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An examination of elementary school leadership seen through the lens of complexity theory

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An Examination of Elementary School Principal Leadership: Seen Through the Lens of Complexity Theory

by

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Dissertation

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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This study reflects the efforts of many exceptional people. Over the years, the support, love, and prayers of many family members, friends, and faculty have sustained me during this process. This study began as a commitment to school administrators in public schools all over this nation to champion their efforts in preparing our youth for the future, but it soon blossomed into a work that held meaning for not just public schools but all institutions that are involved in educating our children.

I would like to thank all of the participants of this study. The wonderful principals and teachers who gave of their time to help tell the story of elementary school administrators in a changing school community. Their commitment to educating all children was evident throughout our many interviews. I also acknowledge the district administrators who encouraged and supported my efforts. They were crucial in making things happen.

My husband, Frank, and my two daughters helped me move through difficult times and supported me with their faith in me and the project. My Dad was an unwavering force who offered constant words of encouragement. My friends and family, both far and near, never stopped believing in the importance of my work and were constantly cheering me on.

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supported and challenged me throughout the study, constantly helping me make connections between my study and the potential benefit for the entire educational community.

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ABSTRACT

The knowledge era has been described as a time when new information will be developing through a lens of globalization and technology. Many organizational theorists are thinking of leadership that abandons age-old bureaucratic practices and enables the organization to meet its goals. Through the lens of complexity theory, schools are seen as organizations that are constantly adapting to environmental change. Leadership for such organizations is seen as moving away from command and control and toward democratic, person-centered relational styles. The primary goals for this research were to identify the leader behaviors of elementary school principals who effectively lead for change in an environment that is standards-based with high accountability and to identify personal characteristics that enable the principal and the school to thrive in a turbulent environment.

This case study analysis of the leadership practices of three elementary school principals documents specific attitudes and behaviors used in daily school management. Interviews with principals and teachers from three elementary schools over a three-month period showed coinciding patterns that support the study's internal validity. The study found that a school with a constantly changing environment and the pressure of mandatory high stakes assessments was viewed by the principals as the "new normal" that could be managed through a heightened sense of accountability of staff and the use of effective communication with all constituents. Contrary to the more top-down approach to managing, the data showed that when school leaders reflect a strong moral base, social awareness, empathy, and flexibility and adaptability, positive changes for all stakeholders can occur. The participating principals had support for their decision to become principals and to create environments of relative stability for the children and staff at their schools. The study also revealed that an
environment of trust and confidence among teachers was built when the principals encouraged teacher leadership, practiced collaboration, insured effective use of staff, and restructured school improvement processes based on individual school needs. Analysis showed a strong connection between the principals’ personal characteristics and their behaviors as applied to managing the school and relating to staff. Conclusions include recognition of specific personal characteristics and leader behaviors that pave the way for leadership in self-organizing, emergent schools. Future research focus may include the dynamics of interactions between principals, teachers, parents, and the context in complex organizational systems, which over time fosters creativity.
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Whenever we humans see clearly and understand the true dimensions of any problem, we become brave and intelligent actors in the world. It is time to open our eyes, change our lens, and step forward into actions that will restore sanity and possibility to the real world. (Wheatley, 2006, p. 186)

The knowledge era has been described as a time when new information will be developed through a lens of globalization and technology. The jobs of the future will center on information and services. The current focus on developing organizational leadership theory will abandon the age-old bureaucratic paradigms and enable the organization to meet its goals (Ulh-Bien, Marion, & McKelevy, 2007). This leadership focus also holds true for schools. An example of emergence can be seen in schools that adapt to environmental conditions and have a strong impetus for change. These new schools are better suited to face current situations (Morrison, 2002). The school becomes self-organized. It is internally restructured and works well because of reliance on human relations, distributed leadership, servant leadership practiced by the principal, and team-based approaches with appropriate support mechanisms (Morrison, 2002).

Traditional views of leadership grow out of the long-held view that organizations are systems that seek equilibrium, whose futures are knowable and arrived at by leaders who plan interventions and control behaviors (Stacey, 1992; Wheatly, 2006). The characteristics of complex systems are incompatible with these traditional notions of leadership, which emphasize the ability to predict, plan, and control organizational futures.

Theorists and researchers are able now to see webs of interconnectedness that bind the world together; we are more aware that we live in various interconnected relationships;
we now see that profoundly different processes explain how living systems emerge and change (Wheatly, 2006). An understanding of complexity theory is helpful in understanding leadership behaviors in education (Morrison, 2001). One of the key principles of complexity is that an organism interacts dynamically with its environment, influencing and in turn being influenced by its environment. A process that describes school improvement as a re-tooling of schools and uses terms such as order, consistency, and uniformity to describe schools’ internal systems, does not seem to fully describe what is needed to support an emergent system (West-Burnham & Davies, 1998).

There is a direct relationship between leadership and social systems. When schools are viewed as complex adaptive systems, they demonstrate the ability to survive by affording the elements of the school to organize within an overall framework that includes the goals and values of the school. Within this framework, the schools begin the creative process that will facilitate development of new ideas that are better suited to the new environment (Cardona, 2000). School leadership is impacted by the non-linearness and unpredictability of systems. A core construct of complexity theory is emergent self-organization, whereby systems achieve order because multiple local agents interact, and those interactions produce unintended outcomes without the intervention of a central controller (Chiles, Meyer, & Hench, 2004). Organizations take on properties and structures that are unexpected (McKelvey & Lichtenstein, in press) because people and groups interact and the results of those interactions produce novelty. This premise creates confusion for leaders in complex organizations who were trained to predict and control the organization’s future.

This case study was based on the work of McKelvey (1999), Maguire & McKelevy (1999), Marion & Uhl-Bien (2001), McKelvey & Lichtenstein (in press), and others. It
closely observes elementary school principals’ behavior to isolate the leaders’ enabling behavior during emergence and self-organization.

The study began with a discussion of complexity theory, complex adaptive systems, and complexity leadership theory. There was also a review of three schools, with interviews of each principal, and three teachers at two of the schools. A qualitative approach was used to capture and identify the complex interactions and behaviors in which an elementary school principal engages daily. The personal characteristics of the principals were central to the study and were also examined.

**Statement of the Problem**

School leadership is often the focal point of the conversation regarding the change process in schools. When schools are seen as complex adaptive systems, principal leadership theory should include distributive, transformational, transactional, transcendental, servant, and quantum leadership components (Morrison, 2002). When schools are viewed as emergent and self-organizing, they require leaders with emotional intelligence (Morrison, 2002) to create an environment that fosters emergence. Being able to recognize and implement specific leader behaviors at the appropriate time is necessary in an evolving environment. Being able to lead in the midst of a changing environment creates greater levels of innovation and adaptability (Ulh-Bien et al., 2007).

Emergent forms of leadership in schools require team development, incentives and motivation, an acute knowledge of human relations, emotional intelligence, and servant leadership to provide organizational learning for schools by accessing the creative and interpersonal side of the teachers who lead (Morrison, 2002). This newer form of leadership is not deterministic and composed of frameworks and blueprints for a specific future. It is
much more about fostering and nurturing the emergence of self-organization in an
unpredictable and turbulent world. Emergence refers to a non-linear suddenness that
characterizes change in complex systems. Emergence may come from the merger of certain
systems or a cascade of changes through network connections (Bak, 1996). Creativity and
learning occur when emergence forms a previously unknown solution to a problem or creates
a new, unanticipated outcome (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

Lewin and Regine (2000) asserted that school leaders need to be able to cultivate
conditions rather than direct practice, create disturbance and the need for innovation,
maintain a vision, and recognize and foster relationships. More research describing behaviors
of k-5 elementary school leaders who are involved in emergence and self-organizing, would
offer principals a way to function in new ways.

**Purpose of the Study**

This case study examined the leader behavior of three k-5 school principals in
Dresden County, Michigan, which highlights the behaviors of the principals who lead
schools during the change process. The research analyzed the behaviors and personal
characteristics of three elementary principals as they responded to daily processes and issues
at school. The study was guided by the following questions:

- What personal characteristics enable the principal to thrive in a changing school
  environment?
- What behaviors do the principals exhibit as they work in an environment that is
  standards-based with high accountability?

To contribute to the knowledge base of administrative leadership, the case study
methodology appears to be the most appropriate research strategy. It is important to examine
the principals’ behavior in the context of the school environment. The contextual conditions relate directly to the theoretical base of the study. The case study strategy also gave the researcher flexibility in the use of focused interviews and archival data to triangulate the data for validity.

**Significance of the Study**

The discussion of high-stakes accountability and top-down management styles of principals was extensive in the literature; limited documentation emerged surrounding the specific behaviors of principals who are responsive to the increased mandates. Recent research indicated that leaders often see turbulence in the environment as an opportunity to encourage creative thinking (Gross, 1998). The effective school leader is often described as one who uses different leadership behaviors for different circumstances (Fullan, 2001). A focus on the degree to which principals’ behaviors vary according to the environment based on research findings provided important clarification of the actual behaviors that may be beneficial to the educational community and the researchers examining it.

Principals seem to be reverting to a dependence on visible and tangible results in response to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, which models linear approaches to problem solving (Reeves, 2006). This renewed focus on linear thinking may limit the alternative leadership choices for principals.

This qualitative research study respected the present pressures related to accountability and sought to identify the specific behaviors of principals as they moved their schools forward. By examining the characteristics of the principal behaviors and the expressed factors of influence behind these behaviors, both leadership training and research promotion is supported.
Using the findings of research on leader behavior in schools, districts can determine the qualities needed to lead k-12 schools for the future. Higher educational institutions can obtain information helpful in developing courses to prepare future administrators. New research in this area will create an opportunity for reflective thinking and spark conversations, which will expose new paths to follow in the study of school leadership.

Definitions

Rational Systems - Organizations that have formal structures and rules that govern behavior and formulate roles and relations that are independent of the personal attributes and relations of the people occupying the positions in the structure (Scott, 2003).

Complexity Theory - A science of complex interactive systems which explores the nature of interaction and adaptation in systems and how they influence such things as internal restructuring which relies on relationships and creativity (Hazy, Millhister, & Solow, 2007).

Complex Adaptive Systems - Systems in nature that have the capability for self-organization which enables them to develop, extend, replace, adapt, reconstruct, or change their internal structure so that they can respond to and influence their environment (Morrison, 2002).

Emergence - The result of interdependent agents who exchange information, take actions, and continuously adapt to feedback about others’ actions rather than from the imposition of an overall plan by a central authority (Chiles et al., 2004).

Self-Organizing - The ability of systems to reorganize themselves in response to changes in the environment.

Organization of Chapters 1-5

This study is divided into several chapters. Chapter 1 served as an introduction to the
study, providing background, intent, and the broad parameters of the research. The literature surrounding the focused topic and other perspectives responsive to the key research questions are explored in Chapter 2. Details of the methods, tools, setting, and participants are outlined in Chapter 3 along with a discussion of the process for analysis in a qualitative study. Chapter 4 includes findings from the data and organized responses to the research questions. Chapter 5 offers a summary, conclusions, and recommendations for use of the findings by the k-12 educational community or institutions of higher learning.
CHAPTER 2—REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In the search for a simpler, more effective way to run organizations, Margaret Wheatly (2006) pointed out that present ways of organizing are outmoded. She further stated that the feeling that things are out of control and chaotic are signals of our failure to understand a deeper reality of organizational life. Although many would agree that life is ambiguous, the study of leadership in organizations has often been approached as if leaders should look at what should happen next, as if leaders could eliminate the ambiguity that often exists in organizational life (Plowman, Solansky, Beck, Baker, Kulkarni & Travis, 2007).

**Rational Systems in Education**

It would seem that the rational system perspective more accurately describes schools today. The defining characteristics of such organizations are not only efficiency, information, optimization, implementation, and design but also authority, control, coordination, rules directives, and performance programs (Scott, 2003). In rational systems, there are formal structures and rules that govern behavior and formulate roles, and relations that are independent of the personal attributes and relations of the people occupying positions in the structure. Rational system theorists emphasized goal specificity and formalization because these elements make an important contribution to the rationality of organizational action (Scott, 2003).

Current federal educational policy reflects the characteristics of a system built on the theoretical base of rationalism. Since passage of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) in 2001, the nation’s educational policy has emphasized national accountability procedures, nationally authorized instructional techniques, and nationally standardized testing (Kozol, 2005). Standards and assessment were a large part of the policy that defined specific elements in
Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), such as minimum group size, a full academic year, statistical procedures, and selection of the academic indicators, and what it means to make AYP on each indicator (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The NCLB legislation is representative of a rational system: a series of actions organized in such a way to lead to predetermined goals with maximum efficiency (Scott, 2003).

The current federal educational policy uses different language but still has similar goals and directives of NCLB. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (2009) includes language that indicates that states and their school systems have more leeway in the choice of programming that lead to fulfilling the goal of improved learning for students. The current policy components (Educate to Innovate, and Race to the Top High School Commencement Challenge) include encouragement to grant applicants to be creative in their program development. However, the emphasis is still on accountability for teachers (White House, 2011). The federal government has also developed an assessment tool for states to use with students at specific grade levels. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) measures mathematics and reading as well as other subjects. The test is administered to a sampling of students across the nation. Schools who participate can access their scores and compare their efforts to schools around the country. Many states model their assessments after the NAEP (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

To align with current federal educational policy, states have adopted many of the same types of reform. Michigan is a performance and results-driven education system. The Michigan State Board of Education stated that its goal is to advance policies that make sure that new teachers are properly prepared to teach the state’s curriculum to all students and to receive ongoing professional development, performance evaluation, and career rewards.
needed to move student achievement forward (Michigan Department of Education, 2011). Michigan has also recently raised the cut-scores needed for proficiency on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) and the Michigan Merit Examination to match national benchmarks for college and career readiness. The MEAP test has been the measure of student academic progress since 2001. Tests such as the MEAP have become the definition of success, not merely a predictor of it (Meier, 2002).

Overview of Complexity Theory

Complexity theory has made its way into organizational science, challenging the linear mechanistic view of organizations, with analogies from the physical sciences of systems whose future states are unpredictable and full of surprise (Anderson, 1999; McKelevy, 1999; Richardson & Chilliers, 2001). In contrast, the rational systems theory represents the linear view of organizational development and operation. A further examination of complexity theory illuminates its compatibility with the current environment as it relates to school leadership.

Complexity Theory is concerned with the science of complex interactive systems, which explores the nature of interaction and adaptation and how they influence such things as emergence, innovation, and fitness (Hazy et al., 2007). This theory has its origins in biology, physics, and mathematics. At its core, complexity theory embraces adaptation, development, and survival. The beginnings of this theory have been traced to Hodgson (2000) as he followed the concepts of emergence and unpredictability to philosopher C. L. Morgan (1927), who lived during the 19th century. Hodgson, a 1930s economist, discussed the significance of emergence and unpredictability in business organizations. More recently, Hodgson cited the work of Polyani in the 1960s, as Hodgson discussed emergence in
Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968), a biologist (circa 1930), developed the open systems theory that Katz and Kahn (1996, 1978) further built upon using the work of Allport (1954) as a guide. An open system was considered to be dynamic, with component parts generating energy in a self-regulating environment. Novel changes were attributed to the interaction of the organism with the environment. Complexity theory goes further than open systems theory in explaining emergence in organizations. One of the main ideas underlying complexity theory is that the environment must be turbulent to account for change (development and creativeness through self-organization) within the system. As systems edge towards more complexity, they become more volatile and must expend more energy to become stable (Morrison, 2001).

Complexity theory is a derivative of chaos theory. While chaos theory stresses the unpredictability of the future, it also suggests that the outcome of one situation becomes the input to the next. Chaos theory cannot be aligned with human interaction because of its premise that the organization has little internal capacity for spontaneous change (Stacey, 2000).

Complexity theory has many similarities with open systems theory and chaos theory but takes the systems theories one step further. A complexity system is a collection of interacting components, which together function as a whole with boundaries and properties (Lucas, 2000). Wheatly (2006) described differences between Newtonianism, a view of the world that believes influence occurs as a direct result of force exerted from one object to another, and what she refers to as new science, a focus on holism rather than parts. Systems are seen as being composed of networks, and attention is given to relationships within those
networks.

Using complexity theory as a lens through which to view schools helps us see schools using a dynamic rather than static perspective and understand how schools adapt to external and internal contexts. Complexity theory also shows effective ways to benefit from individual creativity and innovation within a school-wide framework (Santa Fe Center for Emergent Strategies, 1999).

Complexity theory originally developed in the physical sciences, where scientists were attempting to understand the complexity of nature and increasingly found linear models to be ineffective in capturing the complex and emergent nature of phenomenon (Ashby, 1962; Holland, 1995; Kauffman, 1995; Prigogine, 1997). The following are characteristics of complex adaptive systems:

- They are made up of many agents who act and interact in unpredictable ways.
- They are sensitive to changes in initial conditions.
- They adjust their behavior in the aggregate to their environment in unpredictable ways.
- They oscillate between stability and instability.
- They produce emergent actions when approaching disequilibrium.

Complex systems are non-linear and are rarely explained by simple cause and effect relationships (Plowman et al., 2007). Complex adaptive systems have the capability for self-organization, which enables them to develop, extend, replace, adapt, reconstruct, or change their internal structure so that they can respond to and influence their environment (Morrison, 2002). Complex adaptive systems are constantly modifying and rearranging their building blocks in the light of prediction, experience, and learning (Waldrop, 1992). For example, a
school might move from being a school of the arts to becoming a school that specializes in mathematics and science in response to the environment and in order to reposition itself in the environment.

The interacting elements of a complex adaptive system must be understood together. In a holistic view, these elements cause new elements to form and new structures and new rules of behavior to occur. Each element influences and, in turn, is influenced by the other elements in the system and, in turn, they give rise to emergent new forms whose nature and structure might not have been possible to predict (Morrison, 2002).

Chiles et al. (2004) described the concept of emergent self-organization as complexity theory’s “anchor point phenomenon” (pp. 499-519). In self-organizing systems, order comes from the actions of interdependent agents who exchange information, take actions, and continuously adapt to feedback about others’ actions rather than from the imposition of an overall plan by a central authority (Chiles et al., 2004). All complex systems have the capacity to self-organize; this ability helps them to develop, extend, replace, adapt, reconstruct, or change their internal structure so that they can respond to and influence their environment (Morrison, 2002). A school that responds to its environment may reorganize its activities to become a community resource, change its curriculum to further meet the needs of its students, or support student learning through the use of technological programming.

Stacey (1992) suggested that self-organization is a process in which teams and groups form spontaneously around issues, with the participants themselves (not managers) deciding what their boundaries will be.

These systems are sensitive to fluctuations in any part of the system. The story of the flap of a butterfly’s wings in on part of the world creating a storm in another part of the world.
world (Lorenz, 1963) is often used to illustrate the concept that small fluctuations in some variables can have profound and unpredictable effects on other variables. These changes are not reversible; a butterfly is not simply *more caterpillar*, it is something completely different (Morrison, 2002).

Researchers argued that when organizations move away from stability and into complexity, adaptive tensions give rise to emergence and self-organization. This emergence and self-organization result from the demise of the old system and the birth of a *new system* that develops new structures that could not have been envisioned initially (Maguire & McKelvey 1999).

**Complexity Leadership Theory**

The complexity leadership theory model is built on the core proposition that leadership is not just the influential act of one person or group but rather is embedded in a complex interaction of many variables. The underlying assumptions of complexity leadership theory are:

- Complexity leadership theory tends to be enmeshed in a bureaucratic superstructure of planning, organizing, and mission.
- Complex adaptive systems are open systems.
- Leadership, however defined, only exists in, and is a function of, interaction (Hazy et al., 2007).

John Stephens (1967) used the metaphor of agriculture to understand the process of schooling. In comparing agriculture to the factory, he suggested that in agriculture we do not start from scratch or focus our efforts on inert and passive materials. Stephens suggested that leaders start with observing the complex and ancient process and then organize their efforts
around what seeds, plants, and insects are likely to do naturally. Those who lead during the self-organizing process must begin with strong *intention*, not a set of action plans. Plans do emerge during the self-organizing process, but locally, from responses to needs and contingencies (Wheatly, 2006).

Leadership for self-organizing and emergence moves away from command and control and moves toward democratic, person-centered, relational styles of leadership. Though transformational leadership has its place in a self-organizing school, transcendental, distributed, servant, and quantum leadership might be more fitting for styles of leadership for a complex school because they stress open-endedness, unpredictability, and interpersonal relationships (Morrison, 2002).

**Transformational leadership.** Leadership in the emergent self-organizing school has to move away from the commanding hierarchical style to more democratic, relational styles of leadership (Morrison, 2001). Leaders in a changing environment should have a strong emotional intelligence that guides them. Schools are nonlinear, complex, and unpredictable systems that require a compatible leadership approach that is very different from the historical leadership approach of the industrial era.

Leadership styles have changed over the years to reflect the need to support organizations in environments that are constantly in flux. Over the years, there have been a number of assumptions regarding leadership in educational organizations. Hoy, Tarter, and Whitkoski (1992) and Brown (2000) found through their research on school leadership that teachers responded positively to principals who had a leadership style that consisted of both structure and consideration of their needs. This view of school leadership is more appropriate for an emerging school than a view that emphasizes hierarchical command and control.
Transformational leadership requires a certain emotional intelligence from its leaders that a linear structure does not. Linear approaches do not take into account that change can occur anywhere in organizations. Transformational leadership provides the professional development necessary for all members of the school to assume leadership roles as necessary. Transformation embodies emergence; it is a process that creates new relationships within the organization and between the organization and its environment (McMaster, 1996). When schools exist at the edge of chaos, there is a need for leadership that is visionary, sparks creativeness amongst its followers, and develops a culture of individualized support that develops platforms for change. Transformational leadership embodies these dimensions. There is a need for school leaders to be able to make sense of situations and make connections, plan for diversity, promote self-organization, and increase the emphasis on cooperation and interdependence (McDaniel, 1997).

Though transformational leadership is an effective framework for leading emergent schools, there is a caveat; this form of leadership should be used in conjunction with other leadership styles in order to be effective in an organization that is constantly changing. The literature suggested that transformational leadership can be as manipulative as transactional leadership if the outcome is to get people to behave as you would like them to. Considering these criticisms of transformational leadership, there may be a need to move beyond the transformation to distributed, transcendental, quantum, and servant leadership to obtain a truly effective leadership style for complex adaptive systems such as schools.

Transcendental Leadership. Leadership can be portrayed as a spiritual, relational process (Biberman & Whitty, 1997). Transcendental leadership can be a field of inquiry within the broader context of workplace spirituality (Fry, 2003). Transcendental leadership
uses values, attitudes, and behaviors (altruistic love, hope/faith, vision) to intrinsically
motivate followers, thereby increasing the followers’ senses of spiritual survival, i.e., their
calling (life has meaning, making a difference), membership (interconnection, being
understood, being appreciated), and the resulting positive outcomes for the organization (Fry,
2003; Fry, Vitucci & Cedillo, 2005).

Without the desire to manipulate others, transcendental leaders address the
weaknesses of transformational leadership by providing the motives behind leaders’
practices: altruistic love, a sense of wholeness, harmony, and well-being produced through
care, concern, appreciation of both self and others, and an authentic selfless concern for
people. The transcendental leader helps followers feel powerful and able to make decisions,
accomplish work, and lead on their own (Fairholm, 1996; Fry, 2003; Korac-Kakabadse,
Louzmin & Kakabadse, 2002).

Pablo Cardona (2000) described the concept of the transcendental leader as being
concerned with the followers and trying to contribute to their personal development. April,
Macdonald, and Vriesendorp (2000) discussed the idea of servant leadership in complex
organization such as schools. Principals are seen as leaders who synergize through the use of
professional learning communities.

Distributive Leadership. Leadership in a complex organization is not only
concerned with the power of senior figures and hierarchy (Morrison, 2002). Leaders can
emerge from anywhere in the organization (Brandon, 1992). The complexity of our current
environment suggests that an efficient way to problem solve would be for all members of the
school staff to take on a leadership role (Shapiro & Gross, 2008).

Nickse (1977) suggested that teachers are in the best position to be leaders in schools
because not only do they have a vested interest in what takes place but also have a sense of history of the organization and of their colleagues; they know the community and are in a position to implement change. Keil (1994) acknowledged the importance of having several leaders in organizations within complexity theory, arguing that because, in complexity theory as in chaos theory, small actions can have large effects, individual actions can produce large consequences. In many schools, teachers assume the leadership roles through the framework of professional learning communities.

In many schools, because of antiquated views on leadership, there is tension between the principal and those who should also have a say in the decision-making process (Shapiro & Gross, 2008). For the practice of teacher-leadership to be fully realized in a school, the principal must be more than a passive supporter; rather, he or she needs to anticipate the resistance that teacher-leaders may encounter from their colleagues and help them broker the relationships that they will need to do their work (Johnson & Donaldson, 2007).

There is more than one leader in a complex school. Leadership does not become invisible or rest in one individual; it can be found in individuals throughout the organization. Change in schools encourages shared leadership (Lamoski, 2000).

Quantum Leadership. The term quantum leadership is derived from quantum physics. It is used to describe how subatomic particles interact with each other in a turbulent environment that is constantly in motion. Quantum physics focuses on relationships and uncertainty: none of us lives in isolation (McNamara, 2001). Quantum leaders present a clear vision and enrich the culture of an organization through the promotion of ownership and understanding. They encourage and nurture relationships at the school (Morrison, 2002). Quantum leadership aligns with complexity theory because quantum leaders are constantly
connecting the school with its community; they disturb and rattle the system in order to stimulate change. As change is created, quantum leaders promote organizational learning and keep the latest information flowing (Marion & Ulh-Bien, 2007).

Yukl (1999) described an alternative perspective to traditional leadership as a shared process of enhancing the collective and individual capacity of people to accomplish their roles effectively. Complexity leadership advocates and elaborates upon on such a collective process of leadership.

As we view the educational leadership models of the past century, we see that they are built on top-down bureaucratic paradigms. These models are effective for an economy based on physical production but are not well suited for an economy where knowledge is at a premium (Uhl-Bien, Marion, McKelvey, 2007). Quantum leadership fits well into the framework of complexity leadership theory because of its ability to recognize individual staff talents and strengths and to facilitate and enable staff to interact and conceptualize in new ways. Quantum leaders are always looking for new ways to enable the core competencies to interact more efficiently so that creativity will flourish.

Many theories have been used to define educational leadership. The initial concepts of public education in America were built upon moral imperatives of training youth with the ethical and moral foundations determined by the predominantly white, Protestant, male social power (Dewey, 1916). Early in the 20th century, school leadership reflected the industrial imperatives included in management concepts in the business arena, which focused on efficiency and production (Taylor, 1911). The principal took charge as the leader of the school, which was seen as a factory with the essential product being students prepared to participate in the workforce. In this early theoretical approach, leadership development
adhered to role definition, hierarchies, and outcome standards.

Complexity leadership fits into a relatively new and emerging genre of leadership research that moves away from the conventional thinking of the past 20 years. Complexity theory allows educators to focus on the generative process of adaptive leadership, which focuses on the enabling leader’s functions in creating the conditions that promote these generative processes (Schreiber & Carley, 2006). Using complexity as a theoretical base, school administrators are able to develop a perspective of the school as a complex adaptive system. This base helps to clarify the administrator’s role in facilitating emergence in the organization.

An example of a school that is emergent would suffer from low performance and be identified as a **failing school**. The school staff is splintered. Each teacher has been working under a great deal of stress, and there is a large staff turnover each year. Despite the hiring of a new principal, whose style is assertive and directive, there is little perceptible change. The school is closed by the school district. A new school re-opens with a new principal who helps all stakeholders organize to establish school improvement goals. The job of the new principal is a facilitator, providing whatever support necessary to *make things happen*. There is a concerted effort among the new teachers to work cooperatively to achieve a consistency of approach in treating special needs students. The curriculum is redesigned to move toward student-centered learning. The old system is unable to adapt, so a new system emerges that is better suited to the situation being faced. The original attempts to force change upon the system by hiring a new principal was not successful because self-organization cannot be mandated; it emerges spontaneously of its own accord. The new system is restructured internally; it works because it relies on human relations, distributed leadership, servant
leadership by the principal, and team-based approaches, together with appropriate support mechanisms (Morrison, 2002). It is evident that school districts have state and federal mandates to which they must be adhere; however, this does not stop the process of emergence, and mandates can be managed and integrated into the school goals.

Leader behaviors are often viewed as skill sets. These behaviors include monitoring, consulting, and delegating (Hemphill & Coons, 1950; Hallinger & Hausman 1993). Other work in this tradition has recognized broad leader behaviors, including autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire (Lewin, Lippett, & White, 1939; White & Lippitt, 1960). Task and relationship-focused theories (Likert, 1967) surfaced as well as task-oriented and relationship-oriented leadership models. Complex social systems behave in ways quite different from expectations arising from experience with simple systems. However, simple systems still form the basis for most principal leadership theory (Forrester, 1996). These theories set a foundation for leadership theory but were limited due to the focus on individuals at the top of an organization. There was little mention of the leaders’ context and how that may affect leaders’ behaviors.

**Contingency Theory**

The environment in which leadership develops served as a framework for contingency theory, which acknowledges the context of the leader’s work, actions, goals, and behaviors (Feidler, 1973). Contingency theory emphasizes the relationship between the leader’s characteristics and the situation. Feidler goes further to develop scales to measure leader effectiveness and the least preferred co-worker. The use of these scales helps to determine the consistent leadership style of the leader.

**Situational Leadership Model.** A contingency theory of leadership that suggests a
different pattern of leadership behavior depending on the maturity of the follower is termed *situational leadership* (Hersey & Blanchard, 2001). The researchers defined job maturity as a person’s technical knowledge of a task and the psychological maturity required to perform a task. Follower readiness and leader behavior can produce four possible leadership styles: *telling*, which is similar to directive leader behavior; *selling*, which is directive and supportive; *participative*, which requires leader-follower interaction to form decisions; and *delegating*, a leader behavior that assigns tasks to followers along with the authority to perform the new tasks.

**Transformational Leadership Model.** Transformational leadership is focused on the leader’s ability to change individuals’ thinking. It differs from transactional leadership in that transformational leadership theory focuses on the process by which the leader interacts with the followers and instills in them the need to reach to higher levels of motivation (Northhouse, 1997). The leader transforms and motivates the followers by making them more aware of the importance of task outcomes, inducing them to go beyond their own self-interests for the sake of the organization, and activating their higher-order thinking skills (Bass, 1998). Research has shown that the cognitive skills required to initiate routine tasks are different from those needed to initiate non-routine tasks (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995). In emergent (change) organizations such as schools, many leader behaviors focus on promoting interdependence, communication, cooperation, diversity of thought, and self-organization (Morrison, 2002).

**Servant Leadership Model.** Servant leadership has its beginnings in organized religion (Berry & Cartwright, 2000), where leadership is viewed as a vocation based on serving others. Saint Augustine believed that the transcendental leader is a leader in the
classical sense. He felt that the purpose of all rulers was the well-being of those they ruled (Gini, 1995). The transcendental focuses the managerial work on the need of the collaborators, but not in a manipulative way: to win their trust in such a way that they are more inclined to want what the leaders want (Bass & Avolio, 1993). Specifically, the leader tries to understand and develop the collaborator’s transcendent motivation: the motivation to do things for others, the motivation to contribute (Cardona, 2000). Morrison (2002) suggested that transcendental leaders put the needs of others first. This is especially evident as principals attempt to develop a sense of community in a school.

The studies of Wheatly (1999), Jaworoski (1996), and Kouzes and Posner (1999) indicated that the journey of leadership is primarily an internal effort to connect with a higher influence. Transcendental and servant leadership are often linked to a leader’s spirituality. The challenge of transcendental and servant theories of leadership may be how to integrate theories of leadership into practical contexts. Servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1997), and transformational leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000) acknowledged the relationship between leaders, followers, and their surroundings. When describing her experiences with Central Park East Elementary and Secondary schools, Deborah Meier (1995) acknowledged the powerful relationships that the schools leaders developed when looking for solutions to communal problems. Servant leadership fits into the framework of complex leadership theory, which puts heavy emphasis on the leader having a moral and ethical connection to his or her followers. This is especially true of the servant leader who sees his or her primary responsibility as relationships and people, and those relationships take precedence over the task and the product (Lubin, 2001). In self-organizing and emerging schools, principals cultivate conditions rather than direct practice. They create disturbance and the need for
innovation, but in a safe environment, all the time keeping an eye on key relationships and where the school is headed (Morrison, 2001).

**Summary**

Complexity theory and related leadership theories examined the leader behaviors needed to respond to a non-linear, self-organizing school. The literature highlighted the importance of leadership growth that is responsive to the key components of complexity theory and supported principal leadership that demonstrated the ability to promote emergence and self-organization.
CHAPTER 3–RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Within the framework of a qualitative research approach, this multiple case study of suburban elementary school principals examines their personal characteristics and their behavior as it pertains to leadership in a complex, highly accountable, emergent school environment. Data derived from this study may provide a better understanding of how these principals create meaning in the ever-changing environment and how they lead with the constraints of state and district mandates in their everyday interactions with teachers, students, and parents.

The principals in this study came from different social and economic backgrounds. They have all had a long history of leadership at the elementary level. This multiple case study is an examination of the principals’ personal characteristics and their leader behavior. The qualitative research approach and interview process helped to focus on these personal characteristics and behaviors through the lens of complexity theory and emergence for self-organization. Two questions guided this study:

- What personal characteristics enable the principals to thrive in a changing school environment?
- What behaviors do the principals exhibit as they work in a standards-based, high accountability environment?

These guiding questions require a qualitative approach to thoroughly examine the contextual conditions that contain many variables. Qualitative strategies allow for subjective yet informed interpretations of more dynamic investigations respecting the varied perspectives of the participants engaged (Glesne, 1999). I chose the case study method of investigation because it allows the retention of the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life
events such as organizational and managerial processes (Yin, 2003). Quantitative research methods would not be an appropriate choice for determining how elementary principals help their schools emerge and reorganize to be more responsive to the environment. The goal of the proposed research is to provide a complete, rich description of the behaviors of specific individuals; however, it may not be possible to generalize findings. In many respects the design emerged fully as the research progressed.

**The Personal Aspects of the Study**

As the researcher in this study I brought many years of experience in education and social work to the project. These experiences clarified my thinking regarding the needs of children in our society and their need to be educated in a nurturing and holistic environment. My studies of complexity theory as it relates to leadership and management in the business environment led to my belief that complexity theory can have important implications for complexity leadership in education.

*Early influences.* When I was young, my mother worked as an elementary school secretary. She loved her job and often shared stories of the children in her school who did not have advantages others had. She said that the teachers brought clothing, food, books, or anything else the students needed to make their time at school productive and, more important, to help them understand that they were like the other students. My father was a city government worker who valued education. He, like many others in his generation, saw a high school diploma and college degree as a way to *further yourself* in an environment that was not often receptive to people of color. He earned a master’s degree at 45 years of age and taught at a community college in Washington, D.C., until his retirement.

Uncles who taught school at the secondary level at schools in low-income
neighborhoods shared success stories about students who graduated despite the odds against them. However, they also told stories of students who dropped out and never returned to school because of circumstances often beyond their control.

As I began my undergraduate studies, I felt the desire to impact the lives of children. I was just not sure of how and where to start. In the late 1960s, while a sophomore in college, I became involved in change at the neighborhood and community level. Volunteering at the community center, women’s health centers, and local church put me in contact with families and children, and enabled me to hear their stories. I learned more about these families in a very personal way. I earned an undergraduate degree in social work and went on to work for the public schools as a social worker in the Child Care Early Learning Program. Social work led to employment as a case worker at a methadone clinic for women in the inner city and as a foster care case worker. As divergent as these jobs seemed, they showed me how a turbulent, chaotic environment can affect one’s life and how people can emerge from adversity to regain their lives.

**Schools–teaching and learning.** Seeing how the children often suffered and became invisible in a school system that was unable to understand their plight, I wanted to be actively involved in educating the children with whom I came in contact. Upon obtaining teaching certification and a master’s degree in education, I began my teaching career in 1978. During my teaching journey, I taught kindergarten (starting with a university supervised experimental school) and grades 1 through 8. The experimental kindergarten experience was especially interesting because we were encouraged to try new teaching techniques when others failed, and we were given a great deal of autonomy as teachers to change curriculum and general practice. I had similar experiences in a large urban district that embraced the
teaching of Dr. James Comer as a way to address the needs of the entire child in a holistic manner. The binding thread of all of my teaching experiences was seeing children who had been otherwise written off achieve academic success.

As a teacher, I worked with several wonderful principals whose transformational core impacted on major dimensions of the school. Their leadership was concerned with vision, values, culture, and systemic change at the school. I watched as these principals showed their teachers and staff individual consideration, always focusing on how to help the teachers improve their practice. These forward-thinking administrators nurtured the creative process by helping teachers see that there was always more than one solution to a problem. The behavior of these principals went a step further, showing genuine servant leadership. They asked the staff, “How can I enable you to enjoy and learn from your work with the students?” As teachers we really appreciated this attitude, and it created a feeling of community at each school. Building teacher leaders was also an important part of the principal’s work, and I was a recipient of a principal’s efforts to develop my leadership potential. These principals understood that the environment outside of the school would continue to change and that the staff would have to be flexible and able to change at a moment’s notice to keep the students on track to reaching their goals. After observing the administrators in their daily work, I decided to move forward and pursue a position as an elementary principal.

The principalship further informed my understanding about how schools work and their position within the larger system. My experience in urban districts and suburban districts enabled me to understand their similarities and differences. I learned about the many types of administrative decisions in which a principal engages throughout his or her day, which often begins at 7:30 am and does not end until 9:00 pm. This research study has
allowed me to observe three principals and to examine their belief systems and how their beliefs affected their behavior.

**Research Design**

Qualitative research methods have been used to describe and understand a social phenomenon from the perspective of those involved to contextualize issues in their particular socio-cultural-political milieu, and sometimes to transfer or change social conditions (Glesne, 2006). As the researcher, I was able to view the respondent’s experiences not through an objective lens but through my own experiences. Through the interpretation process, I was able to address any unknown biases. Approval to conduct this study was granted by the Human Subjects Review Committee of Eastern Michigan University (See Appendix A).

In a chaotic world we need leaders, not bosses. Schools need principals who help develop a clear identity that lights the dark moments of confusion (Morrison, 2002). When we add the voice of chaos theory to school leadership practices, we can see how a complex, highly accountable, emergent school environment can be impacted by principals’ behaviors and personal characteristics to create capacity within their schools. Through the multiple case study, seen through the lens of complexity theory, I examined elementary school principals’ leader behavior and personal characteristics to gain better insight about how they keep their schools functioning and meeting the needs of the students who often come from diverse backgrounds.

**Monitoring subjectivity and reflexivity.** As a qualitative researcher gathers data, awareness of specific subjective areas is crucial to the quality of the study. There are some perspectives that could shape, skew, distort, construe, and misconstrue what is seen and heard by the researcher (Glesne, 2006). Though subjectivity can have negative implications
for the researcher, being aware of it can also highlight the virtuous aspects. Glesne stated, “Subjectivity, once recognized, can be monitored for more trustworthy research and subjectivity, in itself, can contribute to research” (p. 119).

As a former elementary principal, I constantly used my subjective lens (Glesne, 2006) to be more aware of my views on the education and leadership. However, I realized that my feelings regarding school leadership and educating low-income children and children of color had to be monitored during the study.

Because this was my first qualitative research journey, I needed to ask questions of others who had conducted qualitative research. This was particularly helpful as it helped me as I collected interview data and recorded my own thoughts and reflections in my journal and field notes. There were times during interviews with principals that I felt that I knew exactly what they were going through. They described the tensions they felt between wanting to be more collaborative with teachers and the mandates of their school district. Very often there was no time for collaboration. Decisions had to be implemented quickly and with full support from staff.

As the interviewing progressed and I built stronger relationships with the principals, I became protective of them. This was especially true during the data analysis and final reporting process. After much discussion reflection and discussion, I was able to work through the feelings and understand that all of the data I received were pertinent to the final analysis.

Through the use of the reflexive process, I was able to look more deeply into connections between myself and others (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). As I entered the suburban elementary schools of the participating principals, I had to be cognizant of my biases that
included a preconceived notion of the community’s income level, their racial makeup, and their attitudes toward low-income children and children of color. I had to confront my bias of thinking that principals who worked in these districts had an easier time of it compared to urban principals. I found that I had to call on my ability to be objective especially during the analysis stage of the research where it would have been very easy for me to favor one principal over another because of a shared interest or experience.

**Trustworthiness and authenticity.** Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that the basic notion of trustworthiness relates to this question: “How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to” (p. 290). The current research study provides structural corroboration (Eisner, 1991) in several ways. The data of the study are triangulated using the concepts of critical reflexivity, critical reflexivity on subjectivity, assessment data, and thickly described interviews of principals and teachers:

I strived to present a total and complete picture of the principals in their environment. Through the use of thick description (Geertz, 1973), the study describes motives, meanings, contexts, and most important, situations and circumstances of action (Denzin, 1989, p. 39).

The research and analysis of all data was further strengthened by direct quotations from teachers and principals, as I was able to observe trends, themes, and patterns. Direct dialog of the experiences also helped the reader to identify more fully with the educators, as their experiences became more believable and relatable.

The study inquiries focused on how and why the exemplary outcomes of emergence and self-organization occurred, showing direct replications of these conditions from case to case (Yin, 2003). The multiple case study approach is an appropriate method for obtaining
information about the motivations, tendencies, and habits of individuals in the workplace (Berg, 2004). The multiple case studies provided the opportunity to obtain direct, varied perspectives of individuals most deeply involved in the experiences under investigation. Through the use of multiple principals from different elementary schools, the scope of the information was richer and created opportunities to identify patterns of similarity in principal choices, motivations, deterrents, and supports. The ways in which leadership decisions were made was illuminated through the study of three separate elementary schools (Schramm, 1993). The contextual conditions, such as the turbulent environment, are critical in determining how principals make leadership decisions.

**Setting.** Blue Hills School District was chosen for this study because of its location demographics, and the economic and social changes that have impacted each particular school in that district. The Blue Hills School District occupies 37 square miles of northeast Dresden County, and is a result of a 1954 merger of five small school districts. The smaller districts had no high school facilities and sent their high school-aged students to Wright High School for a fee. Today, Blue Hills has ten elementary schools, four middle schools, and two high schools.

The community comprises neighborhoods that reflect the economic and cultural diversity evident in the schools. The state’s current economic environment has significantly impacted the district. The district demographics are changing in Dresden County, and Blue Hills, like many school districts, is undergoing change on all levels. District demographics indicate that one of three students qualifies for the Federal Free/Reduced Meal Program. The enrollment trend shows an increase in ethnic minorities in the past five years. The continued growth of the district and the individual schools within it will depend on the ability of district
officials, the principals, and staff to successfully meet the needs of all of the students.

**Subjects.** The Blue Hills Schools’ Assistant Superintendent of Personnel who had extensive experience in the field of personnel selection for school districts assisted with the identification of the principals for the study. The administrator had a keen understanding of the changes that have impacted Blue Hills in the past five years and had hired and supervised administrative staff for the schools.

The chosen elementary principals were the sole administrators of their buildings, and each had demonstrated effective leadership for change at their schools. Each principal had at least three years of administrative experience in the current school. The school’s demographic profile reflected economic, racial, and cultural diversity in its staff and pupil population. Although I had not personally met the principals suggested for this study, I had an opportunity to visit the district on several occasions and had visited schools and observed principals at work.

A phone call was made to each principal requesting his or her participation in the study. The principal participants were informed that they would be engaged in an interview to elicit their views on leadership of elementary school principals during challenging times. The principal then identified three teachers at two of the schools to be interviewed. The teachers were either members of the school improvement team or a committee that regularly engages in decision-making at their respective schools. The teacher participant group, though they were not necessarily representative of all teachers at the school, would offer a different perspective of the daily school experience. All participants signed the Informed Consent Form before any data were collected (See Appendix B and C).

**Procedure.** The focused interview process included teachers and principals (Merton,
Fiske, & Kendall, 1990). The purpose of teacher interviews was to understand the participant’s experiences in relationship to the principal’s leader behaviors. The principal interviews helped the researcher better understand the personal characteristics and behaviors that impacted leadership. A conversational tone was used with open-ended questioning. Interview questions were derived from the case study protocol (Yin, 2003) using a focused approach (See Appendix D and E).

Reviewing state assessment scores from each school illuminated any variance in achievement at each school (See Appendix F). Since the study looked at principal behaviors, the collection of archival records such as the state assessment results seemed most appropriate (Yin, 2003). All names and identifying information were removed for the study, and pseudonyms were assigned.

Multiple sources of information were used in the data collection process to develop converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 2003) which were used to strengthen the core of evidence.

Data Collection. The first step in the data collection process required contacting the school district superintendent or designee to obtain permission to approach the chosen elementary principals and, thus, to request permission to conduct a study at their school sites. The principals were asked to participate in an interview to solicit views on principal leadership, particularly reflecting on their experiences with distributed leadership and organizational learning at their schools.

The second step was to schedule interviews with the principals and teachers at the elementary schools. Initial contacts to the principal were made by phone, with follow-up confirmation in writing. The teachers were contacted by the principal, and arrangements were made for interviews. The consent letter provided each participant with a clear explanation of
the scope and intent of the study. Each participant received an offer to review the analysis of the responses and the findings prior to publication. This member check allowed for an initial higher level of trust in the responses and later internal triangulation of data (Glesne, 1999).

Finally, I viewed copies of each school's state assessment scores for grades 3, 4, and 5 for the 2010-2011 school years. The principals shared archival data such as news articles documenting special school programs and events. I noted these as part of the interview process. Comparison of these physical artifacts to the teacher participants’ descriptions of the principals created another opportunity to triangulate the data.

**Data Management.** Qualitative studies that use interviews are subject to the idiosyncrasies of human behavior (Berg, 2004). This study respected the needs of the participants and made adjustments with regard to time, personal challenges, and levels of comfort in disclosure. The three principals agreed to interviews in June, when school was dismissed for the year and August, at the beginning of the school year before students arrived. However, the interviews scheduled over one week in June and two weeks in August required changes due to scheduling challenges. The factors of end-of-year and beginning-of-year meetings required the study to expand to four weeks.

The researcher documented any external challenges that may have influenced the responses of the participants and the resulting data. For example, a change in the time of one interview required moving some other interviews closer to the stressful opening day of school. In these instances, the researcher acknowledged revisions to the participant and made efforts to manage the outside influences, noting any factors that might have impacted the data specific to the individual respondent.

In an effort to ensure trustworthiness in both the data and the analysis of the findings,
the following strategies were used:

1. Standardized questioning was used for each participant.

2. Tape recorded interviews were reviewed during the analysis.

3. Important non-visual aspects of the data such as gesturing, vocal changes, and impressions were noted during the interviews.

4. Respondents’ intended meanings were captured accurately.

5. An on-site review of archival data was conducted. The data included the MEAP test results for the 2010-2011 school years pertaining to each elementary school.

6. A phased approach to initial interviews was organized including telephone calls to help clarify data and the analysis of archival data.

The participants were assured of confidentiality through the invitation to participate letter and verbally prior to the beginning of the interviews; this established an environment of trust and open conversation. The researcher also monitored her own feelings and emotions to avoid displaying bias or influence (Glesne, 1999). This facilitated the credibility of the qualitative analysis and the findings.

The researcher made a specific effort to triangulate the process and the data by carefully designing the interview questions. The open-ended questions helped to elicit information from participants who had different perspectives. Clarification of information and questions used with the participants added depth and corroboration of the issues at each school.

At the end of the interviews, principals shared their school's most recent test scores and discussed at length their feelings regarding the test. The physical copies of the test results created another opportunity to triangulate the data. The researcher kept field notes and
journal entries that were reviewed immediately following each interview to add to the clarity of the interview while fresh in the mind of the researcher. The transcribed, typed interviews were copied twice to provide a dual data set of individual responses; this process enabled interviews to be sorted in multiple combinations. The individual tapes of each interview were reviewed along with the protocol; doing so enabled verification and elaboration on the short notation-coded responses. Specific conversations, key quotes, or unique uses of language offered additional depth to the data. The researcher listened to each tape at least three times along with a review of the data corresponding to each respondent. When needed, follow-up telephone interviews for clarification were conducted with participants.

The interviews and protocol notes were stored in the appropriate folders in the data analysis program (Atlas/ti6). The follow-up interviews were also entered into the analysis program. All identifying information was removed, and tape recordings were securely stored in a locked file.

The data management process secured all information regarding the study including responses of participants and coordination of calendars through a numerical coding system to include a unique three-digit number assigned to each participant. For example, the file for one principal could be 14-1. This allowed for consistent organization of all information while creating a level of confidentiality, anonymity, and assigned pseudonyms for each participant. The researcher used this careful filing system through a computerized data base, separate from the analysis program for all data from field notes and tape recordings.

Data Analysis. In a discussion of qualitative analysis, Miles and Huberman (1994) provided a detailed process for objectively reviewing the subjective data inherent in qualitative research that ensures that content analysis of the data can stand up to scrutiny.
Through the careful application of specific ways for drawing meaning from data, the authors outlined 13 structured qualitative mechanisms that can assist in trustworthy analysis resulting in findings that can be successfully defended. Among these mechanisms were the following:

1. See what goes together; note patterns or themes, see plausibility, and/or clustering;
2. See what is evident in the data; make metaphors, make contrasts/comparisons, and/or positioning variables;
3. See relationships more abstractly; subsume particulars into the general, factor, and/or note relations between variables, and
4. See chains of evidence and/or make conceptual/theoretical coherence out of data.

Because qualitative analysis requires organizing data in a way that allows for making sense of the parts in relation to the whole (Glesne, 1999), the analysis approach used in this study used these mechanisms as a guide in the initial sorting and coding of interview data, as well as the analysis. The researcher let the emerging detail from the responses shape the content of the applied mechanisms (Berg, 2004).

Through data reduction of the field notes and careful analysis of the taped discourse, the researcher began to organize the information compiled through the interviews into units of key words, phrases, and sentences by each respondent. The criterion for selection (Berg, 2004) and isolation of specific units of the data focused on common characteristics of content, tone, and relevance. These units are part of an inductive analysis process” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The analysis began with sorting these units or single pieces of information into broad categories by merging characteristic traits into data clusters. The open coding (Strauss, 1998) of the original data allowed for the establishment of large chunks of clustered data used for
clarifying and organizing the research information. These clusters spiraled around the intent of the research questions, ultimately emerging as praxis points for the final analysis of findings.

Using suggested mechanisms for analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the researcher initially analyzed the open coded categories by individual respondent responses to each question, then across the group by each question. The clustered data could then be examined for meanings behind actions, influencing factors, and evidence of coherency by individual and group reports. Sorted data clusters revealed patterns and relationships that resulted in more discrete clusters of data. These initial data clusters, or axial codes (Berg, 2004), began to focus the data toward an interconnected body of information which spiraled from the larger groupings back into sub-particles for analysis. These smaller pieces of the data clusters from individual respondents were viewed beside the analyzed group responses by question to allow for the emergence of a “chain of evidence [or] coherence of the data” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 245). Using all of the formed data clusters, the researcher again reviewed all field notes and tapes toward satiation of the content. The full process required a continuous loop of sorting, organizing, data review, refined sorting, organizing, and grouping.

The data analysis process included all data from the direct interviews, telephone interviews, and the separate database of the state-mandated test results, and led to the following:

1. Initial grouping and coding of key words, phrases, or inferences by each respondent across emerging broad categories.

2. Sorting of the broad categories by each respondent into developing data clusters and relationship patterns.
3. Continued review and analysis of data clusters by each respondent to identify patterns, themes, integration of data, comparisons and contrasts, relationships, and chains of evidence in behavior or coherence of practice within the units of analysis.

4. Initial grouping and open coding of key words, phrases, and inferences from each question across all respondents into broad categories.

5. Sorting of broad categories by question across all respondents into developing clusters and relationship patterns.

6. Continued review and analysis of data clusters across all respondents to identify patterns, themes, integration of data, comparisons and contrasts, relationships, and chains of evidence in behavior or coherence of practice within the units of analysis.

7. In-depth analysis of the resulting data clusters in relation to the research questions, cross-group respondents, allowing for the emergence of themes, patterns, and expanded groupings.

8. Review of the Michigan Educational Assessment data to identify perceived evidence of academic improvement in context to the individual respondent and across respondents.

9. Review of field notes and journal entries.

10. Analysis of sub-particles reflected through emerging themes, patterns, and expanded groupings among the individual responses and collective responses to consider anomalies or outlier responses.

From the results of the content analysis, conclusions were drawn relative to the research questions being investigated. Further, final conclusions and recommendations were related to the original problem of the study, the specific principal leader behaviors that are
supportive of those aspects of complexity leadership theory emphasizing greater levels of innovation and adaptability.

Summary

The qualitative methods used to examine the two research questions were explained in Chapter 3. Personal aspects of the study were described, as were the issues relating to subjectivity, reflexivity, and trustworthiness in qualitative research. The selection process for determining and soliciting participants, formation of interview questions, the process of conducting the onsite interviews with principals and teachers, methods for documenting the responses of the participants, and the management of the data were also topics in this chapter. Full examination of the data followed triangulated data collection and review and extensive analysis. The structure of the spiraled data analysis process used and the steps used to ensure trustworthiness were described. Finally, information in Chapter 3 underscored research standards using a research approach founded upon literature reviews and theoretical guidance, and an understanding of the responsibility to provide for the potential for future study.
CHAPTER 4–PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This study examined the behaviors of three elementary school principals during times of change in their schools. The study also examined the personal characteristics of the principals that enabled them to guide their schools in an environment wrought with the pressures of high accountability, an economic downturn, and high stakes testing. When schools are viewed as complex systems, the interacting parts function as a whole with boundaries and properties (Lucas, 2000). Complexity theory, as it relates to school leadership, suggests that schools are complex, nonlinear, and unpredictable systems that impact significantly on leadership (Morrison, 2002). The theoretical framework of this study proposed that elementary school principals working in school districts situated in turbulent environments display many behaviors that align with complexity theory. Leadership within a non-linear, self-organizing school is remote from the hierarchical command and control mentality of bureaucratic organizations in which compliance is the watchword (Riley, 2000). However, the data in this study revealed that there were times when the participating principals reverted to leadership behaviors aligned with more linear organizations.

The primary data for this study were the individual interviews conducted with the principals and teachers at the selected schools. Archival data were provided through the district, the local community service organization, U.S. Census Bureau, and State Department of Education websites. The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What personal characteristics enable the principals to thrive in a changing school environment?

2. What behaviors do the principals’ exhibit as they work in an environment that is standards-based with high accountability?
Morrison (1998) described the key elements of leadership for self-organization in a complex organization as flexibility, responsibility, commitment, and clarity of communication, vision, and direction. The data from this study described how the principals acquired the personal feelings and beliefs that moved them toward the principalship.

The leader behaviors described in this study helped the principals navigate in their environment to obtain student achievement. Leadership for complexity has many components. Although no one leadership theory provides the framework for a complete analysis, there are certain leadership styles that align with complexity theory, such as transformational, transcendental, servant, quantum, and distributed leadership (Morrison, 2002). This study demonstrates how the three participating principals used parts of these leadership styles at different times during their interactions with parents and school staff.

**Context for the Study**

The three principals in the study worked in a suburban school district in the midst of a shift in student population from one that was middle-class to one experiencing an influx of low-income families and a transient Hispanic population. The principals talked about their jobs and how it had changed over the years, noting especially the need for them to make changes in their leadership behaviors.

The Blue Hills school district is located outside of a large midwest city, close to the scenic shore of a lake. Changes in the economy over the past 15 years have brought hard times to the City of Blue Hills, which once was an active fishing and recreational community for automobile executives and their families. Although some families left the city to find work in the larger metropolitan area, many families still reside in the Blue Hills schools area, and new families are coming to take advantage of the good schools, and low-cost of housing.
The economic recession had a devastating effect on the state. Data obtained from the American Community Survey (U.S. Census Bureau) indicated that many families suffered economic hardship. The increasing need can be seen in the overall increases of the number of students who apply for free and reduced lunch. Data from the 2009-10 school year showed that more than 50% of students were eligible for free and reduced lunch in eight districts located near the Blue Hills district; six of those districts were shown with rates above 50% since 2006-2007. More hard times are forecast for the area due to very slow economic growth. The Blue Hills school district has had to make adjustments across the board to serve its students in a difficult economic environment.

It was evident that the principals in the study had a strong commitment to the community and the education of the students in their schools. The principals lived in the community and felt that their students’ success was directly tied to the survival of their community. Each educational leader developed and honed strategies and personal philosophies that moved his or her school forward in this environment.

Three principals participated in the study: Beverly Gates, Principal at Royster Elementary, Megan Rodgers, at Stevens Elementary, and Bill Myers at Taylor Elementary. This study described the personal characteristics shared by some of the principals and how these characteristics influenced their leader behaviors and kept the schools moving forward academically.

**Beverly Gates - Royster Elementary School**

At first glance, Royster Elementary could have been just another suburban school building with a large circle drive to accommodate the many busses that transport students each day, but the school was much more than that. The school appeared to be the physical
focal point for the mixture of homes and businesses in the area. I visited Royster Elementary to interview the principal and staff and noticed more of the small things that made this building more than a school.

The movement of the teachers, students, and parents when school was in session seemed to give the school a breath and heartbeat of its own. Students moving through the halls laughing, smiling, and sometimes engaging in horseplay gave the school vitality. I sensed a feeling of camaraderie amongst the staff. Parents (mostly mothers) filled the school office to check in with the secretary. There was a casual banter between parents and the school secretary. I observed that parents appeared relaxed with the teachers and the principal. There were smiles and an ease that indicated a high level of comfort. I later learned through interviews and observation that the school operated in an organized way, but there was also the ability to adapt to change.

Most Royster families did not live within walking distance of the school. At the end of the school day, the k-8 classes had a specific schedule for leading bussed students to the transportation waiting area. These students rode the school bus to the adjacent housing developments, which were older and consisted of small and mid-sized homes built after World War II to accommodate the rise in middle-class families who preferred a home close to, but not fronting on the lake. Some teachers said that the economic dip hurt the employed parents whose work depended on the auto industry, but most families held on to their homes.

School challenges. As I watched the parents interact with their children, I was initially struck by the lack of Hispanic parents at the school on that day. Royster has the largest Hispanic population of all of the elementary schools in the Blue Hills District. I later learned through interviews with the staff and principal that most Hispanic parents were busy
working on the small farms and orchards in the area. Perhaps because their employment as migrant workers in Michigan was of short duration, they left the education of their children to the school.

In our interviews, Beverly shared that there was a connected network of teachers from Royster and the middle school for Hispanic students who remained in the Blue Hills school system. This connection was formed to share student achievement data and all pertinent information to assure a smooth transition for students as they entered middle school. The goal was to improve the quality of learning for all Hispanic students, who often had a very different school experience than the others.

Morrison, (2001) referred to as schools that are responsive to their environments.

At a time of perturbation a new system may emerge through interaction of its internal and external elements; communication is strong and the schools self-organize into a new external structure. (p.14)

As an example of Morrison’s (2001) responsive schools, Beverly discussed the possibility of a new program of academic and social support for the Hispanic students and their families. Beverly and her teachers had a vision of what this program could be, but at the time, it was only an idea. Beverly discussed this idea with the middle school principal who accepts Royster students as they leave fifth grade, but Beverly acknowledged that more communication between the schools and the district would have to take place to actually create a program built on specific elements to offer consistency of instruction for Hispanic students. Though Beverly’s idea to extend instructional techniques and programs for the fifth grade students as they begin middle school will probably not mean the creation of a new school, it is a perfect example of the school staff spontaneously organizing around an issue,
with the teachers and principal (not district administrators) deciding what their boundaries will be.

Beverly considered the transiency of the Hispanic students a challenge. It was clear that these students required the Royster staff to become creative in response to their issues, including students who have Spanish as a primary language, instructional deficits, and the lack of the basic necessities such as clothing and food. Beverly had a strong commitment to helping students who had fewer advantages. This moral imperative was evident in Beverly from an early age, and will be examined further as she discusses her childhood in a rural community.

A rural beginning. Royster Elementary had been Beverly's *home away from home* since 1993. She was attracted to the field of education because of her love of children and the need to feel that she could impact their learning in many positive ways. Beverly grew up in a household where education was valued. Beverly recalled:

My father was a hard worker. We only saw him in the evenings when he came home from his job as a mill worker but we considered those times as precious. Dad and mom insisted that we put schoolwork first. This was easy for me because I enjoyed learning. My parents were not hard on us, but I learned at an early age if you didn’t waste time and got the job done, there were rewards. Mom cooked our favorite desserts if we completed our chores or did especially well in school.

Of her three siblings, Bev was considered the *organized* one. By her own account, as a child, she was the first one ready for school because she always had her clothing in order, she knew where her books and homework were in the morning, and she found it easy to study for tests because she had devised her own methods for remembering things. She
recalled, “These methods were basically word association techniques, but they served me well.” This personality trait of organization is evident in Beverly’s view of how an effective school operates. Further discussion with Beverly revealed that she credited good organizational skills that enabled her school to cope with the diversity and change that it faces each year:

I keep charts and diagrams tracking student progress. This data is furnished by the district, but I keep track of how the lower performing students are doing by grade and then I meet with the teachers to decide how we can help them improve. These students are especially important to me. I want them to succeed.

Working with children has always been an important endeavor for Beverly. As a child, she realized that there was a disparity in wealth and education that disproportionately affected many children. This was especially true in the small rural community Beverly called home. Beverly shared an incident that was significant in her ethical and moral development:

In the church we (the family) attended we had a special time after the service that the pastor referred to as a “time to feed the sheep.” Various members of the hospitality committee would prepare dishes and set out a delicious buffet for the congregation. Mother insisted that my sisters and I volunteer to serve on occasion. This one particular Sunday we noticed that there was a family who came and ate a great deal. We recognized the children immediately. They attended our elementary school. These two children were not easily identifiable as being poor. However, it was clear that that meal was important to them. I remember thinking that we were fortunate to have the things that we had.

The experience of helping out at the church was Beverly’s turning point. Her family’s
commitment to helping those who were less fortunate helped become a way of life.

Beverly obtained a bachelor’s degree in special education in 1976. Initially, she began her teaching career in a second grade classroom but soon moved on to special education where she taught emotionally impaired elementary students. Beverly recalled:

…I felt the challenge to help these students learn and be able to go through the school system successfully. As I chose a major in undergraduate school, I thought about social work but then decided that teaching would be a better way to help students. Helping children being prepared academically was a strong motivator for me when I chose my profession. I wanted students to have positive interactions with adults, instead of negative ones.

Beverly went on to say:

I can remember seeing classmates of mine being humiliated by teachers that didn’t understand why they couldn’t get it. The teachers meant well, but they had no knowledge of specific instructional techniques that would have helped the students learn more effectively. It was sad. I really felt for them (the students).

Beverly received a great deal of satisfaction from teaching and helping the small group of students and their families, teaching the children and preparing them to be productive citizens. Beverly recalled the commitment that she had to the students:

I always wanted my students who were labeled emotionally impaired to feel that they were coming out on the good end of a situation. So often the special education students at this school spent their days in the principal’s office because they were “uncontrollable.” I just felt that we as teachers owed the children more than that.

**Personal Characteristics.** Beverly was raised in a rural community that shaped her
ideas regarding children, families, and schools. She developed a sense of duty to the students with whom she worked based on the concepts of right and wrong that were taught in her home. She shared some of these characteristics with the other principals in the study.

**Social awareness—School community as family.** Beverly credited a keen knowledge of the people who have helped her make good decisions that have benefited everyone with whom she has come in contact. As she recalled her early career in teaching she recognized a desire to work with teachers, which drove her to seek the principal position at the elementary school where she was teaching. She recalled:

> The rural experience was a good one for me. I had relationships established that were positive, and I knew the community. I learned a lot about how schools run because in a smaller school district you wear all kinds of “hats.”

Beverly described her experience as a principal a rural school attended by 700 students:

> I was the person who represented the district at meetings and planning sessions. I was doing the preschool, the gifted and talented, and the curriculum advisory committee. I often represented my district at the county-level meetings. That was a wonderful experience for me.

Beverly recalled that she personally knew 70% of the students and their parents. She lived in the same community as her students and considered that to have been an advantage.

> It helped me understand when a student came to school reluctant to participate, that his grandmother had passed away the day before and this was affecting his performance. I also had a better understanding of the economic realities that my families faced daily.

At the time of the interviews, the school community was relatively stable
economically. Royster parents were employed, but many of the jobs that they held were not the high paying jobs that existed before the recession. When Beverly and her staff saw a need, they worked hard to fill it. When students came to school without the proper winter clothing, they went to the clothing closet to get whatever they needed. As Beverly described the children who were in so much need at her school, her speech slowed and was tinged with sorrow. The children were more than students to Beverly and her staff:

They felt like part of the school family. In my past administrative experience the students and staff members came from similar backgrounds. When I came to Royster, I had to ask questions and do a lot of reading to learn about my students. My colleagues (other principals) were helpful. We shared stories and they gave me suggestions.

Beverly applied the school as family concept to the constituencies when she started working at Royster.

**Flexibility and adaptability—Working together to put students first.** When Beverly came to the Royster elementary community in 1993, she felt energized and excited to work in an environment very different from the rural environment that she left. The few minority students who had been at Royster for several years had academic skill levels similar to the majority of the students. Royster was changing; her present student population included many students from different economic and social backgrounds. Beverly explained:

As you can see the area across the street has businesses. There are small homes for rent and apartments behind those businesses. Lots more people from the city moved out here pushing each school’s boundary. With that came a change of ethnicities and economic status of the children. The families did not stay in one
place for a long time.

Helping the new families becomes integrated into the community and the culture of the school became a new focal point for Beverly. She added:

I knew that the children needed to feel stable and safe at Royster; they needed to have teachers who understood their culture and could speak their language.

The teachers wanted to help the students in their transition into the community.

Beverly described a Back Pack Program that distributed food on weekends for the needy families at the school. Teachers commented on the number of children who came to school in need of breakfast. There was also a fear among the staff that certain students were not eating at dinner time after they left school. Beverly and the teachers also volunteered to staff an afterschool Homework Club for students one hour twice a week, with bus transportation for students after each session.

We noticed that the children were having problems in school because, when homework was sent home, their parents could not read the assignments and help them. Both the children and their parents were under a great deal of stress and we did not want that for them. We also issue all emails and hard copies of newsletters in Spanish.

Beverly’s current concern for her students and their school success in part was built on observations made early in her career with special education students. Beverly recalled:

Being from a rural community I have seen families whose economic status depends on a good harvest. I have seen what it does to families that have to move often and start over in a new school and a new community only to have to pull up stakes again when the harvest season is over.
Beverly has used her knowledge of her staff and parents as a catalyst to make consensus decision-making and collaboration more effective.

We can usually come to agreement by using consensus decision-making techniques. However, one thing that holds us back when we are making decisions is when individual stakeholders tend to look for a solution that will help them.

Beverly stated that she used the school improvement team members to help staff and stakeholders to support the need for new programs and initiatives at the school.

The teachers at Royster embraced parents who served in the traditional ways. Though there were not as many stay-at-home moms as there used to be, there were a core of room mothers who could be counted on for support. The teachers interviewed said that they could depend on their room mothers to plan parties and help with field trips. These mothers were the women who would phone the other classroom parents to get them to help with special projects and so on.

The Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) at Royster Elementary was similar to the other parent organizations in the district. Beverly described it as, “a vehicle for teachers to get to know parents better and form trusting relationships.” She added:

The Royster PTO exists to work closely with the staff to assist and support their efforts. There is a level of input on decision-making but that is not the main focus of the group. Parents want not so much to help with the big cause; they want to help with the children in the classrooms. They want to see their child see them at the school being involved.

Beverly acknowledged that there is a small group of parents that she can depend on to give support for new initiatives and curriculum; however, most parents show their support in
other ways. Beverly feels being at school enables the parent to know what is going on in the classroom and, when their child comes home at the end of the day, to talk about what went on in school, the parent knows what it is all about. She listened to the parents and observed their needs. Beverly admitted:

This parent group is structured in many ways like the other schools in the district, but they (district administration) give us latitude to make changes and tailor the parent group to meet the needs of our school. We are working on getting parents more involved on the decision-making end of things, but most problems are solved quickly by me and the teachers.

Beverly felt that there was merit in parents being involved in the decision-making process at school. However, she more often enlisted advice from staff when making decisions concerning special school programs and curriculum matters.

**Leader Behavior.**

*Sharing Leadership – Encouraged teacher leadership.* Beverly believed that the state assessment test was a constant focus for her school. Royster students continued to achieved Annual Yearly Progress, and the achievement trend was consistent improvement in most areas (see Table 1), but Beverly felt that it was not without a great deal of effort on the teachers part to meet the needs of the school's fluctuating population. Beverly liked to keep the atmosphere at Royster as “smooth” and calm as possible. She wanted to emphasize good teaching and did not want the teachers to feel the pressure and urgency of the annual state assessment; still, she felt the ever present need to keep the test “on the front burner.” Beverly believed that the best way to do this was to stress with her teachers that they had to use the curriculum as a “road map” to learning for the students.
It helped the teachers see that the curriculum would bring them the results that they wanted with student learning. We would naturally be ready for the state or district assessment if we just taught the curriculum.

The teachers agreed with Beverly, even though there needed to be additions and modifications to meet the needs of all of their students.

Beverly also included teachers on the interview team for new staff. She felt that it was rewarding for current teachers to be involved in the interviewing process for new teachers. When filling new positions, Beverly and her interview team searched for teachers that had learning styles that would fit the needs of the students and complement the teaching staff. She stated:

... (When teachers come to Royster), they need to work, be successful, be responsible, and do their part. This makes my life much easier in the long run. As a member of the selection team, I look for the qualities that candidates have that will enhance our teaching staff. Leading for me has been like being a coach of the football team. Everyone here has a specific skill to share; it is all a matter of getting the right people on the bus.

Beverly acknowledged new initiatives in the areas of school management; communication and instruction were constantly being shared with the principals in the district. Very often, Beverly had to depend on the strong and trusting relationships that she had with the teachers to get these new ideas and ways of doing things embedded into the school culture. She knew that the teachers trusted her, and they respected her previous experience as an elementary teacher.

As the principal, Beverly felt that the way to get teachers on board with new
programs was to encourage them to try new things, especially academic initiatives. She felt that this supportive role was the principal's job.

I knew I could mandate compliance in many, if not all situations, but helping teachers feel that they had an active part in what happens in the school would net stronger commitment to the education of all of the students.

As the formal leaders of the school, Beverly allocated tasks to team members, but new teacher leaders emerged in response to adaptive tensions as their teams and committees searched for operating strategies. Beverly recalled when her teachers were introducing a new curriculum project to their peers at Royster and how she considered it an example of real teacher leadership:

I basically have five or six teachers who will step up to the plate and accept responsibility (for leadership). They will pilot any new program. They will go to the ISD and come back and share something new with their colleagues. They will invite them into their classroom to see how something works and then help others as they implement.

Beverly let her teachers know that it was alright to fail because, as a team, she and the other teachers would be there to support each other and help them get back on the right track. Bev wanted her teachers to get involved in making a positive change for the children. However, she shared the accountability for outcomes. The principal told her teachers, "ultimately I am the one who will support you because, whatever the outcome, the ultimate responsibility is mine.” Beverly described this type support of teachers as they modified a district reading support program:

I noticed that with the *Daily Five* district sponsored reading initiative; the
tried it and liked it. However, they realized that it needed to be modified to fit the needs of our students. In small grade-level groups they made all of the necessary changes to the scheduling to accommodate the program and tailor it to school. Others joined in. Their enthusiasm was contagious.

The next year, the school district introduced a mathematics version of the Daily Five, and the teachers once again embraced the program and came together, with the principal’s approval, to look into its benefits, and modify it for use at Royster. Through the process of emergence organization (the school) experienced the influx of students with specific academic deficits, and information is fed back on the organization by through networks and amplified until bifurcation propels the organization forward, reworking paradigms, and eliciting a change in direction or transformation (Jantsch, 1980).

Beverly assumed responsibility for facilitating teacher leadership at Royster. Often, that meant that teachers needed to take on leadership roles to develop new ways of getting ideas across to the students. Beverly said, “The teacher leadership concept helps teachers feel an ownership and accountability for decisions that were made at the Royster.” When asked how she helped teachers accept new ideas, Beverly proudly shared that she let her teachers know when they were hired that there were certain expectations of them. Describing the teacher selection process further Beverly stated:

I look for candidates that relate well to parents. I also look for technical flexibility, someone who can teach any grade well. I have teacher representation with me when I go to the interviews. I see teachers being involved at this level as a part of the collaborative school improvement process.

*Building bridges–Relationship Building.* Beverly beamed when she talked about the
parents of Royster Elementary; she appeared to be very satisfied with the relationship between the school and its parents. Beverly reported having newsletters and other communications prepared in Spanish and English. This was in direct response to the needs observed by teachers. After further discussion, it was revealed that the parents who were heavily involved in the decision-making process represented those families from whom several generations of children had attended the school. When asked about the level of parent involvement from the Hispanic and African American parents, it was stated that the majority of them did not actively participate at school. However, Beverly indicated that these parents were supportive of the direction that the school was taking, even though they were not always physically present at the school.

Beverly said that transiency had the potential to create an achievement obstacle for children from low-income families and for the school to serve them. Royster elementary is located on the northwest side of the district. It is a beautiful, newly built building with room for the generously equipped children's play area in the back. With a touch of melancholy in her voice, Beverly talked about how the neighborhood around the school had changed:

Before I got here, the land around the school was filled with homes. It was blue-collar, and Royster elementary was a neighborhood type of school. Then the neighborhood’s vacant land became more industrial. As you can see, the area across the street has a lot more businesses. There are more people from the city moving out this way, and pushing the school boundaries.

Finding ways to address the differences of new students, some of whom were not attending school regularly, was an issue for Beverly and her teachers. What most concerned her was the language barrier between teachers, students, and their parents. The lack of
understanding of the students’ culture and transiency were also of concern. Beverly felt that not addressing these issues effectively could negatively impact her state assessment scores. I can get the teachers help with learning the language and we can learn more about the culture of our Hispanic children, but I cannot do anything about the way students come later and leave early at this school.

Student transiency was an issue for the majority of schools in the district. The central office had developed some programs to help. However, each school had a unique personality that required redefining and modifying these programs to suit the needs of their individual schools. Beverly considered herself as the person who had the ultimate responsibility for change in the building. She realized that schools had to be creative in response to the changes in the school community, and she appreciated the need to bring the school staff, community, and parents together to help create an environment to help the students succeed. She had faith in the teachers’ ability to educate the students and insure success. As principal, Beverly saw her role as a galvanizing factor to bring a diverse group of parents together to support the teachers’ efforts. All of this structuring and engineering for specific outcomes (behavioral and performance) became a difficult task for Beverly. She described a collaborative effort between her and the teachers to make children of different ethnic backgrounds feel at home at Royster Elementary:

...that started me thinking about the need for bilingual staff that could translate documents and conversations, to help build a home/school connection. The bilingual staff could also understand the children's culture and be able to speak to them in their native language. Beverly was successful in securing the bilingual staff that she needed by inviting district
administration to her school to observe firsthand the need for a more diverse staff.

Beverly appeared confident that Royster elementary was poised to be successful in the coming years. The obstacles to progress, such as student transiency, staff changes, and district reorganization among others, will not stop the school from moving forward. She felt that Royster Elementary like other self-organizing systems was not a passive, helpless victim, forced to react to the environment. Royster Elementary staff had learned a great deal about their mission and who they were. This enabled them to use resources more effectively to sustain and strengthen the school. All of this was done with the guidance of a collaborative, experienced principal.

Royster Elementary had a small group of parents who assumed the leadership role on the school improvement team. Most of the parents who were active at the school did so in relatively traditional ways, which included helping in the classroom and helping with special/seasonal school programs.

Beverly acknowledged that her past experience as principal in a community very different than Blue Hills helped prepare her in many ways for her current position. Beverly credited her administrative experience at other schools, in addition to Royster, for her ability to facilitate change in her building. Beverly felt that knowing why and how teachers react in different situations was an asset.

The Royster teachers were responsive to the needs of parents. During one particular meeting of third grade teachers, two of the teachers stated that they had received comments from their Hispanic parents that the parents did not know exactly how to help their children at home. The teachers agreed that there needed to be workshops to help the parents in this area. The teachers organized colleagues at other grade levels to facilitate evening workshops.
“Not all of the teachers could attend, but we had a good turn out,” recalled one teacher. The teachers also realized (through survey data and informal conversations) that parent participation could take different forms, so the grade-level groups began to work on non-tradition ways for parents to become involved in their child’s education. Beverly observed:

…teachers working to build relationships with parents of their students. It is an understanding that is built on a more personal/individual level that is most satisfying for the parents. It is stronger than the big picture. Parents do not seem to want to help with the big causes.

*Step by step improvement –Restructuring the school improvement team.* When asked about the system that the school used to further school improvement Beverly described the process:

We have a team with a chairperson. We are currently at the end of a cycle, so in the fall we will be starting with new members. My teachers are of the opinion that everyone should have the opportunity to lead whether you are a Goal Team (a group of teachers who address academic issues at the school) or a School Improvement Team (SIT), so that we have input and articulation at all levels. The SIT meetings are held during our restructured day (The restructured day is one day during the week that the school start and ending times are adjusted to allow for professional development).

There are times when the staff comes together to hear team reports, discuss them, and make decisions. Beverly said, “I really like these meetings. Everyone is hearing the same message at the same time and they can give input.”

Beverly explained that the Goal Team was developed to manage academic goals and
allocate the Title 1 funds for instructional purposes. She explained:

> We have our Title1 plan tied to our school improvement goals. They are one and the same. Our Title 1 students are the same children who comprise the sub groups for MEAP testing purposes.

Beverly added, “Whatever our math, reading, and writing goals are, the Goal Team suggests to the staff how the Title 1 monies should be spent to support strategies.”

Beverly admitted that the school improvement structure had to be modified to meet the needs of the school. She stated that this process works for Royster, and she feels that the staff would be receptive to further changes to the process if necessary. Beverly noted that there were other instances where the staff wanted to change the way things were done at the school, and she usually is receptive if staff brings her the proof (data) that indicate that a change is needed and describes how a new direction would help them reach their goal.

**Difficult changes - direct control.** Sergiovanni (1992) referred to the traditional characteristics of leaders–decisive and forceful. Leaders must have a vision and successfully manipulate events and people, so that vision becomes reality. Sergiovanni described the opposite of servant leadership in this excerpt about direct control:

> The official values of management lead us to believe that leaders are characters who singlehandedly pull and push organizational members forward by the force of personality, bureaucratic clout, and political know-how. (p. 119)

Beverly understood what he was describing, because she had to revert to this behavior due to changes in the school environment. As she discussed how decisions get made, Beverly admitted that there were times when she had to make independent decisions that the teachers knew nothing about. She saw that as part of the job of the principal. The teachers at Royster
appeared to appreciate being involved in the decision-making process

Beverly stated, “Sometimes the teachers do not have enough information to make a quick decision, in which case I move forward.” When asked how the teachers feel about this, Beverly said that they understand and are sometimes relieved to not have to make a decision. She credited this attitude to teachers’ humility regarding their limited expertise and experience in certain areas and their ultimate trust in her leadership ability. Morrison (1998) noted that a more directive style of leadership is evident in schools in the early stages of successful innovation, and is appreciated by all participants. However, the principal attempting to break free from conventional views of leadership for the long term should not be perceived as an engineer of all positive outcomes (Plowman & Duchon, 2007).

The expectations for constant improvement on district and state assessments can cause a type of tension for principals. “We really want teacher input on certain issues, especially concerning curriculum, but we do not always have the time required to go through the collaborative process,” lamented Beverly.

The teachers’ perspective. Meeting with the teachers at Royster was a pleasant experience. They were relaxed and happy to talk about their school and it’s principal. It was early summer, and school had just ended for the students. Parents were coming in to pick up odds and ends, which had been left by students in a hurry for the summer vacation to begin. Each teacher was interviewed individually, usually in his or her own classroom. The teachers discussed what motivated them to become educators at the elementary level, conditions at Royster, the teacher’s role, and solutions to problems.

Sydney Trellis. Sydney had been teaching at Royster for five years, but she had been a teacher at one other elementary school in the district for two years before coming to
Royster. Sydney really enjoyed her current position at Royster. She decided to teach while she attended the local university and lived on campus. She stated that this arrangement worked out because she was able to work at the nearby YMCA. Sydney looked forward to the swimming classes that she taught to the children at the YMCA. “Teaching seemed like a natural choice for me since I enjoyed being with children so much,” Sydney noted. Her parents supported her choice to go into education. Though neither parent was a teacher, they had a respect for the profession and wanted Sydney to follow her dream.

Sydney came at Royster Elementary after being the fourth grade teacher at another school in the district. She liked the school, but said the principal there was rather dictatorial and there was a constant “tug and pull” going on between the staff and the principal. She had heard about Royster from a colleague. Beverly Gates had a reputation in the district of being “tough but fair.” Sydney decided that Royster Elementary might be a better fit, so when the opportunity to transfer arose, she took it. Sydney said she was greeted warmly by the staff on her first day at Royster, but what really impressed her was the reception that she got from the principal (whom she had already met prior to her first day at school). “Mrs. Gates made me feel like I had been at Royster for years. I remember that we had a long conversation in her office before I went to my classroom.” Sydney said that she had questions about scheduling and record-keeping that Beverly answered. She then was introduced to her mentor teacher, whose room was next door to hers.

When we talked, Mrs. Gates laid out her vision for Royster. I got a feel for just where the school was headed. She (Beverly) said that the teachers played an important role in meeting goals. Their voices were always heard.

How the teachers were treated seemed to be an important issue for Sydney. She really
hoped that this school would be different from her previous school. Sydney recalled a time that represented how Beverly made decisions with the staff:

   The teachers felt that the addition of more meetings was going to be a hardship, but Beverly encouraged us to come together and decide when these meetings could be held during the school day. In most cases, she met with us to give us the principal’s perspective, but the final decision was ours.

Sydney admitted that she was not the only teacher who felt the meeting schedule was too much. “It seems that we do not get a chance to do much actual teaching. This consensus and collaboration has another side. It takes up a lot of time.”

   Sydney said that she was always glad to see the parents of her students under any circumstances. She felt that most parents were working and, for that reason, they did not come to the school to help out as much as they used to. “I have parents coming in from day-to-day to help with library check out and computer lab. I also have a mom who comes in to read to the children.” This participation level has changed, according to Trellis. Sydney described the reason for the limited parent participation at school:

   We have a lot of parents who say, ‘I do my job from 3-9 p.m., but the school day is yours.’ The staff really works hard here at Stevens to make parents feel welcomed. There is a different dynamic when I feel like I am putting it back on them when their child is not behaving or doing their work during school hours.

Sydney went on to discuss how she felt when dealing with the angry parents she encountered:

   When parents came in confrontational, I felt inadequate. I felt that I should be able to send work home to be completed without a hassle for the parents. I talked to
other teachers and they said that they had experienced the same type of thing. We met and decided rather than try to change the parent’s attitudes about homework, maybe we could change the way that we did things.

Sydney was pleased with the outcome of the small group meeting about this issue. Teachers took their ideas to Beverly, who thought their modifications to the homework policy were reasonable. Sydney appreciated Beverly’s willingness to “have the teacher’s back,” if problems arose.

**Rita Jackson.** Rita was raised in a small town close to Blue Hills. She came to Royster Elementary directly after graduating from the state university. Rita was the newest member of the teacher group. She had only been on the staff for two years, and brought all of the enthusiasm that one would expect from a new teacher, along with an uncharacteristic desire to be a teacher leader.

I was a little unsure at first as to how the rest of the teachers would accept me sitting on the Goal Team. Mrs. Gates encouraged me. She said that I should give it a try. I did and things are working well.

Rita described the Goal Team where she was a grade-level representative:

Every one of the staff at Royster is a member of the school improvement team; at Royster it’s called the Goal Team. It’s just a natural part of things to look at where we have been and how we got there. Throughout every cycle (school year) we have hard core data to say this is working and, if it is not working, what are we going to do about it? …at my grade level we constantly get together to revamp our lessons to match the needs of the students.

Rita liked the organized environment at the school and attributes this to Beverly. She
especially appreciated the way the teachers had input into the school improvement process through the use of the Goal Team. Rita felt that the teachers are comfortable with this process because Beverly supported their efforts. She was “no nonsense” in her approach, but the teachers really appreciate it. “We know what the expectations are, and we work to see that things happen,” stated Rita.

The teachers at Royster felt the pressure of the yearly state assessment. It was directly or indirectly the focus of almost every meeting. Rita Jackson acknowledged that because the Goal Team was working on curriculum matters, the assessment took center stage. “We try to not say the words state assessment, but we know that we have to keep moving upward. Sometimes it is a struggle. The student population changes all of the time.”

**Brenda Moore.** Brenda Moore waited patiently for me to arrive at school for our appointment. I was late and came into her room in a rush. She reassured me and told me to catch my breath. I did and, after a heartfelt apology, started our first interview. Brenda had been teaching at Royster for 14 years, but she started teaching five years before that at a middle school. Brenda was calm and displayed a sense of wisdom that sometimes comes with being an educator for years. She had seen changes and challenges at the school. Brenda had grown up in Blue Hills, which fostered a deep commitment to Royster and the community. The teachers considered Brenda to be the teacher who represented the history of the school. She could relate the growth and changes that the school had gone through under the leadership of Beverley Gates. Brenda was one of the senior teachers on staff who worked hard to stay current. “Unfortunately some of the teachers are not comfortable with the technology, but we try to help each other. I try to tell them that using the computer is not that hard. If I can do it anyone can,” Brenda said with a smile. She expressed concern about being
able to meet the needs of the new students who were enrolling at the school.

We try different things to help these students but sometimes it is not enough. We have strong teachers and varied support services. The students are doing fairly well when they leave Royster and we want to keep their success going.

The discussion turned to the question of how Royster keeps the upward learning trajectory moving forward. Brenda shared the efforts being made to pave the way for the students entering middle school. Brenda excitedly stated,

I do not even teach fifth grade, and I can see the benefit of these meetings. We have come together as a staff with the middle school counselors and teachers. This has not happened in such a systematic way before. The teachers appear to be building a new relationship to create instructional continuity for their students.

The concept of teacher leadership was not new to Brenda. She had served on committees in the past. There was something really different about serving on the Goal Team. Brenda felt that her voice was heard, and she was able to impact the outcome on important issues.

At first I did not believe it could happen—a principal stepping back and doing what the teachers suggested. No way! This encouragement of teacher leadership did take place at Royster.

Brenda believed that staff working together is the key to success. She knew the principal set the tone for success. Brenda described how this happened:

Most of us have been here for a long time and we fit together like a glove. That’s because Mrs. Gates chooses her staff carefully. They all have to mesh together. There are times that the staff has differences, and then Mrs. Gates steps in and makes a
decision. We can usually all live with whatever she decides. I have heard rumors that this whole teacher leader concept will die away like every other new idea in education. I hope that that is not true. I have been around for a while and have seen a lot. Even with different students coming to us each year, the use of technology (that some of us just don’t get), and the pressure from all of these assessments, I think we can make it.

Summary

Beverly Gates used a tough love approach to motivate her teachers. Beverly also believed in collaborating with her staff to gain the buy-in for new projects and curriculum efforts. The teachers are encouraged by Beverly to be risk-takers. One method was to show them that she had faith in them to be successful. However, she struggled with the tension brought on by her attempts to foster distributed leadership at Royster Elementary, somewhat because of the bureaucratic school system of which her school was a part.

Megan Rodgers-Stevens Elementary

Upon entering the school for the first time, a staff member showed me the way to the main office, which was hidden by construction material and workers discussing where the new wiring was to be installed. Megan appeared through all of the noise and activity to greet me. She was very excited at the prospect of sharing the story of her school, including the physical and cultural changes that it had been through during her time there. There was a quick tour of the building as she explained how the long awaited improvements would affect the students in the fall. I observed how effervescent Megan appeared. There was quite a bit of confusion and activity that day, but Megan seemed unfazed. She said that she hoped that all of the construction would be done by the start of school, but if it was not, they would make it
Discovering her calling. Megan found a quiet place behind the school library to begin the conversation. When asked what attracted her to education, Megan stated that she really did not see herself as a teacher initially. Her husband was a band teacher in the Ann Arbor Schools. She recalled:

I had been working at the local university credit union when one of my husband’s friends told him about a position in the Blue Hills schools for a computer para-professional. At that time I was taking classes in liberal arts with no real direction, so I worked as a para-professional while I finished the bachelor’s degree in education. During the end of her undergraduate work, Megan realized that she “really liked being with kids and helping them learn.” Megan stated that concerned colleagues questioned her about the advisability of changing her professional course in mid-stream. She responded that she wanted to follow her desire to make a difference in a child’s life. Megan then applied for a teaching position in the Blue Hills district.

The years that she taught grades one through three stimulated Megan’s creativity. She had studied child development theory in her undergraduate classes and wanted to teach using the multi-age approach. Her principal gave her the support and resources that she needed, and Megan began what was to become a longtime commitment to developing curriculum to fit the needs of all children. She proudly emphasized that the multiage program she developed for the district is still voluntarily being used in some schools.

Megan said that many people encouraged her to further her career and consider administration. She described a principal with whom she had worked with for eight years, as someone who “saw something in her, that she did not see herself.” The principal suggested
that because Megan had been so successful creating the multi-grade program and supporting teachers as they implemented the program, she should apply as an educational technician at the school. This job required that Megan once again work with teachers to help them integrate technology as a tool for student learning. Megan recalled that, “It was an eye opening experience, and I grew a lot.” Megan further explained:

Initially I was the media technician at one school. After three years, the job changed dramatically, and I was traveling to several schools. During this time, I observed principals at work and said to myself, “I can do that.” I was simultaneously attending the Principal Leadership Program (an intermediate school district initiative).

When the Stevens principal position came up, I was encouraged to apply by the human resources office. I did apply and was very happy to get an interview. Megan did not have a master’s degree in education as many of her colleagues did. Initially she felt that this may have been an obstacle to conquer in her new job. She commented:

The job has put me on the learning curve of a lifetime. The courses I took did not prepare me for many of the day to day experiences of running a building. I often had to use my intuition and gut feelings to make decisions that felt right for the situation.

**Challenges.** Stevens Elementary school is set in a quaint neighborhood in Blue Hills. A passerby would not think that there were any challenges that faced the school. However, in my interviews with the Megan Rodgers, I found that the school staff struggled with the cultural differences of the students it now served. The families who were experiencing problems in the home created problems for teachers at school. Megan shared the teacher’s
intentions and their frustration:

We here at Stevens want to help these students fit in and do well, but they seem to have to break down the barriers of skin color and economic status. It seems that all of has to happen before teaching can take hold. Sometimes the parents are hostile and defensive. We are only trying to help.

Megan talked to other principals about the concerns that she had about the parent and teachers’ relationships at Stevens. She was particularly close to one principal who shared the same concern. They talked about how to understand these families better, but Megan’s colleague did not have any sure, quick answers. Megan felt that it all came down to getting to know the children and their families. Megan admitted that her teachers had some biases, which had to be confronted before real relationships could be forged.

The teachers and I attempted to discuss this situation at staff meetings with the help of our social worker. She gave us some insight into what our students had experienced before coming to Stevens. She suggested that we shed some of the stereotypical views that we had about the children so that we could have a better understanding of things.

Megan suggested ongoing training for the entire staff to help facilitate their understanding of children and families of other cultures.

**Personal Characteristics.** Megan always enjoyed working with people. From a young age, she wanted to do something meaningful for others but was not sure exactly what it would be. Her desire to be a help to others coupled with her ability to plan and execute served as the foundation for her leadership experience.

*A shared commitment to the community–Social awareness.* As I traveled through
the halls at Stevens Elementary, teachers greeted me and appeared to be very friendly. They offered general information about their classes and the children. They shared enthusiasm about the upcoming school year. Megan attributed that to the fact that she has been able to attract teachers who share the same teaching philosophy that she does.

We are all concerned about the children who have no coats in the winter and no food to eat at home. This is not something that the school has had to deal with in the past. Hunger and poverty have not been things that Megan had experienced, but she had always felt that everyone needs a chance to live a meaningful life and, by teaching, she hoped to be able to provide that for children. Megan felt that each staff member had something to share with a child. Giving back was important to her. After all, this was the neighborhood in which she lived. When we discussed how she got the teachers and the rest of the staff to buy in to the school as community concept, Megan shared a story that served as a platform for involvement. Megan recalled how the building custodian served as a mentor for cognitively impaired students:

Our real leader in the building is our head custodian, Bill. He heard me talk about how some of our students needed male role models in their lives. Bill volunteered to work during the day with a small group of students; reading with them, listening to them, and offering support wherever needed. These students shadowed the custodian learning about his job and how it was crucial to the effective operation of the school. The custodian felt useful and a part of what was going on in the school. The students felt like part of the school and not just those special kids.

Megan shared how this mentor activity helped other teachers see how they could get involved in helping students in school. As we sat and talked on this visit, Megan expressed
that she was happy that the school was getting added rooms and a new science lab but
displayed some anxiety as she described why the changes were needed. The local economic
environment had changed the neighborhoods from solid middle-class, to streets beset with
vacant homes. The once stable community had become very transient. Low-income families
from the larger city were moving looking for better job opportunities. Once luxurious
condominiums were now transformed into low-income rentals. Megan described it this way:

Mitchell Towers was prime property 15 years ago with expensive high rise
apartments. My husband and I could not even afford to live there. Now it is
subsidized housing. Most of my students live on Edy Street. The students live in
government subsidized apartments, where $25.00 moves you in, and you get free heat
for three months. After three months they are gone.

Megan shared that the older members of the community, who lived on the more
stable streets, wanted to move but they wanted to stay in the community that they loved and
where their children grew up. The attitude of the community toward the new comers has
been a problem for Megan. She had to explain their presence to more than one parent who
has seen them as ‘those children.’ She described the dilemma:

The people who live in the neighborhood that surrounds the school struggle with this
new dynamic. The demographic picture changed just about the same time that the
district decided to open the enrollment to schools of choice students. Now you
hear parents comment on how good things were at Stevens before schools of choice.
They fail to realize that the children live in our attendance area.

Megan felt that it was important to get the community to realize that with the influx
of new students came opportunities for new learning. She met with teachers and found that
they had heard some of the same comments from parents. The state assessment scores for Stevens had fallen in the past ten years. “The scores used to be the strongest in the county,” recalled Megan. Currently, Stevens is doing well and continues to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), through what Megan called a concerted effort of parents and teachers. Megan acknowledged that it is only because of the efforts of the teachers who consistently address the needs of all of their students.

*Our little ones –Empathy.* In response to the issue of new students entering Stevens Elementary at mid-year, Megan and the teachers expanded the Friend to Friend program that provided a mentor for the new students. The student mentor helps the new student navigate the school environment. The teachers interviewed stated that they saw this program as one that helped reduce the anxiety that the students felt those first days of school. "Megan is very sensitive to the needs of our new students. She always thinks of ways to ease their transition and make them feel at home. Megan described other supports for her students in need:

> We do a lot of things for students that just sort of evolve out of needs that we observe. I have a social worker who is phenomenal. She has located needy families through researching local churches and agencies along with our school records. With the support of staff, we serviced over 100 families during the holidays, providing food and small gifts for the children. This effort came about as a building project because we lived with the children all year and recognized their needs.

Megan further stated, “I support the staff in these endeavors because I truly believe that we cannot begin to educate the children until all of their basic needs are taken care of.”

Megan emotionally shared the impact of the low achieving students who have come
to Stevens in greater numbers each year. She describes the children as being “little ones whose families just have to move around a lot.” Megan indicated that she does not have so much of an issue with Hispanic migrant students. Low performing children who come from families where parents have lost jobs and have to move pose more of a problem. She explained,

I have approximately 400 students here at Stevens; last year 100 of them came and went. Fifty-five percent of my kids are on free and reduced lunch. It has really been hard sometimes. The students usually do not have a strong educational background. We have to be really creative to bring them up.

Taking care of the students’ academic needs is naturally a priority for Megan, I have the support of the district when I want to introduce new teaching techniques or special programs at Stevens. They seem to respect my abilities as a principal and shown me in many ways that they understand the needs of the lower income students. Any project that benefits the students here is encouraged.

The state assessment scores move up and down through the years, but we consider ourselves innovators at Stevens. We can bring the scores up. It is more important to us that we nurture the whole child. We will do whatever is necessary to help the children learn. That may be feeding them and clothing them first.

**Leader behaviors.** Each principal showed different ways in which they approached issues at their schools. The leader behaviors in which they engaged showed how they interacted with staff and parents. In this study, leader behaviors during interactions between the principal and the staff led to changes in the way that the staff and the principal expected to relate to one another in the future (Hazy, Goldstein, & Lichtenstein, 2007).
**Let’s do it!—Encouraged teacher leadership.** As Megan shared her view of how teachers contribute to the growth of school, she discussed the need for all teachers to be involved in the decision-making process. The school improvement team at her school met with her from time to time; however, the teaching staff as a whole was involved in interpreting data and curriculum decisions. Megan saw her role as a team member and relished working with the teachers concerning curriculum matters. Stevens fifth grade teacher Darcy recalled how she feels about Megan and her ability to lead:

I often go to Megan with an idea or a specific need for my classroom. I get her opinion because I trust her as a professional. She is our principal and mentor, but she is first and foremost an educator. She understands our needs for the children. She is not judgmental, just helpful.

It was important to Megan that all of the teachers were familiar with the school improvement plan and could articulate its role in improving student achievement. Megan saw her role of principal/facilitator as being the one who kept a yearly rotation of the team and committee members.

I do have a school improvement team. It consists of a parent representative and a teacher from each grade level. Team membership changes from year-to-year. Teachers volunteer for opportunity to serve. I really consider my entire staff to be the SIT, because of the decisions that we are making, the volume of data we are looking at, and the reports that have to go to the state; everyone has to be involved.

Teams address complex tasks in changing environments by collaboratively using their knowledge (March, 1991). As team members continue to work and grow together, they
slowly move toward *groupthink* (Janis, 1972). The one way to avoid this is for the team membership to change by having new members join. Maintaining the appropriate team heterogeneity is a key task for complexity leaders (Mackey, McKinley & Kiousis, 2006).

Stevens Elementary teachers held Megan in high esteem. All teachers interviewed talked about how she took time to discover teachers’ strengths and gave them the opportunity to grow in these areas. This identification of leadership potential of each teacher is a key management skill (Crom and Bertels, 1999). Megan was able to accomplish matching teachers with their strongest skills by placing teachers in particular teams or groups that reflected their interests. Megan considers herself an effective leader who attempts to use the specialized instructional skills that her teachers possess.

I know we have state policies that outline teacher qualifications for specific subjects. I just think that teachers may also have another area in which they are skilled, and they should be able to use that talent to meet the needs of the students.

Megan feels that they are at the beginning of the change process in many ways, and they need to have a principal with a clear vision who can inspire them to try new things.

Megan described her teachers as “the best group of people around.” She referred to her staff as the backbone of the school. She attributed this admiration to working for years as a curriculum consultant and supporting teachers. It was clear that Megan appreciated the men and women who teach the students. Megan encouraged teachers and staff to take risks without fear of recrimination

*Working as a team—Collaboration.* Much discussion in our interviews focused on how Megan facilitated collaboration among the staff in the advent of Response to Intervention (RTI), the research-based approach to address the goal of enhanced education
for all children (MAASE, 2006), which created an opportunity for the Stevens teachers to came together collectively to modify the program for their students. RTI consists of eight core principles and requires an integrated approach to instructional delivery. All teachers at Stevens were being required to be collaborative leaders who were involved in the planning and implementation of the RTI process. The teachers at Stevens Elementary had a sense of how systems work. They understood how RTI had the ability to positively affect the learning of the entire student body. Megan stated, “I used that information to leverage, to engage the teachers to think in novel ways about how students could benefit from this process.” The teachers learned how to share the student learning data in new ways (Beeby & Booth, 2007). Megan recognized that this could be a challenge, because not everyone would buy in to the new RTI way of doing things. The lower grade teachers were seen as being more fit for the task. They easily grasped new concepts and enjoyed the creative process. The use of technology in their instruction was not seen as threatening. However, the upper grade teachers slowly responded to change of any kind, especially instructional change that involved the use of technology. Megan described how her teachers offered support with new curriculum and technology initiatives:

I basically have five or six teachers who will accept the responsibility to try something new. They will go to the ISD and come back to share a new concept with their colleagues. They will also invite them to their classrooms to see how something works and help if the teacher needs advice on using the computer program or other technologies. I consider this to be the first steps toward teacher leadership.

To help the other teachers understand the importance of the new RTI initiatives for their students, Megan enlisted the established teacher leaders to talk to the teachers who were
reluctant. The development of teacher leadership has not been easy. Several of the teaching staff was “not sure how new initiatives could be successful.” Megan observed, “Once they took the first step and had success they would try and take chances.” Field theory advocates Sheldrake (1995) and Wheatley & Kellner-Rodgers (1996), concurred that culture, vision, and shared values shape the values of the members of the organization.

The principal has to have a clear understanding of what components have shaped the field in which the school operates. They have to be able to remove inconsistencies that promote constraints upon the school which usually have external origins (Morrison, 2001). Megan depends on the teachers at Stevens in many ways. The community concept that she encourages, enables teachers take more responsibility. This included working collaboratively. Fifth grade teacher Ruth Jenkins described her experience at Stevens:

   We help one another out. We meet at grade levels and across grade levels. That is especially true of lower grade teachers. We all have the same philosophy. We get along really well. We share lessons that work and materials.

   Much of our interviews focused on how Megan facilitated collaboration among the staff. She indicated that the teacher’s ability to share effective instructional practices is very important. Megan acknowledged that the school district provided professional development on academic topics; however, the trainings and information sharing regarding local school issues were more often than not left up to the individual schools. Most schools in the district engaged teachers in the trainer-of-trainer’s model. These trainers received support from the principal, who was involved in the training as a participant. In most instances at Stevens, Megan facilitated workshops for teachers. She shared the responsibility because she said she enjoyed working directly with the teachers.
Megan stated that she often gets directives from the central office that must be modified to fit her school’s needs. This was the case with a district adopted program, Positive Behavior Support. The program suggested ways for schools to develop a system of supports to encourage and reward acceptable student behavior.

The teachers interviewed agreed that, for the most part, everyone worked together, but there were certain teachers who still preferred to work alone. Megan allowed teachers who choose to work alone to do so. She shared, “They usually come around to the group-way of sharing and collaborating. If they do not, I am still happy to have the majority of my teachers working together.”

Megan valued the open communication that she has with the parents at the school. “They will see me in the hallway or outside on the playground and ask questions or share ideas,” stated Megan. “Some of the ideas are really good and I share them with staff.” There is a parent group at Stevens that acts as an advisory group to the principal.

Parents like to be able to approach the principal and feel that their concerns are being heard. I try to spend time listening to them and it actually pays off with more parent support. In the seven years that I have been here at Stevens, the parents complained that there were no more student clubs at Stevens. They said that there were a lot of programs for low students but not for the smarter ones. So I took the community concerns to the staff and we agreed to form a Student Advisory Council. This club was different from the traditional one. The children could be in third, fourth, and fifth grades; they had to have a recommendation, a resume, and an essay explaining why they wanted to be on student council. We brought in adults from the community,
school board members, parents and district administrators to interview the students for positions on the council. The students enjoyed the experience. They worked with a volunteer teacher who had sponsored a student council at a previous school.

Megan also stated that the student advisory council was a small endeavor that gave children the opportunity to step up and assume leadership positions in the school. Megan was quick to add, “The original idea came from the parents. The teachers gave their suggestions and both groups collaboratively brought the idea to life.”

**A change-Restructured the school improvement process.** Megan shared how she gave focused attention to the state assessment test results and encouraged teachers to work together to develop the necessary strategies to help all students reach the proficiency rate. She felt that it was important to help teachers understand the political implications of the test because it was the underlying influential factor in decisions made at the district level. Megan stated,

I felt secure that my teachers could handle the academic challenges presented for the students, even the ones who had special learning needs. We pay close attention to our test data. We have meetings to examine it. We decide which skills need to be retaught and devise ways to change instruction so that the students understand. If teachers do not know how to use the data, or they don't understand it, there is help here for them.

One of Megan’s joys was to spend time in the classroom supporting teachers in any way that she could. It was important to her that her classroom visits not only be tied to evaluation but to be seen as a time for help and collaboration. She felt that these informal visits were a way to build the relationships that serve as the basis for student achievement.

After examining the test scores for the past two years for grades 3-5 at Stevens, the
researcher observed minimal fluctuation (See Table 1). When the Megan asked about the status of their school’s general proficiency rates, she emphasized that she felt that there was always room for improvement, but the teachers worked very hard to meet the educational needs of all students, and that effort has kept the scores consistent and in most areas showing improvement. Megan stated:

We have been pouring over classroom assessments, teachers’ notes and, naturally, the state results to get the best estimate of our students’ needs. With all of the changes here, keeping focused is important.

During our interviews, Megan expressed the need for all teachers to be involved in the decision-making process. The school improvement team met with her from time to time; however, the teaching staff as a whole was involved in interpreting data and curriculum decisions. Megan saw her role as a team member and relished working with the teachers on curriculum matters. The Stevens SIT was different than the other schools in the study in several ways: the Stevens SIT met as needed around a specific issue. There were subcommittees that met regularly and passed on decisions made at the larger SIT meeting, which included all teachers. The teachers appeared to be happy with the arrangement and they all agreed on it. There were fewer meetings for them and more time for actual teaching. Megan considered herself a learner who was growing, learning, and changing with her staff.

Some teachers still want to assume more challenges. I notice the younger ones going back to school to receive advanced degrees. They naturally want to be in the forefront of leadership. The others need a little more encouragement or motivation. They do not want to attend meetings but to help in other ways. Either way they have to be involved on some level.
**Do as I say—Direct control.** There were times when Megan felt that she still had to take over the management part of her role as school leader. She stated:

In a perfect world I would like them (teachers) to step up and assume more leadership. Their input is needed because of the many decisions that have to be made. Sometimes I think that it would be much easier if I just took the reports and filled in all of the answers or gave directives. Heaven forbid someone comes from the state department of education for an audit; teachers would have to know the school’s vision and academic programs. They would have to know what was going on. That requires involvement.

Megan had some anxiety regarding the teachers who were not on board with the concept of collaboration. She often felt the need to give directives to keep them actively involved in whatever was going on. Megan also gave instructions to the staff because there were some directives that came from the district or the state that could not be altered. Megan understood how bureaucracies worked, but she often felt undermined by the structure that she worked in.

**The teachers’ perspective.** The teachers interviewed at Stevens Elementary met me in the school office. I had just finished a principal interview with Megan. The teachers wanted to know if I wanted to meet them together or individually. They appeared a little apprehensive when I said individually. Megan seemed to sense it and suggested that we use the library or their classrooms.

**Rosa Birden.** Rosa Birden volunteered to speak with me first. Rosa was a small woman with brownish red hair, who appeared calm and secure in the teaching position at Stevens. Her room was pleasantly decorated with number charts and alphabet lines on the
children’s desks. She asked me to please excuse the mess. Explaining the clutter, Rosa said that she believed in children having stimulating environments with plenty of books and activities around. Rosa referred to herself as a *newbie* at Stevens. However, she was a seasoned teacher who had successful teaching experiences at other schools in the district. When asked why she decided to transfer to Stevens, Rosa explained,

> I am close to retiring and was looking for a school that had a laid back feel to it. No stress. I had heard that Stevens was the place. Megan works hard to make working conditions good for us here.

Rosa was candid as she described her other school where the pressure was on to get the students to do well on *the test*. When asked what other things attracted her to this school, Rosa added:

> It seemed that all of the teachers had a niche and they were working with others who shared their interests. At the staff meetings, I was very quiet when the teams reported on their progress on different projects. I sat quietly, hoping nobody would notice me. Fortunately Megan did notice that I seemed quiet at the meetings. She saw me in the hall one day and said that she had heard from some of the other teachers that I was interested in curriculum planning. Well, I was interested, and that was the beginning of me becoming a school improvement team member.

Our conversation moved into the area of decision-making at the school. Rosa initially stated that Megan made the decisions. When questioned further she came up with several times when the teachers came together in grade-level teams and decided on a particular book they all wanted to use, or a school rule that they wanted to put in place. Rosa could not remember any teacher decisions that had an impact on the entire school. Rosa stated that the
teachers did not mind having a larger say on what went on in the school. “When Megan needs input she usually goes to the SIT leaders who are teachers, and they help out.”

*Ruth Jenkins.* Ruth asked if we could conduct the interview in the library. She said that she just wanted to get out of her classroom for a few minutes. Smiling, she said that she needed a change of scene. There were construction workers coming through the library, so on this day, we had to move back to Ruth’s classroom. Ruth was relaxed during our interview as she started to tell me about the job that she had before coming to Stevens. She said that she had a bachelor’s degree in botany. “I really did not know what to do with my degree so I worked in a garden store after graduation. I am kind of like Megan in a way. I did not start out as a teacher.” Ruth described what made her decide to change professions:

> I was becoming frustrated with working in the garden store. I wanted to share more of what I knew. Teaching came to mind. I liked kids and I loved the physical sciences. It seemed like the perfect match. I went back to school and enrolled in a dual master’s degree program to get my teaching certificate and a master’s in physical science. After she received the teaching certificate she applied to teach middle school science in the Blue Hills District.

I have lived in Blue Hills all of my life. Our city has changed and a lot of people blame it on the economy. Stevens has a transient population. We have apartment complexes that run rent specials for three months, and when that time is up, the families leave. We expect (student) movement in the beginning of the year, but in the middle of the year you have five or six (students) leaving and coming. It breaks up the environment in the classroom.

Ruth and the other teachers on her grade-level group took pride in how they prepared
the fifth graders for middle school.

Having been there, I have a feel for what is expected of these kids. Megan allows us to add to the curriculum as needed. She gives us leeway with the curriculum. As long as we are teaching the basic curriculum, we can add things to meet our grade-level needs.

Ruth began her teaching experience in middle school, before No Child Left Behind (NCLB) became law. When she earned her elementary teaching certificate, she had a difficult time adjusting to the new assessments that were required of the children at that level. However, she said that Megan’s support guided her through. She described it this way:

I think that Megan has pushed, to help us feel that all of the assessments that the students complete during the year have a purpose. They dovetail right into our school improvement plan. There is really a place for assessment. Megan stresses at our meetings that student assessments and the data that are derived from them drive our instruction.

As the discussion turned to school leadership, Ruth stated that she felt the teachers did have opportunities to assume leader roles. However, as researcher I sensed Ruth holding back with her answer. After further questioning Ruth admitted that because of Megan’s past educational experiences, she tended to insist on her own solutions to problems rather than accept the teacher’s ideas. However, Ruth quickly added that she had faith in the principal’s decisions on any level.

Summary

Using her past experience as a language arts specialist, Megan Rodgers focused the teachers at Stevens Elementary on the most effective ways to educate a diverse group of
students. The student advisory council at Stevens was designed to help students develop leadership skills. Megan used her experience as a curriculum support teacher to develop a multi-age program for her school. It was adopted by other elementary schools in the district. Megan respected her teachers and wanted to give them all of the latitude they needed to make good educational decisions for students, but there were times when conditions dictated that she make important decisions alone.

**Bill Myers—Taylor Elementary**

The rain was falling very hard on the Monday morning of my first visit to Taylor Elementary school. Principal Bill Taylor was waiting for me in his office. School was officially closed, but there were still a few cars in the parking lot. Taylor Elementary had a large building adjacent to it for the district’s early learning program. At first glance, it looked as if Taylor Elementary encompassed the whole block. The school was surrounded by newly built homes that I later found out were the homes of his students.

I was greeted by the school secretary, who let Bill know that I was there. Bill Myers was a small, jovial man with a broad smile. Bill was so relaxed and willing to talk about his career because he was seriously considering retirement.

I have worked most of my life, and now I am ready to relax and spend time with my family. Taylor Elementary has been a gift to me. It is one of the newest schools in the district. The students consistently do well on the state test and I have the strongest teachers in the district. These past few years have been very good.

I was interested to hear Bill’s story because after reviewing the school’s test score data, there was evidence that students were achieving at Taylor. We discussed the interviewing process for this study, and Bill was more than happy to share his path to the
principalship.

**All in the family.** Bill came from a middle-class family in Pennsylvania. He was a hard-working young man who knew by the time he entered high school that he wanted to become a teacher. Bill recalled:

I can remember the first time that I wanted to become a teacher; I was sitting in a history class, and my teacher came into the room with a black jacket, red tie, and a black briefcase. Little did we know that in that briefcase was a wreath that he put on his head and said ‘Friends, Romans and countrymen lend me your ears.’ The class got very quiet. We were about to study Julius Caesar and we all had parts to study.

Bill went on to say that that special teacher was his father, who was a master motivator and meaningful instructor. Bill credited his father with being a huge influence in his life, personally and professionally. Bill stated, “Dad taught us that all children deserved and needed a good education to become productive citizens, but he also emphasized that learning could be fun and engaging for the student as well as the teacher.” Bill remembered having his friends over as a teenager and his father was so popular that they would ask him for advice and respected his opinion. “My Dad was a person who really cared about young people and their futures. I guess he passed that on to me.”

“The student’s best interest comes first here at Taylor,” Bill stated. He enjoyed his time as a teacher. He remembers his past experiences with students:

I have had teaching jobs in rural areas and cities but what I remember most is the students wanting to learn, no matter what the economic situation their parents were in. I can remember getting involved with a program for aspiring teachers called Future Teachers of America in my junior year at high school. I developed a love for
elementary school students by working in this program. We volunteered on
Saturdays, helping low-income students with academics. These students wanted to
learn, and they did well with one-to-one tutoring.

Bill realized that the homes from which children came definitely had an impact on
their ability to learn at school. As a principal, Bill wanted to create an environment that was
welcoming and accepting for these students and their families:

I feel that teachers have to understand the non-academic needs of their students, so
we made sure in all of the schools that I have been a principal in, that student’s basic
needs were cared for. I was the principal at an elementary school in Blue Hills that
had a large Hispanic population. The teachers and I gave special help to the parents
as they settled into the neighborhood and learned the culture of the school.

The community that surrounds Taylor could be considered middle-class. Most of the
parents work outside of the township. You could call Blue Hills a bedroom
community. We have very few Hispanic or African American students.

Bill Myers was raised comfortably in western Pennsylvania, but he admitted that
there was not much ethnic diversity in his community. He learned about people from
different cultures and ethnic groups as an adult. The Myers family realized that they were
fortunate to be middle-class with the social and economic advantages that it provided, but
they recognized that there were others who did not have the same advantages. Bill was drawn
to these students and felt that they had more in common with other students than differences.

Bill remembered:

When I became the principal of a school with lower-income students, I knew that I
had to set the stage for working together among teachers, parents, and the
administration. Our teachers were fantastic, and they had a built-in love for the children, so coming up with ways to help them was easy. I had to create the time for them to meet, and at times, the financial resources to support their efforts.

Bill also stated that the teachers with whom he worked were accepting of children from different backgrounds. “I usually worked with women teachers who showed a deep understanding of what these students needed academically.”

**Challenges.** Taylor Elementary was one of the district’s newer schools. Bill was thrilled to have received the transfer to the school which sits in a cluster of new buildings one of which is a new daycare center. Bill once again described his position as principal as “wonderful.” The community surrounding Taylor consists of new housing. Bill described his first few years at Taylor:

…the school has been in existence for 16 years but I have been here for 13. When I got here, the culture had already been established. Taylor had operating procedures, which had been established by the principal that was there before me. He and his team had actually done the job of designing the new school. He brought in a core of teachers with him, so when I came in, a bit of the culture had already started.

The school was built to accommodate the new students whose families would be coming into the community. The year Bill arrived as principal, the school saw a large influx of students. Bill described it as an “explosion.” Bill saw this as a challenge that he could handle:

I had to put up portable units out in the back to accommodate the new students. We had over 800 students. Classes were full at all levels. I started picking up more teachers at that point. I had to add 12 new teachers, which changed the existing
culture of the school 360 degrees. We started bringing in programs to bring people together. We were forced to collaborate. For two years we worked setting up committees and structures as a framework for how we would work together to help the students succeed.

Bill felt that he never let the magnitude of the change overwhelm him; he “went with the flow” and changed things, keeping the students’ academic success in mind.

**Personal characteristics.** Bill was always energized when we talked. He was confident and relaxed. Talking about his experiences in education gave him a sense of pleasure. He had a love and respect of the teaching profession not seen in the other principals. Bill’s father was a teacher. Bill admired him and looked to him as a role model. As a student in his father’s classroom, Bill learned that an education was important and could also be fun. Bill felt that teachers impacted students the most, and wanted to create an environment so that they could effectively teach.

**Working it out–Commitment to creating an environment for learning.** Bill wanted to teach from the first time he saw his father in the classroom. Teaching elementary students started when he did his student teaching in Lexington, Kentucky.

I had never really considered teaching young children. My plans were more focused on high school. There was something about the children’s smiles that charmed me. They were so happy to learn new things. You couldn’t have a discussion with them like you would with an older student, but their natural enthusiasm made up for it.

Bill appeared to enjoy the administrative aspect of his career also, collaborating and supporting the teachers. During our interviews, he shared that the times that brought him the most pride were the ones where he sat down with the teachers and discussed managing some
of the problems that faced them. Problems such as teacher accountability, time for collaboration, and how he and the teachers restructured the school improvement process to cut down on administrative trivia.

**Leader Behavior.**

**Working to stay on top—Encouraged teacher leadership.** Teacher leadership at Taylor Elementary was an important part of the school improvement process. Bill felt that the impetus for this was not only his feeling that teacher leadership is important in schools, but also that federal mandates require it. Bill explained:

> It is not a secret that the state has gone overboard with testing. Even with NCLB there are limited finances and resources to fulfill the obligations that you have. In the last few years, I have tried to help the teachers understand how politics affects the decisions that have to be made at the school level. In the last ten years, the Blue Hills Schools have been in the top ten of the schools in the state as far as test scores are concerned. At Taylor, I think that our teachers understand the need to stay on top.

Bill depended on two teachers who worked hard to get things done at the school. They answered to only Bill, but he considered them his teacher-leaders. They could sell an idea to the others and get them involved. Bill depended on them a great deal. Bill has kept the focus on student achievement at Taylor. District-initiated curriculum alignment efforts have been the key to good test scores. The teachers have the ability to craft lessons based on the curriculum that meet the needs of the students. When discussing the academic performance of the students Bill proudly shared:

> We knew that most of our students would do well on the state test; it was the other small group of economically disadvantaged students about whom we were not sure.
At Taylor Elementary, 40% of my students are in that group. The teachers work hard at identifying the skills that the students need and they are creative with their delivery of instruction. Surprisingly our low-income students do well every year. I credit the teachers.

Bill facilitated meetings when teachers met to align the curriculum with the state test. He said that that process showed them what they were actually asking students to learn. The entire teaching staff was involved in accomplishing this goal. The teachers used an online software program (Data Director) to help them make the important decisions involving their students’ academic needs.

The teachers at Taylor collaborated with the principal to solve problems and make decisions. Bill supported collaboration at the school by giving the teachers the information they needed and then trusting their decisions. The school district is set up that way. Our superintendent functions collaboratively. The teachers almost expect it; they want to have a choice; they want to have a voice. Since NCLB there has been a heightened sense of accountability for all school staff members. Bill explained that accountability is the main reason he sees to it that teachers have an opportunity to voice their opinions on any topic that affects them at the school. “We don’t always agree, but they appreciate being heard.” stated Bill. He viewed his role as principal as someone who provides time for and facilitates meetings where teachers can come together.

Parents play a big role in the Blue Hills school district. The same can be said for their role at Taylor Elementary. Bill feels that that is the way it should be. He explained:

We have been a very successful school because of the support of the parents. Taylor has an active parent club with very influential parents on it. Some of them are
school board members. Parents have always had a role at schools, but I see a shift in the past 10 years. You could say that now they want to play a collaborative role in what goes on in schools.

Bill has always kept his parent group busy at the school. He designed ways for parents to become involved that seemed to be acceptable to parents and teachers alike. Bill described one way parents are involved at Taylor:

For the past two years, the parents at Taylor have run the Science Olympiad, and the school has won awards. The parents enjoy being in the school and working directly with a group of students. Parents also assume more formal roles by joining the parent organization. I meet with the executive board of the organization and set meeting agendas with topics for the monthly meetings.

Taylor elementary has parent involvement opportunities similar to the other two schools in the study. The principal at Taylor appeared to control and monitor the actions of parents closely. He wants parent to be at the school seeing what is going on and feeling free to offer to help. Bill worked directly with several parents with whom he could meet regarding any issue and get immediate support. These parents could usually get others on board to move projects forward.

**Collaboration for school improvement.** Taylor Elementary experienced a great deal of change in student population and staff size in 1999. At a time when Blue Hills was experiencing a 5.74% population loss (CLRsearch.com), new families were moving into the community and that made Taylor, the only elementary at the time at the far north end, swell with students. As we took a tour of the school, Bill pointed out the new housing that surrounded his school. Bill shared that at this time of growth at the school, he had to put
portable units in back of the school to accommodate all of the new students. He had four sections at each grade level. Bill’s goal was to make the students and their families feel that they were an important part of the school. There were new teachers to place and train. There were also new parents to get acclimated to the new school. Bill turned to his teachers for help and support, especially during this time of change. It was important to Bill that the processes and structures that were in place prior to his coming to the school stay in place with some modifications. Bill described the current school improvement team:

We have a viable school improvement team comprised of nine members and two co-chairs. I work closely with them. We meet monthly and, many times, the sub committees meet twice a month. I cannot tell you when the last time was that I made a decision by myself. Generally, we come to consensus after we collaborate on an issue. I very rarely make a call on my own unless it is an emergency. There are never any surprises for the teachers.

At Taylor elementary, time to meet became a problem for Bill and his staff. Because of increased accountability on all levels, he wanted his staff to have the opportunity to mold instruction to fit the unique needs of the lower-performing students. Bill shared his feelings regarding time to collaborate:

It became a question of when can you schedule more meetings? It was like building an airplane on the fly. The teachers were getting besieged with morning meetings. They got fed up with that, which I can understand. At the bargaining table, the teachers and the district came up with the idea of the restructured day. Every Tuesday, the students come to school a half an hour later and the teachers come in an hour earlier so that the teachers can schedule a meeting.
This fixed meeting time was helpful for Bill and his teachers. Bill referred to the running of a school not being a “one man show,” as in the past, but a collaborative effort that includes the school district. As with all of the teacher meetings at Taylor, the school improvement team set the agenda in collaboration with the team members.

*Just not enough time—Direct control.* Bill said that his philosophy of educational leadership in an elementary setting is to treat your staff fairly, and that will build the trust and loyalty that you need to get things done. He considers the teachers as the “front line staff members” who day-after-day interact with students.

Having been a teacher for years before becoming a principal has given me insight into what teachers need to teach students from any background. I guess that I just step back and let the teachers be leaders. I cannot do all of the work and I wouldn’t try.

When the teachers want to make a change, they will bring it to me through the school improvement team.

The teachers usually get the his support, although there are times when Bill said that he has to “veto” an idea or decision because the teachers do not have enough information to make a sound decision. The teachers appeared to accept his decisions without question.

**Summary**

Bill Myers was the most experienced principal in the study. He had been the principal at Taylor Elementary for 13 years, and he had worked as a teacher and principal for the Blue Hills District since 1967. Having been a principal at both large (800 + students) and small schools, Bill had a reputation as a leader who worked well with teachers and got the job done. The teachers at Taylor Elementary expected to have a voice in the decision-making. Bill enabled them to become involved through the use of collaboration and team work. He
had a true passion for teaching and leading; however, Bill often reverted to leader behaviors more fit for more hierarchical organizations. This occurred often when district-mandated initiatives such as data driven decision-making needed to be implemented.

**Discussion.** When schools are viewed as complex, adaptive systems, it requires a complete paradigm shift to understand new forms for schools in a modern era. This puts a great deal of responsibility on the shoulders of principals and other leaders. This study examined the principals and their school environments, emergence, and most importantly new and old forms of leadership. Through the use of direct interviews, the three principals in the study shared their experiences during times of change at their schools. They shared specific leadership behaviors and personal characteristics that were instrumental in addressing school issues that evolved due to changing conditions, which included more accountability, a down turn in the economy, and high stakes testing. At times, the principals’ personal characteristics and leader behaviors were in alignment with complexity leadership. However, the principals’ leader behaviors changed when there were changes in the environment. Being flexible enabled the principals to change course quickly, while not losing focus and direction for the school. Beverly demonstrated this flexible quality when she suddenly realized the need for bi-lingual teachers at Royster Elementary. The school had never had a bi-lingual teacher but sorely needed one as the student population changed. Beverly had limited classroom space at the school, but she and the teachers created space for the new Spanish teacher. Bill also demonstrated his ability to be flexible as he described how he made accommodations for the rapid influx of new students and new teachers into a school that barely contained the students that were there. Flexibility is considered as one of the key elements of complexity leadership. Though flexibility is usually associated with a more
authoritative style of leading, Morrison, Gott, & Ashman, (1989) found that, in schools, a more authoritative, directive leadership style characterized the early stages of successful innovation. This was appreciated by all participants, as it inspired them with confidence in the principal. In the middle and later stages of an innovation, a more democratic and less directive style of leadership was valued, after the participants had developed their own expertise.

One of the leadership characteristics shared among all of the principals was the ability to revert to a more authoritative leadership style when the conditions in the school environment warranted it. Megan discussed the anxiety she felt about teachers who were withdrawn and not collaborative about decision-making. Megan felt the need to give those teachers directives just to keep them engaged. She also realized some decisions were mandated from the district or the state and not for discussion. Through analysis, insight was gained into the nature of leadership in schools that wanted to operate in a decentralized and empowered way, but existed in a bureaucratic environment.

**Personal characteristics.** All three principals shared personal characteristics that align with complexity leadership. These personal characteristics were usually shaped in childhood and influenced by parents, family, and community. Patterns were recognizable early in the interviews regarding the principals’ social awareness and an ability to be flexible and adaptable in most circumstances. There were significant differences in their early upbringing. One principal grew up in a rural environment with minimal exposure to diverse populations. The farm community in which she was raised had few schools and small student populations. Another principal grew up in a middle-class environment and exposed to stable neighborhoods where most went to college and held white-collar jobs. The third principal
grew up in a semi-rural community with a father who was a high school history teacher. Throughout their youth, all of the principals learned to value education and see it as a way to a better future. They received support for their desire to work with children from the adults around them. All three principals in the study felt an obligation to positively impact education for young children. They felt the best way to do it was to teach in the public schools in their communities. Beverly and Megan were sensitive to the experiences of their students who came from disadvantaged backgrounds. Though none of the leaders in the study experienced the same level of economic hardship, they had empathy for the families and understood the basic needs of their students. Continued exposure to the teachers, children, and their families helped to reinforce the personal characteristics and beliefs of each of the leaders.

Morrison (2002) said, “Working with children and adults in an emergent educational setting requires a great deal of emotional intelligence to foster the positive relationships required for self-organization” (p. 57). Morrison further described an emotional intelligent principal as one who adopts more humanistic principles, creates a safe environment for experimentation and risk-taking, promotes interdependence, communication, cooperation, diversity, and self-organization. “Leadership must attend to the human side of the organization, both personally and interpersonally” (p. 57). The principals in this study decided that they wanted to have a career educating children and used a form of leadership that centered on their values and beliefs.

Beverly decided early in her career that teaching was for her. The transition to the principalship was the next likely step. Beverly’s early experiences at rural schools gave her an opportunity to learn administrative tasks while still working directly with students in the
classroom. When encouraged to apply for the principal position at the k-8 school, she excitedly agreed. She was happy to get the position and did not have any anxiety about the tasks at hand. She saw it as an opportunity to put to use all of the skills that she had learned earlier in her career. Beverly had the same attitude when she assumed her current position. Beverly felt that there would be challenges with the principal position, but she knew that her experience would help her. Being the confident and organized one in her family and early experiences of self-awareness, visionary leadership, empathy, and organization enabled her to have confidence as she assumed school leadership positions as an adult. Beverly also exhibited the moral dimension of leadership (Fullan, 2001). Her strong belief was that all children were entitled to a good education, regardless of their circumstance.

Megan became a teacher later in her professional career. She was not sure exactly what she wanted to do but realized that she enjoyed being with children and chose a career impacting a child’s education. Megan had conflicting feelings about why she was chosen for the job as principal. The district administrators recommended her, and her interviews went well. It was determined that she was a good fit for Stevens Elementary. Megan still questioned their decision; after all, she did not have a master’s degree or as much experience as the other candidates. Her mentors attempted to reassure her that she was the best choice for the job, but Megan still struggled with some anxiety. Ultimately, she learned that having empathy, social awareness, and being flexible and adaptable can produce greater results in an emergent environment than years of formal education alone. Viewing leadership as a job that required having skills to perform certain tasks led Megan to question her own abilities as a beginning principal. Designing for emergence provides organizations and their leaders with the capacity to use the intelligence that exists throughout the system and to develop novel
responses to the challenges that organizations face (Plowman & Duchon, 2007). Megan appeared to develop more confidence in her abilities as she grew in her position as principal. Her teachers spoke with confidence about the support that she gave them as they grew in their own leadership efforts. As she learned to build networks (the school improvement team, curriculum teams, and Positive Behavior Support teams), Megan learned that presenting herself as a competent leader was important to motivating teachers to step out and take risks. When Megan reached the point of feeling overwhelmed with an issue, she solicited the support of mentors and colleagues. She turned to the teachers and collaborated to find the best way to solve problems. Megan had never turned away from hard work and taking risks. Her own young adulthood comprised many events that required her to change. Megan sensed that to be a capable leader, she would make mistakes and learn from them.

Megan encouraged teachers to take leadership positions at Stevens Elementary; however, she worked regularly with a core group of teachers. The others were reluctant, so she gave those teachers assignments to complete during the school year just to keep them involved.

Bill was a student in his father’s history class. He was continually amazed at how his father touched lives not only as a teacher but also as a mentor to many. Bill wanted to be like his father. His genuine respect and affection for teachers and the work they did began with his feeling of admiration for his father. Bill often mentioned how much his father was loved by the students and fellow teachers at his school.

Bill was interested in helping his teachers be the best that they could be. He listened to his staff and gave them power to make their own decisions. Taylor elementary demonstrated the most democratic environment of the three schools participating in this
study. The data showed that Bill embodied the servant leader. He was what Greenleaf (1997) described as the leader who synergized and developed a sense of community in the institution, with shared power and decision-making and group-oriented approaches. However, Bill, like the other principals, made decisions independent of the staff when circumstances warranted.

Bill welcomed new students to the school, even though sometimes there were more students than originally anticipated. Early in his tenure, Bill had to make changes quickly. He added two portable units to house students. The quick infusion of students required changes to the teaching schedule. He made additions to his teaching staff systematically with the collaboration and support of the staff. Bill wanted to bring new families into the school in a seamless way, making them feel wanted and a part of the Taylor Elementary family.

I was unable to speak directly to teachers at Taylor Elementary. Bill retired before teacher recommendations were made. Attempts to speak with teachers about their former principal were made, but they showed no interest.

**Leader behaviors.** The principals and teachers at the three participating schools did an effective job educating the students, but they were aware that the transient and low-income students may come with learning gaps that had to be addressed. For Megan and Beverly, the ability to reach these particular students became a goal for each school year. Beverly and Megan, along with their teachers and staff, instituted several long term changes in how the school works which included:

- Improvement in internal and external communication
- Joint planning and teaching
- An emphasis placed on literacy
• Raising children’s motivation, self-esteem, and experience of success

Bill depended on his teaching staff to initiate and carry out changes; however, he provided the focus for the changes. Bill often intervened when meetings became unproductive and made the necessary decisions to get projects back on track. He realized that he could not let any obstacle hold the school back from academic achievement.

Two of the principals, whose student populations were constantly changing, had an intimate knowledge of their school’s environments and understood the internal and external pressures influencing change. Beverly and Megan discussed at length the political and economic forces that impacted their schools. Their knowledge came from long term experience working in the district at various levels and examining school test score data, population trends, and district politics. It was evident through the interviews with Stevens and Royster teachers, that much discussion had taken place regarding the relationship between culture and student achievement, parent attitudes toward school, and student in-school behavior. Megan and her team expanded the district food and clothing program to a year-long effort in her school. Beverly and her staff tailored the backpack program at her school to include appropriate seasonal clothing for students. Megan heard the Stevens’ parent request for a specific program to further develop the high-performing students’ leadership skills and acted upon it. According to complexity theory, communication must take multiple forms, be conducted through channels, and be open in a networked structure for self-organization such as schools (Morrison, 2001). Communication in schools is a key variable in their success (Peters, 1989; Cillers, 1998). Responsiveness to the parents and community created a feeling of trust between Megan and the parents at Stevens. Megan and the teachers
developed and sponsored a student council, which facilitated leadership skills. The students on the council also had a voice on the school improvement team. In each case where the school was responsive to its external and internal environment, changes introduced to the internal environment brought changes to the external environment (Morrison, 2001).

Leadership for an emergent, self-organizing school resonates with certain aspects of transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1990). Megan and Beverly displayed many transformational leadership characteristics. Through their efforts to educate their students from migrant and or low-income households, each principal created new initiatives at their school, increased effective communication, and developed teacher expertise through supporting effective staff development (Kelly & Allison, 1999). These initiatives emerged from the need to create a better learning environment for their students.

There was strong emphasis on student achievement at Stevens and Royster Elementary schools, which created a mandate for targeted instruction. “The district shared the goals of education for all of our students before school starts each year, stated Beverly; I know that most principals take this very seriously.” Beverly made sure that her staff was ready for the challenge by making sure that the teachers have their students’ needs assessments the first day of school. She emphasized, “The information from these tests lets teachers know what students are below, in the middle, and above in their performance.” Beverly was also careful to hire teachers who shared the same values and goals for student learning that her staff had. To keep the staff focused, Beverly and the staff developed a “game plan” for improvement, which was always shared at meetings. In doing so, the teachers saw Beverly’s vision for student learning not as simply a goal but as an enabling structure which supported synergy and collaboration (April, 1997).
Megan worked with her staff as they developed innovative ways to instruct student who came to the school with learning gaps. All staff received training from the school social worker about how to be more culturally competent in their approach to relating to parents and families. Megan and Beverly saw this as a necessity. Bass (1990) suggested that transformational leadership both broadens and elevates participants’ interests, and enables participants to look beyond the immediate and self-interest towards the mission of the organization which is realized through group participation.

Beverly shared the importance of relationship-building at Royster. She felt that because of the diverse population at the school, it was necessary to bring the varied groups of adults together and open the lines of communication. The goal at Royster was “one voice, one vision.”

At Taylor Elementary, Bill Myers did not focus on some of the same issues as those at the other schools. Taylor was situated in a higher-income neighborhood with a relatively stable ethnic composition. Bill had a smaller percentage of students who displayed learning deficits. He was able to impact their achievement by focusing the teachers on using the data to identify areas that needed improvement. The teachers created the necessary instruction for each student. Bill saw his main responsibility as the principal to keep test scores high and teachers happy. Bill had a very high-functioning staff who insisted on being involved in the decision-making at the school.

Each principal in the study had some level of difficulty with the tension that develops when principals are encouraged to implement transformational changes in their schools when the entire system does not operate this way. When the tension overwhelmed the principals, they reverted to the old ways of leading. These directive leadership styles often achieved
short-term results but were very bureaucratic in nature.

Beverly found that there was not always time to devote to collaboration and consensus decision-making that she and the staff desired. She commented,

It is the urgency that you feel to make sure that the children are getting the best. We often have to create time to meet and discuss issues. The district provides time for professional development but we often need more for the other issues.

Beverly had to make decisions independently and hope that the teachers would be in agreement. Beverly always let the teachers know that she would take responsibility for any decision that was made at the school, but she always felt better when she made decisions in conjunction with the staff.

Megan shared this dilemma. She felt that leading at the school was not just the principal’s job. She also had to make independent decisions. In Megan’s and Beverly’s schools, the teachers appeared to accept independent decisions of the principals as necessary. None of the teachers interviewed complained about the principals having to make decisions without their input. Many were glad to not have to make a decision, and they supported the principal. The teachers cited the respect and trust that they had for the leader as the reason that they would gladly follow their directives and decisions.

For Bill, there were times during the school year that he made decisions independent of the rest of the staff. This often happened when there was a district-mandated program required of every school. Bill stated that it was not easy to sell an idea to staff after these types of mandates, because the staff was so used to having a say. Bill felt that the Taylor teachers accepted the mandates because of the “ground work” that he had laid by sharing with them the districts goals for students prior to the mandate. The school structure at Taylor
Elementary was democratic to meet the needs of the expert, highly effective teachers. The
democratic structure was most suitable for building team harmony, building trust, and
improving communication in all key areas of emergence and self-organization (Morrison,
2001). Goldman (2000 suggested that it may be beneficial to link the affiliative style with
the authoritative style of leadership to prevent “drift” in an organization (p.84). Bill
successfully gaged his teachers’ needs and applied the right type of leadership for the
circumstances

This pressure associated with leadership for complexity can be described as a tug or
complexity, the pressure to simplify increases, in the way that a rubber band pulls with
greater elastic tension the further it is extended” (p. 138). According to Webb (1981), people
often want a leader to turn back the clock–not so much to reclaim a heritage or recover lost
virtues, but simply to escape harsh realities, by stuffing the genie back in the bottle. The
principals realized that returning to past practice is not the answer, but they struggle with
finding time for the collaboration with staff.

Summary

This study of elementary principals during times of change revealed that elementary
school principals in turbulent environments display behaviors that align with complexity
leadership. The leader behaviors of these principals, such as encouraging teacher leadership
and collaboration resonate with complexity theory, which suggests that leadership for
emergence moves away from the command and control method toward democratic, person-
centered and relational styles of leadership (Morrison, 2001). Complexity theory supports the
notion that change occurs at every level of an organization, and that leadership should be
developed at all levels. There are two important implications that are derived from the need to replace the command and control mentality. First, an alternative style of leadership is needed; second, leadership becomes distributed and, instead of one leader, there are many (Morrison, 2001).

The principals’ personal characteristics such as social awareness, and flexibility and adaptability also tended to reflect those needed to lead emergent schools. Complexity theory highlights the fact that organizations similar to schools often come to the point that change must be made in the organization for its survival. When schools are out of step, a bifurcation point of self-organization or state of instability in terms of complexity theory, the leader must be aware of the internal and external environment and be able to facilitate new connections and relationships based on extensive communication (Morrison, 2002).

Each principal in this study came from a different background; however, they shared the distinct characteristics of social awareness, flexibility and adaptability. The principals in the study also shared person characteristics that made them successful in their leadership endeavors. They were aware of the social dynamics of their communities and their schools. They understood the varied cultures of their students. Flexibility and adaptability was evident in the principals’ responses to changes at their schools.

The following themes related to leader behaviors: encouraged teacher leadership, collaboration, restructured school improvement process, and direct control. The principals in the study helped teachers see their strengths and supported them as they tried new things. The teachers shared how the principals supported them, as they created time to meet and discuss issues. There was general agreement among principals that programs and structures often had to be changed to accommodate the schools. One size did not fit all. They described the
changes that were made at their schools.

The principals shared tension and anxiety regarding how they defined their role in the school and how sometimes they had to revert to old ways of operating. They had not discovered a way to eliminate this tension, as external variables exerted pressure. However, the principals felt that the trust that existed between them and their staffs eased the tension when more direct decision-making was needed.
CHAPTER 5—FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, and RECOMMENDATIONS

Change is everywhere. The future is unpredictable. Turbulence rather than stability characterizes the environment in which schools operate and school leaders lead (Morrison, 2001). The role of the elementary school principals in the study was impacted by the changes in the environment (student demographics, economic forces, accountability). Complexity theory provided a framework to develop new ways of leading organizations during times of change. The principals displayed several aspects of complexity leadership. This leadership paradigm focused on creative and adaptive capacity of complex adaptive systems such as schools (Uhl-Bien et al, 2007).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the personal characteristics and leader behaviors of principals as they related to leadership for self-organization and emergence, key ideas in complexity theory. The study also examined teachers’ perceptions of the principals and their leadership. The respondents’ perceptions of the environmental challenges that surrounded the schools in the study were also investigated. Analysis of the data provided insight on the personal characteristics that helped principals to make decisions regarding their schools. The analysis also revealed the specific behaviors that the principals used to structure the internal environment of their schools. There is much documentation on the impact of principals on the school’s learning environment (Lashway, 2003). As the search for the attributes of successful principals at the elementary level continues, the need for accurate and purposeful research on this topic is important. The discussion, conclusions, and recommendations that follow come from data obtained from principal and teacher interviews, artifacts, and related literature.
The data collection process began by contact with the school district assistant superintendent to explain the study and obtain permission to conduct the study with three elementary school principals and teachers in each of the three schools. The principals were interviewed regarding their views on principal leadership in the elementary school. Teachers were asked to share their professional experience at the school. The researcher viewed copies of each school’s state test scores for grades 3, 4, and 5 for the 2010-2011 school years. The principals shared archival data such as news articles that documented special school programs and events.

Using a case study of three elementary principals, this research examined their specific behaviors and personal characteristics in a high accountability environment. The principals’ disclosures reflected patterns of social awareness, flexibility and adaptability at varying levels. The three principals in the study were aware of the history of their school communities and the economic conditions of the residents. The principals were striving to better understand their students’ needs by learning about their culture. Two of the elementary schools in the study experienced regular fluctuations in their student populations due to an influx of migrant workers and their children. The principal of the third school worked in an area of relative economic stability. His leadership experience was different from the others, in part, because of the stability of his student population. New students, who were often culturally different than the majority of the students had an impact on how the principals managed their schools. Most of the new students came from low-income households. The principals quickly learned that many of these students had basic needs that were not being met at home. New programs emerged at the schools that helped these students.
Patterns of leader behavior became the themes that emerged upon examination of the data: encouraged teacher leadership, collaboration, restructured school improvement process, and direct control of the decision-making at the school. The three principals recognized that teacher leadership at the school was an important component of the functioning of the school. They also acknowledged teacher leadership as a key to their success as administrators. The teachers who were interviewed also described their participation in the decision-making process in a positive way. They stated that the principals welcomed their ideas and suggestions. The teachers felt that they had a voice and an important role in the school, which went beyond their interactions with their students. With all of the collaboration that occurred in the three schools, there were times when the principals struggled with the need for unilateral decisions. The reasons for these decisions were spurred by time constraints, political considerations, and lack of insight into the situations requiring a quick, effective decisions. The principals considered themselves to be “progressive” and liked using collaborative structures in their schools. They did admit that sometimes in the “real world” of every day school operations, this was just not possible. This conflict existed constantly for the principals, but they felt that the teachers still respected and trusted them, and it helped ease their tension.

Summary of the Problem

The study explored the personal characteristics of three principals, their decisions to become leaders in elementary schools and their behavior during times of high stakes testing and daily fluctuations in the school environment. The researcher studied the practices and perceptions of three suburban, public school elementary principals to determine what personal characteristics and behaviors they displayed and how they impacted their schools.
Methods

Three public elementary school principals were selected to participate in a case study involving a suburban school district experiencing change due to downturns in the state and local economy, high accountability, and the pressures of high stakes state testing. The schools consisted of grades k-5 and served various ethnic and economic groups. Two research questions guided the research that examined the personal characteristics and behaviors that the participating principals brought to their leader positions:

1. What personal characteristics enable the principals to thrive in a changing school environment?

2. What behaviors do the principals exhibit as they work in a standards-based, high accountability environment?

Specific interview questions and supplemental questions, supported with requests for archival data review, documented commonalities in the principals’ personal characteristics and behaviors. Principals met with me in their own schools. Follow-up interviews were conducted by phone. Open-ended questions, presented in a semi-structured format, allowed for consistency combined with the natural flow of a conversational style of interview. The researcher used the tape-recorded interviews and field notes during the content analysis. Careful attention to capturing both the obvious and the latent content of the interview insured deeper meanings could be examined. The researcher noted latent content, which reflected perceptions of tone, body language, and phrasing.

The interview summaries formed into data clusters. These clusters identified personal traits and leader behavior in the school setting. The analysis followed a symbolic interactionist orientation, where reduced data uncovered patterns of meaning (Berg, 2004).
Reduction allowed the data to initially chunk into categories then divide back into sub-categories. This resulted in the emergence of several common themes analyzed in relationship to the research questions of the study.

**Findings**

The three principals in this study responded individually to leadership demands, as they perceived the demands to be appropriate to the needs of their school. Many of their responses revealed that their behaviors hinged on past experiences, which were often very different than the situation in which they currently found themselves. Collectively, principals’ interview responses led to five primary themes that were directly related to the research questions:

*Personal characteristics*

- Social awareness—Participating principals demonstrated an awareness of the internal and external environment that affects the decisions made at the school. An understanding by the leadership that, in a complex system, the interactions among the constituents of the system and the interaction between the system and its environment are such that the system as a whole cannot be understood by analyzing its components (Chilliers, 1998).

- Flexibility and adaptability—These connected characteristics represent the principals’ ability to produce adaptive outcomes in a social system. It produces collaborative change that emerges non-linearly from interactive exchanges (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000; Lichtenstein and the gang, 2006).
Leader behavior

- Encouraging teacher leadership—The participating principals shared (distributed) leadership with their teachers. This practice results in many leaders in the school, each exercising leadership in their roles or fields.

- Collaborating—When viewed as complex adaptive systems, schools need to collaborate to survive (Chilliers, 1998). The principals in the study met with the teachers regularly to hear their views and make decisions that everyone could support. Collaboration garnered trust among the staff.

- Restructuring the school improvement process—The school improvement process in the three participating schools was a flexible structure used by the staff to address issues (academic and social) that impacted the school.

- Exercising direct control—In complexity leadership, direct control is considered an authoritative approach to leadership, in which all decision-making begins at the top, and compliance is required of all constituents.

During the principal interviews, though there was little direct discussion of the need to maintain or improve state test scores, a palatable level of anxiety was noted. The principals found support for their efforts from the teachers and, to some degree, the school district. Together, the staff exhibited a commitment to building a strong culture of success in each school. Despite several noted obstacles, the principals expressed hope for the future. Even as they expressed concern, they continued to cite examples of academic success for their students, and expressed a sense of accountability for the success of their
students and their schools. They assumed responsibility for keeping the school community informed at all times, perhaps reflecting the moral and ethical perspective of those who chose principal leadership at the elementary level. The theme of student academic success was the anchor for their leadership and applied behavior. The findings revealed that principals proactively supported teachers as they dealt with the state testing cycle and other emergent issues that developed during the school year.

**Conclusions**

Elementary principals’ behavior was shaped by the environment in which they led. Specific environmental components were allocation of resources, ethnic changes in the school community, and changes in state assessment expectations. However, their personal characteristics also had a strong influence on their behavior. The principals responded to the individual needs of their schools. The study was done in three elementary schools in a single suburban school district; however, the schools varied in their student populations. The collective group of principals’ interview responses yielded two primary themes related to personal behaviors: social awareness, and the combination of flexibility and adaptability. The common themes identified related to leader behaviors were encouraging teacher leadership, collaboration, restructuring the school improvement process, and direct control of the decision-making process. The principals in this study did not readily share leadership strategies with their colleagues. The principals discussed the regional support center, the district, and the support principals received, but they felt a stronger sense of community with the teachers in their schools. The principals expressed the value of being able to support teachers as they educate all of their students, and principals felt the support that the teachers gave them as they faced the responsibility of running a successful school.
Despite several noted obstacles, such as student mobility, students coming from low-economic backgrounds, and a constantly changing education landscape related to assessments and high accountability, the principals did not express hopelessness. Principal Beverly Gates declared her teachers to be “the best in the district” and said that she planned to apply for a state award for academic excellence during the next school year. Bill Myers noted that he had a great deal of respect for his teachers because they actually did the work of educating children. Principal Megan Rodgers shared how her teachers extended their work day to reach out to the parents of new students to get to know them better.

Principals expressed their commitment to the students’ overall success without focus on their job security or self-aggrandizement. Rather, there was a sense of internal accountability for the success of students and staff, the belief that all of the students deserved the best education available, regardless of their circumstance, and that students’ success depended on the collaborative efforts of the school staff. These values may reflect on the moral and ethical orientation of those who choose the elementary principalship or be an accepted way of practice by older, more experienced principals; either way, it reflects the tenants of complexity leadership in action.

**Implications**

The study’s findings revealed that the principals had specific personal characteristics that influenced their leader behaviors toward improving learning for all of their students. Collaboration with teachers and other key constituents appeared to be the most preferred and practiced behavior. The most clear message involved principals’ belief that working with others to solve problems was critical and one of the most difficult aspects of their jobs. This realization implied a need for greater support for more time and resources to implement the
collaborative process in schools, not only from the district but also from the local bargaining units. Further, the ideas also implied the need for deeper training in how to realistically approach the collaborative process in schools, and how collaboration actually works in schools.

Principals shared the value of special programs and activities to meet the needs of the children of various ethnicities who were enrolling at their schools, but principals found challenges related to understanding these students’ cultural background and how it impacts learning. The effort to become the facilitators of a more culturally relevant environment for their students permeated all of the principals’ leadership efforts. The clear implication is the need for teacher training on culturally relevant instruction to identify various options for creating lessons and experiences to support the learning outcomes for teaching Hispanic, African American, and poor children. Inherent in these needs is assistance to principals for obtaining a clear picture of their role as facilitator that could provide a learning environment in their school that is responsive to all of the children in the community.

While noting several instances of positive parent activities, few comments of study participants referenced the decision-making role that parents assume at schools. Findings of this study suggest implications for a review of the supportive potential for parents in schools and a need for a more flexible approach to develop structures for participation.

Finally, the degree to which the principals are experiencing success using behaviors derived from the personality characteristics had several implications. The findings of the study imply that principals need a repertoire of leader behaviors, which can be used interchangeably. If principals rely on what worked in a past context and do not understand how change may require a new idea or process, the implications for principal leadership
preparation based on research, theory, adaptation, and implementation are significant.

It was clear, given the scope of implications from the experiences of all principals participating in the study, that the educational community had the opportunity and the responsibility to provide adequate training for principals relating to effective practice in a changing environment. This could be accomplished by acknowledging and responding positively to the expressed stress factors (state testing and a changing student population) along with the implied support needs of the principals (more time for planning, training, and collaboration). By strengthening the availability of research-based practices, considerations for improved theory-to-practice links emerge.

Recommendations

The value of any educational research study about the elementary principalship is to ultimately improve learning for students. The implications for this research offer several areas for action that call for educational researchers:

- Further research about the use of complexity leadership theory as a base for principal training at all levels and further exploration on how complexity theory influences the school environment.
- Research that examines what tenants of leadership in a complex environment translate from theory to practice and can net sustainable results for change.
- Further research addressing principal leadership using complexity as a framework independent of the school district.
- Research that identifies the personal characteristics of successful principals who lead at the elementary level during times of change and how to use this knowledge in hiring practices.
Further research conducted on the effects of a complex environment on urban, rural, and suburban school districts.

Research about how to effectively promote culturally relevant teaching in schools, where each year, the student populations are growing more diverse.

The recommendations are relevant to the implications derived from the interview data, and suggest ways that the educational community can support the professional growth of elementary principals. This study and its recommendations added to an understanding of complexity theory and its potential to impact elementary principal leadership practice. The study resulted in the emergence of common themes of social awareness, flexibility and adaptability, collaboration, restructured school improvement process, and direct leadership control. Implications for current practice, future study, and recommendations for educators emerged.

Summary

Principals participating in the study suggested a need to more effectively meet the educational needs of the changing population of their schools. The three elementary schools studied had undergone a major shift in population in the past five years. There had been an influx of Hispanic students and low-income African American students. There was a significant reliance on the teachers who influenced most of the principals’ decisions. Trust in the teacher's abilities was successful in maintaining and moving students beyond proficiency in the areas of mathematics and reading on a state assessment test.

The themes of teacher leadership, collaboration, and a restructured school improvement process provided a commonality of focus for the principals, toward not only
improving instruction of all students but also for continued professional growth toward a more culturally competent staff. The transformational model of leadership advocated by Bass and Avolio (1994) unfolded, as the principals continued to find ways to improve their students’ academic performance. Uncontrollable factors faced daily by the principals could have made them cynical; however, they displayed optimism and sought solutions to problems that affected their schools.

The data from the study indicated that the principals found that uncontrollable changes in the environment were barriers to successful in management of their academic programs. Research verified the potential impact of a chaotic economic, political, and social environment on the overall health of schools and the effectiveness of school principals (Anyon, 1997). Research also indicated that the impact of outside environmental change could be reversed through a balanced approach that includes leadership that includes team development, incentives, and motivation, human relations, servant leadership, and organizational learning that utilizes the creative side of schools (Morrison, 2002). In this complexity leadership model, principals moved from being victims of change, and were empowered to instill their sense of social awareness, flexibility and adaptability, and collaboration to the school population.

This study exposed the feelings of principals grappling with cultural changes in their environment and the symbolic implications of their actions. Though impacted by the influx of children and families from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, two of the principals were prepared and willing to collaborate with teachers to make the school experience a positive one for the students. The third principal did not experience the same issues as his colleagues; he focused more on helping teachers maintain the status quo. His student
population was stable and high-achieving. However, frequent mandated changes from the school district required an informed decision. The data also showed that the respondents displayed personal characteristics and related behaviors that are evident in leaders who use complexity theory to inform their practice.

The resulting recommendations of the study offer tangible considerations for the educational community to ease the impact of change in public elementary schools. These combined recommendations offer ways for principals to examine and identify their own leader behaviors. Future research is recommended to focus on using the results to improve elementary principal leadership in every environment. Finally, this study added to the need for a theoretical base for school leadership, as it was found that an understanding of complexity theory can inform the development of the practice of school leadership coherently and richly (Morrison, 2001).

Margaret J. Wheatly (2006), professor, management consultant, and author of Leadership and the New Science presented her observations regarding the future of leadership. She described them this way,

Here is a very partial list of new metaphors to describe leaders: gardeners, midwives, stewards, servants, missionaries, facilitators, conveners. Although each takes a slightly different approach, they all name a new posture for leaders, a stance that relies on relationships with their networks of employees, stakeholders, and communities. No one can hope to lead any organization by standing outside or ignoring the web of relationships through which all work is accomplished (p.165). The three principals in this study understood this. Their environment inside and outside of the school was constantly impacted by high accountability, economic downturns, and high
stakes testing. They realized that they had to connect with their teachers, students, and their families in meaningful ways to ensure student achievement in the classroom. They displayed the personal characteristics and leader behaviors that moved their schools forward during chaotic times and enabled their students and staff to envision a bright future.
REFERENCES


April, K. A. (1997). *An investigation into the applicability of new science, chaos theory, and complexity theory, to leadership and development of guiding principles for the modern leader and organization*. Cape Town, South Africa: University of Cape Town, Graduate School of Business.


The role of leadership in emergent self organization. The Leadership Quarterly 18, 341-356.


Appendix A–University Human Subjects Review Committee Approval

EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
Education First

University Human Subjects Review Committee @ Eastern Michigan University @ 200 Boone Hall
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197
Phone: 734.487.0042 Fax: 734.487.0050
E-mail: human.subjects@emich.edu
www.ord.emich.edu (see Federal Compliance)
The EMU UHSRC complies with the Title 45 Code of Federal Regulations part 46 (45 CFR 46) under FWA00000050.

UHSRC Initial June 16, 2011 Application Determination EXEMPT APPROVAL
To: Carole Benedict, Leadership and Counseling
Re: UHSRC #110509 Category: EXEMPT #2 & #4
Approval Date: June 16, 2011
Title: "An Examination of Elementary School Leadership: Seen Through the Lens of Complexity Theory." The Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee (UHSRC) has completed their review of your project. I am pleased to advise you that your research has been deemed as exempt in accordance with federal regulations. The UHSRC has found that your research project meets the criteria for exempt status and the criteria for the protection of human subjects in exempt research. Under our exempt policy the Principal Investigator assumes the responsibility for the protection of human subjects in this project as outlined in the assurance letter and exempt educational material.

Renewals: Exempt protocols do not need to be renewed. If the project is completed, please submit the Human Subjects Study Completion Form (found on the UHSRC website).

Revisions: Exempt protocols do not require revisions. However, if changes are made to a protocol that may no longer meet the exempt criteria, a Human Subjects Minor Modification Form or new Human Subjects Approval Request Form (if major changes) will be required (see UHSRC website for forms).

Problems: If issues should arise during the conduct of the research, such as unanticipated problems, adverse events, or any problem that may increase the risk to human subjects and change the category of review, notify the UHSRC office within 24 hours. Any complaints from participants regarding the risk and benefits of the project must be reported to the UHSRC.

Follow-up: If your exempt project is not completed and closed after three years, the UHSRC office will contact you regarding the status of the project and to verify that no changes have occurred that may affect exempt status. Please use the UHSRC number listed above on any forms submitted that relate to this project, or on any correspondence with the UHSRC office.

Good luck in your research. If we can be of further assistance, please contact us at 734-487-0042 or via e-mail at human.subjects@emich.edu. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,
Deb de Laski-Smith, Ph.D.
Interim Dean
Graduate School Administrative Co-Chair
University Human Subjects Review Committee
Appendix B—Informed Letter of Consent for Principals

Date_________________

Dear______________________,

I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership at Eastern Michigan University. As part of my research I am undertaking a qualitative study during the spring of 2011. My advisor, Dr. Ronald Williamson from Eastern Michigan University will be co-researcher. This letter is to invite you to participate in this study.

The knowledge era has often been described as a time when the development of new information will be heavily influenced by globalization and technology. There is research in the area of organizational studies that would suggest a more natural holistic approach to school leadership would facilitate the development of new ideas that are better suited to the new teaching and learning environment. To facilitate this new leadership prospective principals are being asked to share leadership and create cultures that support learning at all levels. This study will identify who these principals are, and what enables them to thrive and support their schools in an ever changing environment.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be interviewed and asked to share your leadership experiences and your feeling and thoughts’ regarding what makes a successful elementary school principal (focusing on specific personal characteristics and behaviors). The interviews should take no more than two, hour-long, sessions to complete. I will be interviewing two other elementary principals in your district. All results will be kept confidential and each piece of data will be kept anonymous. The information collected will be made available to the general public. The interviews will be taped and then transcribed. They will then be analyzed using Atlasti.6 Qualitative Data Analysis software.

There will not be any foreseeable risks to you by participating in this study, nor is there any direct benefit for your participation. However, your participation will be helpful in identifying principal behaviors that support effective leadership in elementary schools.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and there will be no penalty if you choose to not participate. If you choose to participate and wish to withdraw at any time you may do so without negative consequence. The results of this study will be presented in narrative form. All participants will remain anonymous, and there will not be any identifiable information available to the reader. Regardless of your decision to participate, a summary of my findings will be available to you upon
request. I can be contacted at cbene6218@sbcglobal.net or (313) 342-7535. The goal is to have this study completed by the end of the 2011-2012 school year. If you have any questions or concerns, you may reach me at the contact information above. You may also contact my dissertation advisor, Dr. Ronald Williamson at rwilliams1@emich.edu.

This research proposal and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee for use between________ and __________. If you have any questions about the approval process, please contact Dr. Deb de Laski-Smith, Interim Dean of the Graduate School and Administrative Co-chair of UHSRC at (734) 487-0002 or at human.subjects@emich.edu.

I would like to thank you for your consideration of my request. If you are in agreement and with the conditions and would like to participate, please complete the tear off form below and return it to the researcher at the time of the first interview.

Respectfully,

Carole L. Benedict

**Consent to Participate:** I have read all of the above information regarding this research study, including the research procedures, and possible risks. The content and meaning of this information has been explained and I understand. All of my questions at this time have been answered. I hereby consent and do voluntarily offer to participate in this study.

**Print Name**

**Signatures:**

_________________________________________  ______________________________

Participant                                                                 Date

_________________________________________  ______________________________

Investigator                                                                              Date
Appendix C—Informed Letter of Consent for Teachers

Date_________________

Dear______________________,

I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership at Eastern Michigan University. As part of my research I am undertaking a qualitative study during the spring of 2011. My advisor, Dr. Ronald Williamson from Eastern Michigan University will be co-researcher. This letter is to invite you to participate in this study.

The knowledge era has often been described as a time when the development of new information will be heavily influenced by globalization and technology. There is research in the area of organizational studies that would suggest a more natural holistic approach to school leadership would facilitate the development of new ideas that are better suited to the new teaching and learning environment. To facilitate this new leadership prospective principals are being asked to share leadership and create cultures that support learning at all levels. This study will identify who these principals are, and what enables them to thrive and support their schools in an ever changing environment.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be interviewed and asked to share your teacher-leadership experiences and your feelings and thoughts’ regarding what makes a successful elementary school principal. The interviews should take no more than one, 45 minute-long, session to complete. I will be interviewing several other elementary teachers in your district. The interviews will be taped and then transcribed. All results will be kept confidential and each piece of data will be kept anonymous. Interviews will then be analyzed using Atlasti.6 Qualitative Data Analysis software. Upon its completion the study will be made available to the general public.

There will not be any foreseeable risks to you by participating in this study, nor is there any direct benefit for your participation. However, your participation will be helpful in identifying principal behaviors that support effective leadership in elementary schools.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and there will be no penalty if you choose to not participate. If you choose to participate and wish to withdraw at any time you may do so without negative consequence. The results of this study will be presented in narrative form. All participants will remain anonymous, and there will not be any identifiable information available to the reader. Regardless of your decision to participate, a summary of my findings will be available to you upon request. I can be contacted at cbene6218@sbcglobal.net or (313) 342-7535. The goal is to have this
study completed by the end of the 2011-2012 school year. If you have any questions or concerns, you may reach me at the contact information above. You may also contact my dissertation advisor, Ronald Williamson at rwilliams1@emich.edu.

This research proposal and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee for use between_______ and _________. If you have any questions about the approval process, please contact Dr. Deb de Laski-Smith, Interim Dean of the Graduate School and Administrative Co-chair of UHSRC at (734) 487-0002 or at human.subjects@emich.edu.

I would like to thank you for your consideration of my request. Your informed consent to participate in this study under the conditions described is assumed by your completing the interview process with me the researcher. Do not consent to the interview if you do not understand or agree to these conditions.

Respectfully,

Carole L. Benedict

**Consent to Participate:** I have read all of the above information regarding this research study, including the research procedures, and possible risks. The content and meaning of this information has been explained and I understand. All of my questions at this time have been answered. I hereby consent and do voluntarily offer to follow the study requirements and take part in this study.

**Print Name_____________________________**

**Signatures:**

**Participant_______________________________Date**

**Investigator_____________________________Date**
Appendix D–Interview Questions–Principal

Leadership

1. What kinds of programs and initiatives have you facilitated in this school that has supported its success?
   a. *Probe:* Are they working? Why or why not?

2. What role do you think teachers play in developing schools that are responsive to the environment? How would you describe the kinds of relationships that you have had with teachers in this school?

3. What is the relationship between you and the parents? Describe the role of parents in “how things get done” at this school.

4. Tell me about your involvement in the process. Describe how goals are determined and how decisions are made.
   a. *Probe:* How do you know that these processes are effective?

5. How do you handle the possible conflict between state and federal mandates, philosophies and the emergent needs of the school?
Appendix E–Interview Questions–Teachers

1. What kinds of things have been instituted in the school that has facilitated the academic success of students? How has the way the school has operated over the past 3 years changed?

2. Describe the role of the principal at this school.

3. What do you think about the professional development opportunities offered to teachers in the past year? How is it determined what the teachers will be learning at these sessions?

4. How do things get accomplished at this school?

How would you describe your philosophy of teaching?
### Appendix F‒Blue Hills Public Schools State Assessment Results

2007 - 2010

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<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix G–Leader Behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Conditions</th>
<th>Transformational</th>
<th>Servant</th>
<th>Directive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>Middle income community, consistent student enrollment, high state assessment results.</td>
<td>Vision driven leadership, charismatic</td>
<td>Fostered a feeling of shared ownership and interdependence regarding the children’s learning.</td>
<td>Followed district mandates, Made unilateral decisions that affected staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beverly</td>
<td>Highly transient student population of varied ethnicities</td>
<td>Culture building, Structuring, Vision Building</td>
<td>Fostered a sense of community based on the needs of the students and teachers, made it safe for teachers to grow and take risks</td>
<td>Restructured school improvement team, made unilateral decisions that affected staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>Downward trend in the economic condition and transience in the student population.</td>
<td>Intellectual stimulation, management by exception</td>
<td>Facilitated the surfacing of others ideas and network, viewed awareness of others as a disturber rather than a comforter.</td>
<td>Made unilateral decisions concerning curriculum and school improvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix H–Cycle of Environmental Change

The influx of transient low income students each year

creates an effective learning environment for students and a satisfying work environment for teachers

creates a need for constant reevaluation of practice at the school

supports the transformational and servant leadership styles of principals

suggests the need for students to be educated in a holistic manner