OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE PERSPECTIVES OF NINE ALABAMA PRINCIPALS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Alabama principals who have overcome the challenges of School Improvement. The signing of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has led to wholesale changes within the public education system and has had lasting effects on school leadership. The role of principal has become more complex due to the multifaceted responsibilities to which one must adhere. Under the current legislation of NCLB, schools must attain 100% proficiency in reading and math by 2014. Additionally, schools must meet the state goals of adequate yearly progress (AYP). When schools fail to meet these goals for two consecutive years, they are designated with School Improvement status. In the research literature, leadership has been identified as the second most important school-related factor to student achievement. This study sought to uncover strategies these principals used to emerge from School Improvement status.

The researcher used a qualitative methodology utilizing a phenomenological approach to obtain the perspectives of Alabama principals. Nine principals from three elementary schools, three middle schools, and three high schools in central Alabama were purposefully selected for this study. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews, artifacts, and site observations. Six themes and 19 sub themes related to the phenomenon were developed from these interviews.
The six themes that emerged were Accountability, High Expectations/Commitment to Success, School Culture, Curriculum Shifts, Professional Development, and Pressures of the Principalship.

This study will assist practicing leaders who are experiencing the challenges associated with the status of School Improvement. Principals may learn from the lived experiences of their colleagues and adapt the lessons that proved to be successful and sustainable for them and their schools. This study serves to encourage school leaders to keep student achievement at the helm of the school and to know what is best, and to do what is in the best interest for children, regardless of state and federal legislation.

Keywords: No Child Left Behind, Adequate Yearly Progress, Accountability, School Culture, Curriculum Shifts, Pressures of the Principalship
DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to the memory of a very important person, Willie Young, Jr. who instilled in me to never give up on anything. It was he who first called me Dr. Vann before I ever imagined it as a possibility. I miss you Granddaddy!!
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

“We made it! We made it! We made AYP!” sounded loudly as the elementary school principal celebrated after locating her school on the list printed in the local newspaper. In this age of high stakes and accountability mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), many school leaders wait anxiously for the state’s report on the annual assessments to display the same excitement. Results can either be overwhelmingly positive or detrimental to a local school and/or school district. According to the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE), 367 Alabama public schools, or 27%, did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in 2011. As states annual measurable objectives (AMOs) increase yearly, the number of Alabama schools that have not made AYP has notably increased.

Previous researchers have shown that principal leadership is an intricate factor of student achievement (Grigsby, Schumacher, Decman, & Simieou, 2010). Hess and Kelly (2007) purported that a key to school improvement is school leadership. Authors of previous studies demonstrated that the second most important school-related factor to impact student achievement is leadership (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlston, 2004). As demonstrated by recent research, school leadership can have both direct and indirect influences on student outcomes (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008).
With varied responsibilities of school leaders, improving student performance is a pressure that most school leaders face today. In the present standards-based accountability movement, test results are of utmost importance to school leaders (Lewis, Rice, M., & Rice, R., 2011). As a result, the essential business for all education leaders is to address the basics of schooling today – teaching and learning.

The signing of NCLB has led to wholesale changes within the public education system (Ashbaugh, 2000), and has had lasting effects on school leadership. The role of the principal has become more complex due to the multifaceted responsibilities to which one must adhere. The transformation of principals’ roles as manager and instructional leader is due to the rise in the accountability system with NCLB (Grigsby et al., 2010). According to Blasé and Kirby (2000), principals must be skilled and effective as instructional leaders, change agents, problem solvers, and visionaries. Sharpe and Walter (2003) suggested that in order for schools to be successful, there must be strong leadership.

With the implementation of NCLB, K-12 public education is experiencing strenuous accountability measures at the elementary and secondary levels. According to Sergiovanni (2009), one in three principals affirmed the most pressing issues he/she faces is the implementation of NCLB. According to the provisions of NCLB, states must assess students annually based on challenging state standards (Jorgensen & Hoffman, 2003). AYP, the accountability measure by which states, school districts, and schools are held, is used to determine the education success of students. The state’s high school graduation exam is measured for secondary schools, while an assessment for students in third through eighth grades in math, reading, and science is utilized (Jorgensen & Hoffman,
When schools do not meet the AMO, nor make AYP for 2 consecutive years in the same component, the status of School Improvement is placed on the school by the state department of education.

**Statement of the Problem**

Under the current legislation of NCLB, schools must attain 100% proficiency in reading and math by the 2013-2014 school year. Since the implementation of NCLB, the goal of all public school districts and schools has been to meet the state’s AYP requirements. According to the provisions of NCLB, schools that do not meet AYP requirements for 2 consecutive years in the same component must be placed in School Improvement status. According to the Center of Education Policy (CEP, 2011), Alabama has experienced an increase in the number of schools being placed in the School Improvement designation since its implementation. There are numerous researchers who have examined the complexities of the requirements of NCLB toward yearly progress. However, upon review of available literature, there is a paucity of research regarding the lived experiences of Alabama principals who have overcome the adversity of being in School Improvement status, successfully progressed from that status, and not resubmitted to the designation.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Alabama principals who have overcome the challenges of School Improvement. Based on the 2006 report by the CEP (2006), 11% of Alabama schools did not reach the
AMOs. AMOs represents the percentage of students that must score proficient or advanced on English language arts and mathematics tests aligned with state content standards to attain AYP (CEP, 2011). As reported in 2011, 27% of Alabama schools did not attain AYP, resulting in 222 schools being placed in School Improvement status.

This qualitative research consisted of interviews with nine principals of schools previously designated with School Improvement status, successfully progressed from the status and maintained AYP to not be resubmitted to the listing. The voices of stated participants contributed to the body of literature regarding principal leadership, high stakes assessments, and overcoming adversity in public schools.

**Research Questions**

This phenomenological study was designed to explore the lived experiences and beliefs that influenced Alabama principals to overcome School Improvement status, successfully progressed out of the School Improvement designation, and not been resubmitted to the listing. The central research question for this study was as follows:

What are the lived experiences for the participating principals while the school was identified with the School Improvement designation?

The sub-questions for this study were as follows:

How do participating principals view their beliefs and core values while in School Improvement status?

How do daily school operations change for participating principals while being in School Improvement status?
What kinds of support are in place to overcome challenges according to participating principals?

How do participating principals view effectuating change with faculty and students while in School Improvement designation?

**Significance of the Study**

High stakes accountability has caused the role of principal to become more complex and challenging (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2008). The challenge of meeting the progressive baseline standards of states remains a primary concern for many educators. Lashway and Coffey (2008) emphasized that accountability for producing positive results is incumbent upon teachers and administrators. As the year 2014 swiftly approaches, most schools consider obtaining 100% student proficiency as both challenging and unrealistic.

This phenomenological study identified the strategies and best practices utilized by principals who once faced school improvement, were able to meet the challenge, overcome and progress out of the status, and maintain AYP to not be resubmitted to the designation. As Alabama has over 200 schools facing school improvement to date, this study significantly aids in contributing effective leadership strategies to principals. The shared experiences of participants also give voice to the standards movement both nationally and statewide, and highlight topics for future professional development opportunities. Last, the research contributes greatly to the limited body of literature that exists today on the stated topic.


Limitations

This study was subject to the following limitations:

1. This study focused on the shared experiences of nine Alabama principals of K-12 schools.
2. Utilizing qualitative research methods, the data were only generalized to the group being studied.
3. As the instrument for this study, the researcher was value-laden and presented personal biases as data were analyzed and interpreted.

Assumptions

The following assumptions outlined the study:

1. Participants selected for the study were willing, cooperative, and forthcoming about the experiences.
2. The perspectives of the participants accurately reflected their practice and honestly depicted their experiences.
3. The researcher was a learner in the process as knowledge was gained from participants.
4. Verification strategies were utilized to insure the trustworthiness of the study.
Definition of Key Terms

For this study, the following definitions of terms apply:

**Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP):** Tool used to describe whether a school has met all of its accountability goals (Zepeda, 2004).

**Alabama High School Graduation Exam:** State achievement test given to Alabama students in grade eleven to determine adequate yearly progress.

**Alabama Reading and Math Test:** State achievement test given to Alabama students in grades 3-8 to determine adequate yearly progress.

**Annual Measurable Objective:** Annual benchmarks established by the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) towards the goal of all students scoring proficient in the areas of reading and math for each year continuing to the year 2014.

**Instructional leadership:** The process of setting high academic standards and expectations, supervising classroom instruction, and monitoring curriculum (Lashway, 2003). For the purposes of this research, the instructional leader will be the principal.

**No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB):** Federal legislation that requires states to make continuous and substantial progress towards the goal of academic proficiency for all students in reading and math.

**Principal:** A school leader and administrator who leads the school in day-to-day operations.

**School Improvement:** According to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the designation placed on schools that do not make AYP for 2 consecutive years in the same component of reading, math, or the additional indicator (CEP, 2006).
Self-efficacy: One’s personal judgment of his/her ability and capability to execute a plan of action to obtain desired results (Bandura, 1986).

Summary

As accountability measures progressively increase, the role of the principal becomes more challenging. The principal of the school plays a vital role in meeting the academic challenges placed before the school. School Improvement status placed on a school does not have a positive connotation. Hence, an individual’s sense of efficacy and commitment to change is pertinent to successfully meeting those challenges to overcome the negative image designation. This qualitative study acknowledged the lived experiences of participating Alabama principals and the efforts made to overcome the accountability challenges, and how an individual’s sense of self-efficacy played a crucial role.

This study is divided into five chapters. The first chapter provides a brief introduction of the accountability movement, the role of principal leadership, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, and the significance of the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature. Chapter 3 describes the research methods utilized, forms of data collection, data analysis, and the validation strategies utilized to insure the credibility of the research. Chapter 4 identifies and presents the qualitative data collected from each participant. Each participant is described in detail as well as themes that emerged from the participants’ responses. The final chapter, Chapter 5 presents the research findings and identifies implications for further research.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of literature provides necessary background information to support the theoretical framework of social cognitive theory and its development of a principal’s sense of efficacy. The literature review discusses the historical development of the principal role and its changing characteristics. Finally, this chapter will provide brief overview of the standards reform movement and its effect on the accountability system in Alabama.

Philosophical Principles

This study is framed within the constructivist paradigm. This allowed for collaboration between me and the participants of the study. The constructivist approach to research intends to understand the “world of human experience,” (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 36). Within the constructivist approach, multiple realities exist which are interpreted by individuals in time and place. Hatch (2002) identified the ontology of constructivism as having multiple realities. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), reality is relative and constructed from individuals’ mental constructions through interpretation and communication. Hatch (2002), stated that with constructivism absolute realities are “unknowable,” (p. 15), and individual perspectives are the objects of inquiry. Creswell (2007) suggested that as participants view situations, meanings are formed through interactions with others. This perspective emphasizes that multiple realities exists because individuals experience the world from varied points of view.
Hatch (2002) stated that one’s knowledge is constructed symbolically and not objectively. As a result, reality is what one agrees it to be. The goal of the research, according to Creswell (2007), is to depend on the individual participant’s viewpoint of the identified situation. Consequently, the points of view are formed through the interactions of others. Hatch (2002) purported the impossibility of researchers to be objective. Creswell (2007) stated that the researcher positions themselves to recognize how their own life experiences are relative to interpretation. Researchers make interpretations of what they find by deriving meanings of their experiences. According to Creswell (2007), in constructivism, the researcher’s intent is to establish the meanings of others based on their realities. Hence, qualitative research is an interpretive research.

**Theoretical Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was guided by the work of Bandura’s (1977) social cognitive theory of self-efficacy. According to Bandura (2005), self-efficacy is a person’s judgment of his/her ability and capability to organize and execute a plan of action to obtain certain desired effects and outcomes. In other words, self-efficacy is an individual’s overall judgment and perception of his/her capability to perform certain tasks. Beliefs of self-efficacy contribute to the motivation of individuals as they determine the goals they set for themselves, the effort that is placed on those goals, and the amount of time and effort they choose to exert in the face of adversity (Bandura, 2000; Wood & Bandura, 1989).

Resilience in response to failures is another factor of self-efficacy. Bandura (1979) suggested that an individual’s self-confidence will determine his/her motivation to
be proactive. The more individuals believe in their capabilities, the greater their efforts will be to perform a task. Patterson (2007) stated that the difference between resilient and less resilient principals is determined by how one responds to adversity. The principal leader’s interpretation of the adversity is critical. The interpretation of the “bad things,” according to Patterson (2007), not only affects one’s outlook, but also expresses the individual’s level of optimism about circumstances of life. Patterson (2007) identified four responses to adversity by leaders: unrealistic pessimists, realistic pessimists, unrealistic optimists, and realistic optimists.

Collective efficacy, an extension of social cognitive theory is defined by Bandura (1997) as “a group’s shared beliefs in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainments” (p.477). Within school settings, Bandura (1997) stated collective teacher efficacy is the perception of teachers within the school that the efforts made by the faculty as a whole will have a positive effect on students. The shared beliefs of the faculty have influence on the school setting (Hoy & Miskel, 1996). The four sources of mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and affective states are critical in the development of collective teacher efficacy according to Bandura (1997).

**Social Cognitive Theory**

Social cognitive theory, a social learning theory, developed originally from the works of Miller and Dollard in 1941 (Bandura, 2005). The theorists initially proposed that if individuals are motivated to learn a particular behavior, then that particular behavior would be learned through clear observations (Bandura, 2005). The view of the theo-
rists suggested that individual learning occurs by triadic reciprocal causation of observing people within their environment, behavior, and cognition— the way in which one thinks.

Canadian psychologist, Albert Bandura, further developed the social cognitive theory. This theory included an agentic perspective that intentionally influences one’s functioning and life circumstances (Bandura, 2005). With this perspective, people are self-organizing, proactive, self-regulating, and self-reflecting. Bandura (1989) asserted individuals contribute to their own motivation, affect, and action. As self-organizers, people form intentions and develop plans of actions and strategies to execute formed ideas. The second human capability to social cognitive theory posits forethought. Bandura (1986) asserted that people not only react to their environment, but behaviors occur by forethought. As this process begins, individuals have a plan of action; meanwhile, the individuals anticipate likely outcomes and utilize those possibilities as motivators of their efforts.

Individuals are self-organizers, proactive, and also self-regulators, as outlined in social cognitive theory. According to the development by Bandura (1986), the human agentic perspective of the theory asserted the individuals do things that contribute a sense of satisfaction and self-worth. Individuals develop personal standards and regulate their actions.

Self-reflective capabilities allow individuals, according to Bandura (1991) to self-examine their own actions. Through self-awareness, individuals reflect in their own personal efficacy, the sound judgment of their thoughts and actions, and make corrections of their actions as necessary.
Social cognitive theory distinguished amongst three modes of human agency: (a) direct personal agency- in which individuals bring their own influence directly on themselves and their environment; (b) proxy agency- individuals anticipate desired outcomes; and (c) collective agency- group action is exercised. Bandura (1997) emphasized, however, that beliefs of personal efficacy are more central and wide spread among the three mechanisms of human agency.

**Theory of Self-Efficacy**

Regarding school leadership, Bandura (1986) stated that a school administrator’s self-efficacy is his/her capability to “organize and execute courses of action required” (p. 386). In these types of environments, educators believe that what they do is important. As such, efficacy becomes very important with successful leadership (Bandura, 1986). Challenging goals may not be pursued if a leader does not have a sense of efficacy. Similarly, as obstacles to goals become apparent, individuals who lack efficacy may not be able to overcome them (McCollum, Kajs, & Minter, 2006). Patterson (2007) stated efficacy is comprised of two components: an individual’s sense of competence and a sense of confidence. Some principals, according to Patterson (2007), are competent leaders, but do not have the confidence to lead while facing adversity. While on the other hand, some principals have the confidence to lead through the adversity, but lack the competence to accomplish the goal. As noted by McCollum et al. (2006), “Efficacious leaders will be successful in their jobs,” (p. 31). Therefore, self-efficacy is important in developing educational leaders in an effort to attain success (McCollum & Kajs, 2009).
According to Bandura’s (1997) extension of social cognitive theory, self-efficacy as a personal factor can have significant effect upon human agency. Bandura (2005) defined self-efficacy as a person’s judgment of his/her capability and ability to organize a plan of action to obtain certain desired effects and outcomes. Beliefs of self-efficacy contribute to the motivation of individuals as they determine the goals they set for themselves, the effort that is placed on those goals and the amount of time and effort they choose to exert in the face of adversity (Bandura, 2000; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Bandura (2002) posited that personal factors that serve as guides and motivators are established with the core belief that one’s actions can produce desired outcomes, “otherwise one has little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties” (p. 270). Self-efficacy is an important construct in understanding human behavior in various social contexts.

As the key agent, the principal sets the tone and direction for the school. Bandura (1997) identified a principal’s sense of efficacy as a judgment of his or her capabilities to carry out a course of action to produce desired outcomes in the school he or she leads. The self-efficacy beliefs of the principal can have tremendous impact with goal setting, aspirations, and persistence (Bandura, 1986; Gist & Mitchell, 1992). McCormick (2001) stated, “successful leadership involves social influence processes to organize, direct, and motivate the actions of others. It requires persistent task-directed effort, effective task strategies, and the artful application of various conceptual, technical, and interpersonal skills” (p.28).

McCollum and Kajs (2007) researched the influence efficacy and goal-orientation has on each other with principals. The study involved 312 principal candidates or early
career principals- 88 males and 222 females and 2 not reporting gender. Ethnicity ranged from Caucasian (51.6%), Hispanic (25.2%), African American (20.9%), Asian (1.3%), and other (1%). Utilizing the School Administrator Efficacy Scale (SAES) to measure school administrator efficacy, the researchers found all efficacy-related dimensions were positively correlated with mastery goal orientations. Findings of the research indicated clear significant relationships between goal-orientation and school administrator efficacy. According to the researchers school administrator candidates and practicing principals who have mastery goal orientation will be the most efficacious (McCollum & Kajs, 2007). The researchers posited that without a sense of efficacy, school administrators will likely not pursue challenging goals nor attempt to overcome obstacles that get in the way of those goals (McCollum, Kajs, & Minter, 2006a, 2006b; McCollum & Kajs, 2007).

Schultz, D. and Schultz, S. (1998) expressed an individual’s performance range on a variety of tasks can be impacted by efficacy; as well as an individual’s effort to engage in self-improvement for effective school practices. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) stated that principals may feel efficacious for leading in certain contexts, but may not feel the same sense of efficacy in others. Wood and Bandura (1989) suggested that in order to achieve and succeed at organizational goals, a robust sense of efficacy is needed to sustain attentional focus and perseverance. According to Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) principals with a strong sense of efficacy have been found to be consistent in the pursuit of their goals; however, they do not persist in unsuccessful strategies (Osterman & Sullivan, 1996). Likewise, Lyons and Murphy (1994) stated as principals carry out their administrative roles, principals with a higher sense of efficacy are likely to use internally-based person power to perform. On the other hand, principals with low
sense of efficacy have been found to persist in ineffective courses of action when faced with challenging issues (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Osterman and Sullivan (1996) stated when principals are challenged, those with low efficacy are likely unable to adapt to available opportunities. As individuals with low efficacy, principals are likely to use external bases of power to perform their administrative role (Lyons & Murphy, 1994). Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2005) examined the extent to which personal factors, assessments of principals, as well as key resources and support systems within the school context contributed to those principals’ self-efficacy judgments. Five hundred fifty-eight principal participants of Virginia completed the 18-item Principal Sense of Efficacy Scale (PSES) that assesses principal’s self-perceptions of their capabilities to lead in certain situations (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). A questionnaire was also included that focused on varied questions of demographics, preparation, and interpersonal support.

The researchers reported little or no significance with demographic variables of the principal in relation to their self-efficacy beliefs. Variables included race, gender, school setting, and experience level. On the other hand, it was found that the self-efficacy beliefs of principals are correlated with principal preparation and the interpersonal support from the superintendent, central office personnel, teachers, and support staff.

A separate study (Smith, Guarino, Strom, & Adams, 2006) was conducted and explored the demographic variables of the principal and his/her self-efficacy beliefs, perceived differences in beliefs and actual practices of principals, and their efforts to facilitate effective teaching and learning at their school. Two hundred eighty-four principals from 12 states in the Southeast, Midwest, West, and Northeast regions, along with Alaska
were studied using the PSES. There were 74 elementary schools, 30 middle schools, and 31 high schools represented. The gender ratio was 66% males and 34% females, which included 83% White, 14% Black, and 3% other. The majority of the responses were from rural schools (54%), while 25% were urban and 17% suburban.

The study focused on four variables: (a) self-efficacy in instructional leadership, (b) self-efficacy in management, (c) instructional leadership, and (d) time devoted to management. The results from this study indicated, however, a significant difference in gender and self-efficacy; females scored higher on self-efficacy in instructional leadership than males, principals working in schools with high free/reduced lunch scored higher than those with lower ratios of free/reduced lunch, and principals working in large schools scored higher than those in smaller schools.

**Resilience Theory**

Resilience theory, developed in the field of psychology, according to Patterson and Kelleher (2005) is a multi-dimensional construct that offers tools to equip leaders to develop from situations of adversity. The theorists posited that resilience is not a “fixed-trait phenomenon” (p. 3); rather it is developmental, can be learned, and taught. Resilience, as defined by Patterson and Kelleher (2005), is using one’s energy productively to overcome adversity stronger than ever. Patterson, Goens, and Reed (2005) identified three dimensions from the framework of resilience theory: (a) interpretation of the current adversity, (b) the capacity to tackle the adversity, and (c) the actions needed to become more resilient when faced with adversity.
Dimensions of Interpretation

Following the stimulus-response theory in psychology used to respond to events following adverse situations, the variable of interpretation is added within the resilience theory. Based on the theory, the stimulus (S), as the adversity, unexpectedly happens. Interpretation (I), what one believes caused the adverse situation, risks that may evolve due to the adversity and the consequences faced as a result of the adversity. Based on an individual’s interpretation of the adverse situation will determine the response. Utilizing this dimension allows an individual to choose their interpretation of an event, and hence, determines the response. Patterson and Kelleher (2005) stated “how you choose to interpret things that happen to you shapes your overall outlook, whether it is your general outlook on life or your outlook specifically connected to adversity that enters your life” (p. 5). In essence, the authors posited one’s interpretation of an event as their level of optimism or pessimism. Four levels are identified: (a) unrealistic pessimists, (b) realistic pessimists, (c) unrealistic optimists, and (d) realistic optimists.

Unrealistic pessimists have a negative interpretation of adversity and therefore, no confidence in overcoming the challenge. Realistic pessimists have a seemingly accurate interpretation of the event; however, confidence is minimal in their thoughts of making a difference. Unrealistic optimists believe they have an accurate interpretation of the adverse situation, as they are quick to make judgments about the issues and do not consider all risks involved. Finally, the unrealistic optimists believe they can make change during adverse situations. Realistic optimists understand completely what is going on and how to change the situation. These individuals believe they have the skill set to effectuate change, (Patterson & Kelleher, 2005).
Resilience Capacity

Adversity happens, whether chronic or crisis, how an individual responds to a situation is determined by their resilience capacity of personal values, personal efficacy, and personal energy (Patterson & Kelleher, 2005). Personal values are represented by core values- principles that define and individual’s character and what matters most to them. Personal efficacy is the belief that individuals have it in themselves to overcome adversity while having a sense of self-confidence and competence. Personal energy refers to the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual (Patterson & Kelleher, 2005) mindset needed to endure challenges. As stated by Patterson and Kelleher (2005), resilient leaders remain true to their core values.

Collective Efficacy

As stated in social cognitive theory, the control individuals have on their own lives is influenced by their efficacy beliefs (Goddard, 2001). Bandura (1997) identified collective efficacy as being associated with the persistence, thoughts, stress levels and the achievement of groups. Identified with the basic tenets of self-efficacy, collective efficacy is concerned with the performance capabilities of the whole group, rather than individual. Distinguished for school settings, perceived collective efficacy refers to teacher perceptions and his/her views of the entire faculty delivering courses of action necessary to have positive effects on students (Bandura, 1997). Based on research conducted by Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk Hoy (2000) it was found that collective teacher efficacy have strong measurable effects on student performance. As indicated by Hoy, Sweetland, and Smith (2002) the strength or weakness of collective teacher efficacy can either help
or hinder positive effects of individual efficacy. The stronger the collective efficacy, the more likely individual teachers are to use effective teaching strategies and skills they already possess, devise new ways to address challenging situations, and share their knowledge with colleagues (Brunson & Steiner, 2007).

Goddard et al. (2000) identified two key elements for collective teacher efficacy: analysis of the teaching task and assessment of teaching competence. Goddard et al. (2000) postulated the perception of group capabilities to educate students successfully occurs when the level of difficulty of the teaching task is considered to the perception of the group’s competence. Analysis of the teaching task refers to teachers assessing what will be required while engaging in teaching. Occurring at both the individual and school level, teachers analyze what comprises effective teaching, obstacles to overcome, and identify resources available to achieve success.

Goddard et al. (2000) sampled 70 teachers from 70 different schools in five states to test the Collective Teacher Efficacy Scale. One-half of the schools selected were identified as having reputations of relatively high conflicting faculties and the other half had relatively low conflicting faculties. The schools’ reputations were identified by individuals within the district as educators, administrators, and professors. Responses were from 46 teachers in 46 schools, which resulted in 24 teachers from low conflicting schools and 22 teachers from high conflicting schools. Researchers reported that assessments of teaching tasks and teaching competence were strongly interrelated and formed a strong sense of collective efficacy within the organization.

A second study conducted by Goddard et al. (2000) comprised of elementary schools from one large urban Midwestern school district. Data from teachers and stu-
dents of 47 elementary schools were collected from surveys. Variables of student test scores, gender, race, and free-reduced lunch status were tested. The study offered evidence that perceived collective efficacy is related to student achievement.

Assessment of teaching competence refers to teachers analyzing their individual teaching task, along with the teaching competence of the faculty (Goddard et al., 2000). This analysis inferred the teaching skills of the faculty, training, and expertise. Teachers made explicit judgments of their colleagues teaching competence and ability.

The major influences of collective teacher efficacy were from four sources, just as self-efficacy – mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and affective state. Mastery experience as a group, teachers experience success and failure. Success builds while the faculty’s collective efficacy while failure has negative impacts (Goddard et al., 2000). Failure becomes more discouraging after success has occurred more frequently at the school. Vicarious experience allows teachers to not only actively participate with direct experience, listening to the success stories of colleagues and other schools are essential. Organizations learn by observing other organizations (Huber, 1996). Social persuasion in which teachers participate in workshops and professional development opportunities can influence teachers positively. Verbal persuasion, direct experiences, and opportunities to observe successful experiences can influence faculty’s collective efficacy. Affective states refer to the organization’s ability to react to crisis and pressures and to continue to function positively. Less efficacious organizations will react in negative, dysfunctional ways; while high efficacious organizations can react and continue to function positively.
Historical Development of the Role of Principal

The first documented system of public education dates to the passing of the Massachusetts law of 1642. Education primarily took place in the Puritan home at that time (Weiss, 1992). By 1750, states adopted the responsibility of public education as a result of the tenth amendment to the Constitution. According to Shen (2005), all towns in Massachusetts with schools were required to have certified teachers. Supervised by councils, these schools were one room facilities due to the small towns and communities. As local populations grew, multi-graded schools and on-site supervision became pertinent. The head teacher or principal teacher was appointed by the council to manage the growing school. Although the head teacher/principal teacher had administrative responsibilities, teaching was still primary (Sharpe & Walter, 2003).

As community populations grew, more schools emerged with a greater level of complexity. Sharpe and Walter (2003) purported administrative duties became more overwhelming to complete part-time. Additional duties of scheduling classes, assigning students, and maintaining discipline became more apparent for the principal to assume. Prior to 1850, the principal mainly completed clerical duties. However, over the next 50 years, the principal’s responsibility shifted to school organization and management, instructional supervision, staff development, and school/community relations (Pierce, 1934).

In order to assist with the school management, some school boards expanded its members. According to Shen (2005) although teachers and other board members opposed additional leadership, city superintendents were appointed. During the mid-nineteenth century, superintendents began to delegate those additional building level re-
sponsibilities to the principal. These additions led to the full-time role of principal and eliminated the teaching aspect of the position (Kavanaugh, 2005).

According to Weiss (1992) several factors led to the principalship: (a) cities population growth, (b) grading of schools, (c) the elimination of teaching as a duty of the position, and (d) the establishment of the Department of Elementary School Principals in 1921; however, it took decades for the principal position to become concrete. Beck and Murphy (1993) organized the development of the principal position from the 1920s-present by themes based on evidence found in educational literature.

1920s

Beck and Murphy (1993) described this era of the principalship as spiritual and social leader. Most often, the principal was compared to ministers as having a calling for the position. The expectations of principals were to organize curriculum, monitor and observe teachers and teaching, and assist them with effective teaching strategies (Shen, 2005). The principal was expected to be actively involved in the community and to make social contacts for the school.

1930s

This era saw a shift of the principal from spiritual leader to business executive (Shen, 2005). Adhering to the principles of Frederick Taylor’s Theory of Scientific Management, it was believed that schools should be run like a business with using business principles for accounting and fundamental budgets, maintenance, and student accounting.
(Beck & Murphy, 1993). Current research and development were utilized by principals to make informed decisions and solve problems during this time period.

**1940s**

Referred to as the “Democratic Leader” Kavanaugh (2005) emphasized school leadership was reflective of the times of World War II. This era of principalship regarded schools as the means to train and assist students to become productive citizens. According to Beck and Murphy (1993) principals and teachers began to work cooperatively with curriculum development and implementation of instruction. The role of principal became more as coordinator and less director.

**1950s**

The role of principal during this period, according to Kavanaugh (2005) also considered the goals of Taylor’s Scientific Management theory and organization, as well as the human relations approach. According to Shen (2005) the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration proclaimed that education administration had reached a turning point due to its approach to school management. As during the 1930s with the use of scientifically-based research, principals were expected to use research in the school settings. Utilizing empirical data to assist teachers with effective teaching strategies was also an espoused value (Beck & Murphy, 1993). The delegation of duties and dependence on clerical staff to perform was significant to the principalship during this decade. According to Kavanaugh (2005) the principal’s focus during this period emphasized the principal running the facility rather than leading the school.
1960s

This era considered the principal to be bureaucratic (Kavanaugh, 2005). As society experienced turbulence, principals continued using technical scientific management approaches to conduct school business. As a result, the formal evaluation of measurable outcomes of the principal witnessed an end to the management and the development of the humanistic approach, as principals found themselves reporting to all stakeholders more than ever before.

1970s

During this time period, the principal influenced members of the community to be involved in schools. As principals continued to wear many hats, the school leader worked closely and collaboratively with teachers to focus more directly on teaching and learning (Rousmaniere, 2007).

1980s

In the 1980s, the principal was considered to be the instructional leader. This school leader was expected to be a visionary and to develop a plan to fulfill the vision (Catano & Stronge, 2007). As instructional leader, the principal was directly involved with teaching and learning. The term “change agent” was introduced to describe leaders in an effort to implement the school’s vision. Principals were viewed as focusing on teaching and learning; as well as providing professional development and resources to assist with classroom instructional needs (Kavanaugh, 2005).
1990s

Reaching out to the community was an important aspect of the principalship during this era. Establishing community ties was vital during these times (Shen, 2005). According to Beck and Murphy (1993) community demographics began to change. Hence, student populations grew to include more minorities, students speaking languages other than English and more children of poverty (Kavanaugh, 2005). The introduction of the charter school and private school voucher system as an option to public education became prevalent (Noll, 1996).

Present

The emphasis placed on the leadership role of the principal has changed during the past 30 years (McEwan, 2003). As a result the demand of the principal leader has become two-fold: principal as school manager and principal as instructional leader (Sharpe & Walter, 2003).

The managerial side of leadership identifies the day-to-day operations needed by the principal (Sharpe & Walter, 2003). Green (2010) stated the principal leader of today’s school is expected to be the “chief learning officer,” one who is focused on teaching and learning. Referred to as instructional leadership, leaders use data to improve teaching and learning in an effort to impact improvement (King, 2002). As defined by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2001) instructional leadership is “leading learning communities” as facilitator, guide, and encourager of the educational environment. According to Sharp and Walter (2003) regardless of the school level, elementary or secondary, the single most important person to a school’s success is the prin-
Principal. Strong leadership is crucial to developing a successful school (Fullan, 2002). Ultimately, the instructional leader is accountable for student achievement (Grigsby, Schumacher, Decman, & Simieou, 2010).

Kafka (2009) stated that the principalship of today is different from that of the past; and needs to be radically different from how it was. In past years, the principal as an effective building manager was good enough (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000). However, as stated by Lewis, et al. (2011), the current reform efforts have transformed the role of educational leaders. In order to be successful, leaders must adapt to the constant changes in our society. “Every day, in thousands of schools, effective principals are thinking about how they can best lead and manage multiple systems that together can bring effective practices to scale so that all students-and all adults-achieve better results” (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2008, p.23). Hence, the responsibility for numerous educational outcomes ultimately lies with the building level administrator (Catano & Stronge, 2002).

In the text Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do, the National Association of Elementary School Principals provide a resource guide for practitioners by setting priorities and providing specific tools and resources for principals to assist with the standards of effective leadership. The six standards identified are (a) lead student and adult learning, (b) lead diverse communities, (c) lead 21st century learning, (d) lead continuous improvement, (e) lead using knowledge and data, and (f) lead parent, family, and community engagement. The authors addressed the six standards as priorities to achieving positive results for students.
Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership by Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) identifies key findings about successful school leadership. Each finding is supported with empirical evidence. The seven claims are as follows:

1. School leadership is secondary only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning;
2. Almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices;
3. The ways in which leaders apply these basic leadership practices – not the practices themselves- demonstrate responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the contexts in which they work;
4. School leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions;
5. School leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed;
6. Some patterns of distribution are more effective than others;
7. A small handful of personal traits explain a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness. (pp. 27-28)

The authors posited the above as necessities to be effective as a school leader in the midst of education reform.

The Standards Reform Movement

The standards-based education reform movement spans over 20 years in the United States. Acknowledged as the central framework of education policy, standards have become the guide for school-based reform (Massell, 2008). In an effort to establish and ensure rigor, policy makers seek to address challenging questions of what standards should be and how they should be set and applied for quality public education of American students. These standards, both content standards and performance standards, have caused systemic change in curriculum and learning (Shepard, Hannaway, & Baker, 2009).
Today’s standards accountability movement focuses on producing results in schools, and holds teachers and administrators accountable (Lewis et al., 2011). Multiple national reports have challenged the public education system and its direction in the United States (Bjork, Kowalski, & Young, 2005). As a result of these reports, reform efforts for public education have developed with politically motivated educational agendas (Kowalski, 2006). Grubb and Flessa (2006) stated “current federal, state, and local school accountability measures as well as policy initiatives that call for improved leadership have placed increasing demands on principals” (p. 518). Several major legislative acts began this change effort of school reform. The initial legislative impact of The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 established the stage for school accountability. Followed by the controversial document *A Nation at Risk* and its implications of public education; Goals 2000: Educate America Act; and lastly, the present day 21st century legislative act of the NCLB signed into law by President George W. Bush. NCLB forced education leaders to align academic priorities, and according to Fullan (2002) has caused a shift in academic accountability. Commencing with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), public education and accountability would be forever changed.

**Elementary and Secondary Education Act**

The accountability of schools through standards began with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) when passed in 1965 by the U.S. Congress. Emphasis of the law was equal access to education and the establishment of high standards and accountability for schools. Originally signed into legislation as part of the “War on Pov-
ESEA authorized federal funding to support students underperforming in poor, disadvantaged, schools (Popham, 2001). The content of the Title I *Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged* established the onset of accountability. The purpose of the Title I provision was to ensure that all children have equal and fair opportunity to a high, quality education in order to reach minimum proficiency on state assessments and standards (ESEA, 1965). Included are the basic components of the initial legislation:

1. Ensuring that high quality academic assessments, accountability systems, teacher preparation and training, curriculum, and instructional materials are aligned with challenging State academic standards so that students, teachers, parents, and administrators can measure progress against common expectations for student academic achievement;

2. Meeting the educational needs of low-achieving children in our Nation’s highest-poverty schools, limited English proficient children, migratory children, children with disabilities, Indian children, neglected or delinquent children, and young children in need of reading assistance;

3. Closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers;

4. Holding schools, local educational agencies, and States accountable for improving the academic achievement of all students, and identifying and turning around low-performing schools that have failed to provide a high-quality education to their students, while proving alternatives to students in such schools to enable the students to receive a high-quality education;

5. Distributing and targeting resources sufficiently to make a difference to local educational agencies and schools where needs are greatest;

6. Improving and strengthening accountability, teaching, and learning by using State assessment systems designed to ensure that students are meeting challenging State academic achievement and content standards and increasing achievement overall, but especially for the disadvantaged;

7. Providing greater decision making authority and flexibility to schools and teachers in exchange for greater responsibility for student performance;

8. Providing children an enriched and accelerated educational program, including the use of schoolwide programs or additional services that increase the amount and quality of instructional time;

9. Promoting schoolwide reform and ensuring the access of children to effective, scientifically based instructional strategies and challenging academic content;

10. Significantly elevating the quality of instruction by providing staff in participating schools with substantial opportunities for professional development;
11. Coordinating services under all parts of this title with each other, with other educational services, and, to the extent feasible, with other agencies providing services to youth, children, and families; and
12. Affording parents substantial and meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children. (ESEA, Sec.1001)

Proponents of ESEA asserted that the legislation encouraged other movements towards the equality of educational opportunity for specific populations (Halperin, 1975). The populations that have benefitted from the law include handicapped children, bilingual students, and areas of child nutrition. Wayson (1975) expressed a negative view of the law. According to Wayson (1975), the failure of ESEA was funding not being utilized as intended by Congress. Instead, funds were being used to prevent desegregation in Southern and Northern states. It has also been noted that the ESEA failed to achieve its purpose due to local principals and teachers refusal to accept the law. Often, school principals were not consulted or included in the decision-making process regarding expenditures of the funds (Wayson, 1975). Although the central office of a local school district may have been a proponent of the ESEA, “the fact remains that teachers and principals—not higher ranking officials make the decisions that determine whether a reform will be successfully implemented” (Wayson, 1975, p.153).

A Nation at Risk

As a result of legislation and education studies, states have adopted standards of leadership to be used as benchmarks for performance in an effort to improve schools. The standards movement began after the release of A Nation at Risk. In 1981, The National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) was challenged by then Secretary of Education, the Honorable T.H. Bell, to compile a report on the quality of education in
American schools. In 1983, a report of the findings of the state of education was released entitled: *A Nation at Risk: the Imperative of Educational Reform* (NAR). The document noted several ills with the American K-12 education system. Student preparedness for the 21st century was indicated as a result of identified mediocrity in educational performance. A new commitment to education reform ensued. According to Ravitch (2003), it was to become one of the most influential U.S. education reform documents of the 20th century. However, the repercussions of NAR ignited significant changes with public education of America’s K-12 schools.

This seminal document scrutinized American schools as failing and sparked reform efforts locally, statewide, and nationally. According to Guthrie and Springer (2004), the initial intention of the report was to promote and celebrate American public schools; however, the findings indicated the present system of education as a failure. The basic tenets of the report stated that (a) American students were not up to par with students from other countries academically, (b) schools suffered from uneven standards, and (c) teachers lacked preparation. As a result, the commission emphasized the nation’s economy and security would suffer if action did not occur (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Upon reflection 25 years after the report was released, the U.S. Department of Education (2008) indicated progress had been made following its issuance. Determined by the U.S. Department of Education (2008) to still be a nation at risk, the United States is more informed, more accountable, and identified its role and challenges to become a better education system. States developed content and curriculum standards upon which standardized-based testing was implemented in the 1980s and 1990s. Additionally, the
requirement of states receiving federal funds to implement academic standards and standards-based testing at certain grade levels was included.

Even though the report commissioned in 1984 sounded a loud alarm, state and local officials worked to develop the standards, testing, and accountability. The U.S. Department of Education (2008) acknowledged the nation changed from at risk of complacency to a nation at work on its shortcomings and accountable for results.

**Goals 2000: Educate America Act**

In March 1984, Congress passed standards-based education reform into law, Goals 2000: Educate America Act. According to Rudalevige (2003) the act “signaled a nationwide commitment to standards-based reform. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act required states to develop content and performance standards for k-12 schools” (p. 64). As stated by Earley (1994), “although references to standards remain in the legislation, they are entirely voluntary. No state is required to meet nationally developed standards, nor seek federal government endorsement of state or local standards to receive Goals 2000 funding” (p. 3).

The National Education Goals to be achieved by the year 2000 were as follows:

Goal 1: *School Readiness* – By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn

Goal 2: *School Completion* – By the year 2000, the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90%

Goal 3: *Student Achievement and Citizenship* – By the year 2000, all students will leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography, and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our nation’s modern economy
Goal 4: *Teacher Education and Professional Development*- By the year 2000, the nation’s teaching force will have access to programs for the continued improvement of their professional skills and the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to instruct and prepare all American students for the next century.

Goal 5: *Mathematics and Science* - By the year 2000, U.S. students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement.

Goal 6: *Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning* - By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

Goal 7: *Safe, Disciplined, and Alcohol-and Drug-Free Schools* - By the year 2000, every school in the United States will be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

Goal 8: *Parental Participation* - By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children. (Goals 2000, Sec.102)

Seeing an increase in the role of federal government in education, many states opted not to apply for the available funding. Although many states did not receive the additional funding, some states accepted the federal dollars from Goals 2000, but did not use the funding as Congress intended (Superfine, 2005). Those states were not sanctioned for non-compliance. According to Superfine (2005), little evidence existed that the law had an impact on student achievement. As a result of the law not being implemented as intended, Congress refused to reauthorize the law. Hence, another law containing a number of provisions regarding accountability and flexibility was introduced, The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

**No Child Left Behind**

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) signed into legislation by President George W. Bush, has been identified as one of the toughest mandates to emphasize accountability results and academic achievement of the principal (Abernathy, 2007). The
purpose of the legislation was to insure that every child in every school perform at the individual grade level in the subjects of reading and math. According to the law, the four tenets of NCLB included: (a) more accountability for improved academic achievement and student performance, (b) federal funds would be spent to enhance academic programs for improving schools, (c) increased flexibility and funding with states and local districts, and (d) parental choice and more information be provided of schools.

This legislation had insured a paradigm shift be made for all public education systems to benefit the education success of all children engaged in public education. Requirements of NCLB caused school systems to: (a) promote effective professional development and mentoring for teachers and administrators, (b) utilize technology initiatives in classrooms, and (c) emphasize mastery of challenging academic content standards with effective teaching and learning strategies (Zepeda, 2004). Hayes (2008) has noted that as pressures for accountability have been placed on schools, the law has made a difference in the lives of children and families.

Two basic goals were identified by NCLB (2001). The first was “closing the achievement gap between high-and low performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and non-minority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers” (Wright, P., Wright, P., & Heath, 2003, p. 20). The second goal was to create an accountability system in which the primary objective was to close achievement gaps.

Under NCLB, state and local school districts would be required to adhere to the following:

- Create their own standards for what a child should know and learn for all grades;
• Test every student’s progress by administering standards-based testing to students in each of the three grade spans, 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12;
• Sort test results by socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and level of limited English proficiency;
• Make test results public at both the state and local level;
• Make continuous improvement towards achieving state standards;
• Bring all students in all schools up to each state’s standard of proficient performance;
• Measure progress by requiring a small percentage of the nation’s fourth –and eighth-grade students to take the National Assessment of Educational Progress test in math and reading every other year;
• Face real consequences for failing to meet improvement standards (NCLB, 2001).

The initial goal of NCLB was to insure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education and reach at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state assessments (Abernathy, 2009). However, States must sanction schools and districts performing poorly on those assessments. One of the sanctions is to withhold Title I funds to those schools. According to Abernathy (2009) the heart of the testing and sanctions is AYP. “Making AYP is the quest for every school and district under No Child Left Behind” (Abernathy, 2009, p.5). AYP is based on the results of students’ scores on the state’s standardized assessment administered once a year. To achieve AYP means that a school or district has a high percentage of students scoring at high academic proficiency or the school is demonstrating continuous academic improvement. If a school fails to make AYP for 2 consecutive
years, the consequences and sanctions become more severe. Test results are reviewed for students assessed at each grade level and for eight student subgroups, five racial and ethnic identifiers (Black, White, Hispanic, American Indian, and Asian or Pacific Islander), students receiving free or reduced priced meals and those who qualify for special education services. Schools are judged by the performance of each subgroup; however, there must be at least 40 students in that subgroup to be considered for AYP evaluation. It only takes failure in one subgroup to affect a school or district’s AYP status. The more qualifying subgroups that a school has, the more chances it has to fail. Larger schools with more subgroups and diverse populations are at more of a disadvantage (Abernathy, 2007). Under NCLB, schools are measured by student performance, not the school’s services. Targets of proficiency have been set and approved by the U.S. Department of Education beginning with assessments given in 2001-2002 school year. According to the act, 100% of schools and district’s students must meet proficient standards by 2013-2014 in the areas of reading and math.

In a 2002 study of North Carolina, randomly selected principals from 25 school districts were chosen to obtain their perceptions of the state’s accountability program regarding NCLB provisions and its impact on their roles. A three-part questionnaire was developed to solicit responses for the key components of the accountability program – principals’ levels of support; their level of influence with teachers, instruction, and resources; and demographic information (Lyons & Algozzine, 2006). The respondents indicated the impact of student monitoring of achievement, curriculum alignment with standardized testing, remediation and tutoring opportunities, and protected instructional time were identified as positives with the accountability program. Meanwhile, the prin-
principals responded negatively to the AYP requirement of NCLB, testing requirements for special populations of Limited English Proficiency students and special education students, and the sanctions that are applied if the schools fail to make AYP. Other researchers have indicated that administrators are affected by NCLB. Administrators view the NCLB as straining school systems and view the legislation as punitive (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003). As a result of NCLB, administrators also reported an increase in the level of pressure to meet demands of operating school and accountability. In a study conducted by Wiley, Mathis, & Garcia (2005) with the Great Lakes states found that 85% of schools are projected to fail making AYP in 2014, the date specified in the legislation that all students are expected to be performing at proficient levels. The projection of the study caused many to question whether the achievement gap will be closed as proposed in the original legislation.

**School Improvement Designation**

After the first year of implementing requirements established by NCLB, the state of Alabama began preparing to meet rigid guidelines. Under the provision, the state of Alabama had to devise a written plan addressing compliance with AYP and accountability (Alabama Education News, 2003). Alabama’s accountability system is inclusive of state and federal requirements. Student assessment results for reading and math are derived from the Alabama Reading and Math Test (ARMT) and the Alabama High School Graduation Exam (ALSDE, 2011). Baselines or “starting points” were established for both contents of reading and math. The AMOs were established for each content, which increases yearly to attain 100% student proficiency by 2014.
Baselines, according to the ALSDE (2011), were utilized to set target goals for schools to attain AYP. Components that determine whether or not Alabama schools make AYP include the following: (a) annual measurable objectives for reading and math – the percentage of students scoring Level III or Level IV (meeting or exceeding proficiency) on the ARMT in reading and mathematics; (b) additional academic indicators- in elementary and middle school this refers to making improvement towards the required 95% attendance rate. At the high school level- required improvement is with the Alabama High School Graduation Exam and its graduation rate of 90%, and (c) participation rate- to meet AYP, each group of participants must have 95% participation on the assessments.

According to the ALSDE (2011), any school that does not make AYP will be identified by the state with the title Did Not Make AYP. Upon being identified, schools designated as such must do the following: (a) conduct a needs assessment of the students, staff, and programs; (b) develop a Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP) that specifically addresses the areas in AYP was not met; (c) receive approval of the CIP submission from the local board of education; and (d) implement the Continuous Improvement Plan. Additionally, the local education agency (LEA) must provide support to the school beyond what had been provided in the past.

When schools fail to make AYP for two consecutive years in the same component (reading, math, or additional indicator) the designation for School Improvement Year 1 status is assigned to the school. If the school fails to make AYP the next year in the same component as the previous year, the school will be identified for School Improvement Year 2 status. The status of School Improvement increases in severity as schools continue
not to make AYP. School Improvement Year 1 is the status identified by the state for any school that does not make AYP for 2 consecutive years in the same component. The CIP must be revised, revisited by the LEA, and the LEA must receive assistance from a knowledgeable consultant. Inclusive of the CIP, according to ALSDE (2011) schools in School Improvement Year 1 must implement at least one of the following: (a) high-quality professional development specifically aimed to address the cause of the academic achievement problem; (b) implement a rigorous and focused curriculum; (c) implement supplemental educational services from the approved list of providers. If the school in School Improvement Year 1 is a Title I school- a school receiving federal funds due to a high percentage of students receiving free and reduced priced meals- the school must also implement the following: (a) provide written notice to all parents of the school’s status; (b) offer public school choice, and (c) spend not less than 10% of the Title I allocation on high quality professional development.

As the School Improvement status increases (School Improvement Year 2-6+) sanctions become more severe with increased levels of intervention and corrective actions (Abernathy, 2007). Sanctions range from possible school staff replacement, employing a “turn around specialist” who meets specific criteria established by the state, and also possibly suspending the decision-making role of the school principals. Although the purpose of NCLB and the school’s responsibility of AYP is to increase academic achievement there have been many criticisms of the law (Hayes, 2008). A quantitative research study was conducted in California with principals of schools in Program Improvement and non-Program Improvement settings (Ibarra, Santamaria, Lindsey, & Daly, 2010). Six hundred California principals of Title I schools were randomly selected and
surveyed with follow-up interviews being conducted with the principals who had led their schools out of Program Improvement. Sixty percent of the sample of Title I principals were female, two thirds were age 50 years and above, over 70% identified as White. Fifty-four percent of the schools were not in Program Improvement. Ten percent had successfully exited Program Improvement, and 36% were in Program Improvement.

Researchers indicated that principals in Program Improvement settings reported significantly less efficacy regarding leading change efforts than principals not in Program Improvement. Inclusive of district influences, principals in Program Improvement settings perceived the district climate to be less open, more centrally controlled, and less flexible to innovative approaches (Ibarra et al., 2010). “A leader’s shift in thinking from compliance to accountability, to a moral, professional responsibility for improvement is key to developing gap-closing strategies focused on inclusion of historically underserved students” (Lindsey, D., Jungwirth, Pahl, & Lindsey, R. 2009, p.36).

In a separate study Santamaria (2008) conducted an exploratory quantitative analysis of California schools designated with Program Improvement status. The researcher’s goal was to determine the relationship between Program Improvement and principals’ sense of efficacy within the state. The sample for the study consisted of 649 California primary and secondary principals. Five hundred forty-nine principals responded that they were in Title I schools, 53 principals in Program Improvement Year 1, 34 Program Improvement Year 2, 34 Program Improvement Year 3, 28 from Year 4, and 30 from Year 5.

Santamaria (2008) discovered principals from schools that had successfully exited Program Improvement did not differ from the other groups. However, the study did yield
results indicating principals from schools in Program Improvement, levels of self-efficacy did differ significantly from those whose schools was not in Program Improvement. Remaining in Program Improvement had a negative effect on principals’ sense of efficacy. Statistical differences in means of efficacy existed between principals in Year 1 and Year 4 Program more significantly affected by Program Improvement than other subgroups.

Summary of Literature

Nationwide reform efforts throughout the years have all focused in the area of increased educational accountability. As a result, the role of the principalship has seen various changes. Consequently, principals as school leaders must demonstrate positive results in the aspects of student learning. The characteristics of efficacy and resilience, as indicated by Bandura’s (1997) social cognitive theory, are instrumental with leadership during difficult times. As schools face School Improvement status due to failure to meet AYP, it becomes more difficult to close the achievement gap by 2014 that has been mandated by the current legislation of NCLB. Principals with a higher sense of efficacy may have a greater chance of meeting the expectations of the federal legislation.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In an effort to record the voices, perspectives, and lived experiences of principals, qualitative research methods were used for this study. Hatch (2002) emphasized, “In qualitative work, the intent is to explore human behaviors within the contexts of their natural occurrence” (p. 7). This study utilized the phenomenological research design. In phenomenology, lived experiences are comprised by the accounts and commonalities of multiple individuals (Creswell, 2007). According to Hatch (2002), researchers who utilize the phenomenological approach make an interpretation of the lived experiences shared and observed by the participants. Understanding the common and/or shared experiences is relevant to develop more meaning to the stated phenomenon.

The topic presented explored the challenges of being in School Improvement status. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain insight and in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of participating Alabama principals who have overcome the adversity and successfully exited out of the School Improvement designation and have not been resubmitted to the status. The research problem gained the perspectives of participating principals on meeting the challenges of being in School Improvement status outlined in the provisions of the NCLB, and how they successfully emerged from the School Improvement designation and not returned to the status. A problem exists because each year the AMOs, the percentage of students that must score proficient or advanced on English language arts and mathematics tests aligned with state content
standards to attain AYP (CEP, 2011), increases yearly. Under the current legislation of NCLB, schools must attain 100% proficiency in reading and math by the 2013-2014 school year. Since the implementation of NCLB, the goal of all public school districts and schools has been to meet the state’s AYP requirements. According to the provisions of NCLB, schools that do not meet AYP requirements for 2 consecutive years must be placed in School Improvement status. According to the CEP (2011), Alabama has experienced an increase in the number of schools being placed in School Improvement designation since its implementation.

**Philosophical Paradigm**

This study was framed within the constructivist paradigm. This allowed collaboration between the participants of the study and the researcher. The constructivist approach to research intends to understand the “world of human experience,” (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 36). Within the constructivist approach, multiple realities exist which are interpreted by individuals in time and place. Hatch (2002) identified the ontology of constructivism as having multiple realities. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), reality is relative and constructed from individuals’ mental constructions through interpretation and communication. Hatch (2002), stated that with constructivism, absolute realities are “unknowable,” (p. 15) and individual perspectives are the objects of inquiry. Creswell (2007) suggested that as participants view situations, meanings are formed through interactions with others. This perspective emphasizes that multiple realities exists because individuals experience the world from varied points of view.
Hatch (2002) stated that one’s knowledge is constructed symbolically and not objectively. As a result, reality is what one agrees it to be. The goal of the research, according to Creswell (2007) is to depend on the individual participant’s viewpoint of the identified situation. Consequently, the points of view are formed through the interactions of others. Hatch (2002) purported the impossibility of researchers to be objective. Creswell (2007) stated that the researcher positions themselves to recognize how their own life experiences are relative to interpretation. The researcher makes interpretations of what he/she finds by deriving meanings of his/her experiences. According to Creswell (2007) with constructivism, the researcher’s intent is to establish the meanings of others based on his/her realities. Hence, qualitative research is an interpretive research, (Creswell, 2007).

This research study is value-laden (axiology) and required the researcher to identify personal biases. The researcher is a practicing principal, and faces many challenges to insure that the daily functions of the school are carried out. The complexity of the job has progressed from my initial appointment. With the pressures and challenges to meet the AMO and AYP identified by the ALSDE, the researcher also share the experience (epistemology) and anxiety of meeting the challenges established yearly. The role of principal has placed emphasis on instructional leadership and building capacity amongst members with shared leadership (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2008).
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Alabama principals who have overcome the challenges of School Improvement status. According to the 2006 report by the CEP (2006), 11% of Alabama schools did not reach the AMOs. AMOs represents the percentage of students who must score proficient or advanced on English language arts and mathematics tests aligned with state content standards to attain AYP (CEP, 2011). As reported in 2011, 27% of Alabama schools did not attain AYP, resulting in 222 schools being placed in School Improvement status.

This qualitative research consisted of interviews with nine principals of schools previously designated as school improvement. The voices of stated participants are shared to contribute to the body of literature regarding principal leadership, high stakes assessments, and overcoming adversity in public schools.

Research Design

In an effort to record the voices, perspectives, and lived experiences of principals, qualitative research methods were used for this study. Hatch (2002) emphasized, “In qualitative work, the intent is to explore human behaviors within the contexts of their natural occurrence” (p. 7). This emergent design explored the lived experiences and beliefs of principals who have been in School Improvement designation and successfully emerged out of the School Improvement status and not re-entered. According to Creswell (2007) research conducted qualitatively seeks to use the researcher as the instrument. Patton (2002) states that qualitative inquiry best facilitates research that seek to discover individual’s perceptions of their experiences and the meanings they make of the
experiences. Qualitative research is based on real world occurrences and situations. With this qualitative inquiry, the researcher does not manipulate the phenomenon or setting. Patton (2002) shared that qualitative research is comprised of three methods. They are in-depth open-ended interviews, collection of written documents, and site observations. Data from participant observations, interviews, and artifacts related to the social phenomenon of School Improvement status were collected for this investigation (Hatch, 2002).

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Alabama principals who have overcome the challenges of School Improvement status, successfully progressed out of the School Improvement status, and not re-entered the designation. In phenomenology, lived experiences are comprised by the accounts and commonalities of multiple individuals (Creswell, 2007). According to Hatch (2002), researchers who utilize the phenomenological approach make an interpretation of the lived experiences shared and observed by the participants. Understanding the common and/or shared experiences is relevant to develop more meaning to the stated phenomenon. For a successful phenomenological investigation, Creswell (2007) has suggested collecting in-depth interviews with as many as 10 individuals. According to Kraus (2005), phenomenology provides the researcher with an opportunity to find out what people are doing, what people think they are doing, and the meanings behind those experiences.

**Participants and Site**

Participants for this study were selected utilizing purposeful sampling. In purposeful sampling, the participants and the site are chosen because they can deliberately inform understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).
This study specifically utilized criterion sampling. Since this study focused on principals who have overcome being in school improvement, the individuals studied have experienced this phenomenon. According to Creswell (2007), criterion sampling works well with individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon.

The Accountability Report issued by the ALSDE provided the listing of qualifying schools that met the previously stated criteria. The participants for this study consist of nine principals (three elementary school, three middle school, and three high school) of Alabama’s K-12 schools who also met the established criteria. The ALSDE’s Education Directory provided the names, mailing addresses, and email addresses of principals who met the specific criteria for the selection process.

The distinct and specific characteristics of each of the participants regarding the factors that included their individual school in School Improvement status were discussed and revealed explicitly. Basic characteristics observed from the Accountability Report from the ALSDE for elementary schools from being in School Improvement status from Year 2-Year 5 to overcoming the status included, but not limited to the subgroup for special education students, subgroup for free and reduced priced meals, participation, and failure to make AYP in reading. The middle school participants range from being in School Improvement status from Year 2-Year 4, included, but not limited to additional indicators of attendance and participation, subgroups of special education. Participants for high schools range from School Improvement Year1-Year 3 included but not limited to, participation and graduation rate.

The researcher selected nine principals from central Alabama. The participants were selected based on the established criteria of being the school principal when the
school did not meet the annual goals for AYP that resulted in School Improvement status. The principals’ ages ranged from 35-60 years. The educational background of the participants includes master’s degree, educational specialist degrees, and doctorate degrees.

Each location had its own special characteristic that made it unique from the others. All schools utilized in this study were public schools funded by the state of Alabama, while some received assistance from the federal government under the Title I federal program due to schools population of students receiving free or reduced meals.

**Data Collection**

For this phenomenological study, the researcher primarily collected data from in-depth interviews of participants. Hatch (2002) stated that qualitative researchers use interviewing to uncover meaning of participants’ experiences and make sense of their worlds. The researcher captured the thoughts of participants which brought richness and depth to the study. Depictions of the lived experiences of the participants contributed as rich examples of the research. Additional data forms collected include observations, documents, and audiovisual materials from the various sites. All interviews were conducted at the workplace of each principal participating in the study. The interviews were semi-structured to allow sufficient time for input from the principals. Prior to the semi-structured interview phase, permission from the participant’s superintendent to conduct the interview was granted. An email for consent to participate was sent to each participant’s superintendent for approval. When an email confirmation was not received a courtesy telephone call was placed to the superintendent’s office for approval. Upon consent
from district administrators, the researcher purposefully approached principals who were willing to participate in the study.

Upon identification of the participants, an introductory email for participation in the research study was submitted (Appendix A). When an email confirmation had not been received, a telephone conversation was conducted to obtain consent. The interview process was conducted with one-on-one interviews with participants in the fall of 2012 with each participant interview being completed prior to beginning the next to aid in the organization of the data analysis. The interviews were scheduled and conducted at a time and location convenient for the participants. A micro-sized tape recorder, with permission of the participant, was used to record the interviews. Careful consideration was made to test the recorder prior to the beginning of each interview. A participant data sheet (Appendix B) was used to obtain demographic information. The interview protocol (Appendix C) was utilized with open-ended questions and space to script responses. Open-ended questions were crafted to engage the participants in dialogue about their experiences and understandings. This approach ensured that each participant be asked the same questions for an opportunity for probing that could illicit emerging themes. This form of inquiry allowed the researcher to explore the phenomenon of School Improvement designation in depth. Initial interviews lasted approximately 60-75 min and were conducted at the participant’s school. Clarifying interviews were conducted on the telephone when needed. Nine interviews were conducted to insure credibility of the study. Interviews consisted of three elementary school principals, three middle school principals, and three high school principals to have varied perspectives of the phenomenon presented. Consent from the participants in the study was obtained prior to the interview. A consent form ap-
proved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, was provided for each local superintendent granting permission to conduct the study in the school district, as well as an informed consent being provided to the principals identified for the study (Appendix D). The purpose of the study, the amount of time needed to complete the interview, and plans for the interview results were discussed with each participant.

To minimize possibility of participants being identified, interviewees were assigned pseudonyms to maintain participant confidentiality. Participants were informed of the confidentiality of the proposed study. Upon concluding the interview process, interviewees were thanked for their participation and time devoted to the study.

**Data Analysis**

Hatch (2002) stated that data analysis “is a systematic search for meaning” (p. 148). In qualitative research, data analysis is the process used to elicit what has been learned by others. “Analysis means organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researcher to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationship, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories” (Hatch, 2002, p. 148).

Hatch (2002) referred to the process of data analysis process as asking questions of the data. Creswell (2007) suggested a three analysis strategy for qualitative research: (a) preparing to organize the data, (b) reducing the data in themes with coding, and (c) data being represented in tables, figures, or data, graphs, and charts.

Upon data being organized, Creswell (2007) suggested that transcripts be read several times in their entirety. After the completion of each interview, the researcher had
the audio tapes of each interview transcribed. Transcripts were read several times while listening to the audio tapes to ensure accuracy of the transcribed tape and capture the experiences of the participants. “Memoing” of field notes and transcripts with key concepts, short phrases, and ideas about the data and what should be done next was also employed (Creswell, 200). In an effort to suspend any personal experiences, presuppositions, and avoid interpretation, bracketing was used. Bracketing, as described by Hatch (2002) is a specific strategy used by the researcher for separating impressions, feelings, and interpretations from the data collected during qualitative research. The researcher relied on the descriptive details of the participants’ experiences of what was real. Reflections from the observations and interviews were recorded and kept separate from the data collected.

Once the data were organized, the researcher described the findings in detail, developed themes, and interpreted the data; along with expressing personal views of the phenomenon in order to establish biases (Creswell, 2007). Word recognition techniques were utilized to develop themes. The word repetition technique in which words that was often used a lot while conducting the in-depth interviews was noted. These repetitions indicated that those ideas were important, recurring themes. Key-words-in-context (KWIC) was another technique used to develop themes. In this technique, key words are identified and searched in the text to find all instances of the word or phrase. Contrasts and comparisons were also made of the participants shared experiences. Themes were essentially developed as a result. Creswell (2007) suggested reducing data collected in qualitative research by coding small manageable sets of themes, five to seven, to incorporate into the final analysis. Direct quotations and descriptions were included from the
participants. Transcripts were coded with pseudonyms provided for the participant. This coding gave organization to the responses.

**Validation Strategies**

Creswell (2007) purported validation as a means to assess accuracy of the data findings described by the researcher and participants. This process adds credibility and authenticity to the research. Creswell (2007) recommended that at least three validation strategies be used with qualitative research. This study utilized the following strategies to insure the credibility of the research: triangulation, member checking, external/internal audits, and peer debriefing.

**Triangulation**

This phenomenological study used one-on-one semi-structured interviewing methods, site observations, and collected documents to gather the lived experiences of the participants. This triangulation allowed the previously data collection methods to be merged into related themes. Hatch (2002) described this as a process of obtaining corroborating evidence from various sources in an effort to shed light on a theme or perspective. Each participant gave descriptive interviews related to the phenomenon and provided artifacts as documentation of their efforts. The site observations provided insight on the daily functions and duties of each principal and provided a hands-on experience for the researcher to see each school and participant in action.
**Member Checking**

In an effort to insure credibility, the participants’ views of the data collected were solicited during this process. According to Creswell (2007), member checking involves the researcher “taking data, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions back to participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (p. 208). Further, this process allowed the participants to play an active role in the process. After the interviews had been transcribed, drafts of the transcriptions were provided to each participant to insure accounts documented had not been misconstrued.

**External/Internal Audits**

According to Creswell (2007), external audits are another means to establish accuracy of the data. Creswell suggested the use of an external consultant; an individual who will serve objectively because he/she does not have a connection to the research study. The process allows the auditor to determine if the findings, analysis, and interpretation are supported by the data. Internal auditing occurred with members of the research committee providing a system of checks and balances. The auditors assisted to help identify biases and examined the analysis of the collected data. The feedback provided to the researcher by internal and external consultants proved beneficial to the study. According to Given (2008), audits are important to ensure consistency throughout the research process as multiple individuals will participate in the research across varied settings.
Peer Debriefing

The research utilized peer debriefing as a fourth method to establish accuracy and authenticity of the data. This method allowed the researcher’s peer to evaluate collected data. According to Creswell (2007), the peer remains honest with the researcher concerning the study, and allows the researcher to disclose any issues or concerns. Colleagues and members of the dissertation committee served in the capacity as debriefors. Emails and follow-up telephone calls were made to colleagues and dissertation members after data analysis had occurred. A journal was kept of each debriefing session for documentation.

Role of the Researcher

Being an educator, the researcher has varied perspectives with 18 years of both classroom experience as an elementary school teacher, and administrative experience as high school assistant principal, and elementary principal. After spending ten years as a fifth grade classroom teacher, the researcher realized early the importance of the results of the state’s standardized assessment. Fifth grade is an accountability grade in which annual measurable objectives are identified by the state’s high stakes assessment of the ARMT. The anxiety and pressure experienced throughout each school year became overwhelming at times. The researcher had personal motivation to never want it spoken that fifth grade’s scores caused the school to be identified with the School Improvement status. Therefore, she worked diligently during those years to ensure that would not occur. The collective efficacy of the elementary staff made a tremendous difference with
our students. AYP was maintained during my tenure, and the school has maintained the status ever since. Meanwhile, the experience at the secondary level was not as fruitful.

The researcher entered into the high school as an assistant principal. Accountability at the secondary level was far different from the elementary level. Educators at this level relied on the results of student performance on the Alabama High School Graduation Exam. The school had been identified with the school improvement status year 1 after my first year. The school’s principal began establishing protocols for each teacher to begin targeting those students that were struggling academically and having difficulty with performing on the state assessment. However, the conviction of the faculty was not consistently apparent. A sense of lethargy and defeat was often noted by many. The morale of the faculty was at an all-time low. The researcher remained at the school two years upon being advanced to the present position. With inconsistent leadership at the helm, the school has not overcome the state challenge and is now designated with the status of School Improvement year 5 in which sanctions have been placed by the ALSDE.

The challenge of meeting adequate yearly progress each year is a daunting task as the AMOs steadily increase and become more difficult to achieve with all students expected to be 100% proficient in reading and math by 2014. As an integral part of quality research, the researcher’s perceptions were imperative in constructing meaning and data analysis. The researcher’s personal biases as an educator were established from the outset.
Ethical Considerations

As the researcher of qualitative research, it is critical to protect all participants of this study. Hence, prior to conducting the research, the study was submitted to the IRB of the University of Alabama at Birmingham for review. Once approval had been granted by the IRB, the school systems for which the participants are employed were contacted via email (Appendix A). An explanation of the procedures was provided to each participant; along with risks and discomforts, benefits, and refusal to participate will be disclosed. Confidentiality of the research process was maintained by protecting the identity of the participants, data, and artifacts collected with a code number and pseudonym. Data and material collected were kept and secured in a locked metal cabinet. All identifiers were only known by the researcher. In addition, all transcripts, audio tapes, and data collected will be destroyed within three years of the conclusion of the study. A copy of the informed consent document was provided to each participant for complete details.

Summary

The purpose of this methods chapter was to provide a description of the research design utilized to explore the lived experiences of the principals who once faced the stated phenomenon of School Improvement status. Utilizing qualitative methods of interviewing participants rendered rich details regarding experiences related to the accountability movement. This study’s research design may offer significant contributions to the current literature of self-efficacy, resilience, and collective efficacy regarding the challenges of principals with the current standards reform of NCLB.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The findings of this qualitative study represent the perspectives and views of nine participating principals in central Alabama regarding their lived experiences of being designated with the School Improvement status. In an effort to obtain the principals’ experiences with the phenomenon, the following sub-questions were used to guide the study:

How do participating principals view their beliefs and core values while in school improvement?

How do daily school operations change for participating principals while being in school improvement?

What kinds of support are in place to overcome the challenges according to participating principals?

How do participating principals view effectuating change with faculty and students while in school improvement?

A total of nine participants were purposefully selected to participate in this study. Participants represented six school districts in five counties in central Alabama. This chapter presents an analysis of responses from semi-structured interviews, site observations conducted by the researcher, and documents and artifacts that reflect the practices of the participants. Data were collected from principals in three elementary schools, three middle schools, and three high schools are represented for this study. This chapter
begins with descriptions of the research setting and its participants. A discussion of the relevant themes revealed by the data concludes the chapter.

Based on participants’ interviews and quotes, the themes of accountability, high expectations, school culture, curriculum shifts, professional development, and pressures of the principalship emerged; a discussion of the relevant themes revealed by the data, along with descriptions of pertinent artifacts and school site visit observations will be shared relative to each sub questions.

**Context**

The study included nine principals across central Alabama. Interviews were conducted on school campuses or at other locations selected by the participants. The individuals in this study represented both elementary and secondary education. Elementary schools served grades K-8 (one school served grade K-8, one grade K-5, while another served grade 3-6). Secondary schools represented Middle School grade 6-8 and High Schools 9-12. One school served students grade 6-12. The administrative experience of the participants at the selected school ranged from four years to 13 years as principal. However, the years of total administrative experience ranged from 8t years to 25 years.

School populations varied among districts. Student enrollment ranged from 301 students to 968 students. The participating schools were unique with diverse student populations in both urban and rural settings. Schools were either predominately African American or predominately Caucasian. Student demographics in the urban districts were predominately African American, while in the rural county districts, predominately Caucasian. Eight of the nine schools were identified as Title I schools in which federal fund-
ing is received to assist schools with resources for schools with majority student populations of at-risk and/or low income students. Each school met the study criteria of prior designation with the School Improvement status for not meeting the required state standards and obtaining AYP according to NCLB. Three of the participating schools failed to make AYP and had been in School Improvement Year 1, four of the participating schools failed to make AYP and had been in School Improvement Year 2, one school had been in School Improvement Year 3, while the remaining school had been in School Improvement Year 7.

Research Sites

School 1. School 1 was an elementary school with grades 3-6 located in an urban area of central Alabama. The student population was 300 predominately Caucasian students with 78.5% of students receiving free and reduced priced meals. There was 30 staff members employed at the school. The school was located in the middle of the residential community surrounded by middle class homes. Most students either walked or rode in cars to school. The school did not make AYP in the areas of Special Education Reading Proficiency (SERP) in 2006 and received School Improvement Year 1 in 2007. The school met all of its goals for AYP in 2009 and was removed from School Improvement Year 1 designation.

School 2. School 2 was a high school with grades 6-12 located in a rural area of central Alabama. The student population was 337 predominately Caucasian students with 81.6% of students receiving free and reduced priced meals. There was 43 staff members
employed at the school. Located on a country road, this school was surrounded by open fields of land. Neighboring homes were quite a distance away from the school. Most of the students arrived to school on the school bus. The school did not make AYP in 2007 due to the graduation rate of 70% and received School Improvement Year 1 in 2008. The school met all of its goals for AYP in 2010 and was removed from School Improvement Year 1 designation.

**School 3.** School 3 was a middle school with grades 6-8 located in an urban area of central Alabama. The student population was 360 predominately African American students with 84.3% students receiving free and reduced priced meals. There was 40 staff members employed at the school. This school was located in a residential area of middle class homes. A local shopping center was located within blocks of the school. The school did not make AYP in 2004 in all areas of Reading Proficiency, Math Proficiency, SERP, Black student participation, and free/reduced meal participation and received School Improvement Year 1 in 2005. The school met all of its goals for AYP in 2007 and was removed from School Improvement Year 2 designation.

**School 4.** School 4 was an elementary school with grades K-5 located in an urban area of central Alabama. The student population was 324 predominately African American students with 97% of students receiving free and reduced priced meals. The school was located on one of the busiest streets in the community. Many of the homes surrounding the school were considered rental properties. There was 34 staff members employed at the school. The majority of the students either walked to school or rode in cars. The
school did not make AYP under NCLB in 2003 in the area of Reading Proficiency; however, it had been identified negatively for not meeting state standards on the previous high stakes assessment since 1999. As a result, the school was in School Improvement Year 6 in 2003. The school met all its goals for AYP in 2006 and was removed from School Improvement Year 7 designation.

**School 5.** School 5 was a high school with grades 9-12 located in a rural area of central Alabama. The student population was 659 predominately Caucasian students with 22.7% of students receiving free and reduced priced meals. There was 42 staff members employed at the school. The school did not make AYP in 2005 due to graduation rate of 81% and received School Improvement Year 1 in 2006. The school made met all of its goals for AYP in 2009 and was removed from School Improvement Year 2 designation.

**School 6.** School 6 was a middle school with grades 6-8 located in an urban area of central Alabama. The student population was 600 predominately African American students with 83.8% of students receiving free and reduced priced meals. Located in the middle of the residential community, the school could be seen from the area highway. Most students were bused to school, with a few students walking to their homes or riding in cars. The school did not make AYP in 2004 in Reading Proficiency, Math Proficiency, SERP, and all student participation of Black, White, and free/reduced priced meals and received School Improvement Year 1 in 2005. The school met all of its goals for AYP in 2007 and was removed from School Improvement Year 2 designation.
School 7. School 7 was a middle school with grades 6-8 located in an urban area of central Alabama. The student population was 350 predominately African American students with 85.4% of students receiving free and reduced priced meals. The school was the only middle school in the district. Located in the middle of the residential community, many students either walked to school or rode in cars. The school did not make AYP in 2007 in Reading Proficiency, Math Proficiency and SERP and received School Improvement Year 1 in 2008. The school met all of its goals for AYP in 2011 and was removed from School Improvement Year 1 designation.

School 8. School 8 was an elementary school with grades K-8 located in an urban area. The student population was 409 predominately African American students with 96% of students receiving free and reduced priced meals. The school was located in the middle of a residential community. The school was the center of the community. The school did not make AYP in 2004 in SERP and Special Education Math Proficiency and received School Improvement Year 1 in 2005. The school met all of its goals for AYP in 2010 and was removed from School Improvement Year 3 designation.

School 9. School 9 was a high school with grades 9-12 located in an urban area of central Alabama. The student population was 968 predominately African American with 82.2% of students receiving free and reduced priced meals. The newly built and attractive school was visible from the main interstate of the state. The school did not make AYP in 2007 in Reading Proficiency of students – Black, free/reduced meals, and the graduation rate and received School Improvement Year 1 in 2008. The school met all of its goals for
AYP in 2011 and was removed from School Improvement Year 2 designation. Table 1 provides descriptions of the research sites.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>Staff Population</th>
<th>Title I School</th>
<th>Demographic Area</th>
<th>School Improvement Status</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3-6</td>
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<td>968</td>
<td>123</td>
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<td>Year 2</td>
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</table>

Participants

The nine participants in this study represent a purposeful sample of Alabama school administrators. Each was employed in the same school district in which he or she originally served as principal. Eight continue to serve as building principal, while one administrator had recently received a position as a central office administrator. The principals had been at their respective school from 4 years to 18 years. Each participant had had previous administrative experience as an assistant principal and each held advanced degrees. Four individuals have a doctorate degree, three have an education specialist degree, and two have a Master’s degree in educational leadership. Seven of the nine participants were male. Pseudonyms were provided to each participant to protect confidentiality. Table 2 provides descriptions of the participants.
Table 2

Description of the Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Highest Degree Earned</th>
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<th>Administrative Experience</th>
<th>Research Site</th>
<th>At the school before SI</th>
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<td>Ed.D.</td>
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<tr>
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<td>M.Ed.</td>
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<td>9-Urban</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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</table>

Nelvin is a 38 year old African American male. He is the principal of an elementary school with students in grades 3-6. Nelvin had been principal of the school for 5 years after initially being designated as the interim principal. Prior to his administrative experience, Nelvin had classroom teaching experience as a middle school social studies teacher. Nelvin brought a sense of order to the school. A no-nonsense guy, Nelvin was working towards his doctorate degree in educational leadership at the local university.

Bailey is a 48 year old Caucasian male. He is the principal of a high school with students in grades 6-12. Bailey had been principal of the school for 5 years after being hand selected by the superintendent to “run the school.” Prior to his administrative experience, Bailey had had classroom teaching experience as a high school band teacher. His
entire educational career had been in the same district. Bailey brought a sense of purpose and relevance to the school. He and the school had been recognized nationally for his efforts with curricular changes. Bailey was working towards his education specialist degree at the local university.

Caroline is a 38 year old African American female. She is the principal of a middle school with students in grades 6-8. Caroline has been principal of the school for 6 years. Prior to her administrative experience, Caroline had classroom teaching experience as a language arts teacher. Her entire educational career has been in the same district. Caroline was very instrumental in developing the school into one of the top three middle schools in the district. Her aspirations are to be a central office administrator.

Frederick is a 54 year old African American male. He was the principal of an elementary school with students in grades K-5. Frederick had been principal of the school for 9 years. Prior to his administrative experience, Frederick had classroom teaching experience as an elementary aide, physical education teacher, and school counselor. He also holds a jurist doctorate degree; however, he is not engaged with its practice. Frederick was the only principal who was no longer in the position as principal. He had received a promotion as a central office administrator.

Henry is a 57 year old African American male. He is the principal of a high school with students in grades 9-12. Henry has been principal of the school for 11 years and had previously been the assistant principal at the same school. Henry’s soft spoken voice reflects his classroom teaching experience as a librarian and special education teacher. Henry resides in the same community in which he was raised as a child and re-
ceived his elementary and secondary education. After teaching for 23 years in his home school district, Henry received his doctorate degree in educational leadership.

Adam is a 45 year old African American male. He is the principal of a middle school with students in grades 6-8. Adam has been principal of the school for 3 years. Prior to his administrative experience, Adam had had classroom teaching experience as a middle school social studies teacher. Adam received his education in a northern state and received a college football scholarship. After his 4 years of college education and football, Adam was drafted into the National Football League. Donning a Superbowl Championship ring on his finger, Adam has a stern, positive, yet motivating personality. As quoted in a newspaper article from his college days, Adam always desired to be a principal and to return to his passion for educating children.

William is a 38 year old African American male. He is the principal of a middle school with students in grades 6-8. William has been principal of the school for three years. Prior to his administrative experience, William had had classroom teaching experience as a high school language arts teacher. While short in stature, William’s sense of school pride is evident with his perky attitude. William is working towards his doctorate degree in educational leadership at the local university.

Melissa is a 56 year old African American female. She is the principal of an elementary school with students in grades K-8. With more than 30 years of experience as an educator in the same school district, Melissa’s classroom teaching was as a special education teacher. Her positive attitude illuminates the room and throughout the building. Melissa’s energetic spirit and passion is only rivaled by her motorcycle parked in the principal parking space. Melissa indicated that she had completed her tenure as a true ad-
vocate for her school. She plans to retire from her position as principal at the end of the school year and travel around the states on her motorcycle.

Harry is a 46 year old African American male. He is the principal of a high school with students in grades 9-12. Harry has been principal of the school for 11 years. Prior to his administrative experience, his classroom teaching experience was as a special education teacher. A big, husky man, Harry displays a positive, confident, humorous, no-nonsense personality. Harry has a reputation in his school and district of saying what he wants to say, when he wants to say it, often without a filter. Harry advocates for his school and only wants the best for his school and students. Harry constantly referenced his love for his students.

Table 2 presents the demographic information pertinent of each participant. Data of the participants are provided to display information pertinent to the study.

**Themes**

Semi-structured interviews conducted with participants, along with artifacts provided by participants, helped establish clear themes related to the manner in which principals overcome the challenges of school improvement designation. Hatch (2002) described data analysis a systematic search for meaning. As analysis occurs, the researcher is able to identify patterns, themes, relationships, and make interpretations of the data. Hatch (2002) emphasized, “In qualitative work, the intent is to explore human behaviors within the contexts of their natural occurrence” (p. 7). Creswell (2007) noted that qualitative research begins with inquiry of a problem-social or human- and its assumptions and world views by using a theoretical framework. Data are collected utilizing various meth-
ods such as interviews, observations, and documents. According to Creswell (2007), phenomenology describes the shared lived experiences for several individuals. The concept focuses on commonalities of the individuals who experience the stated phenomenon. Creswell (2007) identified this form of research focuses on what was experienced and how it was experienced. Researchers consider an “abiding concern” (p. 31) that interests them, reflects on essential themes, and write a description of it.

The goal for data analysis was to identify themes that expressed the participants’ experiences. In an effort for each participant’s voice to be heard regarding overcoming the negative stigma of School Improvement status, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted, artifacts relative to the experience were collected, and school site visits and walkthroughs occurred. Transcriptions of the data provide evidence of the statements by each participant. As a result of this triangulation, 6 themes and 19 sub-themes emerged. The six major themes were Accountability, High Expectations/Commitment to Success, School Culture, Curriculum Shifts, Professional Development, and Pressures of the Principalship. The following section details each participant’s thoughts and ideas as related to overcoming School Improvement designation. Themes and sub-themes that emerged from the study can be found in Table 3.
### Table 3

**Summary of Themes and Sub Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Instructional Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State Intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Expectations/Commitment to Success</td>
<td>Data-Driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus on Student Achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Culture</td>
<td>Maintain Order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Establish Discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Monitoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Team Building and Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Shifts</td>
<td>Focus on Standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Common Assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intentional Behaviors of Best Practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>Research Based Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internal and External Supports</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Professional Learning Communities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pressures of the Principalship</td>
<td>Increased responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beliefs and Values</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Accountability

The establishment of NCLB created many challenges for educators in public education. As high stakes assessments became mandatory, the responsibilities of the building principal became more demanding. The theme of accountability emerged among all par-
Participants indicated that since NCLB, accountability was a major factor in their role as principal during the School Improvement designation. The role of accountability had caused a major shift with the daily practice of Melissa and Frederick while the school was designated with School Improvement status. Both participants expressed the necessity of changing thinking and actions during those critical years. Melissa boldly stated, “Being in School Improvement as the principal, it makes you be honest about where you are and to face where you are.” From her initial experience with the School Improvement status, she recalled having to put a plan of action into place. Melissa acknowledged that central office is “concerned with did you make AYP or didn’t you” Melissa said as a leader being in School Improvement was not a good look or a good feel. “It starts with me.”

Frederick described his change in mindset and said the situation made him a better instructional leader. Frederick articulated, “I know that if anything had to change, it would have to begin with me. See, I’m the principal, I’m the instructional leader.” Frederick said it was important that he become the agent of change and that being in School Improvement made it happen.

In the past, the major role of the school principal was as school manager. Ensuring the daily building operations were maintained was the main job duty of the principal prior to NCLB. However, with the mandates of NCLB, instructional leadership became the major role of the principalship. This was affirmed by Nelvin who passionately stated:

I had to start holding the teachers accountable; because it’s in those classrooms where the rubber meets the road. No one wants the state to come in and tell you need to do this, you need to do that. No, we’ve got to get up and do it for our children. Teach our children. That’s what we get paid to do.
When asked for additional information, Nelvin said that “many resisted” his approach, but this showed to him who really “had a heart” for the children.

William’s initial experience with the School Improvement designation was similar to Nelvin’s experience. He stated that the ultimate responsibility of everything “is a reflection of me.” When asked about his role, William expressed a sense of ownership by stating, “Does it mean that my teachers did not have a part, of course not. But I’m the instructional leader so the accountability ultimately lies with me.”

Bailey, Harry, and Henry expressed that communicating the importance of accountability as the instructional leader to the faculty was instrumental for change to occur. Bailey recalled conversations with his faculty of being in School Improvement and how they arrived at this point. Reinforcing the importance of documentation, Bailey recalled the conversation he had had with his staff, “Okay, let’s get the accountability documentation in place and work with that-our CIP (continuous improvement plan).” Bailey’s faculty used the information of the CIP to drive everything they did. Even though the faculty knew there was a little more involvement from individuals affiliated with the State Department of Education, their focus had to be to make sure the problem was being addressed.

Harry, in particular, spoke with teachers about his observations and the CIP’s connection to instruction. He acknowledged his role of monitoring instructional time and admitted that the accountability of School Improvement caused him to pay more attention to details with his faculty:

It’s all about the classroom. I had to monitor instruction more closely. If a teacher is out 15 days, that is 15 days of no instruction. So, I had to get a grip on that. Monitor, monitor, monitor. Prior to being in School Improvement I had not really focused on monitoring.
Henry’s view of the initial process was quite different from the others. Although the school was academically sound, conveying the information to his faculty about the areas for improvement was critical. Henry passionately expressed his views, “It helped me to reinforce the instruction that we were already doing. It helped me to look at it and evaluate what they are doing. And for me, that was a plus; even though we were in School Improvement.”

Another key point of accountability was expressed by five participants. Melissa, William, Bailey, Henry, and Harry discussed anxiety as a life experience of the School Improvement designation. Reflecting on her initial notification of not making AYP, Melissa poignantly said:

I remember like it was yesterday when I got my results. My superintendent handed me my results and I cried. I boo-hooed in front of everybody. It was one of the worst times for me because we had worked so hard.

Melissa recalled the day she received the news of her school being designated with School Improvement status that many of her colleagues rendered compassion and support because of her emotional state. She attributed that moment of receiving the news to her change in focus.

Anxiety was an understatement for William as he relayed the same type of anguish as Melissa even though he was still a fairly new principal. William said, “I felt that no matter what, I had to prove myself and prove to myself that we can be and do better than the numbers said we were.” The participants acknowledged the mere presence of the negative connotation of School Improvement added stress and anxiety to their lives. Bailey discussed his initial stressful experience, “We (faculty/staff) already knew we weren’t going to make AYP because we knew what our enrollment was. It was difficult because
we saw the handwriting on the wall.” As a secondary principal, Henry related to Bailey’s experience of student attendance and drop out. Maintaining a sound academic foundation was not a challenge for Henry. Rather, the problem was student retention. Henry raised the question, “How in the world we can keep these kids in school when they’ve already made up their mind that they will drop out?” Another secondary principal, Harry, said that he also felt stress from the outset. According to Harry the negative phrase “School Improvement” was enough to make anyone feel “less than adequate.” At the same time, Harry could redirect his negative reaction, “It made me do a gut check. Made me feel tough and say we have a better school from what the state and district said about us. It put us against the world.”

All of the participants experienced challenges while dealing with the School Improvement designation. Principals recalled both positive and negative experiences that occurred striving toward AYP. Four of the nine principals had especially unique and challenging situation since they were strategically placed at the school due to the unsatisfactory performance on the high stakes assessment and the school facing School Improvement status. Two of the four principals shared the same negative views about their initial placements. Nelvin unequivocally articulated his disdain for his initial placement, “To be honest with you, I didn’t want to be here.” According to Nelvin, the school was viewed negatively by the district, community, and even by the faculty and staff of the school. Nelvin recalled from an initial faculty survey he conducted that many of the teachers “did not want to be here.” Based on these statements, Nelvin said, “I knew I had my work cut out for me.” Caroline had similar views as Nelvin regarding her placement.
Caroline expressed a sense of resentment as she reflected on the superintendent’s decision to place her:

I was not given an option of whether to come or not. And when that happened, I purposely did not want to come. The school was not in a good place and I didn’t want to start work until two days before school started. I did not want to come here. So I took vacation days and sick days to decide on what I was going to do.

Conversely, Adam had positive views with his school placement. Believing that it was a testament to his hard work at other schools, he considered the placement to be a unique challenge:

The staff was expecting great things, because they knew what I had already accomplished at other schools. I basically just faced they wanted me to turn the school around. And even though I didn’t want to come, the kids deserved more.

In summary, all of the study participants identified the role of accountability and the demands of principal leadership to be the basic premise for providing a solid foundation for the academic development of all students. Although challenging, the principals regarded their School Improvement status as an opportunity to become better instructional leaders with a more distinct purpose.

**High Expectations/Commitment to Success**

The second theme that emerged from this study was the importance of having expectations. As expressed by participants, communicating clear, high expectations of student success was critical to having a mindset to overcome adversity. Educational researchers have established high expectations as a key component for effective schools. All of the participants agreed that establishing high expectations had to be initiated by them. The resolve for academic success was communicated from each principal to his or
her respective faculties, parents, and students. For Henry, this meant meeting with his faculty and letting them know, “I have full faith in my staff and what we believe in and what we do.” Henry reassured his faculty of their academic stability, but acknowledged that a more strategic focus should be placed on the dropout rate. By focusing more attention on the identified deficiencies, Henry enlisted his faculty to become change agents themselves. This proved to be crucial for overcoming the designation of School Improvement designation.

Frederick asserted, “As (the) leader I have to lead by example, stating my expectations and having confidence in the value of teachers and students.” Similarly, Caroline said, “My expectations were laid down immediately and some things there were non-negotiable, and at that time there were a lot of non-negotiables. But we worked through it.”

**Data driven decisions.** Participants noted that data were used to lead their practice and reinforced their expectations. Three high school principals shared the same dilemma of meeting AYP for graduation rate. Bailey’s data were the driving focus for his school. When asked how data transformed his school Bailey said that data were the “driving force” for change within his school. According to Bailey, the reality that students were no longer coming to school had to be addressed with the faculty. Bailey simply said, “We didn’t have the students.” With data made available to all, Bailey and his faculty members decided to assess their existing programs and establish expectations for all students. By using the data to inform instruction, Bailey’s school team decided, “We need to
change because our test scores are dwindling as the annual measurable objectives increased.” The most compelling evidence was a complete change with their curriculum.

Both Henry and Harry described their data review as significant factors in changing perceptions of not only teachers, but students as well. Harry reminded his faculty that there had be a purpose for everything they did; in order to make a positive impact he had to have their “buy in.” According to Harry, “After school tutoring and Saturday school became mandatory for all failing student and Harry was at school every Saturday to show the students his support. Harry said to these students and teachers, “We’re all in this together and this is what we’re going to do to show them we are better than this!”

In order to address student achievement, Henry and his faculty had to contend with the needs of the many students who came from homes in which family members dropped out before completing high school. Recognizing family circumstances as a major factor to retention, the faculty had to make difficult decisions on how to address individual student circumstances. Attention to the data initiated their turn around success. Henry stated, “We looked at each student, identified them by name, and if they failed two or more portions of the graduation exam we forced them into remediation.” Just as Harry, Henry identified that because the students saw they cared enough to make those changes it made a difference. In both Harry and Henry’s schools, students saw that the principals and teachers cared enough to make difficult decisions, and these changes lead to significant improvements.

William’s efforts to review data also lead student achievement. After identifying what was best or his students, William decided to add a course to the master schedule. He said, “We built a period for intervention for those targeted students who had not met the
standards with either Level III or Level IV on the ARMT.” The specific targeting would allow the teachers and students to be aware of specific skill deficiencies so that they could address them. This additional course proved to be successful. William stated emphatically, “If we had not done that, we would still be in School Improvement. It made all the difference!”

**Focus on student achievement.** Curriculum efforts that focused on student achievement were also described by many of the participants. In particular, Caroline reflected on how massive the change was in terms of scope:

Pretty much everything had to change from scheduling with core subjects and electives, to where actual classrooms were (located). I moved classrooms so that there could be a flow from reading to language, math to science, and math to social studies. The goal was if you’re working on the same standard the students could leave one class and go to another class addressing the same standards.

Although some of the faculty was resistant to the changes implemented by Caroline, it was all done, “In the best interest of the children.” Some of the curriculum changes caused several of the teachers to request transfers. However, Caroline was quick to point out by, “If they weren’t willing to make changes for the students we didn’t need them to hinder the progress.”

Nelson’s response also supported the curriculum focus on student achievement. Nelson indicated that change is inevitable and could not see how continuing to do the same things would give you different results. With that in mind, Nelson inquired about programs to help teachers with best practices. For Nelson, student engagement was crucial:
We required the teachers to do best practice strategies, agendas, and objectives posted on the board every day, student engagement. My philosophy was you’re a certified teacher so I know you can teach, but I want to see the students involved. I want to see the students engaged. That’s what I want to see every day, student engagement.

Just like Caroline, Nelson also had teachers who resisted changes. However, in addition to requests for transfers, Nelson identified four of these teachers and said it was best because, “It was unfair to the children. They deserved better and I wanted better for them.”

**School Culture**

The relevance of school culture emerged from each participant’s interview. Principals identified establishing positive school culture as vital for them while overcoming the challenges of being designated with School Improvement status. Four of the nine participants were specifically chosen by the superintendent to lead their respective school and charged with moving their school out of School Improvement.

Caroline noted out that her superintendent not only charged her to move the school out of school improvement but to also change the culture of the school. She emphatically said, “I didn’t want to come here. This school was out of control and everybody in the district knew it.” She described the negative reputation of the school before she arrived as disorderly, unsafe, and unproductive. Reflecting on an initial meeting she had with the faculty, Caroline said:

> If you don’t have control in the classroom, if students and teachers are not safe, how can any teaching and learning be (sic) going on? There can’t be! So, I had to establish school wide discipline and maintain order with the school. I started with the teachers by telling them I don’t supervise students, I supervise adults. So there had to be a change in the classroom.
Caroline knew change would not be overnight and automatic. However, she stated, “It was as if the students wanted the structure—they knew they needed it. It was the adults that had the problems with the changes.” Caroline admitted that it took some time for everyone to “get on board,” but everyone eventually got there.

Being at a very small school, Bailey discussed the lack of commitment from parents and students. He disclosed, “It was nothing for students to just leave the school during the day. Literally, leave—not be checked out.” Bailey said that type of behavior was the norm because the “Students had no interest in school.” Bailey indicated that his efforts to change began with trying to reach the parents. A parent meeting was held to set expectations for both students and parents. Bailey said, “I remember parents coming to me and thanking me for showing concern for their children.” He said that this meeting was the turning point in the school.

Similarly, Nelson recalled how his school suffered before his arrival: At the time I got here there was no organization, no structure, or anything. There wasn’t even a handbook! The teachers were trying to survive. Discipline was out of control and the teachers felt they didn’t have any support. So basically, my first year was trying to get structure in the school.

Nelson said his focus had to be on the basics with establishing rules, expectations, and order in the school. He noted that a few teachers were not in favor of his aggressive actions, but they knew it was needed.

Adam further equated the importance of school culture with school success. Reminding me that he was chosen by the superintendent to change the school because it was “out of control,” Adam asserted:

We can talk about the test and the standards all day, but none of that means anything if you can’t control the culture of the school. This school was haywire the year before I came, but… we had to get order first before we could do anything.
Henry’s perspective of the importance of culture for his school was different from the others. The culture he was concerned with was not discipline, but came from the community. Having a traditionally high dropout rate within the community, it was changing the community culture that would prove to be challenging. Henry passionately described his concerns about a legacy of family dropouts:

The thing we had to deal with more so was trying to break family traits and traditions and improve the need for education in the families that tend to be traditional drop outs. That was a major factor that we had to overcome or address. Along with that we had to deal with teen pregnancy. They would have the babies, but not come back. So those were our factors.

Just like Bailey, Henry found a parent meeting to discuss the dropout rate was imperative. Parent attendance at these meetings became mandatory during the time in which they were under School Improvement status. Proud at the accomplishment of the parent meetings, Henry emphasized, “Since we had parent meetings, we have made some tremendous gains. We still have to deal with the family traditions, but we try to intervene sooner.”

Many of the principals mentioned student monitoring as a key component related to change in school culture. Participants said that the status of school improvement forced them to pay more attention to student data. Harry mentioned the role of data and its relevancy:

Our data meetings became more relevant. We had names to go with the numbers regarding struggling students. Our walk-throughs became more focused and strategic. I checked lesson plans and student pacing charts. I had taken the mentality that I had to inspect what I expected.
Frederick further supported the notion of monitoring. Prior to being designated with the School Improvement status, Frederick admitted he looked at data differently. He said:

I was very strict. Every lesson plan I went over. After establishing expectations as it relates to every aspect of the school and processes, everybody understands what’s required of them and you make sure that you’re fair and just and monitoring and reviewing the needs of the students and the teachers.

Henry’s faculty decided to look at student monitoring differently. They decided to personally address students that were not meeting the standards. A more hands-on approach became important. According to Henry:

Each faculty member had at least one student that had been assigned to them to help monitor and mentor. They were students that had not passed the exam. This way our students had at least one person they can contact about any issues as it related to academics and the need to pass the test successfully. When we decided to do this the faculty was on board! We continue this today and it still works!

Team building was another important characteristic identified by participants. All participants agreed that collaboration and team building were major components in overcoming the status of School Improvement. An example of this was provided by William, “One thing I had to get across to the faculty was that we were all in this together.” The importance of team building became more apparent as he continued to reflect on the experience. In realizing his role to help motivate the staff, William recalled, “We had to be honest about our practices and the changes we needed to get out of the predicament we were in.” William recognized that conversation sparked the faculty to do more and work more as a team of teachers rather than as individual teachers.

With regards to collaboration, Harry asserted, “I used the teachers to talk to each other. The faculty was on board for changes for the most part. Those that felt overworked
and overwhelmed, I used my leadership team to assist me in supporting them.” Harry recognized that collegial influence had an impact on his staff. He continues to use this strategy to this day.

In an effort to build trust and comradeship, two principals incorporated a faculty excursion to enhance their collaborative efforts. Caroline noted:

I informed (the teachers) that it was a team building trip. We will be going out to eat, dressing alike, and doing some real trust building things. A venue was located and we had a good time. It gave us time to build relationships and plan for change the upcoming year.

Nelson also recalled a faculty trip meant for professional development resulted in fostering collaboration:

We rented a van and went to Birmingham, stayed in a hotel, ate together and had conversations to get to know one another. The conversations we had were amazing and developed friendships… when we came back it just spilled over into the new school year.

While facing the negative connotations of School Improvement designation, the principals viewed it as essential that all members within the school were working towards the same goal of student achievement. The movement for change began with the leadership. Establishing a positive school culture was recognized as crucial for effective long lasting change.

**Curriculum Shifts**

Administrator knowledge of curriculum was described as essential for implementing changes as needed. Study participants espoused an attitude that current curriculum practices had to change in order to attain the desired positive results they were seeking to remove the School Improvement designation. Adam, along with many of the other partic-
participants, indicated that a familiarity with the standards was paramount in order to move beyond the negative stigma associated with the status of School Improvement. Adam recalled, “I basically remembered what worked for me as a teacher. The biggest thing is to look at and know the standards, find examples that address the standards and identify outcomes.” Adam admitted that it was a challenge for the faculty to realize the importance of knowing the standards and teaching the standards.

Other statements from the participants mirrored these sentiments. Bailey focused more on the standards, as well as his faculty’s approach to teaching the standards. Bailey completed changed his curriculum approach favor of Project Based Learning (PBL). He stated, “We knew we needed to do something different here. We had to get our kids engaged and excited about school. The priority of needs for project based learning really works for us.” Henry also spoke positively about identifying the standards as essential and ensuring that all of the courses were standards driven. Henry briefly described the focus of their curriculum:

First of all, all of our courses and everything are standards driven. We are not projected oriented type of classes… where you know you get points for projects that may not be beneficial to you academically. We build our students’ writing with a lot of science papers, math papers, and a lot of hands on manipulatives and activities to ensure students have the concepts.

Nelson also acknowledged the importance of implementing the teaching strategies of the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) with his school. Nelson stated, “Most of the teachers realized the importance of changing what had always been done and changing to using best practices to help our students.” He admitted those strategies made big impacts on the students. Melissa recalled the use of extra tutors as a big component of her curricu-
lum changes. “We were able to get extra support for our students and small group instruction with tutoring.”

**Common Assessments.** Utilizing common assessments across grade levels and content areas were also utilized as a result of curriculum changes. Participants had created a systematic approach to monitoring student progress and purchased various programs for regular formative assessments. The principals indicated that regularly assessing students using the same format as the high stakes assessment was critical. Most had either purchased the formative assessments from ThinkLink, STI Achievement, and/or Classworks. The use of these common assessments provided on-going data that could be utilized to spark dialogue during data meetings regarding specific standards of mastery and non-mastery. The principals indicated this focus allowed teachers to specifically target student needs that ultimately made a difference with the high stakes assessment. William noted, “Everyone has a data binder with each student. We know the specific standard they have not mastered and we’re able to target the specific skills. Having the extra data really helped us with remediation and intervention.”

**Professional Development**

All participants agreed that professional development was the key to continued success. Many spoke of their personal experiences with individuals who were assigned from the state to provide professional development. Harry spoke candidly about some of his negative experiences:

> It would depend on the people that came in and if they really wanted to help us… because some of them didn’t. Some came and scrutinized and
portrayed to us that we had nothing going on. If something was said that I didn’t like I was very vocal about it. However, for those that came really wanting to help us address our issues of graduation I was receptive to their ideas.

Frederick’s experience with the information gained from these meetings was quite different. He said that the experience for him was career changing:

School Improvement was the best thing in the world under the worst conditions. I could have never paid to receive all that kind of training and education that I received during that time nor could the teachers. We received professional development on reading best practices and strategies, assessments, classroom management… everything there is to become a successful school we went through it. And with that information it was beneficial.

Participants spoke of the positive external support provided by their district office. Nelson provided an example as he praised his district office personnel, “They were 100% supportive. That was one of the things I asked about when they wanted me to come here. I wanted to know they would support me with resources, with teachers, with parents…and they have!” William concurred, “Central office has been supportive in trying to assist me with whatever I needed. They’ve been there for me. Henry spoke of the positive support, however, he also added, “To be honest with you, as far as central office was concerned, you know, they have to do this dog and pony show for Montgomery to cooperate with the state. But…they have been supportive.” Melissa added, “I had excellent support. At that time I could call the curriculum director and tell her what I needed and ideas and she would make it happen.”

Many participants mentioned the concept of professional learning communities which resulted from being placed on School Improvement. Prior to the effects of high stakes assessment, the principals all admitted the data were mere numbers. However, the School Improvement designation forced them to have meaningful discussions with those
data, and this process began with professional learning communities (PLCs). Caroline recalled introducing the PLC concept to the faculty:

At the time, the teachers were so far removed from data I had established data teams to show them what to look for and how to read and interpret the data. This was done during our PLCs in which we had a specific PD focus of reading and math. During the PLCs, the teachers became empowered because it gave them opportunity to share strategies that worked.

William also advocated for PLCs, “We would have our data binder, look at the numbers, look at the students, and share best practice strategies for everyone to be successful.” It allowed everyone an opportunity to help their colleague and receive help as well.

**Pressures of the Principalship**

The final theme to emerge from the study was pressures of the principalship. Participants acknowledged that the day-to-day duties of the principalship are tremendous. However, having conviction with their own values allowed them to persevere. Throughout this process, seven of the nine principals affirmed that their beliefs and core values did not change while their school was designated with School Improvement status. The majority stated their views had not changed, but they had become more focused. Bailey acknowledged:

My beliefs and values didn’t really change about what I believe in education and what’s right for kids. The only thing that did change was my view on how the system works now that I’m an administrator. Other than that, nothing has changed.

Henry affirmed, “At that time my values and beliefs were the same level because we have always done well academically.” Henry emphatically shared, “Let me tell you something, it made me do a gut check. Made me look at myself. And if anybody tells you it didn’t affect them, they *(sic)* lying!” Adam boastfully described his beliefs:
They did not change at all. Again, my firm belief was we’re not going to achieve anything at this school until I can get students walking in a straight line, not having food fights, and disciplinary issues and students loving to come to school and teachers loving to come to work. Once we get that done, then we can start teaching. That’s been my belief since day one coming here!

Participants of the study admitted that most pressure was placed by them individually. Although the challenge to overcome the adversity was given from each district’s superintendent, ensuring the success wore heavily on the principals. Frederick admitted pulling his team together to persevere was challenging. Five of the nine principals referred to NCLB and its demands at the time as instrumental. Melissa referred to the unrealistic expectations and pressure of NCLB. She stated her disappointment with unrealistic benchmarks and principal jobs being lost because of student performance and not meeting standards. She stated, “That was pressure like none other.” However, the principals acknowledged that their focus should not have been on the legislation. When participants shifted their attention from the legislation to the students that was when change began to happen.

**Site Observations**

Site observations at each facility provided additional insights regarding how each school had been able to maintain their AYP status during these years of accountability. Artifacts collected from participants also provided support for these principals’ ability to be successful.

The sites selected for this study were based on the principals meeting the established criteria. The researcher’s initial encounter at the school set the tone for each visit. The environments of each building visited were welcoming, inviting, and cordial. The
secretarial staff of most schools greeted everyone who entered the office with a smile. One school had other visitors in the building observing the campus and students with their project based learning. The researcher was able to join one of the groups for classroom visits, observed student engagement and witnessed their interactions with their projects. A student panel was formed for the visitors to address any questions the visitors has regarding their observations.

The physical environment of most schools appeared to be well maintained. One middle school, an older facility, had exposed wiring due to technology upgrades. Students transitioned in the hallway seamlessly to get to their destinations in a timely manner. Teachers stood outside of their classroom doors to monitor this transition between classes. An elementary school was truly reflective of a child-centered environment. Art work of literature book characters was on each grade level based on a specific theme. For example, one hallway had the Dr. Seuss theme of *Oh the Places You’ll Go* with the characters from the book painted on the walls. An accelerated reader progress grid of students was also on the wall at the front of the building to display the students’ growth and to use as a motivation to keep reading. As the tour of the building with the principal continued, diagrams of multiplication facts were visible on the steps of the stairwell. The researcher found herself engrossed and captivated with the design and began to engage with the material just like the students walking up and down the stairs. One middle school proudly displayed photographs of student engagement throughout the hallway on each grade level. Photographs of students working collaboratively, faculty members working collaboratively during professional development opportunities, and the principal engaged with the students were displayed throughout the hallways. One high school displayed mo-
tivational quotes hanging from the ceiling throughout the entire building. When I inquired about the banners to the principal and their purpose he replied:

I want my students and faculty to always be reminded that the opportunity for success begins here. With continued effort and dedication they will be successful. So I have these quotes throughout the building for all of us… because I have down days, too.

Throughout the visits, the researcher witnessed a number of interpersonal interactions between the principals and teachers, parents, and students. There was a level of respect shown by all principals and their faculty, staff, and students. During one visit, a parent had come into the main office concerned about a personal matter. The school’s secretary was able to console her and give her the assistance that she needed. During class transition periods students moved quietly throughout the hallways. At one elementary school, students were reading literature books as they exited the cafeteria. In one of the middle school’s students walked quietly in a straight line through what the researcher learned as “central station” to not disturb other class instruction. A middle school principal proudly displayed his camera monitoring system to show the students swift movement during class transitions and all students present in classrooms and not roaming the halls.

When observing classrooms, students being actively engaged with their lesson and activities were evident in most schools. Additionally, the researcher noticed whole group instruction in most classes, with a few cooperative group lessons. The researcher witnessed evidence of the schools’ present assessment data in five schools, along with data binders located in the classrooms of those schools. One elementary school had a data room, The Data Café, in which a 1950s diner style theme was evident. A table top with bar stools and a booth were located in the data room. As a motivational tool, students are
allowed to visit and eat in *The Data Café* when they have completed and successfully mastered certain skills. *The Data Café* displayed high stakes assessment results for each grade level with the benchmarks needed for the present school year. Student names and performances on local school formative assessments were displayed on laminated posters color-coded by level of mastery and/or non-mastery of skills.

Trophy cases were present in each school to showcase school pride of academic and extracurricular achievements in the district. In one conference room, trophies adorned a side table for winning the district math, science, and spelling competitions. These cases became conversation pieces to show how far the school and students had come from previously being in School Improvement.

**Artifacts**

Artifacts collected from participants provided additional support and validation of the principals’ efforts to successfully overcome the challenges of School Improvement. Information presented was beneficial in providing clarification of the dialogue during the semi-structured interviews. Principals made available to me folders and binders of pertinent data from student assessments, handbooks, master schedules, and classroom observation/walk-through protocols. Email notifications were provided to support participants’ efforts to increase student achievement with teachers implementing best teaching strategies in the classroom.

Parent notifications and letters were provided by each high school to explain the efforts and attempts for parental involvement and the principal’s desire for students to attend the intervention classes, after-school tutoring and Saturday school. The benefits for
students attending these extra sessions were explained in the letters to parents in order for them to be encouraged and allow the students to attend. Parents were also given the option to decline the services in the letter.

Agendas from professional development meetings were provided by five principals. Topics of discussion all centered on the core subject areas of reading and math, and how improvements could be made with teaching to improve students’ academic achievement. Agendas also focused on utilizing technology in the classroom. One principal’s focus on technology was due to major equipment upgrades. Collaboration was also evident on agendas. Time was designated for teachers to share successful best practice strategies with one another. One principal coined this as his “teacher talk” time and had protected time set aside for each meeting.

Instructional walk-through and observation protocols were also provided by research participants. Prior to beginning the walk-through, the principal and/or team would decide the specific skill or strategy to target. Immediate feedback on the form would be provided to the classroom teacher to illustrate the instructional quality observed with space provided for areas of strengths and areas of opportunity. All of the feedback was provided to encourage and support teachers to continue the use of best teaching practices and student engagement.

Summary

Qualitative data were collected from interviews, site visits, and collected artifacts. Analysis of these data yielded six major themes. The major themes to emerge in this study were accountability, high expectations/commitment to success, school culture, cur-
riculum shifts, professional development, and pressures of the principalship. Participants’ perspectives were depicted through direct quotes to provide rich descriptions of each participant’s experiences to overcome the negative stigma of School Improvement designation.
CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

One key issue facing education in America is the role of accountability and the impact of federal legislation on public schools. NCLB requirements have compelled principals to lead with a focus on doing more to overcome obstacles and achieve desired results. NCLB has placed significant pressure upon educators to achieve student academic success. As schools work diligently to meet AYP and attain AMOs, the reality remains that many fail to reach established standards. Consequences for failing to meet targets affect student graduation from high school, teacher bonuses, district funding, and retention of principals in their positions (Bonsting, 2001). Due to reform efforts of NCLB, principal leaders acknowledged more responsibility for student achievement, with teaching and learning as the focal points within schools (Fink & Resnick, 2001). As a result of national standards for all schools, leaders have found themselves engrossed in various strategies to overcome the identified failures. According to Leithwood (2004), “Leadership is widely regarded as a key factor in accounting for differences in the success with which schools foster learning of their students” (p. 17). With varied leadership responsibilities, none of the many expectations of principals is more important than being the chief educational accountability officer (Lyons & Algozzine, 2006). Lashway (2002) stated the ultimate test of principal leadership today is the ability to balance demands of accountability with the needs of students. As schools failed to consistently meet AYP, school leaders worked
to address needed changes. Principals questioned themselves and others about their instructional programs and current practices that needed attention.

As mentioned in chapter 1, school leadership is a key component to school improvement. Findings from research support the principal as the key agent for change at the school level and the one who is ultimately responsible for student achievement (Bass & Avilio, 1994; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Leading low performing schools that previously failed to meet AYP proved to be challenging for Alabama principals. However, the principals’ sense of efficacy influenced teacher and collective efficacy. Paglis and Green (2002) defined leadership self-efficacy as an individual’s judgment that he or she can successfully lead by setting the direction for workers, build relationships to establish commitment to change goals, and work collaboratively to overcome obstacles to change. Within schools, principals serve as key change agents by raising the levels of expectations for teachers and students (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004).

All of the principals agreed that a strong sense of purpose and belief in their staff had to be established. The seminal study of Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2005) on principal efficacy noted that the principal “sets the tone and direction for the school, initiates change, provides expertise, marshals resources, unifies partners, and maintains effort” (p. 3). Meanwhile, Smith et al. (2006) established that principal leadership behaviors have become central to effective teaching and learning environments within schools. Alabama principals who were once identified with a school in need of improvement had vital experiences that could be shared with colleagues experiencing the adversity of School Improvement designation. These experiences and perspectives included ways that may prove beneficial for positive student success. Fullan (2002) stated “Only principals
who are equipped to handle a complex, rapidly changing environment can implement the reforms that lead to sustained improvement in student achievement” (p. 16).

As a result, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain the perspectives and experiences of Alabama principals who met the goals of AYP to exit School Improvement. The participants were principals of urban and rural school districts. Each participant met the criteria of having successfully increased student achievement and met the objectives to attain AYP associated with Alabama’s high stakes assessments of the ARMT and the Alabama High School Graduation Exam after being identified with School Improvement status.

This current study focused on the experiences of how nine Alabama principals from three elementary schools, three middle schools, and three high schools- triumphed over the negativity of the School Improvement designation. Qualitative research methods were used to conduct this phenomenological study. A thorough description of the phenomenon was gathered through interviews, observations, and artifacts. Interviews provided insight of the participants’ views and experiences with the School Improvement designation. Data analysis of interviews and collected artifacts yielded six major themes and 19 subthemes. This final chapter presents findings, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for further study.

**Summary of Major Findings**

The research yielded six major themes related to the experiences of the participants whose schools were designated with the status of School Improvement status. Data suggested the role of accountability, high expectations and commitment to success,
school culture, curriculum shifts, professional development, and pressures related to the principalship were indicative of the successes of the principals while their schools were under the designation of School Improvement. Principals of schools designated with School Improvement status found that this designation impacted their roles with regards to accountability and their expectations of success for themselves and others. As educators experienced the designation of School Improvement, participants had an overwhelming desire to become agents of change. Positive change cultures were critical to student academic success. Curriculum shifts and on-going professional development were crucial to positively affecting teacher practice, student achievement, and overcoming the adversity of the negative status.

The challenges associated with accountability and NCLB revealed concern by each principal that each student be held to the same standard as indicated with NCLB expectations. The principals stated a belief that all students can learn, but not all at the same pace. Students receiving special education services were held to the same standard as the general education population. Even though the principals recognized that teachers teach students and not the disability, it had been a cause for concern in the past. The focus was to meet the needs of all students in the classroom. Moller (2008) indicated that when people hold schools accountable for results, managerial accountability remains the discourse for the schools. According to Mintrop and Sunderman (2009), accountability systems have proven to be meaningful instruments in how schools carry out day-to-day business. Accountability for student achievement will remain the ultimate priority of schools; along with the challenge to reach mandated targets of proficiency for each student within the school.
In addition to accountability, research participants expressed the importance of establishing and articulating clear, high expectations of success for themselves, teachers, and students. Harris and Chapman (2002) emphasized that while facing school improvement, heads of schools should express a sense of urgency for maintaining high expectations of students and staff. When clear expectations are shared with others, the possibility for improvement is significantly increased. The participants discussed various opportunities they had taken to reinforce expectations daily with oral and written communications, during professional developments opportunities with staff, assemblies with students, and parent meetings. These efforts are consistent with a previous research study of 50 sites that covered 38 secondary schools and found outstanding principals have vision, expectations and a culture of success (Dinham, 2005).

School culture was also considered a critical component of school success by the principals. Study participants suggested that changes begin with the school’s culture. Specifically, this change has to occur for both students and teachers. This observation confirmed previous findings that school culture is an important element of school change (Barth, 2002). According to Barth (2002), to change school culture is to replace unhealthy characteristics with more desirable qualities.

Subsequently, participants identified their focus on curriculum and professional development as additional strategies for overcoming the School Improvement status. As a result of this designation, participants acknowledged that standards-based and rigorous curriculum had to be implemented, and most importantly- it had to be monitored. The participants explained that a curriculum shift had to occur. Instead of being teacher-

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centered – (what are the teachers teaching?) the focus had to be student centered – (what are the students learning?) Dufour (2002) described this shift in the following way:

By concentrating on teaching, the instructional leader of the past emphasized the inputs of the learning process. By concentrating on learning, today’s school leaders shift both their own focus and that of the school community from inputs to outcomes and from intentions to results. (p. 15)

On-going professional development through research-based workshops and outside experts was also cited by participants as effective methods for initiating changes needed to overcome School Improvement. These activities are consistent with the findings of a study conducted by Guskey and Yoon (2009) in which the authors found a positive relationship exists between professional development and improvements in student learning. When teachers demonstrate what they have learned, internal improvements occur.

Finally, the participants in this study reflected on the pressure of being the principal. Being affiliated with a school with the designation of School Improvement initially had a negative impact on the participants. No one ever wanted to be labeled so negatively. The principals recalled having to motivate and encourage themselves, as well as sustain their confidence first, before they could motivate and encourage others. This finding is consistent with research conducted by Fernet (2011) in which principals’ motivations were associated with their own self-efficacy as it related to their work roles. This study of 568 Canadian principals also noted “principals who present self-determined motivations toward a particular role have greater perceptions of self-efficacy in that particular role” (Fernet, 2005, p. 32). The participants indicated that being instructional leaders was their most important role as principal.
Research Questions

This qualitative study was designed to explore the perspectives of principals regarding how they overcame challenges associated with their school being designated with School Improvement. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine principals to address a set of research questions. The central research question was: What were the lived experiences for the participating principals while the school was identified with the School Improvement designation? The sub-questions for this study included the following:

How do participating principals view their beliefs and core values while in School Improvement status?

How do daily operations change for participating principals while being in School Improvement status?

What kinds of support are in place to overcome challenges according to participating principals?

How do participating principals view effectuating change with faculty and students while in School Improvement designation?

Research Questions Answered

Sub-Question 1

The first sub-question explored how principals viewed their core values and belief system while designated with School Improvement. These nine Alabama principals described their beliefs as non-wavering. Only one principal indicated that her values had changed from focusing on where the students should be, to where they were academical-
ly. These principals’ core values as leaders were formulated by their views of education. According to Hallinger (2011), values are defined as “the ends towards which leaders aspire as well as the desirable means by which they will work to achieve them” (p. 127). Hallinger (2011) regarded values as what shapes the actions and thinking of leaders. Further, values are useful in strengthening and working with the culture of the school. The principals expressed their belief that all children can learn when provided with the appropriate resources to be successful; however, not all students learn at the same pace. This belief caused principals to focus more on teaching and learning. Additionally, participants noted that School Improvement sparked in them the importance of change, and being the agent of change, for the faculty and students.

Sub-Question 2

The second sub-question asked participants to reflect on changes made at the school while experiencing the status of School Improvement. The principals explained that in order to remove their school from the status of School Improvement, normal day-to-day routines had to change. Realizing that change efforts were essential to making needed academic improvements, the participants acknowledged change had to initially begin with them. It was incumbent for principals to emphasize and implement change. The participants emphasized that the way operations previously occurred in the buildings had to discontinue. Principals identified changes in curriculum with greater focus on standards and assessments, student data, and developing professional learning communities. Although difficult at first, participants said that these changes were the best things that happened to them.
The participants identified standards-driven teaching and learning as the first significant change. It was imperative that teachers and students knew the skills they were expected to master. Focusing on standards allowed participants to specifically monitor teacher lesson plans based on state standards and compare plans with actual classroom instruction. These efforts were consistent with the findings of a research study of Iowa teachers who found success with their students and the state testing program after making curriculum changes that aligned instruction with state standards and assessments (Stevenson & Waltmark, 2005). Participants implemented the ARI, Project Based Learning, Saturday school, after-school tutoring, and intervention groups to increase instructional opportunities, and classroom observations and walk-throughs to monitor and ensure effective teaching. According to participants, classroom monitoring was one of the most effective strategies to ensure academic success. This finding is consistent with studies by Andrews and Soder (1987), Freedman and Lafleur (2002), Heck, Larsen, and Marcoulides (1990), Sagor (1992), and Hallinger et al. (1996) which provided evidence that the quality of instruction improved through principal visits to classrooms. One principal, William, said it this way, “We have to inspect what we expect.”

Professional learning communities were established to focus on student data. Formative assessments were utilized throughout the school year to inform students and teachers of standards and skills that had either been mastered or not. Data rooms were established in some schools to have constant reminders of how the students performed on assessments. Opportunities to compare increases and decreases in student performance data were also available. The PLCs provided teachers an opportunity to share effective strategies that might be beneficial for others to utilize in the classroom. Principals and
teachers utilized the data to monitor student progress. The participants articulated that data had to guide every discussion in order to elicit effective change and to be removed from the status of School Improvement. Participants’ experiences corresponded with the recommendation by Fullan (2012) to “engage in dialogue with staff to identify and address concerns and questions” (p.13).

**Sub-Question 3**

Sub-question three asked principals to identify supports that were in place to assist them while in School Improvement. Participants cited extraordinary support provided by their respective superintendents, as well as numerous opportunities for professional development, as reasons for success. As participants reflected on the question, most of them immediately referred to the central office. Principals agreed that central office administrators provided assistance and encouragement to overcome their School Improvement challenges with workshops and material resources. Several principals acknowledged that central office administrators participated in walk-throughs and classroom observations. Participants stated that they benefitted immensely from the plethora of professional development opportunities they received. Frederick stated, “I could have never paid to receive all that kind of training and education during that time nor could those teachers.” As noted by Wegenke (2000), principals need on-going professional development to receive new knowledge and skills in order to maintain a positive school environment. Campos et al. (2005) stated, “Obviously, when principals improve their performance as a result of new knowledge acquired through training, it has a positive effect on the school environment” (p. 32). Only two participants spoke negatively about some as-
pect of the intervention provided by the ALSDE. Henry indicated that some of the professional development did not address his school’s needs, while Harry identified some ALSDE personnel who did not appear to want to help.

**Sub-Question 4**

The fourth sub-question asked participants for their views of effectuating change while in School Improvement. All participants said that change was necessary in order to come out of School Improvement. Change was initially needed with school culture and how daily activities occurred. Fullan (1991) stated “the principal is central, especially to changes in the culture of the school” (p. 145). The principals expressed that changing internal processes was essential for facilitating changes. Also, prior to implementing these changes, participants informed the faculty and staff of the need for change and recommended procedures for accomplishing these tasks. This finding is consistent with Fullan (1991) who encouraged principals to talk with teachers about their position regarding their educational views. As these views were expressed, the focus of the school leaders began to shift. Participants acknowledged that the designation of School Improvement caused a change in them. The principals became more focused on curriculum. This was affirmed by Henry who stated, “It made you look at your curriculum and made you look at your instruction.” Although change can be uncomfortable, participants recognized the important role change played in their schools. The term *necessary* was used by Harry when asked the initial question. He stated, “It was necessary for all of us to change to get out of School Improvement and stay out.”
Summary of Questions Answered

A qualitative research design was used for this study of Alabama principals whose schools had been identified as in need of School Improvement by the ALSDE. Specifically, phenomenology was used to complete the study. Data and findings from semi-structured interviews, observations, and artifacts are limited to the perspectives of these nine participants and should not be generalized.

The data collected and analyzed throughout this study suggested that the nine participants shared common characteristics in their leadership while their schools were assigned the designation of School Improvement status. For these principals, setting and expressing clear expectations of student achievement and academic success with faculty, staff, students, and parents was paramount. Having high expectations of themselves and the belief that they could overcome School Improvement was mentioned by the principals. Commitment to success was critical for all stakeholders, students, teachers, and parents, and this commitment had to be articulated daily by the principal. Participants also noted that their role as instructional leader ignited the fire of change in them to move beyond unsuccessful results to effective teaching and learning in the classroom. The principals identified the following steps as critical to systemic change: classroom monitoring, standards focused lessons, formative assessments, and analyzing student performance data. Participants also credited central office supports and professional development opportunities as fundamental to their success. Finally, participants viewed change as crucial. Although change can be difficult, unfamiliar, and challenging, it proved to be the key to success for the nine participants of this study.
Implications of the Study

Hallinger (2005) noted that school principals have always been expected to perform various roles. However, as a result of NCLB mandates the focus of principals has shifted more towards curriculum development. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) described leading school as complex work. Further, to lead during challenging times take courage (Portin, 2004).

A school with designation of School Improvement would certainly be considered a challenge. Mandates to meet steadily progressing AMOs under circumstances in which schools are not meeting the yearly requirements, can prove to be overwhelming for many. Implications from this study were established relative to the experiences of the Alabama principals whose schools did not initially meet state standards with high-stakes assessments and accountability. As an educator, the researcher has worked in a school that had not previously met the state standards on high-stakes assessments. The researcher is very aware of the challenges schools face to reach academic standards and strategies used to overcome the stigma of School Improvement. Findings from the sub-questions provided insights to the study. Implications were derived from the major findings that emerged from this phenomenological study including: role of accountability, high expectations and commitment to success, school culture, curriculum shifts, professional development, and pressures of the principalship.

Role of Accountability

This study of the experiences of Alabama principals whose schools were designated as School Improvement may provide beneficial information about overcoming the
negative status of School Improvement for administrators, schools, districts, and the ALSDE. In this study, the school principal was identified as the key agent for change in the school setting. The role of the principal has become more complex in recent years, with major emphasis placed on school accountability. Despite the current focus on high-stakes testing and student test scores, participants noted that educators must focus on the relevance of schoolwork for students to establish a connection between the two factors of testing and test results. Because of the accountability of NCLB and the current legislation to reauthorize the legislation, principals, schools, districts, and ALSDE should focus on incremental gains of students’ academic growth.

The researcher recommends that school districts and universities develop and provide programs and opportunities relative to the role of accountability and the principalship. Identifying current measures in place to allow principal leaders opportunities to enhance their skills to be effective leaders for the 21st century is both desirable and needed. Additionally, this researcher recommends that the ALSDE form a task force of principals and teachers who have successfully overcome the challenges associated with the status of School Improvement to serve as mentors and teacher leaders for other struggling schools.

**High Expectations and Commitment to Success**

Participants in this study communicated a high regard for student academic achievement and described student success as paramount. These expectations of success were apparent for all stakeholders including faculty, students, parents, and themselves. Principals recognized that continuously articulating the school’s mission, vision, goals,
and values should be reinforced in order to maintain the school’s purpose of establishing and maintaining the academic success of students. It was suggested that the school environment should be reflective of the school’s focus both verbally and through written documentation continuously throughout the school year. School districts should provide resources needed for principals and teachers to enhance the necessary skills and knowledge to execute the mission and vision of their school effectively.

School Culture

Participants in this study reported changing the school’s culture as one of the critical aspects to achieving success. These principals recognized that a positive culture of teaching and learning had to be established as a priority with faculty and students. In order to remove the designation of School Improvement, the principals recognized that change in the school’s culture, while difficult, was essential for their schools to move forward. The researcher recommends that principals conduct needs assessments to elicit dialogue of what is effective and ineffective in the school. The feedback would provide data for collaboration and promotion of change efforts.

Curriculum Shifts

Participants in this study reported the need to replace existing curriculum with effective approaches to teaching and learning. Principals were entirely aware that in order for students to achieve success, effective strategies had to be implemented in the classroom. Being purposeful with curricular changes was critical. Participants had to implement systemic curricular change in order to see positive student results. Principals iden-
fied the implementation of formative assessments, effective teaching strategies, PLCs, classroom monitoring, walk-throughs and observations as necessary to overcome academic deficits. The researcher recommends that professional development for principals and teachers be provided by experts on how to analyze student data. Establishing data teams comprised of teachers to review student data will prove beneficial and purposeful when analyzing student classwork and formative assessments. These data teams would generate effective strategies for teachers to enhance instruction for student success.

**Professional Development**

Participants in this study identified professional development as vital to the success of their schools. Professional development opportunities regarding effective leadership and teaching strategies should be implemented and attended at the local, district, and state levels. On-going, job-embedded professional development should occur regularly at the school and district levels for all teachers to have the same skill sets to improve student achievement. The principals in the study acknowledged that classroom monitoring and observations were critical to their success. The researcher recommends that observation protocols be developed to specifically target effective implementation of strategies learned during professional development and training sessions. The data generated from observations would allow principals and teachers to identify effective and ineffective methodologies. Instructional coaching opportunities should be provided for principals and teachers to assist them with developing effective strategies to implementing for the classroom.
Pressures of the Principalship

Participants in this study reported that they felt more pressure while the school was labeled with School Improvement. In addition to pressure participants perceived from the central office, participants placed a tremendous amount of pressure on themselves. These principals and their sense of motivation, efficacy, and resilience allowed them to persevere during difficult times. Their central beliefs and core values allowed them to bounce back from adversity and equipped their teachers with strategies to strive for success. A number of principals said that they had colleagues to confer with, while others only relied on themselves. The researcher recommends that school districts provide continuous professional development opportunities on the accountability measures established by the ALSDE and identify specific expectations of school leaders. Principal leadership programs at universities should provide a curriculum devoted to accountability and the role of the principal. In addition, area school districts should develop a consortium of principals to provide collegial support in order to reduce principal burn-out and provide an avenue for principal collaboration. Additionally, principals should join and become active members of professional organizations in order to enhance their leadership skills and seek support.

Recommendations for Future Research

This qualitative study was limited to nine principals throughout the state of Alabama; however, the findings from this study may provide insights for future research. The researcher recommends that the study be expanded to include more principals who have experienced the same phenomenon of being designated with School Improvement.
This study specifically focused on principals who had experienced being in School Improvement, exiting the status and maintaining AYP. A comparative study could be conducted with schools that exited School Improvement, but did not maintain AYP and were placed back in School Improvement status to identify factors that led to a different outcome. Finally, the researcher identified three principals who were placed specifically at the school to make necessary changes for student success. Future research may wish to consider a study to determine the effectiveness and sustainability of the turnaround model used by schools that have been successful in exiting School Improvement.

This study identified previous research results that showed the ultimate responsibility of student achievement was with the principal. However, it is in the classroom where the teaching and learning takes place. In addition to the principal, classroom teachers share in the responsibility of student achievement. It is in the classroom where academic success begins. There must be a cooperative and collaborative effort between the school principal and classroom teachers to implement strategies for positive school improvement. Future research may consider the role the teacher leader plays along with the principal while a school is designated with School Improvement.

**Conclusion**

The legislation of NCLB forever changed the direction of principal leadership. Due to the accountability measures established in 2001 by this legislation, the role of the principal has become increasingly more complex. Studies in diverse countries such as Canada, Australia, China, France, Great Britain, Belgium, and the United States (Cattanar et al., 2007; Chapman, 2005; Su et al., 2003) have shown that the school principal’s
job encompasses a large and disparate number of responsibilities and work roles. These roles and responsibilities include administrative duties, informational responsibilities, and instructional leadership roles (Cattonar et al., 2007). As stated by Leithwood (1994), leadership “only manifests itself in the context of change, and the nature of that change is a crucial determinant of the forms of leadership that will prove to be helpful” (p. 499). Numerous researchers have suggested that the principal is the key agent of change at the school level (Bass & Avalio, 1994; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005). Ultimately, the principal is the one person who is responsible for student achievement.

While leadership skills are important, Bandura (1977; 1986) concluded that it is an individual’s belief in his or her own ability to achieve success that determines whether or not behaviors will lead to successful outcomes.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of nine Alabama principals who had overcome the challenges associated with the status of School Improvement. The researcher established that Alabama principals’ core values and beliefs did not falter while being challenged with School Improvement. Changes in curriculum and school culture were paramount for sustainable growth. Professional development was identified as a major contributor to overcoming the obstacle of School Improvement. As a result of this study, the researcher recommends that school districts, universities, and the ALSDE conduct further research on the role of principal leadership in an age of accountability, establish support systems for principals, and provide continued professional development opportunities.

School Improvement is not a designation with which schools wish to be identified. The negative stigma of the term causes embarrassment and a sense of shame for
many principals and schools. Although this study included nine principals, there are
many more principals and schools locally and nationally that are facing this dilemma. In
fact, while conducting this study, two school districts in central Alabama declined to par-
ticipate even though their confidentiality would be assured. This implied a lack of desire
to recall that negative period of the schools and districts and/or the remnants of humili-
ation from this ordeal. This national dilemma of obtaining 100% proficiency on statewide
standardized tests for all students by 2014 has proven to be wholly unrealistic. The fact
that the reauthorization of NCLB is currently being decided validates these concerns.

As noted by the participants in the study, there is no one best practice or strategy
that can be used for all schools. This study identified various differences in instructional
approaches, the effectiveness of multiple strategies, and differences in program imple-
mentation at the schools. Although each school was different, the solutions that each par-
ticipant derived proved to be beneficial for them. Although success was ultimately found
among these principals, it was a challenging process, both physically and mentally, for all
principals, teachers, and students.

It should be noted that one strategy used at one school may not have been an ef-
effective approach at another. As the needs of the communities and student bodies varied
across the nine schools, the researcher recognized that there was no one solution, ap-
proach, or strategy to positively resolve this situation. The communities and the schools
dictated the best approach for the nine participants. In fact, these principals were able to
identify solutions that were beneficial and successful as their focus shifted to what was
best for their students. NCLB initially caused the participants to dwell on the legislation.
However, once the principals realized that the students mattered more than legislation, positive results ensued.

The findings of this study are intended to help practicing leaders who are experiencing the challenges associated with the status of School Improvement learn from the lived experiences of their colleagues and adapt the lessons that proved to be successful and sustainable for them and their schools. This study serves to encourage school leaders to keep student achievement at the helm of the school and to know what is best, and to do what is in the best interest for children, regardless of state and federal legislation.
REFERENCES


Hall, G. E., Rutherford, W. L., & Griffin, T. H. “*Three change facilitator styles: Some indicators and a proposed framework.*” Presentation at the National Conference on Creating Quality Schools, Oklahoma City, OK, April, 1982.


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APPENDIX A

INVITATION LETTER
May 31, 2012

Name

Address

Dear ______________________:

My name is Corvetta Vann, doctoral student from the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. I am writing to invite you to participate in a doctoral research study I am conducting in partial fulfillment of my studies at the university. The title of this research study is: Overcoming the challenges of School Improvement: A phenomenological study of nine Alabama principals. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of Alabama principals who have overcome the challenge of schools being identified “in need of improvement” status by the Alabama State Department of Education and have been removed from the “need of school improvement” status due to an increase in student achievement on standardized tests. The “need of school improvement” (SI) status will be defined as those schools that do not meet state targets of proficiency in reading and math in for two consecutive years. Schools designated with the status of “in need of improvement” are required to implement changes so that all students receive instruction that is appropriate and adequate to enable them to become proficient in the academic content areas.

You have been purposefully selected to be one of nine participants in this research study based on the fact that you meet the set criteria of having served as principal of a school that was previously identified by the Alabama State Department Education as a school “in need of improvement.” However, your school was removed from the database of schools identified as “in need of improvement” and has not been re-entered into the database. This study will explore the shared experiences from principals of schools that emerged from the status of being “in need of improvement” due to an increase in academic achievement.

The time frame of this project is July 2012 through July 2013. As a prospective participant of this study, your lived experiences will be the focus and your involvement. I will not be very extensive. I would like to conduct one face-to-face for audio-recorded interview with you (up to 75 minutes), job shadow you one day, and obtain copies of any documents and artifacts relative to your effort of your school being removed from the status of “in need of improvement.”

Prior to conducting any interview with you, I will provide you an informed consent agreement for your participation in the study. An interview protocol will be provided for you as an outline of questions I would like to ask to give you time to think about your re-
sponses. Throughout these interviews you might also be asked clarifying or probing questions to elicit additional details and examples from your responses. Information obtained about you for this study will be kept private to the extent allowed by law. Data will be stored in a locked metal cabinet in the investigator’s school office and audio tapes will be destroyed within three years after the completion of the project. Electronic data will be stored electronically on password protected computers. I will take all precautions to ensure anonymity and confidentiality by using a pseudonym throughout study. Only the principal investigator, dissertation committee members, and peer debriefors will have access to the data. You will have the option to withdraw from the study at any time should you choose to do so. Data collected from the research will be published in my dissertation in which anonymity will be ensured.

You may not benefit directly from taking part in this study. However, principals and school districts may have a wealth of knowledge about possible strategies to use to assist in overcoming the challenges of schools being “in need of improvement” status and remaining out of “in need of improvement” status. The findings may provide ideas for additional professional learning communities for administrators. It may significantly aide to the understanding of the multi-faceted and complex roles faced by school principals, and may identify appropriate and innovative leadership strategies.

Thank you in advance for your participation and assisting me with this research study in partial fulfillment of my doctoral degree.

If you have any questions about this research study please feel free to contact Corvetta Vann at (205) 527-7348 or by email at cmvann@aol.com. I look forward to working with you and learning from your experiences.
Participant Data Sheet

**Participant Information**

1. Participant’s Name
   __________________________________________________

2. Position
   __________________________________________________

3. How many years have been principal of this school?
   ______________________

4. Have you served in any other administrative positions? __________ If so, explain.
   _________________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________

5. At which university did you obtain administrative certification?
   _________________________________________________________________

6. How many years were you a teacher?
   ______________________

7. Was your teaching experience the same level in which you are principal?
   __________

8. What grade(s) did you teach?
   _________________________________________________________________

**School Demographics**

9. Name of School
   _________________________________________________________________

10. Name of School District
    _________________________________________________________________

11. Which grade levels does the school have?
    _______Elementary _______Middle _______High

12. Which is your school identified? _______urban _______suburban
    _______rural
13. School Address
________________________________________________

14. School phone
________________________________________________

15. School fax
________________________________________________

16. Number of staff members
________________________________________________

17. Student enrollment
________________________________________________

18. Number of classes/sections at each grade level:

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19. Identify the year(s) in which school was identified in need of improvement by the Alabama State Department of Education.
________________________________________________

20. How many years was the school designated with the “in need of improvement” status?
________________________________________________
Interview Protocol

Name

__________________________________________________________________

School

__________________________________________________________________

Location

__________________________________________________________________

Introduction:

Good morning/afternoon! Thank you very much for taking time out of your very busy schedule to speak with me today about your experiences during the challenging time when your school was identified as “in need of improvement” by the state department of education. I will be asking you questions and recording your responses on a hand-held tape recorder. After the interview, I will be transcribing our session from word-for-word. I will send you a copy of the transcript so that you can review it for accuracy and clarify any responses.

I’m interested in finding out how you were able to overcome the challenge of being “in school improvement.” And as the instructional leader, the charge to lead the school from that “in need of school improvement” was in your hands. I would like to ask you the questions that I provided to you prior to our visit today. I encourage you to be as honest and open as you can be you’re your responses. I really want this to be an opportunity for
you to tell your story. To overcome being “in school improvement” and remaining out of it, is a story I believe is worth being told.

With that in mind, are you ready to begin? I will be scribing some, as well as recording with this hand-held recorder.

Interview Questions:

1. What was it like for you as a principal of a school facing “school improvement?”
2. How did you as principal view your beliefs and core values while your school was “in school improvement?”
3. How did daily school operations change for you as the principal while being “in school improvement?”
4. What kinds of support were in place to overcome challenges while your school was “in school improvement?”
5. How did you as principal view effectuating change with faculty and students while in improvement?
APPENDIX D

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL FORM
Form 4: IRB Approval Form
Identification and Certification of Research
Projects Involving Human Subjects

UAB's Institutional Review Boards for Human Use (IRBs) have an approved Federalwide Assurance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). The Assurance number is FWA00003960 and it expires on January 24, 2017. The UAB IRBs are also in compliance with 21 CFR Parts 50 and 56.

Principal Investigator: VANN, CORVETTA M
Co-Investigator(s): 
Protocol Number: X120539012
Protocol Title: Overcoming the Challenges of School Improvement: A Phenomenological Study of Nine Alabama Principals

The IRB reviewed and approved the above named project on 7-6-12. The review was conducted in accordance with UAB's Assurance of Compliance approved by the Department of Health and Human Services. This Project will be subject to Annual continuing review as provided in that Assurance.

This project received EXPEDITED review.

IRB Approval Date: 7-6-12

Date IRB Approval Issued: 7-6-12


Marilyn Doss, M.A.
Vice Chair of the Institutional Review Board for Human Use (IRB)

Investigators please note:

The IRB approved consent form used in the study must contain the IRB approval date and expiration date.

IRB approval is given for one year unless otherwise noted. For projects subject to annual review research activities may not continue past the one year anniversary of the IRB approval date.

Any modifications in the study methodology, protocol and/or consent form must be submitted for review and approval to the IRB prior to implementation.

Adverse Events and/or unanticipated risks to subjects or others at UAB or other participating institutions must be reported promptly to the IRB.
APPENDIX E

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
**Informed Consent Document**

**TITLE OF RESEARCH:** Overcoming the challenges of School Improvement: A phenomenological study of nine Alabama principals

**IRB PROTOCOL:** X120530012

**INVESTIGATOR:** Corvetta M. Vann

**SPONSOR:** The University of Alabama at Birmingham Department of Graduate Studies

**Explanation of Procedures**

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of Alabama principals who have overcome the challenge of schools being identified in need of school improvement status by the Alabama State Department of Education and have been removed from the school improvement status due to an increase in student achievement on standardized tests. You are invited to take part in one (up to 75 minutes) face-to-face audio-recorded interview. You may be asked to clarify statements made in the initial interview. The follow-up questions or second interview (no longer than 60 minutes) may be by phone, by email, or in person. A participant data sheet of personal and school demographics will be asked to be completed in an effort to categorize the data. A job shadow observation (up to two hours) of walking around the school site with you to help gain insight of your position, and collecting any potential artifacts and documentation you may have relative in support of the effort to being removed from the school improvement status are requested after the initial interview. The time frame for this project is July, 2012 through May 2013.

Prior to conducting any interview with you, I will provide you with an outline of questions I want to ask in order to give you time to think about your responses. Throughout these interviews, you might also be asked some clarifying questions to elicit additional details and examples from your responses. You will have the option to withdraw from the study at any time should you choose to do so. The data from this research will be used in partial fulfillment of the Investigator’s doctoral thesis degree requirement.

**Risks and Discomforts**

The risks and discomforts involved in this study are no greater than the risks and discomforts of day-to-day living. If there is discomfort with any question you may refuse to answer. You will be free to withdraw from the study at anytime without emotional duress or
breach of confidentiality. Your identity will be kept confidential. Your information will be assigned a code number and pseudonym. The list connecting your name to this number will be kept in a locked metal cabinet. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the list will be destroyed within three years. Your name will not be used in any report.

Benefits

You may not benefit directly from taking part in this study. However, principals and school districts may have a wealth of knowledge about possible strategies to use to assist in overcoming the challenges of being in need of school improvement status and remaining out of the school improvement status. The findings may provide ideas for additional professional learning communities for administrators. This study may provide to the understanding of the multi-faceted and complex roles faced by school principals, and may identify appropriate and innovative leadership strategies.

Confidentiality

Information obtained about you for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. However, research information that identifies you may be shared with the UAB Institutional Review Board (IRB) and others who are responsible for ensuring compliance with laws and regulations related to research, and the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). Data will be stored in a locked metal cabinet in the investigator's school office and audio tapes will be destroyed within three years after the completion of the project. Electronic data will be stored electronically on password protected computers. Your information will be assigned a code number and pseudonym. The list connecting your name to this number and pseudonym will be kept in a locked metal cabinet. The data from this research will be used in partial fulfillment of doctoral thesis degree requirements. You should, however, be aware that we might choose to publish the findings of this study at a later date. The Investigator will take precautions to ensure confidentiality. Your identity will not be revealed.

Refusal or Withdrawal without Penalty

Your taking part in this study is your choice. There will be no penalty if you decide not to be in the study. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, and you may choose not to answer any question. Your choice to leave the study will not affect your relationship with this institution.

Cost of Participation

There will be no cost to you from taking part in this study.

Payment for Participation in Research

There will be no payment for participation.

Alternatives

Your alternative is to not participate in this study.

Page 2 of 3
Revised 07/03/12
Participant’s Initial: ____________
Questions

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact: Corvette M. Vann. She will be glad to answer any of your questions. Her number is 205-527-7348. She may also be reached by email @ cmvann@aol.com.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the Office of the Institutional Review Board for Human Use (OIRB) at (205) 934-3789 or 1-800-822-8816. If calling the toll-free number, press the option for “all other calls” or for an operator/attendant and ask for extension 4-3789. Regular hours for the Office of the IRB are 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. CT, Monday through Friday. You may also call this number in the event the research staff cannot be reached or you wish to talk to someone else.

Legal Rights

You are not waiving any of your legal rights by signing this informed consent document.

Signatures

Your signature below indicates that you agree to participate in this study. You will receive a copy of this signed document.

Signature of Participant Date

Signature of Investigator Date

Signature of Witness Date