were not comfortable:

What I needed my staff to see was that I was interested in, not just the money and

the merit pay, and all the things that come with that, but I was interested in what

was happening to our school. And that was a big part of my ability to begin to

develop the important relationships within this building that were going to help

me be successful.

For participants who were new to the building and/or district, immediately

initiating relationships with staff was an important goal. Several participants detailed

specific actions they undertook to meet the staff and to learn their perspective on the

school and its progress. A first-time principal, Amy explained:

One of the first things I did was to have the staff make an appointment with me so

that I could meet them and talk about who they were, what their teaching style

was, what they really liked about the building, what they would change if they

had a chance to change something about the building…One [component] was an

academic goal for each teacher for the year. So, in the first conversation that I

had with them, I had them leave and think about an academic goal that they wanted to accomplish for the year, and then they came back and gave it to me. Sharing a similar idea, Ed, who had been a principal in three other buildings, also contacted staff to provide an opportunity for them to meet with him:

I think probably the best thing I've ever done at all three buildings where I've been principal was to contact every person I'd be working with by phone to introduce myself and give them the opportunity to come in and sit down. In this setting here, it was within the first two days I was here, I contacted everybody, from teachers, to custodians, to secretaries, to food service, and just introduced myself and invited them to come in and sit down. I probably had a third to a half of them actually come in and sit down and talk. What I find helpful about that is it gives me an opportunity to meet them and just listen, and hear what they perceive as the building they work in, the good, bad, the things that need to be improved. …Within those first several days, too, I sat down formally with the principal of curriculum, athletic director, the guidance counselor who was new starting off, too.

Two participants, Gary and Henry, shared a strategy that they both used to learn the names of staff members before the opening day: they made and studied flashcards with the photo, name, and position of each individual. Both recalled positive reactions from the staff when they realized the principal had taken the time to learn about them. Gary described the activity and its results:

I felt this was very important, because I wanted to model by example what my

hopes and expectations were of all faculty of getting to know people, whether it

was the students, the kids…So the first day when they came in, I was very excited

about the success I had. I saw people and said, Hi Judy, or Hi Todd. And right

away, I felt that that…they were very surprised and very shocked by all of that. I

think that really…I received a lot of positive feedback from teachers about that.

Even just a reaction to when I knew who they were before we were introduced.

Where I said, you must be so-and-so, and you teach seventh graders. I think that

helped with my credibility with teachers right out of the chute. It seems like

simple, basic stuff, but it really did help me.

Gary also sent an opening letter to each staff member, introducing himself to them,

describing his background and family, and explaining that he was "not coming in here

with a bunch of answers and solutions; I'm coming in with a bunch of questions, and I'm

real anxious to learn and observe and assess."

Being visible, walking into classrooms, observing, and learning were other

strategies employed by some participants. "I walk around. I used the model of

administration by walking around," was how Carl described it. Henry explained that he

and the assistant principal visited classrooms regularly for informal visits: "From the first

day of school on, we were very, very big into walkthrough observations, so we set the

tone from the first week. Between the two of us, we've done probably close to 500-600

walkthroughs."

Along with "getting to know your staff, walking the halls, you observe and look," Dan went on to explain how he learned detailed information from individual staff members with whom he established immediate connections:

Where I learned a lot…was from my secretary. She had been here. She was wonderful. She helped me so much. She gave me pointers…Then, I had one or two teachers who were kind of friends of mine. I had to be careful not to overstep my bounds. They gave me a lot of pointers, too. I have one; I can go to him for anything. He is wanting to be a principal someday. He's just good, an all-around team player. Then I have a PE teacher. He's outstanding. He's someone who I can go to if I need to gripe to for a few minutes. There are some who are strictly business and professional. There are some, you know what they can be like, so you just keep them close to your side.

In a school where the administrative "turnover rate has been tremendous," Fred described his experiences supporting the staff, meeting with them, and developing open communication with them, which was something they had not had before:

In the last 15 to 17 years, they've had seven principals…It put this group of teachers somewhat behind the eight-ball, because it seemed like every time they turned around, they were getting a new building leader. A new building leader means new ways of doing things. So, getting to know the staff during the first 100 days was really important…Over the course of opening the school, coming into my office in August, up through the first day of school and the two mandatory professional development days, people stopped in and had

conversations. I talked to people about coaching positions, supplemental contract positions, programming. You get to know your secretaries and your custodians. They're very important people. You don't shy away from them…I carried with me things from [previous schools]. Things that I've always done that I thought were positive things, mostly communication kinds of things: weekly bulletin, use of email, verbally talking to folks, office door is always open, those kinds of those things. I don't think those things existed when I got here.

Preparing for the opening staff meeting was another action that had to take place immediately upon beginning the principal position. Beth chose to focus that first staff meeting on the improvement that the school had made with student academic achievement and growth, as well as explaining an unfortunate reduction in force that had just occurred due to decreased enrollment. While part of the meeting was positive, the other part was directed at trying to maintain that positive momentum with the reality of doing so with less staff. Ian, who had previously worked in the same building, chose to focus the staff meeting on team building activities rather than logistics: "A lot of times, that stuff can easily be read and done instead of somebody standing up and giving it to you." Instead, they took part in "fun" activities, "just getting the teachers working together and all on the same page, so that they knew we were all going to be moving in the same direction."

In some cases, participants made small changes right away regarding teacher meetings and collaboration time, based on their observations and what they heard from staff conversations. Other participants spent time in teacher meetings, working with them

on improving student learning. Effective meetings, then, was a theme that was evident throughout many participant interviews. Several participants spent time in department meetings, team meetings, professional learning communities (PLCs), and at staff meetings talking with teachers, getting to know them, "looking at the test item analysis," per Henry; "trying to break the data down for them so that they can see what is truly…what we're able to celebrate and what we need to work on," per Jack; and "asking a lot of questions," per Gary.

Fred was able to provide three professional waiver days for collaboration. In addition, he chose to use staff meeting time for instructional discussions with colleagues, as PLCs, rather than using it as a venue to "sit down and talk about demerits and gum-chewing and that kind of stuff." In a similar situation, where collaboration time was not "built into their schedules," as is the case in many schools, Gary was also able to provide time for teachers to meet during the day:

> Something I was hearing was they didn't have time to meet with their curriculum teachers, math teachers with math teachers, science with science. There was very little interaction. I guess this is kind of…they identified this, but this is something I knew we needed to address…I started forcing more collaboration between our math teachers and our special ed teachers. Our special ed teachers were saying, we're not experts in how to teach math. In fact, they didn't even have all the resources, I found out. They were creating all their math lessons and materials, which was…So we started providing that for them. Now, on the other hand, we had math teachers who weren't experts in handling special needs kids, and how

do we do that? So we started sharing some team time and how they supported

each other.

It was utilizing half-days, teacher work days, but it was also, OK, we're

going to get subs for the social studies teachers so they can get together for a half

day. It was a little bit of everything. And, again, it was me going to them and

saying, what do you need? Well, we'd like this. And, I'd say, OK, what's your

rationale? It wasn't real loose, the fact of, hey, we want a half day, and I rubber

stamped, OK, it's yours. It was them coming to me and saying here's an

objective we need to accomplish, here's our rationale, and we're requesting a

half-day. And then my question would be what results do you believe you're

going to achieve and when will you assess what you did?

An experienced principal, Ed made small changes in order to involve

staff members in dialogue and decision-making. He immediately began a "faculty staff

forum," a concept he had used at his previous schools to provide an opportunity for staff

members to "set the agenda, they can show up and, along with the team, and we sit there

and listen, and go from there." Another new committee, the "academic council," was

also formed by Ed, made up of representatives from each teaching team and each content

area to focus "on strictly academic issues and where we want to go with things."

Another theme regarding supporting staff that was noted from the participants'

interviews was the theme of providing resources and necessary training for teachers, so

that they can provide the best possible education for their students. Identifying a need

within the first 100 days for professional development was often the result of a change

that had been made in programming or staffing prior to the participant becoming the principal. After mandates at the end of the prior year from the central office administration required additional sections of language arts in the middle school schedule at his school, Fred sought out and procured training for his staff in implementing language into their instruction. Another participant faced a similar situation. Upon his entry into his position, Ed heard from a number of teachers that they did not feel prepared to incorporate reading and writing in the content areas, as set forth by the prior principal and the superintendent at the conclusion of the previous year:

> One of the things that came out loud and clear when I sat down with all those faculty to begin the year, was that they really had no concept of what they were supposed to do with that. One of the first things we did was to get a lady here to do a professional development here on reading in the content area, and then we followed that up with some other internal stuff here…There are varying accounts of this, but it sounded like the last day of school, they were told, we're switching to reading in the content area, and they had the summer to stew about it and not really know what to do. There was a lot of uneasiness on their part when the school year began, and rightly so, I think.

Other participants identified a need for professional development following changes they had made themselves during the first 100 days. After altering the special education programming to inclusion, rather than "pull-out," because he felt strongly that if students are tested on the same material, they should be able to access the same curriculum, Dan provided training on inclusion and co-teaching, had teachers attend

workshops, and also worked with the educational service center (ESC) to assist teachers with the new inclusion model:

> Some of the teachers had a difficult time with special ed kids in their classes…We have come a long way to where the staff has accepted the students as our students. But it took a while…They did not want to do inclusion at all...I did send some to training, inclusion training. We did a lot of workshops with the ESC and things like that. And using the co-teaching model, we did some work with that.

Carl, too, was able to immediately incorporate inclusion at one grade level, fifth, and he provided the necessary training to the teachers who would be implementing it.

Supporting: Administration. In addition to building staff, many participants spoke of the other administrators in their buildings and districts, how they worked with those administrators, supported them, and learned from them. Having worked previously within the same district, Jack noted:

> I have close relationships with all the other administrators. The coordinator of pupil services, we talk all the time. And I have a great relationship with the superintendent. He's the kind of guy that I can call, and I can just ask, or I can just say, I don't know what to do in this situation, what advice do you have? And he'll offer it…I think it all comes down to what your relationships are like, and I at least had a jump on, having been inside the district for a long time, the benefit of having a lot of years in those relationships.

Gary, who also worked in the same district as his current role, relied on and supported the administrators with whom he had worked at the high school level, especially when they

planned and implemented a transition program for middle school to high school students: "When I switched positions, I still only had control over one side, but my relationships with [administrators] at the high school made it much easier."

Fred described the number of meetings administrators had to attend, together, in preparation for the school year to begin. While this detracted from his time in the building, he also saw it as a valuable opportunity for collaboration and for learning together with his colleagues. Henry recounted a unique situation in which he and the other district administrators "had to pull together": the certified and non-certified unions had both filed strike notices in the summer. The administrators, then, "had to prepare for that kind of contingency, starting the school year without any [staff]. It was not something I want to do again." Once the possibility of a strike ended, the administrative team in the district "went on an administrative retreat…We sat down and talked about goals for the year." In both cases, preparing for the strike and then preparing for the school year, Henry articulated how important the relationships among the administrative team were as he navigated his first 100 days.

References to the building administrative team were made by those participants who worked with assistant principals and other building leaders at the middle school. In his school, Jack had to hire a new assistant even before beginning his first 100 days. He spent the beginning of his principal role helping the new assistant learn the position, feeling fortunate that they had a personal relationship and a trust level that enabled them to work well together immediately. Likewise, Beth worked with central office administration to hire a new assistant principal, her replacement. The individual chosen

was actually not titled an assistant principal due to certification, but she felt that he had done a professional job thus far, and she spent time supporting him in that new role: "It's a great experience for him. And, actually, it will work out, it will encompass his internship, so when he's finished, he will have that already done."

Also promoted from the assistant principal role in the same building, Ian faced a unique situation. Rather than hire a full-time replacement for him, the district hired a retired principal to work part-time as an assistant principal, and they placed a "leadership intern" (a teacher who was training to be an administrator) in his building as well. Ian spent the first part of his principal position handling most of the decisions and actions himself, and being instructed to "teach [the intern] everything that you know as a principal." He concluded, "So, the beginning of the year, having a leadership intern who's asking me all kinds of questions, having a retired administrator who was not here all of the time,…we didn't make a whole lot of changes right away."

In his first 100 days, Ed chose to restructure the administrative organization in the middle school, and he felt the changes were positive ones:

> We restructured how things run around here administratively. I formed what I
> call an administrative team, that's myself… We have a little different situation
> here. We have a woman who's been with the district a number of years and her
> role is called Principal of Curriculum. She does a lot of the roles that a traditional
> assistant would do, with some additional responsibilities in the curriculum areas.
> Our administrative team is myself, her, our athletic director, who teaches physical
> education here, and our guidance counselor. So we meet weekly just to touch

base and let everybody kind of update each other on what's going on in our areas. We talk about activities that are coming up in the week or the month, to make sure we have coverage for different activities.

Talking through decisions with other administrators, especially those in the central office, during their transition, was mentioned by several participants. Observing a need for a change in school culture, Jack explained that his communication with the central office administrators involved a mutual acknowledgement of that issue and a supportive stance from them, knowing that he could make the necessary changes. In addition, he also referenced a conversation he had with the superintendent about a difficult decision he was facing. Based on staff mistrust, he recommended that the school return a sizeable grant, because with the grant came certain parameters of which the staff was not accepting. "There was a lot of dialogue between myself and the members of central office, but in the end, we realized we could take what we learned in that year and implement it, using *our* resources, effectively." A supportive relationship between Carl and his central office, which, in his small district, was simply the superintendent, was appreciated: "He lets me do what I need to do…I try to do my best to keep him from being blindsided on anything…If I think there's something important, his office is right there, so I'll just go tell him."

While the value of communication with administration was mentioned by participants when speaking of their first 100 days, the lack of communication, and its challenges, was discussed by Amy. In her unique situation, she had worked as an interim principal for one year, and then began as the principal, officially, the following year. In

her second year at the school, her first official year as principal, a new superintendent

was hired whose main purpose, as directed by the board of education, was to pass the

school levy. Amy recounted the communication with both superintendents:

> The [first] superintendent would come down, and we would sit down, and I would
>
> ask him more philosophical kinds of questions about where he saw the middle
>
> school going, how the middle school operated in the district picture, did he want
>
> to continue that, what his thoughts were for having a new person, and what kind
>
> of changes…But then when a new superintendent comes in the picture, things that
>
> you had in mind to do, then you've got to go over that with him and see what his
>
> philosophy is, and if that's the direction. Then, too, with him not around [due to
>
> the levy], it was very difficult to get that communication piece.

Supporting: Parents/community. Establishing relationships with parents and

community members and finding ways to support and encourage their involvement in the

school and in their children's education were goals of many of the participants in those

first 100 days. Although Gary lived and had previously worked in the community, he

began the school year by introducing himself to the parents formally: "With parents, I

also sent out a letter to all the parents introducing myself. I explained to them some ways

they were going to hopefully become part of the climate and culture of the building." He

continued:

> But most of that was informal. I live here in the community. I have a knowledge
>
> of many of the families. Some people have older siblings at the high school. Just
>
> interaction at the ballpark, little league fields, ice rink, neighborhood

get-togethers, community days. I could go on and on. So much of that feedback

was just very informal and listening to what their concerns were.

Jack, who also had previously worked in the same district as his current position, as well

as in the same building, appreciated the relationships he already had with parents:

"Through that role [as the former assistant principal], I had also developed, even with

those students that I was providing discipline for, I had developed a strong reputation and

a strong set of relationships with parents." Similarly, Dan, who had been the principal of

the elementary building in the same district as his current middle school, described his

relationships with the parents of his new school as well as the struggles of involving them

in the school:

I already knew most of the parents, because I had been with them since first

grade. So I was with them first through fifth. When they came to middle school,

I just came on over. I've been with those students since first grade, so I knew

most of the parents. And now it's getting scary, because some of the parents I'm

working with, I actually taught…I have a couple parents when we do some stuff

that will give some input. We had a school improvement night, but we don't get

many. We try to encourage them to come, but it's hard. We had maybe four

parents.

Both from urban districts, two participants shared similar struggles with getting

parents involved in the school and in their children's education. Ian detailed the creative

strategies that he began within his first 100 days for doing so:

We had a lot of opportunities for parents to come in. Now, in my neighborhood, did parents come in? No. I had to come up with all kinds of tricks and tidbits to get some parents to come in. Giving away free grocery carts, having pizza night. I found that if my parents have a chance to have fun, they'll come in. But if they're not going to have fun, if I tell them we're talking about ways they can help their kids with the OAT tests, I get nobody that shows up. But if I have karaoke night, I have 40-50 parents beating the door down wanting to sing with the karaoke machine. So calling it something and then sneaking that bit of education into it, works with my parents, kind of like you do with kids in the classroom sometimes. You need to lure them down the road with some goodies of some sort to get them to fully understand the concept.

Imaginative methods also worked well for Fred, the other participant from an urban district, who immediately began incorporating ways to welcome parents into the school and to offer them assistance in helping their children with their education:

What we've done with Title I funding is to try and stimulate [parental involvement]. We've had…three interim report card pick up nights. We go from 3:30-7:30. We get the parents in to pick up interim report cards. Our Title I tutors have sponsored a couple of programs. We've actually given away calculators, dictionaries, we've got a math dictionary, we gave away a test taking skills book. But the tutors…If the parents agree to sit through a 15 minute presentation on how to use these things, they get to take them home with them. Free. So, that's the beauty of Title I money. It's kind of nice because it has

stimulated parent involvement here. Of course, we'll throw in either hot dogs or

pizza. They'll come up for a meal, they'll get some free giveaways. But what we

require them to do is, we have a little voucher and they carry it around to all their

teachers. The teachers have to initial it before they can get their food, they have to

have seen most of the teachers. We're not going to deny them if they can't see all

of them. Then we also have them sign in, and they have the giveaways. That's

helped. I think most parents are concerned about how they're doing in school, but

they just don't know how to work with their kids. So we try to offer some things

for them on those nights…It's nice. It's just a nice way of getting the folks in.

Actually, I've had the privilege of passing out the pizza and doing the hot dogs.

It's been kind of nice because the time I've spent down there doing that has given

me a chance to informally talk with the parents.

Meeting parents through parent groups and looking for ways to provide

opportunities for volunteering in the building were mentioned by some participants as

actions they performed during their first 100 days. Gary indicated, "I am involved with

the PTO; I go to all the PTO meetings." Likewise, Henry reported, "We have monthly

PTA meetings. I'm on the PTA executive board for the middle school. That was helpful

as well. It gave me at least a small base of parents that I knew I could rely on." In a

small district, Ed established, but is still furthering, a "parent advisory council. We don't

get a lot of people who show up, usually between 5 and 10."

Referencing their volunteer programs, the participants were appreciative of the help the parents have been able to provide, but also hopeful that the program will grow to include more parents. Ed summarized:

> We're trying to get more in here to do tutoring. We're just trying to get people in here during our academic enrichment every day. I've succeeded with a few, but it hasn't taken off like I'd hoped it would. I think the more we can tie these parents into what's going on, the more successful we'll be.

Also trying to encourage increased volunteer efforts, Beth shared:

> We do have a parent or two that has offered to volunteer to come in, so I try to get them to come in and work with a few of the kids that need a little bit of a boost; not a lot, because that person is not a teacher, they're just here to help. So we want to give the kids someone who can help, to boost their confidence and improve their skills, without putting a lot of stress on that person to think they have to actually know what they're doing.

In addition to inviting parents in to the building to volunteer and to establishing relationships, some participants explained their focus on positive communication with parents and the community. In preparation for a monthly email newsletter he planned to begin later in his first year, Ed "did a little survey…in November." He specified:

> I sent it out to [parents] and asked them to give feedback on how often they use the internet, do they have access to it, this and that, and could they give us emails. We probably compiled a list, we had about 540 kids in the building, we got emails from close to 400 of them for parents. We put together a list-serve.

In a district with high parental involvement, Jack reflected on the importance of communication with parents:

> If there's an event that happened in the building that has the potential to cause different rumors to happen, whether it's a discipline situation, or an unexpected fire drill, or whatever it might be, I try to make sure I get communication out to them as soon as possible. A lot of times it's before the kids even hit the door, so that the parents have it and then they can listen to their kids' story and the parents can then feel connected with the school and feel like they're being communicated with…There's a lot of good things to be talking about. If anything, I want them to be at their parties on Saturday nights or at the ball fields, and go, that [principal], he really communicates with us; I feel like I know what's going on at the school, and I know he's got a handle on it. When you manage that, it allows you to get the core things that you need to be able to focus on, and that's student achievement. It limits the distractions that you have. I knew that, and it was important for me to begin that right away.

In addition to parents, establishing relationships with the community was discussed by several participants. In a district with a neighboring university, Beth spoke of the partnership she had developed, along with her administrative colleagues, with that university. Beneficial to both organizations, she felt that was an integral component to her building's success and was proud to have worked on the partnership when she first began her position. In an urban district, where students have significant basic needs, Ian

spoke of understanding and building relationships with the social service agencies in the community:

> That was probably the big change that came on first was to more closely monitor attendance, to come up with incentives and rewards for those kids that are coming to school on a regular basis, and finding out what was preventing other students from getting to school, and trying to hook them up with community agencies and resources so that those barriers could be removed…Now, I have some kids that are not going to learn if they're not here, so I've got to get them here. They can't learn if they're not fed, and they've got to have warm clothes. And some of these agencies help provide some of these things.

> *Supporting: Students.* During their first 100 days and beyond, the participants continually focused on students. They looked for ways to build connections with students, to support and foster their academic achievement, and to be available for students.

The process of building relationships with students was discussed by some participants. New to the building and district, Amy detailed her experience:

> I moved around a lot, went into classrooms, got to know the kids, just did a lot of visiting and a lot of talking, trying to find things out about people and about what a typical student is like. I knew what my own kids were like, but it was interesting learning about middle school students because I had always worked with high school students.

The prior assistant principal in the same building, Jack shared that he had previously been "in charge of discipline and a lot of student programs;" therefore, he had already established some relationships with students and, in his principal role, he focused on furthering those and others. About these connections, he said, "I was very connected to students, so I knew a lot of students by name, and I still do." Another participant, Beth, who had also been the previous assistant principal in the same building, spoke about the effort she made during the first 100 days to meet students she did not already know and to continue those relationships with students whom she did know, based on fond memories she had of teachers and administrators in her own life when she was young. About her former educators, she recalled that they "took the time to say good morning to me every day or they knew my first name, just those little things. So you always have to try to remember to do those things." Correspondingly, Dan described how important visibility was in getting to know students and in being connected with students; one way he accomplished this was by attending athletics events regularly.

Another action discussed by participants was assisting students so they could be academically successful. In an urban district, Ian shared how closely he worked with community agencies in order to provide resources and support for students and their families. Without this outside help, many would be unable to attend school and, certainly, would be unable to focus on academics even if they could attend school. Fred talked about the interventions that he put in place, with teacher assistance, for students who struggled academically. These interventions centered on reading comprehension

and writing in his school "because the OAT test is a reading and writing test, regardless of the subject."

Establishing and maintaining high expectations for students was a goal of some participants during their first 100 days. In his school, Ed, leading his middle school administrative team, completely revised the student code of conduct at the beginning of the school year:

> There had been a feeling that came up loud and clear from sitting down and talking to the people who came in here, the faculty and staff, and also the superintendent, that we had a lot of inconsistencies with how discipline was being handled. So the principal of curriculum and myself sat down and went through and revised everything, got it board approved and everything. That happened by the end of the September, I think, when we actually gave it to kids and went over it.

Stepping into the role of principal of a building where student behavior and disciplinary issues were a significant concern, Carl spoke about changing that culture immediately when school began in the fall. Working with the teaching staff, he began the process: "Number one would be discipline. It would be holding students accountable for their actions...It's the discipline and the expectations within that discipline that helps that accountability." In another school, although disciplinary issues were not a substantial focus of time and energy, Gary still described how, in changing the culture to a more positive one, he also set high standards for student behavior and responsibility. He described how he communicated that with students, during a fun, celebratory event:

Students, I wanted them to see a change immediately and a warm, nurturing environment that took pride in their school. One of the things we did was, they had never had a pep rally, so we had a pep rally that first Friday. I reiterated my expectations for the students, and talked about respect and pride in this place, and respect for each other.

Gary also detailed the changes he made regarding students at the beginning of his first school year as principal of the middle school. After talking about issues and concerns with his administrative team at the school, teachers, students, and parents, and based on comments he had heard from high school students about their middle school experience when he had formerly worked at the high school, Gary felt strongly that these changes were necessary and important in improving the culture of the building and in helping students feel more connected to their school:

> For example, beginning at the start of the day, students used to come in and they used to keep them cooped up in the cafeteria, so you had close to 800 students cooped up for 20 minutes in the auditeria [cafeteria also used as an auditorium]. It made no sense to me. Why can't they come in? If they want breakfast, have breakfast. Go to your locker. So the first thing I wanted to change was that. And that was where a lot of discipline issues occurred. So right off… it was all about control for a kid. The kids felt like they were being controlled right out of the chute. They were being cooped up for 20 minutes in this place. It was about control. You know, it wasn't their school. They were being told, you have to stay here…

For eighth graders, one of the changes I made was, at lunchtime, you're

not going to have assigned seats. We're not going to tell you when it's your time

to go the lunch line. When the bell rings for lunch, you have 45 minutes, or

whatever it was, to come down. And you decide how you want to utilize that

time. If you want to play ball first and then come in and eat, if you want to try to

be one of the first ones in line because you're starved…

I talked to them about, we are giving you opportunities, students. These

are some liberties you haven't had in the past. This was also my way of

establishing expectations with students. I also told them, the way I do things is,

you show me that you're responsible and that you can handle these liberties we're

giving you, it will impact my decision-making down the line, as I make certain

decisions that impact your day as students. And, you're now taking a positive

twist on the discipline and the student climate and culture piece. So I guess that

was a big piece of establishing that with kids. They kept hearing that over and

over again. OK, you're going to have a little more liberty than you've had in the

past; show me that you deserve it.

Supporting middle school.

Supporting: Data. Because schools, and principals, are held accountable for

their students' learning, data was viewed by the participants to be a focus of their goal-

setting, a measurement of their progress, and a means of identifying student needs. They

spent time during their first 100 days discussing data with the district administrative

team, sharing data with their teaching staff, and making changes based on areas of need supported by the data.

Prior to the school year beginning, Henry, on a retreat with his administrative colleagues, reviewed the district testing data, and then building testing data, in depth. From the data, they determined district and school goals. He recalled, "At that point, the district was excellent, but this building was not. We had fallen into effective status, but continuous improvement because we had missed two years on our subgroups, most notably our special ed population."

After reviewing the data themselves or with the other district administrators, most participants focused on sharing the data with the teachers. In a school with a designation of Excellent when he arrived, Jack articulated his experience:

I have just tried to bring to them a continuous improvement mindset and a data-driven mindset. On any given day, your data can look a certain way. Whether it's your daily assessments of what students are doing, or your OAT results, there's always room for improvement; there's always opportunities for growth. I've tried to build that in to what we're trying to do, but it's extremely difficult when you're already an excellent school district or school…You just keep growing and learning and evolving. So I spend a lot of time in their department meetings in the beginning of the school years and especially at this time, trying to break the data down for them so that they can see what is truly… what we're able to celebrate and what we need to work on…The trick is to try to keep the continuum growing and evolving and moving. You never get to the end. That's a hard thing

to get teachers and staff to understand. Even though we turn out a 96% on the

sixth grade math test, with 83% in the advanced and accelerated categories, 83%

is great, but it's not 100.

In an urban school, Fred described:

I gave the teachers their data. Gave them the intervention list generated by the

OAT scores. They got the actual OAT scores, not just the intervention lists, but

the actual OAT scores. We started building a data base that the teachers have that

has kids tracked over two or three years. We provided them the AYP workbook

so they can see which subgroups are not making AYP, which subgroups are

making AYP. So they've become pretty knowledgeable as far as data goes.

Henry explained that he met with each department to review the test item analysis,

looking at "strengths and weaknesses, and then focus[ing] on our weaknesses [to] target

those." He continued, "We looked at the strands and found out where we were strong.

We determined that we didn't need to focus as much on those areas as we did on the

areas where we were weak."

After reviewing the data himself before he officially began his position, Ian, in a

school that was initially designated as Academic Emergency, communicated how he and

his staff set a priority of improving student attendance, as a way to improve student

academic performance:

One of the biggest things we did is we spent time looking at attendance data and

to try and come up with an attendance plan that made sense for [our] middle

school and to look to see how we were going to improve our test scores and how

we were going to get the most bang for our buck. As I recall, the attendance and the academics, the things that we looked at, we could move forward just by getting all of our kids to take the test…The important piece to me was, or the one thing that stuck out to me right away, was kids need to be in this building. They need to be learning. No more 75% attendance days. Because if the kids aren't here, they're not going to learn. And it doesn't matter what the teacher teaches. The teacher could have the most fabulous lesson in the world, but if 25% of the class isn't there, they're not getting it.

In a rural district, in which the middle school progressed from Continuous Improvement to Excellent, the participant responsible for this improvement, Dan, worked with his staff on reviewing the data, pointing out areas where they could focus in order to see improvement, and using the data to support his change of special education programming to inclusion rather than "pull-out":

My goal was to get us out, to meet AYP, to get us out of continuous improvement. That was my ultimate goal. That is what I worked on, and I stressed to the teachers. We talked about the groups. We have our whole group and we have our subgroups, but we're basically a white school. We do have our IEP students and our ED [economically disadvantaged] students. I kept reinforcing that these students do count on our report card. I said, a student can hit three areas, our whole group, free and reduced lunch, and IEPs. And I said, this is why we are getting hammered with our IEP groups, and we're getting hammered with continuous improvement year one. I said we don't want to be in

school improvement year two. My goal was to get us out of school improvement year one. And that's why I put the [special education] students in the core curriculum.

New to the middle school level, Gary, who had previously worked in the same district's high school, reviewed the data and detected areas of need. Without middle school experience, however, he preferred not to present himself as an expert to the staff but rather to ask "a lot of questions" and learn from them. Regarding data, he provided collaboration time for them to review the data themselves, in-depth, believing that "more often than not, they're going to come to the same conclusions you do and now they have ownership over that." He continued:

> So rather than me feeling like I need to convince them that we need to do this and here's how we're going to fix it, they're telling me the same thing and they have a sense of ownership. And, again, I believe they do know best about how to address these issues because they have been here longer than I have. And I saw myself as two things. I thought my responsibility was to a) provide them with the resources they need, whether that's time, place, or whether it's materials or whatever it may be, and also b) to protect them so that they could focus on their work, and take heat and take questions and things such as that, so they could stay focused on what's important and that's student achievement…A big piece of that is, again, we were providing more opportunities for teachers to meet and collaborate. I think, because they felt like they were decision makers for the first time, because it had always been top-down, I would hope and would think that

they took more of an ownership role in the changes they made in their curriculum and how do we prepare for these tests, and the report card, and the OAT. I think that happened, because I know I sat in on those discussions, as I went from meeting to meeting, they would talk about, OK, here's either an objective or a strand we need to address. And I heard them problem solve about how they were going to do that in their classrooms.

After reviewing the data themselves and then with their teaching staff, some participants provided examples of changes they had made to their buildings or programming based on needs reflected in the data. Dan, as already described in this section, noted a need for special education students to have access to the same curriculum as all of the other students, because they were being tested on the same material during the achievement tests. Due to this, he changed the structure of special education programming to inclusion services, rather than having students in a smaller setting with only a special education teacher. In a low-performing school, Fred worked with the district to create specific intervention programs for students who scored "a 405 or less" on any state achievement test (400 is considered a passing score). He established a scheduling structure which mandated that students who qualified be automatically scheduled into the appropriate intervention program. Another participant, Carl, who proudly explained, "When I first started, our scores were 25, 37, 37, and 49. Last year they were 72, 88, 73, and 76," decided to assume the role of scheduling students for courses instead of having that be guidance counselor's responsibility. Using "standardized test scores for placement, we [now] do a lot of ability grouping. That way

my inclusion teachers can get to other students that just aren't designated special

education. We do a lot of intervention."

Supporting: Logistics. The participants provided examples of logistical

responsibilities and changes as integral ways that they affected the instruction of the

students in their buildings. While some discussed preparations for opening day and for

beginning the school year, others mentioned establishing meetings, changing curriculum

and/or programming, and other management responsibilities.

One of the first actions principals must take when they begin a new role is to

prepare for the start of the school year. Amy recounted planning for the first staff

meeting and for Open House:

> It was kind of a whirlwind just even getting my agenda ready for the first faculty
>
> meeting. That was one of the first things I did because I had to, really. The first
>
> thing we had was open house within two weeks of starting the position, so,
>
> where's the information that you used last year? How do we want to change this?
>
> What's the procedure? How do you guys operate at open house? I knew how the
>
> open house operated from being an assistant principal [in another district], but I
>
> did not know how [this school] operated.

In a district facing a potential strike from both certified and non-certified staff, Henry was

challenged with planning for a school year to begin, while also planning for the

possibility of a strike, along with the other district administrators. Fortunately,

"everything was resolved…I'd say a week or two before school started, everybody knew

there wasn't going to be a strike." At that point, he began preparing for the school year, knowing that the school staff members would be in their positions.

Some participants shared about the establishment of committees and meetings, of which they detected a need, either from observation or from direct conversations with staff members. As described earlier, Ed established specific committees to involve staff members in the decision-making process. In a high-performing school, Amy was surprised by the lack of collaboration time that existed. With experience at another high-performing school, she was able to bring ideas with her that addressed that need. She established a monthly meeting for the special education department, who had "never met as a team." She also established weekly "staffing" meetings, where academic placement, challenges, and successes of individual students on IEPs were discussed through a committee. During these meetings, of which she was a part, she "got to know how [special education teachers] operated in the building and then made changes throughout the year."

Making changes to the curriculum and/or academic programming in the building was another focus of some participants' first 100 days. Partnering with the assistant superintendent, whose strength was working with curriculum, Amy created curriculum maps, to detail what should be taught when, throughout the course of the year and in what grade. Henry applied for a literacy grant, which was awarded; this prompted a change in the curriculum to include a literacy component in each subject area. Professional development was provided to teachers as part of the grant and the process. Another participant, Carl, who was unable to make many of his preferred changes until the

following year, did establish inclusion at one of the grade levels, because he had the staffing and scheduling capacity to do so.

Other management responsibilities and changes were conveyed throughout the interviews with the 10 participants. Almost immediately, Fred had to complete the master schedule and "get it programmed so we could do our first batch with kids' course requests and the master schedule." Praising his secretary as someone who "could run this building," Henry described learning from her the bureaucratic requirements of the district, "what paperwork needs to be filed here, and this and that. Stuff that you would never know had you not been here." Beth, heeding the advice of her predecessor to not make any major changes right away, recounted, "We just changed one or two little things. We changed the time when we do our announcements or we instituted doing the pledge in the morning. A couple of small things like that." More extensively, Gary, who was entering a building that needed improvement in school culture, made larger-scale changes. One involved allowing students to enter the building and go where they needed to in the morning, rather than being housed in one location under the supervision of assigned teachers. To accomplish this change, he redesigned teachers' duties:

Teachers had rotating duties as to who was monitoring that, which they dreaded. So, what we did was, I actually moved up the start time for teachers and took it off the end of the day. I asked them to be here earlier, 15 minutes earlier, and they could leave 15 minutes earlier. As an administrator, it's a no brainer. So many of them are going to stay afterwards anyway. So I had all of them come in. In return for that, I also took off their duties, and all I asked was that they are here earlier

and they have a presence in the building. And, for students, they are no longer

cooped up. If you want to go to the library, go to the library. You want to go

meet with a teacher because you didn't understand this question on your

homework, you go meet with your teacher. If you want to hang out by the

lockers, hang out by the lockers. If you want to go get breakfast, go get breakfast.

So, that was a big change for students.

Teachers, we took their duties away. It became a lot less about, this is

what's required of you, and it became about, here's where we could use your help

and where you can contribute. I may not have structured time where I need you,

but just know that we may be coming to you and asking for your help and support

in some ways.

Supporting: Culture. School culture was mentioned throughout the interviews

by participants as an important component to establishing themselves as the principal.

Whether the culture had been positive or negative, most participants devoted time in their

first 100 days to addressing or quietly improving that culture. This involved making the

parents and community feel welcome in the school, focusing on the perceptions of staff,

and focusing on the perceptions of students.

For parents, Jack described how he changed their views of the school culture by

creating a more welcoming physical environment in the office, working with his office

staff on interpersonal communication, and working with his teaching staff on becoming

more accepting of parents in the process of educating their children:

The very first thing I did was talk to my office staff about their role in creating a

welcoming environment and community, rearranged some things in the office to

make it more open. They actually had filing cabinets set up like a wall, and

parents had to talk over the cabinets. They didn't want them in the office. They

didn't want them in places. Now, four years later, we have parents all over the

place. We have built on our volunteer program. Parents feel like they can call me

at any point in time. Open door policy. Sometimes, they just stop in. And what

I've found is, sometimes when we do those recognition programs for volunteers,

we'll do a volunteer breakfast, I have to ask parents to leave now. They will stay

here, and they're comfortable here, and they will talk, so now I have to ask them

to leave because we have work to do…The other part was to change the

orientation of teacher actions and the overall school actions from, this will sound

badly, from what the community was perceiving as a "can't do" attitude to a "can

do" attitude. Parents are our partners. We have a very intelligent and educated

community, so often they bring insight into the educational process that we can

benefit from. And so we need to… they have good ideas as well, so we listen to

those. When it's feasible and reasonable, we'll even implement some of those

ideas. Especially if it's sitting in an IEP meeting, and a parent says, I think this

needs to happen, and it's reasonable, and it sounds like it's on point, and it's

aligned with what the data says, then that to me is a successful partnership.

For staff, participants shared their experiences in making them feel valued and, as

Jack described, "listened-to." Gary sent an opening letter to staff to introduce himself

and humbly share his ideas for creating a more collaborative culture. Ed established

specific committees for concerns, goal-setting, and discussions of academic progress, and

he felt these were critical to not only the school's academic success, but also its success

in improving culture:

> I'm a big proponent of people being heard and those kind of gave an avenue for
>
> people to be able to do that. Once people realize they're being heard, and that
>
> their ideas matter and their opinions matter, it really starts to change the culture of
>
> where you're at. People really start to buy into things and be active participants,
>
> which is the way it should be…Quite honestly, I honestly think the biggest thing
>
> that was done was dealing with the morale of these kids and the staff. Getting
>
> them into an environment where they felt comfortable, they felt like they had a
>
> voice. I think those kinds of things, you know, they're things that you can't
>
> necessarily quantify. You can't put your hands on them. But I really believe that
>
> it's a critical piece for the success of people. When people are in an environment
>
> where they feel like they have a say, where they feel like they're being heard,
>
> they're more likely to go out of the way and go above and beyond and do more.

Similarly, other participants also spoke about the school culture as it related to

students. Carl discussed his role in "turning around the discipline" in his building. With

his high expectations for student behavior and academic performance, the accountability

he and the teachers instilled in students empowered them to be more confident learners.

Gary reported that he made changes that directly impacted students, both their freedom

and their responsibility. He felt that these changes, and the pointed discussions he had

with students about them, allowed the students to have ownership of the school and to feel as though "what they had to say mattered."

Summary: Establishing self in new principal role.

During the first 100 days of the principalship, certain aspects of the participants' actions and decisions were dependent on whether or not they had previously worked in the middle school building or even in the same district, and whether or not they had previously served in a principal role. In all cases, however, the themes from their transition experiences centered around supporting themselves, others, and the middle school building. Following the first 100 days, the participants continued to focus on these areas as they eventually celebrated their schools' improvement.

Transforming Self from *New* Principal to *the* Principal

Because school improvement is a process, it was not assumed during this study that change could occur in such a short time period as 100 days; rather, according to the principal participants, this initial time period often served as the observation and learning phase during which they noted needs and challenges of the school, areas for focus, and opportunities for change in order to affect growth. Any significant changes often occurred later in the principals' tenure at the school; however, they each felt as though small changes or observations they initially made during those first 100 days may have impacted their schools' future improvement. While not a part of this study's scope, the time period after the first 100 days was a topic that each of the principals conveyed in some way, especially when discussing their schools' improved state designation under their leadership. As they referenced the small-scale and large-scale changes they enacted,

their conversations centered on the process of becoming *the* principal rather than the *new* principal. As they celebrated their schools' improvements, they spoke about enhancing themselves, the stakeholders, and the middle school.

Enhancing self.

To further their own knowledge and confidence in their positions, the participants spoke of continuing to rely on the relationships they had built, especially with their mentors. As they began to feel a sense of transformation, being *the* principal of their current school, they also then began to act as mentors for others and provide guidance for their administrative colleagues. In addition, three spoke of joining administrative organizations and/or serving on leadership committees at the district, county, or state level. One of these participants, Jack, gave an example of a committee on which he represents other administrators, with a goal of professional development for school leadership teams:

> I reached out to OLAC [Ohio Leadership Advisory Council] or they reached out to me, and I've served on that building leadership team sub-committee. This is the team who is developing the professional development modules for school districts across Ohio that will help steer their development in building effective leadership teams.

Enhancing others.

Enhancing: Staff. After the first 100 days, which often included establishing relationships with and introducing small changes that affected the staff, most participants described ways in which they had enhanced those relationships, furthered the teachers'

knowledge, and made larger changes that directly involved staff, with an overall goal of improving the students' education.

A major theme of enhancing the staff focused on providing the necessary professional development to advance teachers' skills and understanding of content and pedagogy and creating opportunities for collaboration with other teachers. Beth shared a recent initiative:

> Now, we have taken some steps...We had a couple of waiver days approved this
> year, and we brought in a couple of people from [a district] over in western Ohio,
> because they've been doing for a couple of years Universal Design for Learning.
> They brought some of their staff in and did some demonstrations, and we've
> worked with our staff in the district to work on some of those areas.

Ian reflected on the collaboration time that he was able to create later in his leadership role at the school, noting that he wished it had been something he had been able to do right away, during his first 100 days. Although he initially recognized a need for collaboration time, and, especially, *effective* collaboration time, he was unable to incorporate it into the school day until later:

> If I could have started our weekly cluster group meetings right when I started, I
> think we would be that much farther ahead…We were meeting. But a lot of times
> when you meet, if you're meeting without a purpose, and your meetings often go
> astray, talking about, well Johnny does this and Billy does that, and I sent him to
> the office and they didn't do…and dah-dah-dah and dah-dah-dah…and did you
> know… Without a clear focus and without a clear purpose, without clear goals,

you can meet all you want, and it's not going to change anything. You really have

to have a purpose to that meeting, and you have to be working toward a common

goal. I realized that, from being an assistant principal, that our meetings were not

effective. But, did I really know how to change that right away? No, I didn't.

With a focus on literacy, Henry described the recent professional development that he

provided for his staff, based on the needs identified through the state data:

We also got a grant. We were able to hire a literacy coach, a literacy consultant,

and that also afforded us the opportunity to do a lot of imbedded professional

development. Last year, our focus was reading comprehension and this year,

we're doing Marzano's high-yield strategies, and I think we're seeing our

money's worth out of that…We're doing literacy leadership teams within our

departments, which is an even bigger element of imbedded professional

development. It's a lot of collaboration amongst our staff. We're using that

walkthrough data to help guide them through the protocol process and their

discussions as far as instructional methods.

Describing how she found time for teachers to meet and discuss instructional

strategies and student progress, and how she provided for needed professional

development, Amy, in a school with an initial state designation of Excellent, shared

specific details of where the school was initially and where she was able to lead them:

I noticed right away that teachers had no time in their schedule to collaborate,

there was no time for common planning, there was no teaming, there was no

collaboration vertically with the other buildings. Nobody really even knew. Just

by hearing that, well the sixth grade teacher stole our project, you know, that's what I was hearing in those first 100 days. You know, what should we do about it? I said, aren't you guys talking about that? I mean, isn't that just a regular curriculum day? I was used to that occurring in my previous district. So, I think changing that and getting them a schedule where they have time to collaborate, know what each other are doing, have time to talk about kids, was one of the first things that I put into place. Having a special ed team that operated more effectively in the classroom was one of the first things I did in those days. They really operated as just aides. Even talking to the teachers, between the special ed department and the classroom, they had very little interaction. They really didn't know what special ed was looking for, special ed really wasn't getting what they needed in order to help kids in resource room time, or anything. So, a lot of what seemed like little things, were very important pieces of information they needed to get into each other's hands.

I did come up with some creative ways to do it that first year. We used to meet during their lunch, which was huge on their part that they were even willing to do that. So, they would eat and I would run the meeting, and we would get a lot accomplished. The second year in, I asked for some professional development for the language arts teachers, knowing that value-added was going to be coming. I asked for a literacy specialist coach, because we had no, there was no guidance other than myself. So, not that there was no guidance, but I didn't have any specialty in language arts. I wasn't a language arts teacher. So, I either needed to

be trained, or I needed to bring in somebody to do the training, or I needed the curriculum person to take over. Eventually, what happened this year is that we got the literacy coach, and she did some sessions with my teachers, so it turned out that we got the professional development. So, we would try to do it on our own, but they didn't have the common planning time, so we were able to meet together during our own time. We went and visited other schools…We bought the Nancy Atwell book that they had never read before or seen before. We just did kind of a little bit on our own when we could. We made it fit. But, again, more than 100 days. But certainly something that you start to put in place.

In addition to providing training and time for teachers to learn, some participants also shared other ways their staff members were enhanced. Gary explained how his leadership style has created a paradigm shift of teachers working with the principal instead of being told what to do, and how they're still evolving together: "I said, hey, I need to rely on you people; you're the experts. But, we're still working on changing that. That takes quite a bit of time when they're used to top-down." Dan identified his teachers' strengths and weaknesses and made staffing changes based on that information. He moved teachers to positions where they could be most effective in teaching students and helping them make academic progress.

Two other participants commended the work that their teachers did (and still do) with the students and with changes that occurred. They both shared that their buildings have, as Beth described, "come a long way." Ed discussed his building's value-added measure, noting that the students in the school made more than a year's worth of growth:

"It does mean that good things are happening here. But, it all goes back to the hard work that the teachers are doing." The other, Beth, also remarked about the school's positive value-added measure: "I can't really take credit…the staff really seems to understand that you can't just, like in the old proficiency days, as long as 75% passed then you're OK…They do realize that everybody has to keep moving on."

Enhancing: Administration. Referencing the administrators within the district, participants were quick to share how beneficial strong working relationships are and how helpful a collaborative environment can be. Those who were fortunate to work in a district where this was the case praised this collegiality as a reason "why improvement has occurred in our district, and, additionally, in our school," as Ed explained. Jack discussed the central office administration in particular and how the strength of that leadership and the support received from those leaders were reasons why he had been successful at improving the education of the students in his school.

Enhancing: Parents/community. Improving relationships and fostering positive involvement with the parents and the community were mentioned by several participants, some in schools where involvement was low and some in schools where involvement was high. With each school, there were unique challenges that were faced.

In a district with well-educated and highly involved parents, Jack commended them: "Obviously, our community is strong and supports us in a tremendous way." He then shared that the focus of his school was on furthering those relationships and maintaining that support. Finding new ways to communicate with parents and

encouraging them to be involved in their children's school and education, Ed provided these ideas:

> We started to do a middle school newsletter [in February]. It's an online newsletter. We send it out…It's only distributed via email, or it's on our website. That really helped, too, because that opened up…It just gives a bunch of updates on what's going on in the school, a calendar of events for the upcoming month, different articles with pictures of things that have happened during the past month, there's an article from me, from the principal of curriculum, athletic director, guidance counselor…The other thing, too, with the families, that doesn't fall within the 100 days either, but we did a family picnic and we're going to do one again in May this year. We just had a day, on a Saturday, when families could come here. There was free food and games, and different things, just to kind of promote unity. Yes, that was new. We probably had over 200 people who showed up for it.

Other participants also looked for ways to make more parents feel welcome and, in some cases, even confident enough to come into the school building. In one such school setting, Dan described that focus, noting strategies that he and his staff were working on to "bring parents in." In his district, where parents often only feel comfortable attending sporting events at the school, he relayed that they would begin to incorporate academic discussions or themes at those events in the future. Fred and Ian, too, hoped to find new, creative ways to encourage parental involvement.

Regarding community, in a district near a state university, Beth discussed a continued partnership with that university, improving that relationship and ensuring a benefit to both the school and the university. A recent and future plan for her building was to provide opportunities for professors to work daily in her school, in direct contact with the students and teachers, to help improve education.

Enhancing: Students. Students were at the forefront of the participants' interviews; finding ways to improve their education and helping them become better students and people were common themes. Several mentioned how the middle school child is unique, requiring the middle school staff to focus on, as Gary described, not only their "academic growth," but also their "social and emotional growth." Jack shared this thought:

> One of the things that I think has shaped the four years for us has been our involvement in Ohio Schools to Watch and the National Schools to Watch Program, because it requires you to think broadly and comprehensively across middle school philosophy, not just in the academic excellence piece, but in all the other facets. It's allowed us to pay attention to the other things, because in this standards-based environment, it's really…you can get caught in a trap of just thinking about the academic piece and not paying attention to the developmental-responsive piece or the social equity piece. It just balances you a little bit.

Other participants searched for ways to improve student learning and to help them "show what they know" on state tests, as Ian commented. In Beth's school, an inventory was used to "identify [students'] learning styles," the results of which were provided to

students, parents, and teachers. She shared that those learning styles were used to improve classroom instruction for each student: "We don't ask everybody to just sit at their desk like little soldiers like in the old days when we were in school." In an urban school setting, Fred described one way his school was helping students demonstrate their knowledge on the state tests, addressing common challenges for his students:

One of the things we instituted this year, we just started second semester, it's probably going to benefit the teachers as well, is test-taking skills. We extend homeroom by 20 minutes. We have prepared lessons for the teachers to do, prepared fun lessons for the kids to do with the teachers. It's on bubbling correctly, transferring your answers from the test to the answer sheet, short answers, extended response: '2' = two answers, '4' = 4 point answers, getting the kids to write inside the box, different things like that. So, everyone's involved in that, too. It's accepted, no grumbling or anything like that. It's been a benefit.

In another school, where lack of expectations for students had been a severe issue in the past, Carl reiterated that the school's focus for students continued to be on accountability, for both behavior and for academics: "The kids now know what's expected, but we're always working with them on that and helping them be more accountable."

Enhancing middle school.

Enhancing: Data. These 10 principals described ways in which they and their staff had positively impacted their students' achievement, how the changes they had made resulted in improving the report card designation, individual aspects of the state's

evaluation system (e.g., AYP, value-added), and learning overall. The focus on data was apparent in these discussions.

Some of the participants discussed how they furthered the review of data with their staff, helping teachers look at the data and use it in a meaningful manner. Fred shared how he moved beyond simply looking at how students performed to looking at how each teacher's students performed, in a non-threatening way. He indicated that this took time to establish the trust necessary for teachers to trust each other, and for them to trust him. The teachers had to feel comfortable first and believe that the information would not be used in an evaluatory way:

> We didn't do any comparative data [initially]. I didn't say, here's Teacher A's data and here's Teacher B's data. We're in the process of doing that now, because we're in the infant stages of developing professional learning communities. We want to start giving them comparative data, not to embarrass them, but to stimulate conversation around the table. You know, your kids did really well, what did you do that I didn't do?

In a district where students performed extremely well, Jack discussed how his staff progressed in their use of data and how they also must be continually refocused on finding ways to improve:

> Over the four years, I have now built the capacity for those teams to now look at their data and to extrapolate from it hypotheses about what they're doing or not doing and to set their own department goals, SMART goals, cluster goals, whatever you want to call them. Then I work with the department heads to

monitor those, to make sure that those departments are moving forward. But

that's been a long process. That's taken us four years to really get there…So, it's

all of those combinations of things, along with the relationships, and our ability to

stay centered on the students and the data that they give to us, that has really

helped us to propel forward. It's not uncommon for us to refer to those concepts

in the middle of the year, bring the value-added data back out as a reminder for

why we're doing things, when a team seems to be wallowed in whatever it is in

the middle of February, which is easy to do in February. It's the toughest month

of our school year. I think it's just staying focused on all of the pieces that help

make a school successful.

Other participants mentioned a renewed focus on student progress and on helping

students show growth. Carl shared, "My goal now is to go from getting indicators to

getting your performance index up over 100 and getting those limiteds to basic and basics

to proficient and so forth." In two cases, this focus on growth was based on the value-

added measurement that the state began using, which helped these particular schools

improve their state designation. Dan specified:

We did not meet AYP the second year, but with value-added, with our growth, we

made AYP and that's what took us to excellent. So, it was safe harbor the first

year and value-added the second year. If it was strictly based on AYP, we would

not meet it. If they overthrew value-added, we can show growth, but not what the

state wants us to.

In a similar situation, Beth discussed how her staff responded to the value-added component, and how it had encouraged them to continue to "do what they do" because their students were making progress:

> I think that's probably true that, a lot of them balked a lot of time, that saying that they resented having to teach to a test, if you will, they didn't want to have to do that. And now this [value-added] kind of helps us to realize that you can't just teach to the test, there's a little more to it than all of that. It did make everybody feel better, and it gave them a 'maybe we are doing the right thing by not doing that.'

Enhancing: Logistics. Although changes that were seen as more management in nature were also necessary to help improve the school, the participants with whom I spoke were focused on making changes that affected teaching and learning.

Changing the master schedule and student schedules in order to improve academics was a prominent theme in the participants' interviews. Fred changed the schedule to provide required interventions for middle school students who were not successful on the achievement tests. Dan, who also changed the schedule, did not feel as though the schedule the first year was "best for students" because they had been grouped by abilities "all day long." To remedy this, "the second year, what I did was to group students heterogeneously for homeroom," which also meant that they were heterogeneously grouped during classes that were in non-tested academic areas. In a school where the designation soared from Academic Watch to Excellent, Carl thoroughly described the changes he had made to the schedule. Although he was unable to make the

majority of the changes his first year, he identified the need during the first 100 days and worked with teachers that first year to lay the foundation for the significant schedule and curriculum changes to come:

I came in August, so I couldn't make any curriculum changes. I made all the curriculum changes the second year, and that allowed me to go or allowed the school to go from one indicator to six…Eliminating study hall for fifth and sixth graders…So, you take away the dead time and start filling it up with academics and repetition…I separated my fifth and sixth grade as its own unit, like an intermediate school. I moved a teacher down. Because my fifth grade had four teachers. Four teachers will do a grade-level here, because we have about 100 kids per grade level. I had three that were mainly sixth, so I moved one more down to give them four, and I made them its own little unit. They eat lunch at a different time. They do everything separate, and they are in the hallway separately…I took my seventh and eighth grade, and I combined English and reading to make language arts, therefore I didn't have to have that extra teacher…I got rid of all the study halls in fifth and sixth grade, and I made, they had 45 minute periods and now they have hour-long periods, like an hour and 6 minutes. So I increased the amount of time. I took my specials, and I made them all nine weeks. Some of them were semesters. I made them a nine week rotation. I took away character education, and I made it my interactive math lab for fifth and sixth grade. We couldn't get enough math…The curriculum changes would have to be…elimination of study halls, more time on task, OAT classes.

Similarly, changing the schedule so that teachers would have time to collaborate was noted by some participants as a method of, as Henry described, "affecting student learning in an indirect, but important, way." Amy detailed how she had created time in the schedule for teachers to meet, so they would "know what each other are doing [and] have time to talk about kids." In addition, she incorporated a formal structure of committees and meetings that focused on student learning: "staffings" for teachers to discuss the progress of students on IEPs and to determine whether or not students qualified for IEPs, as well as "IAT [Intervention Assistance Team] meetings to document the progress of struggling students and find ways to help them be successful."

Changes in programming, or additions to current programs, were made by some participants, to address the academic needs of students. In one school, Henry helped to facilitate the incorporation of literacy into all subject areas, through a grant which funded imbedded professional development. In another school, Beth received a "$120,000 STEM grant for this building so we'll be doing lots of exciting things in science, technology, and math." She also, through working with another school district for training, incorporated a program called Universal Design for Learning into the teachers' instructional delivery.

Depending on the situation of the school when the participant first accepted the principal position, some principals eventually implemented large-scale changes that they viewed as necessary, while others continued to maintain precedent as much as possible and made only small, purposeful changes. A participant who utilized his first 100 days to create a list of 13 proposals for large-scale programming, organizational, and staffing

changes, Gary described how he began the process and eventually made the significant

changes he had proposed: by discussing them with his building administrative team, then

the central office administration, and then his teaching staff to gain support. "I wanted

[them] to be stakeholders in [the changes]." From there, "we went through, and we made

some significant changes." In a district where change had previously occurred

frequently, due to high administrative turnover, Henry disclosed how he, even after being

in his current position for two years, was still reluctant to make large changes. He

shared, "Even at the end of last year moving into this year, our changes that we made

were subtle. They were, I think, thoughtful and responsive to areas of need."

Enhancing: Culture. Participants spoke of continuing the "school culture

progress," as noted by Gary, they had made when they first began. Continuing to foster a

welcoming environment for parents and the community, per Jack; continuing to maintain

high expectations for student behavior and for student learning, per Carl; and continuing

to encourage open lines of communication with the staff and to allow them to be a part of

the decision-making, per Ed; were goals that were shared by participants.

Summary: Transforming self from new principal to the principal.

With a focus on school improvement, the 10 participants each shared their

experiences following the first 100 days of the principalship. Themes from the

interviews highlighted their eventual improved state designation as well as the

enhancements the participants made to themselves, the stakeholders, and the middle

school building.

Factors that Influenced Actions and Decisions during First 100 Days.

As they reflected on the transition into their new principal role, especially during the first 100 days, the participants noted that their actions and decisions during that time were often the result of factors other than their own beliefs about what should be done. These factors shaped their transition by influencing them in setting priorities and in determining *what to do*. The participants identified influences from several external factors and one internal factor (leadership style.)

Factor: District Finances

Several participants spoke about their district finances and how that affected their own school, lamenting the reality that certain decisions had to be made based on money rather than solely on what was best for students. Beth summarized, "You would like to say that some of the decisions or changes that you make are yours, but they're not really yours. They come out of monetary issues and things like that." She stated simply, "One external factor that always affects anything is the finances for the district." In a high-performing school and district, Amy discussed the challenges of maintaining a high state report card designation with limited funding:

> It's just not there. So you do what you can, and I'm sure that in other districts that have financial limitations, that it's probably the same thing. You know, not that the people aren't there, but that the money isn't there. So, I'm sure there are schools across the whole state that struggle to get that rating with what they've got.

Factor: District Philosophy

Some participants discussed how the district philosophy shaped the decisions they made. In Ed's district, a strong focus on reading and writing in the content areas was a factor in the professional development opportunities and evaluation programs that he organized. In Ian's district, the focus on continuous improvement and raising test scores was prominent, so much so that it was a component in the administrators' evaluations. He stated, "If your test scores don't improve, you cannot get 'satisfactory' on this part of your evaluation; you'll receive an 'unsatisfactory'."

Working in a district where the philosophy was on establishing and maintaining order and precedent, Fred commented on the numerous policies and procedures: "They're very well established, and as a building principal, you need to learn how to use them and apply them to situations that require you to look into what the district would like you to do."

One district's philosophy was on developing leadership skills: within students, staff, and administrators. Jack shared that this affected how he hired staff members and how he supported them, as well as students. He described:

> There's a long tradition in this district of developing, of identifying teachers early on, placing them into teacher leadership positions, developing them along the way so that they can step into leadership positions in the administrative ranks for continuity sake, just to ensure that the same values are being put in those offices to keep the strategic plan moving and the district moving.

Jack also reflected on how beneficial his district's philosophy of communication and collaboration was to him, especially being a new administrator making difficult decisions. He elaborated:

It's easy to be on an island. They are lonely positions. But one of the key values in our district is centered around team and collaboration and making sure that we're communicating with each other, so that we can make decisions that are consistent across the district, and so that we can feel like there's somebody else out there who's dealing with the same issues we are. There is comfort in collaborating and being a team.

Factor: District Typology

While most of the participants interviewed were not familiar with the state's specific method of categorizing districts, most did speak about how the community and the size of the district, which are the key aspects of the district typology, affected their decisions.

In this section and the section that describes the effect of initial state designation on actions and decisions, pseudonyms are not provided, in order to guard against ease of identification of participants.

In a Type 1 district (rural/agricultural with high poverty and low median income), one participant discussed the number of students his school services who are extremely low academically. He shared that, because it is a high poverty school, there are many parents who are also academically low; therefore, they are less able to help their children with school work, and it becomes a negative cycle.

In a Type 3 district (rural/small town with moderate to high median income), one participant said that, because the students in his school want to achieve and are able to do so, and because there are very few serious discipline issues due to strong family involvement and influence, he and his staff have been able "to focus on the academic areas that our kids are lacking in." He furthered, "We've been able to break down and take a look at the data that we have…We have our discipline problems here and there, but…things are usually pretty calm around here so you can focus on the other stuff."

In a Type 4 district (urban with low median income and high poverty), one participant explained how the focus at the school is on AYP because they have so many subgroups that are measured. "We have many subgroups here. Pretty much, you name it, we have it." She also discussed the decreasing enrollment and how that impacted the size of the building staff and the programs that can be offered. She believed that the changes they had to make affected instruction negatively, reflecting, "I'm not sure it's the best setup that we [can] have…but, unfortunately, the enrollment is not going up."

In Type 5 districts (major urban with very high poverty), two participants noted the effects their community characteristics have had on their schools. Lack of parental involvement was the main negative for one participant. He stated that the parents in his school are unlike "those parents that will work in the background at home with their kids," often because they are unable to do so. He also focused on being "sensitive to the culture that the kids come from…You have to be aware of family background and what the kids come to school with." The other participant from a similar district gave some background on his school: "We are very economically challenged in the neighborhood.

Every day I walk down the street, there's a new house boarded up…Mobility rate is close to 50%, I think it's 43%, so I have a lot of ins and outs." His discussion was mainly centered on finding a balance between academics and social services, "a balancing act that I didn't know existed, because that's one area that I didn't spend a whole lot of time in my education." Students are unable to learn if their needs aren't being met, so he relied on the community agencies for assistance; however, each agency, then, desired time in the building for programs or to maintain outside funding, which detracted from academic time. He clarified how he is often "pull[ed] in different directions":

> Becoming the principal, all these people want to come in, and they want to do this, and they want to do that. You want to work with your neighbors, you want to work with the community, but you have certain restrictions and limitations within the school day and within the building, and what these people can actually come in and do and what they're willing to provide...A lot of social service agencies, a lot of people, work with my kids and my families around here. They do good stuff, but it's a balancing act because we're a school and our primary focus is to instruct kids. Now, I have some kids that are not going to learn if they're not here, so I've got to get them here. They can't learn if they're not fed, and they've got to have warm clothes. And some of these agencies help provide some of these things. So when they come to me and they say, hey, we're getting so much money from [the federal government] but we have to do this, can we do an assembly? You're going to your teachers and saying, well, we're doing another assembly. They ask, well, when are we supposed to teach?

In Type 7 districts (urban/suburban with very high median income and very low poverty), two participants described how their decisions and experiences have been shaped by their communities. One worked in a small district, where the size was a factor in the number of responsibilities she was given. She detailed:

With as small of a district as we are, enrollment-wise, there [are] a lot of responsibilities that are put on the principal's plate that you don't have in a different kind of district. Curriculum is put on your plate, special ed is put on your plate. Just about everything that you have support staff for in a larger district, is part of the principal's role here. Budgeting, scheduling, everything that you do, and there's no assistant, so discipline is there as well, attendance, and all of it. So I think those internal circumstances really have a huge effect on your success because, at first it's a bit overwhelming not to have that support there, especially coming from a district where you're used to that…At times when you're in a larger district and you think, oh I really wish I had more control over that because I would do it differently, when you are in control, and you've got all these other balls up in the air, you just want some help. Especially when your community is expecting the best.

Both participants in Type 7 districts discussed the high level of parental involvement, in a community, as one noted, that is "very intelligent and educated." They felt that this was positive, but that it could also be negative in certain circumstances. One stated that, even though the community and parents are "bright," there are not many who are in the education field, so "even though they're bright, and think they know how it

should be run, they are not always correct." She continued that success depends on "how you temper that," whether the superintendent is supportive of the educators who have expertise in the field of education, or whether the superintendent says, "Well, we're going to change things because I got these three phone calls." The other participant had a similar view, but focused more on managing the parents' and community's expectations:

We have very intelligent, well-educated parents. When you have that type of a community, your communication with them is that much more important. They have the ability to understand more deeply what it is that you're doing and to understand the rationales behind what you're doing. And they think more critically about those things, so the criticism or the feedback that you get is often pretty well pointed and pretty specific. I think it causes us to have a lot more transparency in what we're doing…I think because of the nature of the community, and it is shifting, but there have been a lot of non-working parents. They have a lot of time to talk and analyze and criticize what happens in the schools, so we have to communicate with them often in order to keep the information that they're talking about accurate.

Factor: Prior Principal

"People will bring up a lot of what the previous principal has done, and there are negatives and positives." This comment was made by Amy, one of the several participants who shared that the previous principal and their leadership style (whether positive or negative) and/or their advice helped shape their own actions and decisions during their transition period.

Of those who had positive remarks about previous principals, each had worked with that principal in the past and had established working relationships with them. Beth shared that she had a similar philosophy with the prior principal and that he had given her the advice to not "make many changes the first year, to take that time to be able to reflect on the way things are going and to kind of look for maybe one or two little things." Ian remarked that, while it had been a congenial relationship and while the principal was a valuable source of information, he also was careful not to ask for "too much," because that principal was being involuntarily transferred and was unhappy about leaving the principal position. Dan met with the prior principal "behind closed doors," so the principal could give "me some heads-up, some basic things, who my key people are. You always have the ones that you want to keep close to your side. So he did give me that." The prior principal also advised Dan, who had previously worked at the elementary level, to attend athletic events for visibility and support: "I had never worked ball games or been involved in athletics as an administrator until I got to the middle school level, and he helped me there."

Other participants knew that, based on the previous principal, his/her leadership style, or the high administrative turnover in previous years, a change was necessary. Henry stated that "this office has had a revolving door. I am, I think, number 7, 8 or 9 for many of these teachers that are here. That's probably in as many years." Because of that, he indicated:

A driving force of year one for me was to do no harm. I did a lot of listening and

a lot of observing. I didn't make any radical changes, looked toward the

precedent…because the staff here was so used to disruption and change.

Ed felt that his style was well-received by the staff, and he focused on maintaining that,

because "there had been such discord the year before with [the previous principal's]

leadership style amongst a number of people here." Similarly, Fred explained that,

because of an earlier principal's "harsh style," an interim principal had been brought in to

the building for the second half of the previous year "to lend some stability and put some

salve on the wound." Amy was still obligated to interact with the prior principal, who

was serving in a new educational role in the same community but not in the school

district, and who had been a negative force in the building previously. She clarified:

She was still in the picture. She set out to create her own business as a student

advocate, and it was interesting because there was so much negativity from her.

She had quite a vendetta against the district, and still does.

Jack discussed the previous principal of the building, with whom

he had worked as an assistant principal, in neither a strictly positive nor negative light,

but added that his own knowledge of what to do in his new principal role was less than he

would have preferred because of the administrative team organization that had existed

under her leadership. He spent time during his transition learning the "basics" because of

his experience as an assistant principal:

Our setup prior…had been very compartmentalized. I had my roles and the

principal had her roles. The way she set it up, we didn't really cross. So there

wasn't a lot of, I didn't have a whole lot of insight into what the principalship in this building was about.

Factor: School Culture

In some schools, the existing school culture was stated to the participant as being a priority for immediate change; in others, participants came to realize that they needed to focus on the school culture because of observations they made when they first began. The sixth principal in nine years, Jack shared, "Over that time, the building had gotten a reputation that we were not a friendly place for parents, that parents were not welcome here, and there was an 'us versus them' type of mentality." Similarly, Gary was specifically directed to change the culture of the building because it was not perceived as a welcoming place by students or parents. In another building, Ed, who had primarily been told to raise test scores, and only told "as an aside" to work on school culture, noticed, through his observations and his discussions with staff, that staff morale was extremely low, and, thus, a key priority.

Carl focused on students when discussing the school culture. He described a setting where standards and expectations of students were low, student discipline issues were abundant, and students did not prioritize school work. This existing culture shaped his actions and decisions, especially in the first 100 days.

Jack referenced teachers when discussing the culture. He spoke of the "strong union mentality" that existed in the building. He noted that "much of the union leadership has been centered in this building. The…biweekly district union leadership meetings take place in this building, and there is that mentality. Not that it's good or bad,

just that it needs to be managed." Jack also discussed a situation in the building, related to teachers, that began prior to his acceptance of the principal role. Funded by a large grant, the school was beginning a program that involved several positive aspects; two components, however, merit pay and peer evaluation, were being viewed negatively by the staff. Jack, who had previously been in the building, recognized that, in the excitement about the funding, the school had acted in haste and failed to establish buy-in with the staff, creating a culture of mistrust. He elaborated on the culture, which affected his immediate actions and decisions:

> We caused a lot of gaps to happen in staff understanding, a lot of mistrust in what the purpose was, a lot of… it created more mistrust for what our motivations were, real motivations were, for using it. [I recognized] the impact that it was having on the staff.

Factor: School Designation

Regardless of the initial state designation of the building upon acceptance of the principal position, almost all of the participants identified the designation as a factor that influenced their decisions and actions during their first 100 days. In an era of testing and accountability, they felt continued pressure to improve students' performance on the state tests, to demonstrate that the students' academic achievement was, and is, being furthered.

As was the case in the section describing the effect of district typology on the actions and decisions of the participants, pseudonyms are not provided in this section, to help maintain participant confidentiality.

In a school with a designation of Academic Emergency, one participant delineated some of the needs of his students that had to be met before they would be ready to learn: food, transportation, proper shoes and clothing, and sleep. With the low performance of the students on the state tests, his supervisors and the board of education were very clear that it was his responsibility to improve test scores, and his annual evaluation was based on whether or not he was able to do so. He was focused, then, on meeting these basic needs, through social service agencies, so that the students would be able to learn.

In schools with a designation of Academic Watch, both participants indicated that the designation played a large part in their decisions. Other aspects of education at the middle school level (character education was given as an example) were not possible because time in the school day needed to be devoted to academics. One conveyed: "I'm not opposed to it, but when you're held accountable, I can't choose that over math. It depends on what clientele you're servicing."

In schools with a designation of Continuous Improvement, each participant described that they were labeled Continuous Improvement because they had not met AYP for a specific number of years. With that comes a requirement from the state that the school must send home letters explaining the situation and the options that parents have, depending on the district (e.g., tutoring services for students who qualify for free and reduced lunch, possible intra-district transfers for students). Each discussed how that aspect of publicly sharing this with parents was a strong motivation to focus on areas that needed improvement, and, especially, to focus on improving the achievement and

progress of students in specific subgroups. One participant stated simply, "My goal was to get us out, to meet AYP, to get us out of continuous improvement."

In a school with a designation of Effective, one participant reflected that what he chose to do during the transition period and beyond was directly tied to the testing data. Rather than focus on areas of need that were subjective and unsubstantiated, he found it necessary and purposeful to focus on the areas of academic need that were grounded in the state data by closely reviewing how students performed on the achievement tests.

In schools with a designation of Excellent, both participants stressed how easy, yet insufficient, it was to "say that you're doing things well." One commented that "good is the enemy of great." He referenced his teaching staff: "It's tough to get them to understand that there's more work to do. It's tough to get them to understand that the journey doesn't end; there is no destination." In both schools, the participants looked for small ways to continually improve, because an Excellent designation (which was the highest possible rating when these individuals first became the principals of their current buildings) and the subsequent Excellent with Distinction designation that both earned eventually, as one stated, "creates a pressure because you can't go backwards, and there's nowhere to improve, so you have to find those little spots that you can continue to improve, especially with value-added."

Factor: Superintendent and Central Office Administration

Almost all participants referenced their superintendent and how that individual's directives (or lack of directives) shaped their decisions. Some were given clear instructions from the superintendent on what they should do or change in the middle

school. These instructions ranged from a general "test scores, test scores, test scores",

per Ian; to "what they wanted to see here was just some stability," per Fred; to "I was told

they want math scores increased," per Dan. Ed shared that the superintendent "told me to

do what I could with [morale], and…basically, you've been brought in to raise these

scores." Referencing the continued support and guidance provided to him by the central

office administration, Gary commented:

> I had a pretty clear picture of what some of the needs were from the board of
>
> education office, the people who hired me. I was aware of what I needed to
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> address…I knew what they were expecting of me. One of them was to help
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> change the culture and climate of the school…When the board office talked to me
>
> about considering the position, they talked about that's what needs done, and
>
> that's your greatest strength.

One participant, Carl, was encouraged in a certain direction by the superintendent

but was otherwise "left alone" and "supported." "I was allowed to do what I needed to

do. He knew that we needed to do some things and change some things." He said that

the superintendent told him to focus on discipline in the building but then allowed him to

handle it on his own: "If there's an issue, he'll come to me, but very rarely does he come

to me with anything."

Others received no specific guidance from the superintendent and were left to

determine their course of action through other means. When asked if the district

leadership had provided any guidance, Henry merely shook his head. He later

commented that he just "figured it out." Another participant in this situation, Amy,

discussed how the upcoming levy on the ballot that year was the primary focus of the superintendent, at the school board's directive, so the superintendent was not available for communication. "We really didn't see him for several months…it was difficult to know and to run things by him that I wanted to get started with right away."

In addition to being influenced by the superintendent, some participants were also influenced by other administrators in the district, especially at the central office level. The curriculum director, or, in some schools, the assistant superintendent, influenced some participants regarding their focus on specific data. Beth was grateful for this, stating that the curriculum director "does have a very good grasp of curriculum and data analysis, so that has helped." Amy referenced the work she did with the assistant superintendent on curriculum: "She and I were on the same page with curriculum, what we wanted to do. There were no curriculum maps; there weren't a lot of things curriculum-wise. So she and I were like, we've got to get this started." Gary discussed how the recent structural change in the curriculum department helped him to decide to accept the position, because the new curriculum director he would be working with shared the same philosophy as him regarding leadership and encouraged him in his work on school culture.

Factor: Leadership Style

Although each participant gave numerous examples of external factors that influenced their actions and decisions, most of them also shared that they relied on their own leadership style, their own personality, and their own values when beginning their new position. Gary specifically spoke about the hiring and interview process and how,

through that process, learning more fully about the needs of the building, he reflected on how his own strengths and weaknesses fit with those needs. He concluded that he had the strengths that could affect the necessary change: "I'm a huge believer in fit. I believe that some of my strengths are developing relationships with all stakeholders, whether it's the teacher, the parents, students, and I felt that I could be successful in that role." Other participants were more succinct: "You put in a few of your little things that you think are important," per Fred; "I jumped in and did my own thing," per Amy; and "The way I would approach things or the way I would have done them [is] the way I've done them at other schools," per Ed. Henry discussed how his subtle leadership style was needed in his current building, and that he happened to find a building that "fit." After praising his staff for their hard work, Dan humbly described his leadership style:

> This is how I am. I don't know what kind of leadership it is. My job involves a few decisions. My job is to give you the tools and the resources to do your job. If you need training, my job is to get you training. My job is not to come in and micromanage. You're the professional. My job is to give you the tools to be successful. I'm not a tyrant and I'm not a micromanager.

Summary: Factors that Influenced Actions and Decisions

Actions and decisions implemented during the first 100 days of the participants' principal positions were often the result of external factors. Sometimes, however, the participants' transition activities were based on their own values and leadership style. Identifying these factors that affected their first 100 days, the participants noted the following: district finances, district philosophy, district typology, prior principal, school

culture, school designation, superintendent and central office administration, and leadership style.

Advice for New or Current Administrators during First 100 Days

With the goal of this study being to understand the transition experience of middle school principals, during the first 100 days, in public schools in Ohio who have led their current schools to improvement, I also sought to learn from them advice they would give to other administrators, whether new to the principalship or experienced principals already, who would be leading a new middle school building in the future. The participants of the study reflected on the actions and the decisions they made initially, as well as what they learned during the course of their principalship experiences. Because these participants' schools made improvements in their state designations, they often used that lens when considering what worked well for them and what did not. Their advice, which they may or may not have followed, or even known themselves when they first began their current role, corresponded to many of the same central themes as their actions and decisions did: advice about self, about others, and about the middle school. In addition, they also provided overall advice about making changes and about the importance of finding mentors and collaborating with others.

Advice about Self

Learning about one's self and readying one's self for the principal role was discussed by several participants. Some discussed general advice, some focused on understanding personal values and making decisions, and others discussed the importance of finding the right "fit" regarding one's self and one's position.

Two participants offered general advice for "surviving" the first 100 days of a future middle school principalship. An experienced principal, Fred, in his fourth principal position, succinctly stated, "You really need to take a step back, relax. They always say the first year of any new job is survival. So you learn to survive. Build some confidence." Surprised by the difference between her current position and assistant principal positions she had held in the past, Amy offered:

Really plan to immerse yourself completely…You hear it all the time, but there's a huge difference between the principalship and assistant principalship. It consumes you. It's a great, great job and I love it, but you have to have the time. You really do. Just plan on that, especially the first 100 days, if not the whole first year. That first year is such a learning process.

Other participants focused on knowing one's self, using one's core values to help guide decision-making and goal-setting. Jack advised that the first thing future middle school principals should do "is to get in touch with what their values are and what they believe. Those are the things that are going to be the basis of their relationships inside and outside of the school." Beth shared her experience and advice:

You have to temper things with what you know is right, and what's best. Just go with your gut. I don't know how else to say it. You know, if it feels right, it probably is OK. I always kind of go by that. If I can't justify it to myself, I can't justify to anybody else. I have to be able to rationalize it for me before I try to explain it to somebody else, and, if I can't, there's no way I can get somebody else to buy into it…I reflected on some principals that I had had in the past and

some people that I had worked for. You realize that, even though you don't

necessarily consciously realize that they're shaping some of the things that you

do, they have, some good and some not so good…Just like teachers influence kids

and you don't realize it until much later…You know when you go home at the

end of the day, sometimes you can go home and say that was a really good day

and sometimes maybe I could do a little more.

Discussing "fit," two participants, Gary and Henry, shared how beneficial it was

for them finding a district and school whose needs matched their own strengths. Their

advice was to identify personal strengths and then understand how critical matching those

strengths with the needs of the school is to future success and personal satisfaction.

Henry advised being honest during interviews. In his, he was quick to reveal that his

leadership style meant that he would not feel comfortable making significant changes in

his first year. When he was offered his current position, he knew that his style fit with

the situation in the building at the time, and that the district administrators were

supportive of his leadership approach. Gary, who was called upon to make changes to

the climate and culture of the middle school, provided advice based on his experience:

I don't know if I'd be interested in a principal job until I knew exactly what was

expected and needed. Let's face it, every time a principal position opens up, there

are certain characteristics they're looking for in a principal and things that they

feel need done in that building or in that district. Sometimes it's: keep going with

how we're going. Other times it's: we need to swing the pendulum all the way to

the other side. I'm a huge, huge, believer in fit, and I think it's important for

candidates to find out what they're looking for, maybe even before you apply. If

not, certainly before you accept the position.

It all keeps coming down to fit...and you should know that before you take

it on. I would be, for example, I would be comfortable accepting another

principal job at another school, and now at a high school or a middle school, that

had a critical need for a change in climate and culture. I feel I could take that

position, have some ideas in place, and, boom, we'd be able to roll with it.

Because of my strengths and weaknesses, I don't know that I would take a school

in emergency or watch and have to make academic changes right off the bat

without knowing anything. I don't think that's my strength.

Advice about Others

Advice: Staff.

Almost all participants shared advice about working with staff. Valuable

resources, certified and non-certified staff members are critical elements in a successful

school. Participant advice centered mainly on building relationships and trust with staff

members, listening to them, and finding ways to use their strengths to maximize student

achievement.

When discussing relationship-building with staff, the ideas put forth from the

participants focused mainly on getting to know them, listening to them, and being visible.

Jack elaborated:

Then really just spend that first year listening, especially if it's a new staff to you,

listen to them, learn from them. This is the old cliché: seek first to understand

before you seek to be heard…Make sure that your staff sees you, there's a lot of

things, make sure that you're accessible, that you're out in the building, watching,

learning, listening. That you find a way to develop the relationships that will give

you all the information that you need to know about your school. You can't really

lead the school until you understand what it's about.

Appreciating her own transition situation, in that she had already worked in the same

building, Beth shared the following for others who may not be as "fortunate" as she saw

herself:

I felt like I had an advantage, even coming here, partly because I lived in the

district and my children went to school here. I already even knew the people,

some of the teachers, but some of them were still the people that were here when

my children went through here. It's hard to know what it would be like walking

in somewhere cold. [I suggest you] take some time to get to know the people, the

staff, and the students, and the parents, and the community, provided you didn't

know any of that.

Ian advised, "Listen. Sit and listen. Listen to what the teachers have to say, listen to what

the kids have to say, listen to what parents have to say, listen to what the community

members have to say," but he also cautioned, "Don't commit yourself to anything. You

don't want to say yes or no before you know all the repercussions that come from it. So

you need to listen." Others gave similar advice, ranging from "Do a lot of questioning

and fact gathering and get to know people and…what they think is great about the

building and what to improve upon, because that gives you some insight into…some of

the weaknesses," per Amy; to "I think it's important to communicate to the teachers that you're excited about this and there's going to be some changes. Get them excited about that," per Gary; to "Start by talking to your secretary, custodians. I've found that the classified staff loves to observe and then report. And, in and out of classrooms. Be visible. Rely on the people around you and don't be afraid to ask questions" per Henry.

Two participants who both had previous experience as a principal prior to their current positions provided detailed advice about building relationships with staff. Ed shared:

I think it's very important that they reach out and contact the people that they're going to be working with. I think everybody, I don't think it should just be the teachers, I think it's everybody that's going to be a part of their faculty or staff. Just to introduce, to invite them in to listen. Then, following up on that then is the critical piece of actively listening to what they have to say. I think, in all three buildings that I've been in, the three experiences I've had as a principal, through just actively listening and taking notes on each person that comes in, you start to see themes. And as you start to see themes and you hear over and over again, you really, it really sets for you what you should list as your first priorities.

The other experienced principal, Fred, offered this advice:

It's important to talk to the teachers…During that first period of time, you need to do some trust building. Folks need to know you're human. No need to be an enigma. It's OK to talk about your family and your kids and your likes and dislikes. You open up… I sometimes think I over-communicate. People will

say, you've already given us this, and I say, oh, OK, I couldn't remember if I did

or didn't, but here it is again. But anyway, it's good to just communicate. Keep

the door open. Folks need to talk to you. They need to know that they're

important.

Another aspect of working with the staff that was advised by some participants

was to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each staff member, specifically

identifying their strengths and using those strengths to benefit students. Henry

summarized, "Get to know your staff, get to know their strengths, celebrate their

strengths. Identify the weaknesses and look for ways to improve them." Similarly, Dan

recommended, "Identify your key players, your marginal teachers, your strong teachers,

your weak teachers." Fred elaborated on finding leaders within the building:

Figure out who your leaders are in the building, formal and informal. Work on

building and shaping that building leadership team, because they are the extension

of you. The principal can't do it alone; it has to be done with a team.

Complementary advice was given by Amy, in a district where she felt the sole

responsibility of leading the building, because there were no assistant principals nor was

there much support from other district administration. She advocated "using" others to

help and being clear on exactly what help is needed:

I would suggest that you tailor them the way you want them to be in the first 100

days. Really tell your guidance counselor [for example] how you want them to

operate in the building, and your needs. Find out what their strengths are and then

I would play up on their strengths, because that will ensure your success too.

Advice: Administration.

Working with other administrators was suggested by several participants.

Recommendations focused on central office administration: understanding what's

expected by the superintendent, seeking his/her input, and establishing relationships and

open communication with them; and on the building administrative team, if there is one:

building relationships with them and helping them reach their leadership potential.

Advice for future middle school principals included building relationships with

central office administrators, in particular. In a district where his objective, clearly

explicated by the superintendent, was to change the culture of the middle school, Gary

advocated, "Know what's expected of you, by the superintendent or any of the

supervisors. Know what the expectations are. I would be sure that your strengths meet

those needs." In a large district, with a significant number of district administrators, Fred

recommended:

> I think it's important that you open up some good lines of communication with
>
> the exec that works over you, but [also] the district support people, because
>
> you're going to have to turn to them at some time. We have an office called
>
> Student Services that handles all the cases of verbal assaults, physical assaults,
>
> weapons, and stuff. It's important to know them because it's guaranteed that
>
> during the year that either myself or my assistant principals will be down there for
>
> a hearing. They need to know where you're coming from and you need to know
>
> how they want things handled when you take a case down to them...Because [the
>
> central office administrators] are the folks that are going to be dealing more with

the public than I generally do, because I sometimes get stuck with paperwork that

has to be done, where they're handling the referrals and have to deal with the

parents.

Amy cautioned that, even though one may have ideas to implement, it is important to

communicate those ideas with central office administrators and secure their support:

Just don't think that it's all going to happen overnight. Even though you have all

of these wonderful ideas, there's a lot of people that need to be on board with

your ideas and a lot of people who have to approve your ideas. There are, in any

district, a lot of different opinions.

Another aspect of administration that was discussed by one participant involved

working with the building administrative team, if one exists in a future middle school

principal's particular school. An experienced principal, Fred suggested working with the

assistant (or assistants) to help build their capacity for future building leadership:

I've always been of the thinking that the assistant principals need to do some of

the things that I do, and that would be looking at handbooks, scheduling, because

down the road, they're going to get their own building, so they might as well get

that experience and learn as much as they can. Actually, it's kind of nice, when

you're teaching them about some of the stuff, you learn, you kind of review,

refresh what you already know, but then you also every once in a while pick up

something new. That's important to your job.

Advice: Parents/community.

Because "every community is different," as Ian stated, advice regarding parents

and community centered on building relationships with parents and listening to them, as well as on building relationships with the community. Suggestions for a future middle school principal were to establish trust with the parents and the community, find ways to reach out and help when needed, and utilize their resources effectively to meet the students' needs.

While most participants suggested meeting with parents and listening to what they have to say, one offered more detailed advice. Although Gary was not new to the district, only new to the building, he shared the following:

I think it's important for the parents to know there's going to be a change. Get to know many of them as much as you can. I had the benefit of living in the community, so that was pretty well established. I would think that's very important to create. For example, if I was new to the community, I would probably have found a way to have an evening in August where… a meet and greet. Hey, I'm interested, tell me, what do you feel we're doing well, what are some of your concerns? And to get some of that. And, not so much me talking saying, hey, you. I think it would be important…for example, I established what they call the Golden Rules of [the middle school]. There are four rules and they're basically all centered around respect. I probably would have introduced that and then listened most of the rest of the time.

Other participants focused on addressing the negative connotation that some educators have about parental involvement. Fred commented, "Get to know parents, even the gripers. Sometimes it's good to deal with them, because if you can work with

them and turn them around, then they actually become nice ambassadors out in the community for you." Beth provided similar advice about understanding the parents' perspective to better assist the child's learning:

> Parents still want the best education for them, and they're going to make sure that they do whatever they can to get it. Sometimes it's not always the way that we would agree with, but they still want what's best for their kids. I don't know too many parents who don't. They may not go about it the way that we think they should go about it, but they still want what's best for their kids, but we still have to remember that.

In an urban district, Fred advocated that future principals focus on building relationships with the community, to provide opportunities for student service as well as using the community's resources within the school:

> Look at what's going on in the community, any business groups. Certainly don't shy away from inviting and talking with the councilmen from the area. I actually have in the building, I have [police] officers that are here for added security, but a couple of them are actually…community beat cops. It's kind of nice to hear what some of the kids are doing out in the community.

Advice: Students.

Regarding students, the advice for future middle school principals was simple: be visible and available. Especially at the middle school level, where students need even more social and emotional support, the participants stressed how important it is to get to know the students and build relationships with them.

"Get to know the students," per Amy; "Listen," per Carl; and "Sit and listen," per Ian, were all comparable statements provided as advice for working with students. Henry shared a recommendation, based on his experiences, of how to begin to establish relationships with students: "There's other ways you can make yourself visible, in and out of the classrooms. I'm in the cafeteria four periods a day. Kids see me. They get to know me. That helps." Gary provided a similar comment:

> Then, with the students. I'm a huge, student-centered person and love being around the students. My best days are the days when I'm right with the kids, in the classroom and the cafeteria. Those are my best days. I love it. For them to see that you're excited to be with them. I think that's important.

Advice about Middle School

Advice: Data.

Reviewing and understanding data was a theme throughout the descriptions of participants' experiences, because schools are judged publicly on student academic performance. When providing advice, the participants continued to stress the importance of data, including reviewing the data to learn about the school, and relying on the data to support and highlight academic priorities on which to focus.

To learn about the school, Beth advised that future principals review data: "read stuff on the internet and…look at what things look like" as well as talk to the staff to find out about the needs of the school. To focus on key issues, Jack suggested using data as the rationale and support:

It's [too] easy to say, we need to do better with x, y, or z, and not to have a

monitoring system that allows you to check in on it every week or every 2 weeks

or whatever that period of time is. Pick out the big rocks and keep track of them.

Providing a different perspective about a significant focus on data at the onset of a

principal position, Gary advised future principals to base decisions on the data, but also

stressed that other areas might take a priority if the school is actually doing well: "It

wasn't critical [to focus] on the academic piece. It wasn't like we need to address this

right now, because we're in emergency or watch. I probably would have had a different

approach to that."

Advice: Logistics.

Participants advised looking closely at the logistics of the building, how things are

set up regarding management of the facilities and operations, curriculum, and instruction.

Through observation and discussions, some participants shared that one can note areas of

weakness and can begin looking "for ways to improve them," as described by Amy. In

determining what to change, if anything, about logistics of the building, Ed shared:

I think that there are always things right away that, once you hear over and over

again and realize that it's an issue, that you can address. And I think, when you do

that and it's stuff that has been brought up from the group that you're working

with, they start to see those changes occurring and they start to feel heard.

Advice about the management of school facilities and daily operations included

the following, from Fred, a participant with previous principal experience:

Identify your budget. Know how the money's been spent in the past. Look at the physical plant, see if there's anything in that physical plant that's going to cause some problems, especially with IDEA and access to schools, those kinds of things. Talk to your custodians. See if there's anything in your physical plant that's causing them problems. Work with them to try to remedy those things. Your school treasurer is obviously a good person to learn from. Because the office will handle what we call the 0100 account, which are the general fund accounts. Then the treasurer, who's got a supplemental contract, handles all the 018 accounts, which are the student accounts, so it's good to know how the money's going to be spent, how it's been spent in the past. Your coaches. At the middle school, it's not like at a high school level. We only offer eight sports during the course of the year. But it's good to talk to the coaches and see if they have any concerns or things that need to be addressed before a season starts.

Advice about managing the curriculum and instruction of the middle school included several recommendations. From Amy, in a school with an initial designation of Excellent, came a suggestion for determining professional development needs: "I would look closely at instructional strategies and what teachers are doing in classrooms, because you could plan what professional development you think needs to be in place." Ian discussed how working on smaller challenges, early, through a collaborative process helps to establish the comfort level necessary when discussions must occur about larger-scale curricular changes:

> [They learned,] I can come up with strategies and I don't feel like I'm being
>
> attacked about my profession or my professional practice. Then when it came to,
>
> OK, what's going on in our classrooms, how are we teaching, what am I doing to
>
> make sure these kids are learning, when we got to that point, when we got to
>
> sitting down and talking about our instructional practices in our classrooms, it
>
> became a lot less threatening because you've had other brainstorming sessions
>
> with these teachers and with the administration and principals.

In a school that improved its designation significantly, Carl advised future middle school

principals to closely examine the curriculum as well as the master schedule. Finding and

eliminating "down time" during the school day helped the students in his school receive a

more thorough education; therefore, he suggested ensuring that students are always "on-

task" and that teachers have "the time they need" to teach their standards in depth.

Gary recommended allowing the teachers to behave as the professionals and

"experts that they are", guiding them in the direction that "the school should go" and

providing them with the "resources and training needed" to accomplish the goals.

Through his own experience with this, Dan offered advice for future principals on finding

a balance between managing the priorities sufficiently and not managing the minor

details too "heavily":

> I have to make a few decisions, but it comes back to my staff. The bottom line is
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> that it's good teaching. If you don't have good teachers teaching well, I don't
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> care what you do. I have to boil it down to my staff, because I have a wonderful
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> staff here. I have to give them credit. I might make a few decisions, but they're

the ones who are in the trenches every day doing their work. It comes back to my

staff...You're the professional. My job is to give you the tools to be successful.

I'm not a tyrant and I'm not a micromanager. I think micromanaging would give

a new principal… I think if you get into micromanaging you're going to get in

trouble.

Specific to the middle school level, some participants advised that a future middle

school principal be knowledgeable about the needs of the middle school child, in

particular. Gary suggested reading *This We Believe*, "talking with other middle level

educators", and even visiting successful middle schools. Amy's advice focused on the

philosophy of teaming in middle schools: "Understand how teams work at the middle

school level and why they're beneficial, because teachers are all working together for the

benefit of the kids." She also advocated ensuring that team teachers have time in the

school day to meet together to discuss students as well as curriculum. Addressing the

whole child, Jack recommended a "focus on academics, obviously, but don't forget that

these kids have other unique needs, like social and emotional."

Advice: Culture.

When speaking about school culture, the participants' advice was very alike.

Future principals are advised to learn the culture through observing and listening, and to

understand the critical role it plays in the school's success. Fred noted, "You have to be

very aware of what you're walking into." Beth advocated getting input from staff

whenever possible, because "whenever you give them an opportunity to let you know

what they think is working and what's not working," the ownership and leadership of the

staff is increased, which helps improve the overall culture. Even though he worked in the same building in which he had previously been an assistant principal, Jack shared this:

> You can't really lead the school until you understand what it's about. Once you have an understanding of what that culture is and begin to start to understand what some of the subcultures are, I'll tell you, four years into this, I'm not sure I understand all the subculture that happens.

Similarly, from Ed, a principal with experience at multiple buildings, this advice was provided:

> As it progresses over the course of that first year, you start to get a much better feel for the place, the community, where you're at, the things that are important to them that you might not necessarily understand, the cultural component of it, and just what all of those different things mean. And then you can start to really make some plans and progress, working with people, for what kinds of changes you think should be made starting in year two.

Advice about Making Changes

During their first 100 days, many of the participants made changes to the school, from changing the schedule, to creating committees and other meeting structures, to addressing the school culture. Sometimes, these were the result of their discussions with staff or their own observations, while other times, the decisions were influenced by other factors, like the superintendent or the school's designation, for example. When providing advice for future middle school principals, however, the participants' advice mainly

centered on not making any changes right away, although a few exceptions to this sentiment were also shared.

Individuals who advocated not making changes initially, or at least only making minor changes, suggested that a principal "stand back and observe," per Dan; and "see what's working and what's not working," per Beth; before changing anything. After talking with teachers and understanding what the strengths and weaknesses of the building are, then the advice was to make changes based on the themes that present themselves from those conversations. Amy recommended:

> In the first 100 days, then I would probably not change anything immediately, especially in the first 100 days. You need to really find out how things have operated. Do a lot of questioning and fact gathering and get to know people and how they, what they think is great about the building and what to improve upon, because that gives you some insight into where some of the weaknesses lie.

Ed provided the strategy that he used in several buildings:

> I think the other thing, too, is, I think it's important that you don't go in, storming in with all of these ideas of what you think are going to work, and make all kinds of changes without any kind of input…I have a list, actually, that I put together. I've done it at each place. It's just a legal sheet. I have a list, line by line, of the different themes that I heard from those initial meetings. And then during the course of the time that I'm at the building, I go through them and prioritize them on where I think the need is, based off of what I've heard and what I've seen after I've been there awhile. I just work on my list and keep going. Usually, I'm pretty

close to the end of the list when I leave. I don't know how you would do it any

differently.

Advocating making changes only if something is a priority and if it is something

the staff members support, Ian suggested:

I didn't change a whole lot at first. I mean, I wasn't about coming in here and

shaking things up. But also, in my opinion, I didn't need to shake everything up.

It wasn't that the building wasn't running, the building wasn't in terrible shape

when I got here. There were just a few things that I felt that we could do better,

and just sitting back and thinking about how we were going to get that

accomplished. And start with, I guess if you're going to change something, start

with something that you know people are going to be on board with, something

that you know you can be successful with, and maybe it's just something that

everyone hasn't gotten on the same page before. It's something that you've

wanted to fix, but it's just not clicking.

In a building where he made changes to the special education programming

structure immediately, Dan shared that he had only done so because he already knew the

building, from having taught there previously and having been a principal in the same

district:

The first thing I would recommend, if you're new and you don't know anything, I

would make no changes the first year. Stand back and observe…You don't want

to go making changes because you don't know what needs to be changed. First

year, you make some minor changes. You see where your weaknesses and

strengths are. The second year, you go into it after you've made just a few changes, you take that second year to observe, make more changes. Then the third year, it's yours and take off. That's my advice and that's from my experience…If I didn't know [the building and people], I wouldn't have made those changes. With the data, and knowing our building's strengths and weaknesses, I felt comfortable doing that.

Although most participants recommended making little or no changes initially, others described a different perspective, based on the situation one is entering upon acceptance of a new principal position. In fact, Henry advocated both views, which most of the participants' advice complemented: "Do a lot of listening, do a lot of observing, and don't make any radical changes…you know, unless something really needs fixed." Gary, who, throughout his entire interview, spoke about "not coming in as the expert" and allowing the teachers to be the professionals and the middle school specialists that they are, gave advice that he admitted appeared to contradict his own philosophy. As he spoke, however, he advocated understanding the situation and reacting appropriately:

I want to be careful how I say this, because I think you can see that I don't perceive myself as being a strong leader in terms of a control freak. I'm the complete opposite of that. But I felt it was important that everyone saw that there was going to be change. And I want it to be a positive change.

I was coming in new, and I needed to listen. I think that was very important. To watch and not do a whole lot. To listen and learn. And I would suggest that that's probably going to be the case for most positions you take. I

think people develop a lot of respect for that. But that being said, I think, if you're someone who's been in that building, either as a teacher and/or an administrator, especially if you've been an assistant already, I think there's probably some expectations. I think it's important for you to establish, these are some things we need to work on. For example, if I was going to become a principal at the high school, I would have had some things that… and, not that I'd tear apart everything that [the principal] had done or things we'd done at the high school, but there are things I'd want to tinker with.

You look at Obama coming in. He's coming in during very difficult and challenging times. He had to have some specific things he was going to do with foreign policy and the economy. He didn't have that luxury of taking and assessing for a while.

After making substantial changes to school culture, especially relating to student expectations and discipline, Carl offered this advice to future middle school principals:

If you're a new principal, don't be afraid to make decisions. If you've got to make a decision, if you're afraid of making people mad, then you're in the wrong profession. Some of the teachers I've made mad at first, have come back to me later and said, you've made the right choice. They'll say, the school is much better. I always have tried to do what's best for my teachers as individual people, but only with regard that if it helps the school. If it's not a positive step, then we're not taking it.

Finally, Fred advised spending the first year identifying aspects that need changed, but also making the changes immediately if that is what is asked by the superintendent. For those difficult changes that are sometimes demanded of incoming principals, given the reality of high-stakes testing and the sometimes negative public perception of schools, he was hopeful that the superintendent and central office administration would be fully supportive:

Start to look at things that you might want to change, or start to look at things you might want to focus on as the year's going on to see if these are things that you want to make some adjustments to the second year.

If the superintendent tells a person coming into a new position, you've got to do some major clean-up… We've got the…educational association, the union, to deal with, so major changes, you have to watch the contract language, and due process when you deal with people. But if you're in a building where there's just a superintendent and building principals, and they may not have a union at all, and that superintendent says, you've got to go in and make some major changes, and you need to kill the sacred cows right away, then that's what you do. But if it's a building that's functioning and you just see some things that you want to fix, and there aren't major, major problems, then I think you go about it slowly.

If the superintendent says you can fire all the teachers and hire new ones to get out of school improvement year 5, then, if that's the mandate, that's what you do. You would hope that you have some help. The person transitioning out, or the superintendent or someone in his office would be helping with that. I guess

it would just depend on what folks above would like to see happen. What they

wanted to see here was just some stability.

Advice about Mentors/Collaboration

Although the participants all worked in dissimilar districts, their advice on finding

a mentor or mentors and on seeking collaboration with others was extremely comparable.

Finding an individual who can provide information and counsel, or who can simply listen

and offer encouragement, and, especially, finding an individual with whom there is a

comfort level and with whom one can have open and honest discussions, was a common

theme throughout the discussions.

Ian advocated, "You need to find somebody who you can talk to that has either

been in the situation you have been in, or is in a similar situation you are." Fred

suggested building collaboration by getting "to know your fellow administrators. That's

probably the most important thing, when your team comes together."

Seeking information from the outgoing principal, if possible, was also advised by

Fred:

> If there's any quality time that can be spent with the outgoing administrator. But
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> know when you're talking to the administrator if they've had a good tenure or a
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> rough tenure, because you don't want them to make comments about folks that
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> may influence your dealings with them. In other words, I wouldn't want someone
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> to tell me this is a terrible teacher, and then all I'm doing is looking at the teacher
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> and saying, man, you're the pits. So, I think you need to know who you're talking
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> to in the transition process. If you know someone's had a rough time at the

building, you just focus on policies, procedures, the routine, the structure, how things worked. Stay away from the personalities. If it's someone you know and you trust, and you trust their judgment and value their opinions, you could talk about individuals.

New to the principalship when she accepted her current position, Amy shared the following thoughtful and reflective advice for future middle school principals:

It would help tremendously in the first 100 days if there were somebody from the district that could say, be ready for this, this is coming up, or at least ask, have you prepared, or at least talk about it. Communication is just a huge piece of the puzzle, and, when it's missing, that just makes every day challenging.

Before I would get the job, I would find out the support that the district has to offer principals, because it just helps your success all the way around. I would find out if there's any transition time that you and the old principal could work together, have some days either extending their contract or your contract so that you could be together so that they could go through the procedures in the school.

I would also suggest that you would have some sort of mentorship with somebody. Find out for sure that there is district support for building principals, whether it's the district leadership, meeting with principals monthly, or curriculum support, or you have an assistant principal.

Summary: Advice for New or Current Administrators

After reflecting on their own transitional experiences during their first 100 days in their current principal positions, the participants shared advice for future middle school principals. Their intent was to provide recommendations, based on their recent experiences, which would assist a new principal, whether new to the principalship or merely new to the position, in transitioning successfully. Themes included advice regarding self, others, the middle school building, making changes, and mentors/collaboration.

Summary of Research Findings

In summary, based on the themes that existed from the experiences of 10 principal participants, who were principals in public schools in Ohio who led their schools to improvement, principals who had been in their position for less than four full years, and principals who represented one of the five different initial state designations and one of the seven different district typologies, a framework for the transition into the middle school principalship, during the first 100 days, was developed. This framework consisted of three distinct phases of transformation: 1) positioning self *into* new principal role [which occurred prior to the first 100 days], 2) establishing self *in* new principal role [which occurred during the first 100 days], and 3) transforming self from *new* principal to *the* principal [which occurred after the first 100 days.] Within each phase, the participants focused on three main aspects: 1) self, 2) others [including staff, administration, parents/community, and students), and 3) middle school [including data, logistics, and culture]. Based on their experiences, they also shared factors that

influenced their actions and decisions during the first 100 days, centering on district finances, district philosophy, district typology, prior principal, school culture, school designation, superintendent and central office administration, and leadership style. In addition, they provided advice for future middle school principals, which followed the themes of self, others (including staff, administration, parents/community, and students), middle school (including data, logistics, and culture), making changes, and mentors/collaboration.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As the instructional leader of the school, the building principal is responsible for ensuring that students achieve academically, measured against the performance of other students, and that students make academic progress, measured against their own past performance. The state of Ohio rates the school, and the principal, via the state Report Card, on how the students perform on these measurements, which adds a public component to the principal's accountability. Moreover, in a middle school, the building principal is tasked with providing for the students' academic growth as well as their social and emotional growth, due to the unique needs of the students whom they serve. Necessary to the success of the principal and the middle school, this "developmentally responsive leadership is grounded in the belief that schools should be organized and operated around the developmental characteristics of the students they educate" (Anfara et al., 2006, p. 21). When a middle school principal is new to the role, whether or not he/she has served as a principal before, experiencing a successful transition period is extremely critical given the diverse needs of the middle school students and the public accountability for their academic success.

As Anfara et al. (2006) suggested, "If, indeed, educational excellence is inextricably coupled with effective school leadership, there is much to be gained from studying the experience of school leaders" (p. 50). Given a recommendation to "find, analyze, describe and celebrate good practice in school leadership in order to build a

usable knowledge base for school leaders to share" (Southworth, 2004, p. 340), the challenge is how to identify good practice; in this case, identifying good practice related to the transition into the middle school principalship. The intention of this study was to begin developing this "knowledge base" from the experiences of principals who have recently transitioned, and whose schools have improved under their leadership. While this does not necessarily guarantee that the actions they implemented during their transition period were "good," and while it should not be assumed that that these leaders actually wholly improved their schools within the first 100 days, their transitional actions may be correlated with the initial stages of the improvement process or the preparation for future improvement.

With a focus on the first 100 days of the middle school principalship, this study aimed to understand the transition experiences of 10 middle school principals in public schools in Ohio who led their schools to improvement. The participants were selected through a multi-tier process resulting in 10 individuals who were in their current position for less than four full school years, whose school's state designation improved under their leadership, with no decrease at any time, and who represented one of the five possible initial state designations and one of the seven relevant district typologies.

To learn about the transition experiences of the participants, the research questions for the study were:

1. What are the experiences of Ohio public middle school principals, in schools of improvement, during the first 100 days of the transition into their leadership position?

     a. What actions are implemented by these principals during the first 100 days of the transition into their leadership position?

     b. How do external and internal circumstances (e.g., prior year's state designation, type of school district) and individuals influence the transitional actions of these principals?

2. What perceptions are held by Ohio public middle school principals, in schools of improvement, regarding how their transitional actions influenced their schools' future improvement?

3. What perceptions are held by Ohio public middle school principals, in schools of improvement, regarding effective transitions into the middle school principalship?

In summary, the goal of this study was to gain insight about the leadership transition into the middle school principalship from principals whose schools improved under their leadership, to learn what they did during the first 100 days, what factors influenced their actions and decisions during that time, their perceptions of how their actions influenced the school's improvement, and their perceptions of effective transitions.

Conclusions

Based on the interviews of the 10 principal participants, a theory of the transition into the middle school principalship was developed. The theory details a *transformation process*, beginning with positioning one's self *into* the new principal role, followed by establishing one's self *in* the new principal role, and culminating in transforming one's

self from *new* principal to *the* principal. Within each of these phases, the participants described their *transformation focus*, their attention to self, others, and the middle school. Current scholarship on leadership transitions, specifically transitions into the principalship, includes discussion on these themes. This section presents conclusions from the study's interviews and how those conclusions relate to the current research.

The Transformation Process: Positioning, Establishing, Transforming

Reflecting on their transition experiences into their current principal positions, the participants of the study shared their thoughts, actions, and decisions. The data from the interviews suggested a process of transformation as the participants described becoming *the* principal. Studies have detailed this transformation process, titled in numerous ways, and consisting of varying stages and terminologies. The transition process, referred to by Betof and Harwood (1992) as "the process of moving up," included three phases per the authors: 1) "moving in: establishing yourself in your new assignment," which "considers how to move into your new position", 2) "achieving an impact on the organization," which "describes how to develop a vision that will result in organizational renewal and improvement", and 3) "managing the impact of moving up on your family and personal life," which "describes how to achieve a new life balance while making a management transition" (p. 5-6). Neff and Citrin (2005) outlined a two-phase process of transformation into a new leadership position: 1) "building your foundation" (consisting of the first 100 days, including the countdown period prior to officially beginning the position), and 2) "building on the momentum" (consisting of "the next 100 days and beyond") (p. 261). In a practical framework for successfully navigating the first year of a

principalship, Lindley (2003) described three phases of that initial year: 1) "before the school year begins", 2) "as the school year begins", and 3) "as the school year progresses" (p. 21). Hart (1993) described three stages of socialization in the transition into the principalship: "learning and uncertainty; gradual adjustment during which outcomes (custodial or organizational change) begin to emerge; and stabilization" (p. 28-29). Presenting six stages of the principalship experience, Weindling and Earley (1987) included a stage prior to beginning the position, a stage spanning the first few months, and four additional phases spanning from the remainder of the first year through the eighth year and beyond. In all, research supports a process of transformation during the transition into the principalship.

As stated by Ciampa and Watkins (1999), "The transition period begins before entry. New leaders must leverage the valuable time prior to entry, using it to prepare, learn, and plan" (p. 274). For each participant in my study, there existed a preparatory phase, positioning themselves *into* the new principal role, prior to officially beginning. The specific aspects of this phase differed depending on the length of time the participant experienced between accepting the position and beginning the position and on whether or not the participant was hired from within the district (and, further, from within the same building). Actions included preparing themselves mentally, establishing and/or furthering relationships with stakeholders, and reviewing school data and documentation. Other studies concurred with this preparatory phase and its function (Neff & Citrin, 2005; Daresh, 2006). Daresh reported:

Most people get their first administrative assignments during the summer, before the new school year begins. In an ideal world…you might have a few months to plan for the upcoming school year; check over your school; learn about the students, teachers, staff, and school district…In the real world, however, you might receive your first principalship only a few weeks (or days) before the school year begins. Regardless of the situation in which you find yourself, you can do a number of things in the months, weeks, or even days before teachers and students walk into your school (p. 41).

"We often have described becoming a principal as an intricate process of learning and reflection that requires socialization into a new community of practice and assumption of a new role identity" (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004, p. 488). Addressing this, the next phase for the participants, during the first 100 days, was spent establishing themselves *in* the new principal role. This time was spent, especially, learning and doing all of the necessary tasks to begin the new school year successfully. As they learned about this new position and the new environment, their experiences differed depending on whether or not the participant was hired internally, whether or not they had prior principalship experience, and whether or not they had served in a middle school before.

As discussed in Chapter I, the term socialization is often used to describe "the process of learning a new role" (Crow, 2007, p. 52). "Socialization is generally regarded as including two types: professional socialization and organizational socialization" (Bush, 2004, p. 293). Professional socialization, per Bush, involves developing an

"administrative perspective" in meeting the "expectations that the larger society in general and a preparatory institution in particular communicate regarding how to enact the role," while organizational socialization refers to the "content, methods and outcomes that are based on the organization where an individual works" (p. 293).

The participants in the study revealed that they spent time establishing themselves in their roles through learning as much as they could about their new role and their environment. In each situation, the demands and the expectations varied, so this learning was critical in their future success:

It all comes down to the fact that there are so many possible things to focus on and so little time [during the first 100 days]. The essence of leadership is finding a way to take all the strands of possible activity and be an integrator, prioritizer, synthesizer, direction-setter, motivator, and executor. Doing so well necessitates that you accurately assess your situation from all dimensions and tailor your plan accordingly (Neff & Citrin, 2005, p. 258).

As the participants discussed their schools' improvement, they focused on their experiences during the first 100 days and beyond that helped to guide the improvement process. Their reflections centered on a third phase of transformation, transforming themselves from the *new* principal to *the* principal, while acknowledging that they were still evolving as leaders and continually improving themselves and their schools. Although the participants were quick to highlight actions of their staff, rather than their own actions, as being instrumental in the eventual improvement in their schools, Bush and Jackson (2002) noted that "generations of research on school effectiveness show that

excellent leadership is invariably one of the main factors in high performing schools" (p. 417). During these discussions, it was evident that the participants were focused on improvement and on providing the necessary guidance and resources to ensure that their schools improved.

Throughout this transformation process, the participants were affected by factors that influenced their actions and decisions during the first 100 days. In at least one school, discipline was needed immediately prior to a focus on academics, while in others, the immediate need was to address school culture. Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1999) addressed these different needs succinctly: "Outstanding leadership is exquisitely sensitive to the context in which it is exercised" (p. 4). Depending on the state designation, the community characteristics, and the size of the school, among other factors, the participants made decisions and implemented actions, influenced by a variety of factors, that were specific to their particular situation.

These characteristics of the new environment must be understood by the new principal, in addition to the factors from outside of the district that may also influence the decisions that are necessary to make at the onset. Reinforcing this, Sarros and Sarros (2007) used the terms *issues* and *initiatives* to define two distinct types of actions that CEOs and school leaders undertake during their transition period. According to their definitions, issues are "events generated by parties other than the CEO (teachers, school council members, wider community) prior to and during the new appointment" and initiatives are "events and tasks generated by the CEO upon commencement" (p. 356).

Based on these ideas, and similar to the experiences of the principal participants in this study, decisions that are made, especially at the beginning of a principal's leadership tenure, are often the result of factors other than the leaders own beliefs about what should be done. The participants discussed several external factors that influenced their actions and decisions, with one exception, an internal factor (leadership style), that would be considered by Sarros and Sarros (2007) to lead to initiatives rather than issues.

Stating that "context is not a simple phenomenon – it is multiple, blended and variable," Southworth (2004) suggested that research be "focused on developing not just images of leadership in action, but pictures of leadership in many different contexts" (p. 347). In summary, as the participants experienced their unique transitions, due to their own prior experience and the environment of the principal position they accepted, their "pictures of leadership in many different contexts" demonstrated a common transformation process.

The Transformation Focus: Self, Others, Middle School

Within each stage of the transformation process, the participants identified their specific thoughts, actions, and decisions. These centered around three main areas of focus – their transformation focus: self, others, and the middle school.

Self.

The participants shared that their focus on themselves included preparing mentally for the new role and understanding their personal values and priorities. Several studies uphold this emphasis on self (Hausman, Crow, & Sperry, 2000; Daresh & Male, 2000; Sarros & Sarros, 2007). Understanding that "the first 100 days…were marked

by…increased confidence" but also "loneliness and a heavy workload" (Sarros & Sarros, p. 365), the recommendation of Daresh and Male was: "There must be a strong commitment…for those stepping into school site leadership roles to spend time reflecting on personal values, ethical stances, and other similar matters" (p. 99). The importance of firm values was also stressed by Whitaker (2003):

> Like other leaders, principals can be lonely. Though we work in a community of colleagues, at times we have to make decisions on our own. Without a core of firmly held beliefs, it's difficult to steer a steady course. With this core, we feel secure and confident. And so do our teachers. And most importantly, so will our students (p. 114).

Similarly, Hausman et al. reported:

> Not only do effective principals know themselves, but also they are true to themselves. In other words, their actions are congruent with their values. They understand the contexts in which they are most effective and select such a context in which to work when they have a choice…Understanding one's needs and emotions is… crucial to good school leaders. Effective principals meet their own needs as well as those of their organization. This keeps them energized and efficacious (p. 11).

Another aspect of self that the participants disclosed was that of increasing their knowledge about the principal role and the expectations associated with that role. A study by Bush and Jackson (2002) indicated that this preparation is a "vital component of school improvement" (p. 426). The participants spent time reflecting on how their own

strengths and weaknesses fit within the needs of the school and district. This thought was mirrored in a study by Hausman et al. (2000):

> Effective principals are aware of their strengths and limitations. Acknowledging their limitations enables them to surround themselves with others who possess the strengths that they lack. Such principals have enough self-confidence to let go of some important tasks. They see leadership as an organization-wide phenomenon and allow others to grow and develop (p. 11).

A more thorough discussion of their focus on self throughout the transformation process involved the participants' need for, and their purposeful search for, collaboration and mentorship. All participants recounted the personal and professional support gained through collaboration with others. In addition to support, each reflected on individuals who served as sources of information, from identifying key staff members to providing guidance about building needs. In all cases, participants stressed the importance of mentoring and collaborating, benefitting from a variety of resources for information and support, from the outgoing principals, to their administrative peers within their districts, to peers outside of their districts.

A study by Robbins and Alvy (2003) suggested that some principals, unfortunately, experience a lack of collegiality:

> It's lonely at the top. New principals are not only on unfamiliar ground but will find that by virtue of their positions at the top of the management hierarchy in their schools, they do not have professional peers with similar responsibilities in

their immediate environments. Quite simply, there may be no one else around

who can relate to the problems being faced (p. 270).

With a similar experience, although most of the participants shared numerous examples

of mentoring they had encountered in their positions, one participant reflected that the

lack of mentoring, either formal or informal, in her district, led her to search outside of

the district for collaboration.

In a study of beginning principals, Daresh and Male (2000) found a common

recommendation among their participants, that "support must be actively sought, and

must come from peers" (p. 98). Related to the aforementioned participant's experience,

not only did the recommendation include seeking support from individuals within the

same school and district, but also from outside the district: "Outside consultants acting as

critical friends were important in the lives of many interviewed" (p. 98).

Additional research advocating mentoring for new leaders abounds, with some

stressing a formal structure and others stressing informal communication. Discussing

how best to develop a mentoring program to most effectively assist new leaders, Grogan

and Crow (2004) suggested a combination of incorporating, formally, aspects such as

specified outcomes and a strong district commitment, as well as taking advantage,

informally, of "possibilities and seized opportunities," especially as determined by the

new principal based on his/her immediate needs (p. 465). They remarked, "This is a

potentially new way of looking at mentoring. Instead of viewing it as an understood,

somewhat bounded phenomenon, it might be more fruitful to decontextualize the

concept" (p. 465).

Others.

A focus on establishing and furthering relationships with others was also noted by each participant during the transition period and beyond. Among the first stakeholders mentioned were other administrators and staff members, both certified and non-certified. Relationships with these individuals, staff members especially, entailed being available to them, listening to them, learning their perspectives as well as their strengths and weaknesses, beginning to identify leaders in the building, guiding staff toward school improvement, and providing the necessary resources to facilitate that improvement. These priorities related to a study by Petzko (2008), in which, after studying new principals and the knowledge and skills that were important to them during their transition, it was reported that "new principals are, in fact, in alignment with those of more experienced peers [in that] the need for attention to human relationships and improvement of instruction emerge[d] as priorities across all groups" (p. 238).

Comparable study results pertaining to staff relations have been published. In research on new school leaders, it was determined that, when dealing with staff especially, "the new role necessitated the clear articulation of organizational vision and strategy, good communication and negotiation skills, and the capacity to remain accessible, open, and inclusive" (Sarros & Sarros, 2007, p. 365). Another study examined student outcomes and how they were affected by different school leaders:

Educational leadership involves not only building collegial teams, a loyal and cohesive staff, and sharing an inspirational vision. It also involves focusing such relationships on some very specific pedagogical work… The leadership

dimension that is most strongly associated with positive student outcomes is that of promoting and participating in teacher learning and development" (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008, p. 665).

Studying a school that made a significant improvement in student achievement to determine leadership factors that contributed to the success, Eilers and Camacho (2007) stated, "Reform depends on leadership of a system, including the principal and district staff members who collaboratively work with school staff" (p. 635). NMSA (2003) also highlighted the importance of middle school principals and staff having strong, student-centered relationships in order to affect student learning: "When such dedicated and knowledgeable middle level educators work together, they create exciting possibilities for all students; their professional commitment and passion make a positive difference in the lives of the young adolescents" (p. 9).

Building relationships with parents and the community was another priority of the study participants. Depending on the district typology and state designation, the focus of these relationships differed. In more affluent, high-performing districts, principals focused on communicating with parents and the community and continuing to encourage their participation in the school. In urban districts and districts with lower state designations, the principals focused on getting the parents involved and providing opportunities to make them feel welcome in the school, in addition to utilizing community resources when possible. This focus on parents and community was thoroughly depicted by NMSA (2003):

In today's society, genuine family and community involvement are fundamental components of successful schools for young adolescents. Too many parents mistakenly become less involved in middle school, believing that their children need less support at this level. Continuing parental involvement is as important as ever, so schools must take the initiative to develop needed home-school bonds…Research studies clearly link the involvement of both family and other adults in the community with higher levels of student achievement, improved student behavior, and greater overall support for schools. Successful middle schools, therefore, promote family involvement by sponsoring parent education programs, creating and maintaining links between home and school, initiating volunteer programs, establishing coordinated home-school learning experiences, and developing activities that involve community businesses and various cultural and civic groups (p. 17-18).

In all cases, students were mentioned throughout the interviews. A focus on ensuring student success and on providing the best possible environment for students was noted, as well as a focus on getting to know and being available for students. Correspondingly, students, in a study on principals and their impact on academic achievement, perceived the visibility and availability of the principal to be strong indicators of their own school's success: "Those who cultivated an approachable persona by consistently engaging with students…communicated that [they] were interested in students' personal academic challenges and successes, and students reported this motivated them to 'try harder' with their academic work" (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007, p.

229). NMSA (2003) also supported the participants' focus on students by declaring that young adolescents need to have trusted, caring adults in their lives, especially as they begin to search for adult role models other than their parents: "Remember that young adolescents hunger for positive relationships with caring adults and opportunities for informal interactions and conversations with them" (p. 4).

Middle school.

With a focus on the middle school during their first 100 days, the participants discussed multiple aspects of the school. Some participants, because they had not worked in a middle school before, spent time learning about the middle school philosophy and middle school students' needs, which was strongly advocated by NMSA (2003). Issuing the same recommendation, referencing the unique needs of middle level students, Little and Little (2001) reported:

> Good middle schools have been distinctively planned, staffed, and operated in ways that will provide a program focused on rapidly changing learners who are in transition from childhood to adulthood…Middle school students require an environment sharply focused on their needs and educators who understand and meet those needs in the classroom and beyond" (p. 1).

Some participants, due to the needs of the school when they first accepted the position, focused on the school culture, ensuring that all stakeholders felt welcome in the school setting and establishing a level of trust and openness that had not existed prior, at least recently, to their leadership tenure. In their study, Robinson et al. (2008) noted that the school leader's attention to school culture is critical to student achievement:

Leadership that ensures an orderly and supportive environment makes it possible for staff to teach and students to learn. Protection of teaching time from administrative and student disruption is one critical aspect of this dimension. Another is creating classroom…environments in which both staff and students feel respected and personally cared for" (p. 667).

Congruently, Payne (2001) conveyed the key elements of a positive climate that a middle school principal must ensure are present:

1. The environment promotes creativity, responsible risk taking, cooperation, and mutual trust and respect.

2. Staff and students feel safe at school and in work-related activities.

3. Staff, students, and parents all report that the learning environment is academically stimulating (p. 56-57).

Linking the academic, social, and emotional needs of middle school students into a simple description of the desired student-centered culture for a middle school, NMSA (2003) summarized: "A successful school for young adolescents is an inviting, supportive, and safe place, a joyful community that promotes in-depth learning and enhances students' physical and emotional well-being" (p. 12).

A focus on data was apparent in the interviews with the participants. All participants reviewed data and utilized data to drive decisions within the school. This may be because "the NCLB [No Child Left Behind] legislation places the burden for improved academic achievement squarely on the shoulders of school principal, who, along with classroom teachers, are those 'closest to the customers' (i.e., the students)"

(Gentilucci & Muto, 2007, p. 219). The participants' focus on data mirrored the findings of a study on instructional leadership in which almost all of the principals in that study "talked extensively about improving instruction and achievement in their schools" (Reitzug, West, & Angel, 2008, p. 709). The authors noted from their study that these leaders possessed not only skill, but also purpose in their pursuit of improving student learning.

Other studies, too, have complemented the participants' focus on data and on helping staff members understand and use the data to inform instruction. Daresh and Male (2000) reiterated that the principal, alone, is ultimately responsible for this, and, in this era of accountability, is also ultimately responsible for demonstrating that students "have learned to external reviewers" (p. 99). Similarly, Stack (2003) summarized the importance of data for middle school leaders:

> Successful schools are staffed with educators who understand the need for data, are committed to seeking information from all available sources, and use the findings to drive decision-making…At the heart of every successful [middle] school is a middle level principal and a faculty with a passion for proof (p. 35).

In addition, a focus on school logistics, including managerial tasks as well as instructional leadership, was necessary to the participants. As Heck (2006) stated, "Stronger academic press (i.e., classroom processes, expectations, climate) and leadership were positively related to students' growth, even in challenging contexts" (p. 695). In their work regarding how principals influence students' academic achievement, however, Gentilucci and Muto (2007) explained, "even though instructional leadership is the

espoused priority of principals, it is often shunted aside by the demands of day-to-day

school management" (p. 219). Some examples of management they denoted were

scheduling, providing professional development, begin visible, shaping the building's

culture, and evaluating and providing resources to teachers. Gentilucci and Muto

described these "indirect" actions as "'influencing the influencers' rather than influencing

students themselves" (p. 220). Although these examples were labeled indirect, the

principals in my study referred to these same examples as an integral way that they

affected the instruction of the students in their buildings. Through these actions,

successful middle school principals are able to ensure that the "curriculum…[is] relevant,

challenging, integrative, and exploratory, from both the student's as well as the teacher's

perspective" (NMSA, 2003, p. 19).

Summary

"Schools at different stages of development will need different leadership

emphases. For some schools, a focus on orderliness, safety, and civility may be an

essential prior stage before leaders can give more attention to the curriculum and teacher

professional learning" (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 665). As the participants focused on

themselves, others, and their middle schools during their transformation process, each

principal experienced a unique perspective due to the distinctive set of characteristics of

the school in which he/she served. With a variety of influences and a unique context,

each participant engaged in thoughts, actions, and decisions that focused on his/her own

successful transition and his/her school's own eventual improvement.

Discussion

Effective Principals

Before discussing the transition process based on the experiences of the

participants of this study, a reflection on the effectiveness of these principals is presented.

Prior to the selection process, the level or even existence of their effectiveness was not

known to me, which was an aspect of the study that caused me some unease. I addressed

this by using school improvement as one of the primary criteria for their selection;

although, as mentioned previously, I still did not assume that their transitional actions

were "good" or effective. Reassuringly, throughout the interview process, however, it

became apparent that these principals exhibited many characteristics that are associated

with effective leadership and possessed by other high-quality principals.

In their study of high quality middle school leaders, Valentine et al. (2004)

offered, "Successful schools must have highly skilled principals who can develop the

capacity within their organizations to ensure that every student experiences success" (p.

15). As evidenced by improved school designations, based on improved student

achievement, and by their continual discussion of how they worked to ensure student

success in their schools, the principal participants in my study showcased their ability to

build this capacity.

As further evidence, these participants revealed that they worked with teachers,

students, administrators, parents, and community members to provide the best possible

education for their students. They were in the classrooms regularly, to be visible, as well

as to be knowledgeable about instruction. They provided targeted professional

development to continually improve the quality of instruction provided to the students.

They worked with teaching staff to review and utilize data to drive instructional decision-making. Based on the research denoted in Chapter 2 regarding effective principals,

especially as instructional leaders, in all, the principal participants' focus on student

achievement, which was exhibited through their transitional experiences and beyond,

demonstrated their effectiveness as instructional leaders.

Within the field of research on effective principals, research exists related

specifically to effective middle school principals. While not exhaustive, the following

items were included in an outline by Anfara et al. (2006) who delineated key components

of an effective middle school principal, a "developmentally responsive middle level

principal":

- Understands the intellectual, physical, psychological, social, and moral/ethical characteristics of young adolescents

- Purposely designs programs, policies, curriculum, and procedures that reflect the characteristics of young adolescents

- Provides students with opportunities to explore a rich variety of topics to develop their identity and demonstrate their competence

- Provides students with opportunities to explore, make mistakes, and grow in a safe, caring environment

- Shares a vision for continuous organizational improvement and growth

- Creates opportunities for faculty professional development that address strategies for meeting the needs of young adolescents

- Encourages teachers to employ a wide variety of instructional and assessment approaches and materials

- Knowledgeable about and can implement the components of the middle school concept

- Acts as a responsible catalyst for change and understands that change requires time, training, trust, and tangible support

- Advocates for middle level education and what is best for young adolescents (p. 24-25).

In addition, NMSA (2003), in its list of middle school characteristics, included "courageous, collaborative leadership," noting that:

Courageous, collaborative middle level leaders understand young adolescents and the society in which they live. They also understand the theory and best practices of middle level education. As architects for change, such leaders know that yesterday does not have to determine tomorrow. They strive to educate colleagues, parents, policymakers, and community members about middle school philosophy and proven practices in order to build support for long-term, continuous school improvement (p. 10).

Because reflecting on their practice, their decisions, their actions, and the state of the school is a key characteristic of a quality leader, Anfara et al. (2006) offered a fundamental reflective question for middle school principals to help them strive for

continuous professional improvement: "As a middle level principal, am I developmentally responsive to the needs of young adolescents, their teachers, and the school itself?" (p. 1).

Although the principal participants in my study did not often provide commentary on many of these characteristics, some of their experiences reflected these descriptions. While the limited specific middle school discussion by the participants, however, is discussed later in this section, the research on effective middle school principals is beneficial for middle level principals in reflecting on and recognizing ideal characteristics and striving toward that exemplar.

The Transition Process

The responsibility for understanding the transformation process of a new middle school principal during the first 100 days and for fostering the successful transition of a new middle school principal rests not only with administrative organizations, universities, and state leadership, but also, and perhaps more significantly, with the principal and the school district. It must become a shared goal of all to foster productive transitions.

For future middle school principals, whether those new to administration or those with prior administrative experience, it is recommended that they learn about the transition into the middle school principalship, especially from others who have already experienced such a transition, to help guide their own future transitions. In this case, learning from principals whose schools improved under their leadership may assist future middle school principals in their own transitional actions and decisions, especially those that may help build the foundation for future school improvement.

For school districts, which, unfortunately, are now facing a shortage of principals, it is recommended that they make themselves attractive to potential school leaders through their knowledge of and full support of those principals' transitions and leadership needs. As Daresh (2004) stated:

> This current century has been met with a recognition that, indeed, the shortage of future principals predicted in the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s has now arrived. School districts and numerous state education agencies have noted that not only are there significant numbers of practicing administrators leaving the profession, but there are fewer educators showing any interest in pursuing careers as school administrators (p. 496).

Petzko (2008) furthered:

> If there is a shortage of aspiring principals, if many of those are perceived to be unqualified, and if half leave the position in the first 8 years, something must be done to better address the immediate needs of those who actually do step up to the job (p. 225).

Given the aforementioned state of educational leadership, when a principal is hired, it is critical for that school district to provide any and all supports to ensure the success of the administrator, to foster his/her impact on student learning, and to, hopefully, lengthen the time he/she remains in a leadership position. The district bears responsibility because, during the transition period into a principalship, the first 100 days, the principal is personally affected, but so also are the staff, students, and the momentum of any school improvement, as Fink and Brayman (2006) detailed:

Principals' transitions have often given rise to problems, challenges, and upset for

teachers and principals alike…Accelerating turnover of principals,…principals'

mobility, and the pressures of the standardization agenda have created additional

difficulties that threaten the sustainability of school improvement efforts and

undermine the capacity of incoming and outgoing principals to lead their schools

(p. 83).

Transition plan.

Studies have concurred that school districts have a considerable role to play in

this process, especially in sustaining improvement efforts regardless of individual

principal (Orr, Berg, Shore & Meier, 2008; Fink & Brayman, 2006; Watkins, 2003;

Daresh, 2004), with many proposing that districts must partner with other districts,

university programs, administrative organizations, and other leadership entities to

accomplish this daunting task (Southworth, 2004; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004;

Daresh, 2004). Most studies advocated that the school district implement a transition

plan to help guide the processes and programs during transitions. Watkins succinctly

stated: "Successful adoption of a standard framework for…transitions can yield big

returns for organizations" (p. 239-240). Another study, by Orr et al., described transition

plans as "systems for organizational memory for continuous improvement over time,

rather than episodic leader-dependent interventions" (p. 690). Fink and Brayman also

supported a district-wide leadership transition plan:

Thoughtful succession plans can really help to sustain school improvement. They

provide considerable lead time, they develop shared understanding and

commitment among faculty through meaningful communication, and they

harmonize the new principal's inbound knowledge with the outbound knowledge

of the departing principal…All schools should have a leadership succession plan

that should be an integral and mandatory part of its school improvement

plan…The chances of successful succession are most enhanced when they do not

rest on the shoulders of one or two individuals but are invested in the hearts and

minds of everyone (p. 85).

Transition plan: Mentoring focus. As a primary component of a transition plan,

based on the experiences and advice of the participants in this study, a district must be

prepared to incorporate mentoring for school leaders. "Mentoring for school leaders is a

developmental practice where mentoring is viewed as a key part of individuals becoming

effective leaders and also as a part of socialization to leadership roles" (Daresh, 2004, p.

497). He described mentoring as a way to "guide individuals in their assumptions of new

roles, new job identities, and organizational expectations…as they engage in

transformation from one education role to another" (p. 497). Suggesting the

incorporation of technology and networking in a mentoring program, Southworth (2004)

forwarded, "What may now be needed is more in-school mentoring and coaching…and

support for individuals and teams of leaders as they take on new roles and tasks" (p. 345).

"Every new principal arrives at the door with a unique set of knowledge and

skills, and the induction and continued mentoring provided by the district can prove to be

the factor that makes or breaks his or her success" (Petzko, 2008, p. 242). Given that,

mentoring is a beneficial support for all new principals, regardless of whether or not they

have prior principalship experience; therefore, knowing exactly what a new principal

needs from a mentoring experience can help to ensure the program's success and value.

Daresh (2004) furthered this by articulating, "It is crucial for someone to work with the

new administrator to describe policies, procedures, and normal practices in a school

district", while those who are first-time principals, especially, will need

"feedback…concerning the extent to which they have been able to master the traditional

skills associated with effective performance in administrative roles" (p. 502).

Mentoring relationships of the past and present are often "formed as marriages of

convenience and not as ideal naturally developed relationships" (Daresh, 2004, p. 503).

To address this, Daresh suggested "a one-to-one matching based on analyses of

professional goals, interpersonal styles, learning needs, and perhaps many other variables

that might be explored prior to placing beginning principals with their mentors" (p. 503).

This in-depth analysis would be beneficial for a new principal with prior principalship

experience, or for a new administrator hired from within the same district, because, again,

their needs may be significantly different than a beginning principal's or those of a

principal new to the district or school.

The benefits of an effective mentoring program extend to not only the new

principal, but also to the mentor as well as the school district (Daresh, 2004). Daresh

described the five benefits to the new administrator as: 1) "they feel more confident

about their professional competence", 2) "they begin to see daily translations of

educational theory into daily practice", 3) their "communication skills…are…increased",

4) they have "opportunities to learn some of the tricks of the trade from colleagues", and

5) "mentoring makes people feel as if they belong in their new settings" (p. 503-504).

The benefits to mentors included "increased job satisfaction", "increased recognition from their peers", "opportunities for personal career advancement", a "benefit from the energy and enthusiasm of their protégés", and "new ideas and perspectives" from the new principals with whom they work (p. 504-505). Just as important, the benefits to the school district were detailed by Daresh as "developing more capable staff, the creation of lifelong learning norms, higher levels of employee motivation, improved self-esteem, and greater productivity" (p. 505).

Strongly advocating mentorship as a resource for new principals, especially during their transition period, Daresh (2006) summarized:

> The single most powerful thing a beginning principal (and even experienced
> principals) can do to enhance personal survival and effectiveness is to find at least
> one other experienced educational leader who can be available to share expertise
> related to doing the job more effectively and, perhaps even more important, help
> you to understand yourself and your personal transition into the principalship
> more completely. A mentor can also help significantly with the complex task of
> becoming effectively socialized into the profession of the principalship and also
> into the norms, culture, practices, and procedures of the school district in which
> you find your first job" (p. 160).

Transition plan: Middle school focus. During the course of this study, it was noteworthy that, when describing their transitional actions and decisions, most often the participants did not specifically state a middle school rationale for those actions and

decisions. Even though the transitional framework that was developed from their

experiences relates in many ways to what is advocated by NMSA in *This We Believe:*

Successful Schools for Young Adolescents, the participants typically did not highlight the

middle school philosophy that supported their actions. Whether that was due to the

nature of the tasks that are required during the first 100 days being more general in

nature, whether the participants simply did not emphasize that their actions were

intentionally focused on middle school students' needs, whether there was a lack of

knowledge of middle level education, or whether it was a combination of all three, the

exclusion of specific middle level language during most of the interviews is worth

documenting. If it was due to a lack of knowledge, and based on the support from

literature that there is a distinct void of specialized training for middle level leaders, a

transition plan that includes a focus on middle school philosophy, history, and the needs

of young adolescents is imperative to ensure a successful transition and continued success

of the students in the middle school.

> NMSA (2003) stated that:
>
> The guidelines for selecting educational goals, curriculum content, and
>
> instructional processes grow out of an awareness of and respect for the nature of
>
> these distinctive young adolescents. Educators who understand them…will make
>
> wise decisions about the kinds of schools needed (p. 6).

In fact, in its list of 14 characteristics of effective middle schools, NMSA prioritized

preparation for middle level service by listing it first: "Educators who value working with

this age group and *are prepared to do so* [emphasis added]" (p. 7).

To be responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents, middle level leaders must first know what their needs are and then ensure that the middle school environment, in all its facets, is meeting those needs. "It is vitally important to recognize that the areas of development – intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and moral – are inexorably intertwined. With young adolescents, achieving academic success is highly dependent upon their other developmental needs also being met" (NMSA, 2003, p. 3). In other words, the focus of a middle school must not only be on academics; it must also encompass all aspects of the middle school students' growth in order to be successful.

Acknowledging the need for improved middle level awareness and understanding, McEwin and Dickinson (2001) cautioned:

> In large measure, the future success of young adolescents depends greatly upon the dedication and hard work of …educators who choose to…serve them…Deliberate career choices and dedicated work alone, however, are not sufficient to guarantee that all young adolescents will have opportunities to achieve their full potentials…Educators need access to professional preparation programs which provide them with the specialized knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to be highly accomplished in their practice (p. 17).

Unique aspects exclusive to the middle school were suggested by McEwin and Dickinson (2001) for a preparation program for middle level educators. Those listed here are specific to middle school leaders:

- Thorough study of early adolescence and the needs of young adolescents

- Comprehensive study of middle level philosophy and organization

- Thorough study of middle level curriculum

- Intensive focus on planning, teaching, and assessment using developmentally and culturally responsive practices

- Study and practice in the collaborative role of middle level teachers in working with colleagues, families, and community members (p. 16).

Similarly, Anfara & Valentine (2004) emphasized that preparation for the middle school principalship should include the following emphases:

1. The unique needs and characteristics of young adolescents

2. Age-appropriate programs and practices used to promote the learning of young adolescents

3. Developmentally appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment

4. Middle school history and philosophy…

5. The qualities and characteristics of effective middle-level teachers (p. 2).

These characteristics of a preparatory program call attention to the critical knowledge that an effective middle school leader must possess. As McEwin and Dickinson (2001) argued, however:

Agreeing that the specialized professional preparation of middle school educators is an important idea is not enough. Courageous steps need to be [taken] by middle level educators, professional associations, accreditation agencies, and other stakeholders to develop and support specialized middle level professional

preparation programs and the middle level licensure which supports and sustain

them (p. 17).

To accomplish this, Anfara and Valentine (2004) recommended the following policy

changes regarding middle level principal preparation and licensure:

1. States should establish mandatory requirements for future middle level

    administrators as an incentive for both colleges and universities and

    individuals to pursue specialization in middle level administration.

2. States should require current middle level principals who have not had

    specialized middle level preparation to engage in graduate coursework

    or professional development in middle level issues such as those listed

    above.

3. Colleges and universities should establish preparation programs that

    allow for specialized coursework and internships in middle-level

    schools for future principals and graduate coursework and internships

    in middle-level schools for future principals and graduate coursework

    for current principals who have not had specialized preparation.

4. School districts and schools should require expertise in middle level

    issues as a prerequisite to being hired as a middle level administrator

    (p. 2).

A transition plan, therefore, that is developed for the new middle level leader

must comprise knowledge of the aforementioned key elements, especially inclusive of the

history and philosophy of middle level education and the needs and characteristics of

young adolescents, whether through the principal's own reading and reflection on this information, district- or multi-district- provided professional development, local or state programming, and/or graduate level coursework.   In summary:

> Only when action is taken to significantly improve the professional preparation of all who…work with young adolescents will middle level schooling universally provide the high quality educational opportunities that are needed to assure successful futures for our nation's youth (McEwin & Dickinson, 2001, p. 17).

Implications for implementation: Why context matters. Noting that, at the time of this study, Ohio's licensure program included a specific induction program for new principals, a statewide effort to assist with principal transitions certainly ensures that a plan is in place throughout the state for beginning principals. It is the element of context, however, that can be accounted for through a transition plan for middle school leaders that is developed and supported by the individual school districts. Reflecting on the experiences of the participants of this study, this is especially evident when comparing experiences between district typologies.

Although the themes were common among all participants, within those themes, the descriptions given by the participants demonstrated great variability. For example, while one principal described the high educational level of the parents in his school's community, and another discussed the email list-serve for school information of which the majority of parents were recipients, a principal in an urban district described giving away grocery carts and hot dogs to attract parents to the school for a parent night. As another example of the disparity of experiences, still all within the same common theme,

one participant articulated the school's ability to focus on academics because of the students' other needs already being met (e.g., stable home life, food, clothing, educational support from parents), while another focused on working with social agencies to ensure that students were provided shoes so that they would not feel embarrassed and could attend school regularly.

Given this great diversity, with recognition of our own pluralistic nation, a transition plan must be differentiated by need, sensitive to the aspects of leadership that are specific to the building in which the principal works. The culture of the school, the needs of the students in that school, and the needs of the parents and community, must all be addressed so that the principal can most effectively transition and continue to serve in that building. In order to accomplish this differentiation, the school district must incorporate a transition plan that fits within the greater state model, if there is one, and that wholly meets the needs of the new principal so that the needs of the building's students are known and are able to be addressed at the onset.

Summary

Understanding and planning for middle school principal transitions, school districts, whether alone or in partnership with other districts, universities, and/or state organizations, must create a transition plan for the district, sensitive to the community's unique needs, which includes a mentorship component and a focus on middle level education, to help support effective transitions of middle school principals, to provide a sense of comfort and confidence for stakeholders, to meet the diverse needs of the students, and to continue the momentum toward school improvement.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study was limited in design in that only principals in schools of improvement were interviewed. Future researchers may wish to include individuals in schools whose state designation decreased, to compare and contrast the transitional actions of principals in both categories. Care would need to be taken when contacting those principals and when presenting findings to not offend the participants whose school designation decreased under their leadership.

Other researchers may wish to research leadership transitions utilizing a case study methodology, in which a principal is studied during his/her transition period, with the researcher observing and noting specific actions and decisions made by the new principal. While this would provide immediate, and possibly direct, observations about transitions, my study was focused on first determining whom to study, to purposefully select principals whose schools improved under their leadership. In a case study, the focus would be on learning about the transition experience without knowing ahead of time any subsequent effect the school leader may have.

This study relied on data from ODE to determine principals who led their schools to improvement. Another suggestion for researchers would be to seek participant names from individuals, *gatekeepers*, within certain districts. While this would be subjective, it would help the researcher focus on the study of transitions solely, in that the gatekeepers could be asked to provide names of individuals who specifically had a "successful transition" rather than those whose schools later improved.

Finally, Grogan and Crow (2004) conveyed:

Much less research attention has been focused on the outcomes of mentoring…If

for no other reason than that mentoring is becoming the most popular form of

leadership development, we should invest research effort to investigate its

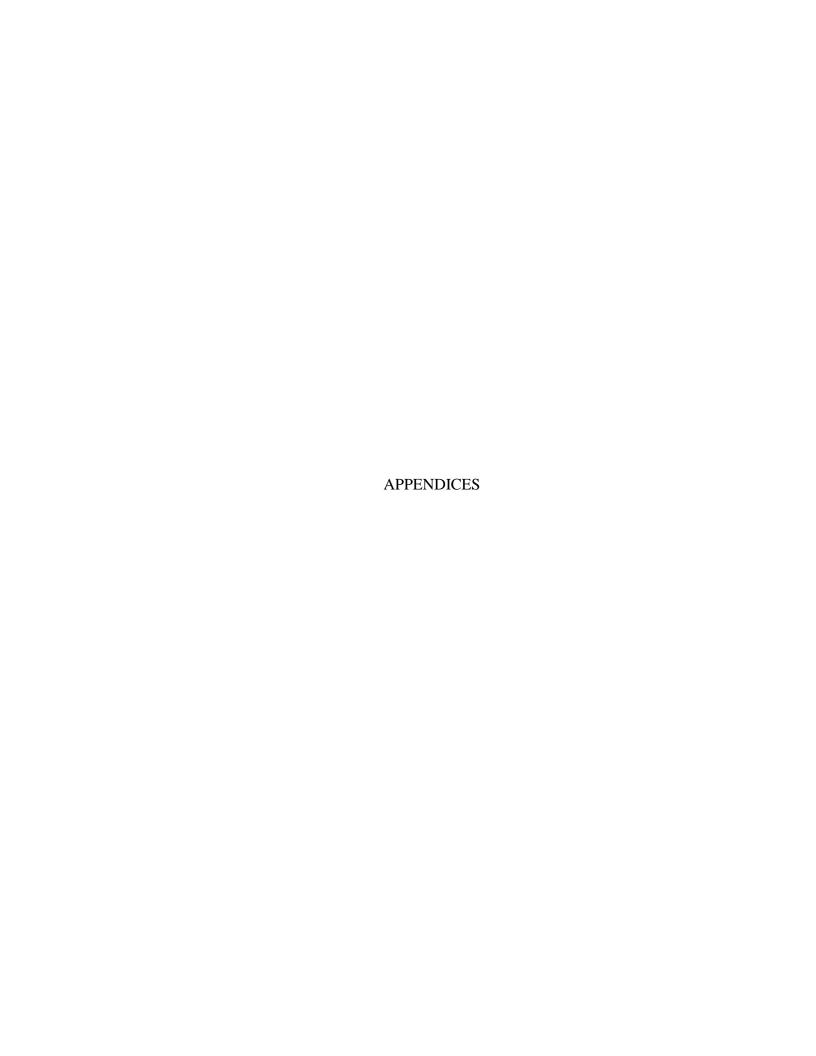outcomes in terms of the effects on students" (p. 466).

To address this, researchers may wish to focus their study of leadership transitions on a

district where a transition plan and/or mentoring program is in place in order to observe

the transitions and learn about principals in such programs.

Summary

Informed by grounded theory methodology, this qualitative study investigated the

first 100 days of the middle school principalship. Based on the experiences of 10

participants, all of whom had been in their current position for less than four full school

years, whose schools had improved their state designation under their leadership tenure,

and who represented one of seven district typologies and one of five initial state

designations, a framework for the transition into the middle school principalship was

developed. This framework included the *transformation process*: positioning self *into* the

new principal role, establishing self *in* the new principal role, and transforming self from

the *new* principal to *the* principal. The framework also included the *transformation*

focus: self, others, and the middle school.

Research was vast related to the transition into a leadership position, the

educational principalship, the transition into the principalship, and the middle school

principalship. This study, however, has connected these larger contextual frameworks,

offering novel data and theory related to the transition into the middle school

principalship that fills a void that previously existed in the literature. This study will be a

resource for aspiring middle school principals and current principals who may accept a

new middle school principal position in the future, allowing them to learn from the

transition experiences of middle school principals who led their schools to improvement.

In addition, included in this study are recommendations for school leaders, school

districts, administrative organizations, universities, and state leadership for understanding

the transition process, developing a transition plan, designing and implementing a

mentoring program for new principals, and providing necessary training on middle level

education to middle school principals.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Opening Statement

"Thank you for agreeing to meet with me about your transition experience into your

current principal position. I will begin by asking you some background information,

including demographics and experience, to help provide a framework for your overall

responses. Following that, I will ask you a few guiding questions that will help us to

discuss your experiences in your first 100 days in this position."

Participant Information

"The first 5 questions have been completed prior to today using the information available

on the ODE website. This information will be used only by me as the researcher and will

not be included in the study. Pseudonyms will be used for participants, buildings,

districts, and communities, to protect the confidentiality of all participants."

1) Name: _____

2) District Name: _____

3) Building Name: _____

4) Initial State Designation: _____

5) District Typology: _____

Demographic Information

"As I ask the following demographic and background experience questions, please note that your responses will help provide a framework for your overall responses. Again, pseudonyms will be used to protect your confidentiality."

1) Current Position:

☐ Building Principal ☐ Other: _____

2) Current Building Level:

☐ Middle School ☐ Other: _____

3) Grade Levels served in current building (check all that apply):

☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ Other: _____

4) Highest Degree Earned:

☐ Bachelor ☐ Master ☐ Doctoral

5) Gender:

☐ Female ☐ Male

6) Current Age:

☐ 20-29 ☐ 30-39 ☐ 40-49 ☐ 50-59 ☐ 60-60+

7) With this year as "1," for how many years have you worked in K-12 education:

☐ 1 ☐ 2-5 ☐ 6-10 ☐ 11-15

☐ 16-20 ☐ 21-25 ☐ 26-30 ☐ 30+

8) With this year as "1," for how many years have you worked in your current position:

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ Other: _____

9) When you accepted your current position, which statement most accurately describes

your prior position:

☐ I was working in the same building, but not in my current position.

☐ I was working in the same district, but not in my current building.

☐ I was working in the same state, but not in my current district.

☐ I was working in a district in another state.

☐ Other: _____

10) Including this principal position, how many building principal positions (not assistant

principal positions) have you held:

☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5+

11) With this year as "1," for how many years have you worked as a building principal

(not assistant principal):

☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4-5   ☐ 6-10

☐ 11-15   ☐ 16-20   ☐ 21-25   ☐ 26-30   ☐ 30+

Building Level:

☐ Elementary ☐ Middle   ☐ High   ☐ Other: _____

12) For how many years have you worked in the following K-12 educational positions:

Assistant principal:

☐ 0   ☐ 1   ☐ 2-5   ☐ 6-10   ☐ 11-15

☐ 16-20   ☐ 21-25   ☐ 26-30   ☐ 30+

Building Level:

☐ Elementary ☐ Middle   ☐ High   ☐ Other: _____

Teacher:

☐ 0   ☐ 1   ☐ 2-5   ☐ 6-10   ☐ 11-15

☐ 16-20   ☐ 21-25   ☐ 26-30   ☐ 30+

      Building Level:

      ☐ Elementary ☐ Middle   ☐ High   ☐ Other: _____

Other positions in education:

☐ 0   ☐ 1   ☐ 2-5   ☐ 6-10   ☐ 11-15

☐ 16-20   ☐ 21-25   ☐ 26-30   ☐ 30+

      Describe: _____

Other positions in education:

☐ 0   ☐ 1   ☐ 2-5   ☐ 6-10   ☐ 11-15

☐ 16-20   ☐ 21-25   ☐ 26-30   ☐ 30+

      Describe: _____

Other positions in education:

☐ 0   ☐ 1   ☐ 2-5   ☐ 6-10   ☐ 11-15

☐ 16-20   ☐ 21-25   ☐ 26-30   ☐ 30+

      Describe: _____

13) Please describe any other leadership/management/supervisory work experience

outside of K-12 education: _____

Interview Guiding Questions

"The following questions are guiding questions related to your transition period, the first 100 days, in your current position. Please feel free to elaborate on your experiences and perspectives."

1) Please describe the time period between when you accepted your current position and when your current position officially began.

    Probe for further exploration: length of time, what you did to prepare for the role

Participant Comments	Researcher Reflections

2) Please describe your experiences in the first 100 days in your current position.

Probe for further exploration: goals, actions, accomplishments, responsibilities

Participant Comments	Researcher Reflections

3) Please describe any external or internal circumstances or individuals at the time of

   your transition that might have shaped your goals/actions during your first 100 days?

   Probe for further exploration: initial state designation, district type

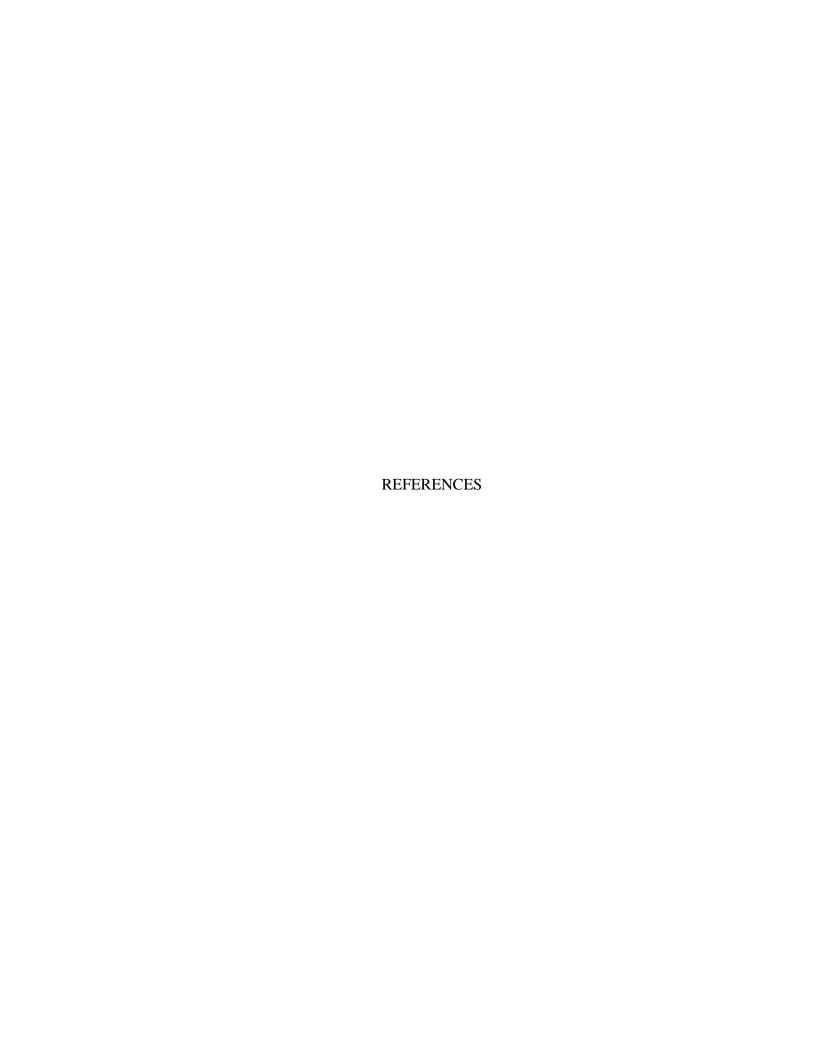| Participant Comments	Researcher Reflections

4) Please describe your perceptions about how your transitional actions may have

   influenced your school's successive improvement.

Participant Comments	Researcher Reflections

5) What are your suggestions for middle school principals who are beginning their first

100 days in a new position?

Probe for further exploration: any other perceptions about effective transitions

Participant Comments	Researcher Reflections

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