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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP DURING COVID-19:

AS A MATTER OF PRINCIPAL: HOW SUPERINTENDENTS STRIVE TO STRENGTHEN THE ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT OF THE PRINCIPALS THEY SERVE

Dissertation

by

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with Anne Rogers Clark, Sara K. Hosmer, Mario Pires

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP DURING COVID-19:

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MEREDITH ERICKSON

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Abstract

Problem and Purpose: Without time for preparation, COVID-19 caused a wave of operational and structural changes that encumbered much of the time and energy educational leaders previously spent on moving the district forward. The ripple effect of the pandemic exposed new challenges in teaching and learning, requiring superintendents and principals to establish efficient and effective responsive systems to support the needs of students. Even so, amid crisis principals were given new managerial tasks. This led to tension as principals' identities as instructional leaders were threatened by increased workloads and changed responsibilities. To better understand this tension, the purpose of this study is to examine how a superintendent strives to increase the organizational commitment of their principals regarding instructional leadership.

Methods: This bounded single-site design examined the interactions between superintendent and principals in one urban district of medium size in Massachusetts where at least 50% of students are high needs. Learning capabilities were used as a conceptual framework to analyze how the superintendent and principals interacted within a Community of Practice.

Implications: This study found that strengthening principals' organizational commitment during this time of crisis was the result of superintendent interactions in three areas: supervisor support, perceived autonomy, and alignment of personal and district goals. Principals' investment increased in a culture where connection, candor, and capacity-building existed. Additionally, organizational commitment increased when there was greater alignment between principals' personal and district goals and the district allowed for more autonomy to achieve goals. Under these conditions principals felt empowered to take on complex challenges and develop innovative solutions. These findings can assist superintendents in cultivating principal investment that will be integral during post-pandemic recovery and reconstruction.

Acknowledgements

This process was supported by many people who invested time and energy in my development and here acknowledge them with reverence and appreciation. I first wish to express my gratitude to my dissertation committee. To my dissertation chair, Dr. Martin Scanlan: Through your high expectations, exemplary teaching methods, thoughtful metaphors, and creative dualities, you have helped me better understand social justice and my potential as a leader. I will always remember thoughtful feedback and your willingness to guide us through the past 3 years. I extend my appreciation to Dr. Daniel Gutekanst who provided invaluable wisdom, humor, and a much needed sense of calm as we navigated this process. To Dr. Nathaniel Brown, I thank you for your commitment to our growth, and your insights to help us travel from proposal to defense. I would like to acknowledge my dissertation team who has been willing to buckle in and find joy in this journey together, be it early Sunday mornings, impromptu calls, crunch weeks, or celebratory downtime. I have learned so much from each of you and cherish our friendship. To Cohort VI, what an amazing thing to stand in your presence and learn with you. I have no doubt that we will continue to go forward to shape the future. #inVIncible. A special shout out to Dr. Miller for expanding my use of seven-syllable words. Thank you to my Carver team for providing encouragement, feedback, and levity throughout my doctoral journey. To my family *and* the one I married into: you believed in me every step of the way and supported me with nourishment, respite, and laughter. Most importantly, thank you to my husband and children who intuitively knew just what to do to help in the moment. You collectively carried more burden so that mine would be lighter; every act of kindness was seen and appreciated! Now we all share in the fulfillment of my dream—we own this!

Dedication

This is dedicated to my three sons, Jordan, McKale, and Whitman—

"Where the roots are deep, there is no reason to fear the wind."

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CHAPTER ONE[1]

Introduction

Many empirical studies examine change in schools and districts. Few, however, focus specifically on responses to crisis situations (Smawfield, 2013). Moreover, a wide variety of situations are often labeled crises (Hannah et al., 2009), as if all disruptive events are homogeneous (Bass, 2008). One-time tragic events, such as the death of a community member or an incident of violence, cause significant pain and disruption in a bounded manner over a relatively shorter period of time (Shultz et al., 2014). In contrast, a crisis refers to something that strains capacity and has the potential for massive and long-term physical, psychological, and/or material consequences for both the learning organization and the members within it (Hannah et al., 2009).

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis that presents a number of challenges for educators, chief among them the urgency of addressing instructional gaps. Early research indicates that temporary school closures and reduced instruction time will lead to reduced educational achievement, both in the short and long term, and the negative impacts are disproportionately affecting historically marginalized students (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021; Eyles et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020).

While educational leaders should always be learning as their contexts change, crises require rapid learning. The research that is emerging during COVID-19 also suggests that, consistent with previous research on schooling during crises, the level of collaboration and the nature of interaction in the community is a key indicator of a learning community's ability to address these instructional challenges (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). In a qualitative study of

[1] This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Anne Rogers Clark, Meredith Erickson, Sara K. Hosmer, Mario Pires.

school leaders from across the United States and in nine other countries during COVID-19, McLeod and Dulsky (2021) conclude that connections among educators, and the learning opportunities created by those connections, are vital: "[A] principal, summed it up when she said, 'If this [pandemic] has done nothing else, [it has shown us that] we need to work together in a connected world and leverage our shared brilliance, our shared experience'"(p. 10). Understanding professional learning of educational leaders during a crisis is thus critical to build capacity for practices that meet the needs of students and create sustained improvement (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Smith & Riley 2012; Mutch 2015).

Crises spur rapid social change. Rapid social change requires rapid learning, and adult learners dealing with new problems are required to be (or to become) extremely effective learners (Tusting & Barton, 2003). If the investments that districts make in adult learning during crises are to have measurable impact for practice, we must better understand how adult learning that supports instruction actually takes place. The purpose of this group study is to understand how leadership is linked to learning through "vision and goals, academic structures and processes, and people" (Hallinger, 2011, p.129), specifically during COVID-19. We seek to identify how districts can best design for professional learning when going through a period of fundamental uncertainty.

Our study investigates professional learning and instructional leadership by understanding a district as a whole through individual layers within the organization (Figure 1.1). We answer two overarching research questions highlighted in the center of the figure:

- During a time of crisis, what do professional learning and instructional leadership look like at various levels of leadership within a district?

- How is the learning of instructional leaders in a district bounded and/or intertwined?

Each member of our research team then focuses more specifically on different roles and relationships within a district, as shown in the questions surrounding the center of the figure. Our study seeks to understand the interactions and interdependencies among the learning experiences of different educators within a district responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, in other words how learning and instructional leadership are bounded (have defined boundaries) and intertwined (have interconnection across boundaries).

Figure 1.1:

Group and Individual Research Questions

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">Hosmer:
During a time of crisis,
1) What influences teacher professional learning and instructional practices?
2) What role do principals play in creating the conditions for this learning?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Pires:
How do middle-level instructional leaders pursue and make sense of instructional leadership during times of crisis?</td><td>CORE Research Questions:

During a time of crisis,
● What do professional learning and instructional leadership look like at various levels of leadership within a district?
● How is the learning of instructional leaders in a district bounded and/or intertwined?</td><td>Erickson:
During a time of crisis, how does a superintendent strive to increase the organizational commitment of their principals regarding instructional leadership?</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Clark:
During a time of crisis, what roles does autonomy play in how principals learn to prioritize curricular goals and to support instruction?</td></tr>
</table>

Prior research has established that effective leadership for learning adapts and responds to the changing conditions of the organization over time (Hallinger, 2011; Fullan, 2020; Senge, 1990; Leithwood & Azah, 2017; Heifetz, 1994). If districts and schools successfully design for learning for educators during a crisis, they will not only navigate the crisis, they will be better able to support educators to make a meaningful impact on student outcomes.

Literature Review

As our study explores the relationship between professional learning and instructional leadership, our review of the literature centers on these two concepts. We structure this literature review in three sections. We first present a view of professional learning informed by social learning theory and compare that approach to an organizational learning understanding, looking specifically at the limitations of the Professional Learning Community (PLC) concept. We then review the literature that establishes that professional learning can be a vehicle for improvement when it is designed in a way that is effective for learning, incorporating opportunities for interaction among educators and including both formal and informal opportunities for learning. Finally, we review the literature on instructional leadership, focusing on three areas: research that establishes shared or distributed models of leadership, the demonstrated impact of instructional leadership, and the emerging research on instructional leadership during crisis.

Learning as a Social Endeavor

Humans learn and develop behaviors by interacting with others. Previously thought to be an individual pursuit, learning has been described as a social endeavor beginning with Bandura (1977). Bandura's work on Social Learning Theory helped to inform exploration of how learning works within groups of people. According to a National Academies of Sciences (2018) report, this shift from an individual understanding of learning to a social understanding represents "one

of the most important recent theoretical shifts in education research" (p. 27). Synthesizing current theory, the report holds that

> [l]earning is a dynamic, ongoing process that is simultaneously biological and cultural. Attention to both individual factors (such as... interests and motivations), as well as factors external to the individual (such as the environment in which the learner is situated, social and cultural contexts, and opportunities available to learners) is necessary to develop a complete picture of the nature of learning" (p. 9).

Following this research on learning as a social endeavor, our study seeks to develop an understanding of learning amongst educators that is influenced by both individual and external factors. For example, our study looks at internal factors, such as educators' perceptions of their identities as learners, and external factors, such as policies that affect instructional leadership or the degree of autonomy permitted in the district.

Limitations of Professional Learning Communities

Social learning theory and consideration of both individual and external factors is not the only way researchers have analyzed how learning amongst educational leaders builds capacity for change and for sustained improvement efforts (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007). Dufour and Eaker (1998) originated the concept of professional learning communities (PLCs) as groups of educators who foster "mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone" (p. xii). The PLC model draws from Senge's (1990) learning organization theory and focuses on the critical roles that leadership and school culture play in professional learning. This model also tends to gravitate toward school

renewal, school reform, and nurturing teams that will contribute to high levels of student learning (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2004; Murphy & Lick, 2004).

The PLC model has considerable popularity amongst practitioners, and many have found it useful as they work to support the development of teams (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007). However, viewing learning through a PLC model has significant limitations, particularly as it relates to the focus of our study within Frederick. One limitation of the PLC model relates to the roles with which the model is associated. Studies tend to address principal and teacher PLCs but neglect other key stakeholders in the educational sector. In a quantitative study of 212 educators in Finland, which investigated the implementation of PLCs through school culture, leadership, teaching, and professional development, Antinluoma et al. (2018) acknowledged that their data collection limited their findings. The data collection was geared specifically towards the teaching staff and the authors recognized the need to investigate the perceptions of other members who play a critical role in promoting learning within schools. In addition, Dufour and Eaker (1998) and Hord (2004) both focused on actions of the principal, neglecting the perspective of middle-level instructional leaders, district-level leaders, and others. Given that our study incorporates all of these critical stakeholders, the PLC model's narrow vantage point is too exclusionary for our study.

Another limitation of the PLC model pertains to its understanding of how knowledge is developed and disseminated across members of a community. Comparing and contrasting three PLC models with three CoPs, Blankenship and Ruona (2007) posited that "work needs to be done to construct a more complete framework for professional learning communities that acknowledges and supports both the formal and informal learning that takes place at the individual, group, and organization level" (p.7). Because we seek to analyze how learning is

bounded and intertwined amongst leaders within the district, the framework that we use must allow for collection of formal and informal nuances of learning.

Professional Learning

Given the limitations of professional learning communities as a framework for our inquiry, we instead turn to professional learning. The terms *professional development* and *professional learning* are often used interchangeably. In this study we make a distinction between *professional development*, a singular event or an activity that has little follow-up and little effect on educators' growth or understanding (Whitworth & Chiu, 2015), and *professional learning*, learning that is sustained over a period of time (Desimone, 2009). Our research focuses on the latter.

Professional Learning as a Vehicle for Improvement

Effective adult professional learning experiences have long been understood to advance individual, school, and district improvement efforts (Peurach et al., 2019). For that reason, professional learning has been a key element within education reform. Both educational policy (e.g., No Child Left Behind, Every Student Succeeds Act) and reports (e.g., the 2004 Teaching Commission Report) include professional learning as a lever to impact student outcomes (Borko, 2004). The resulting accountability structures create a climate in which schools are "urged to learn faster than ever before to deal effectively with the growing pressures of a rapidly changing environment" (Kools & Stoll, 2016, p. 15).

However, research demonstrates that designed professional learning experiences rarely build the capacity of educators (Korthagen, 2016; Guskey, 2003; Bayar, 2014). In a comparative review of continuous improvement methods, Yurkofsky (2020) revealed that the way professional learning is often constructed and delivered is almost never successful because it

focuses on surface level changes, rather than the deep work of addressing learning through organizational change. Even as educational leaders have made progress in becoming more engaged with improving teaching and learning, many still prioritize new reforms and exalt incentivized outcomes. A literature review of research on teacher practices and professional learning by Opfer and Pedder (2011) indicates that professional learning goes awry due to a lack of understanding of complexity and focuses on teachers to the exclusion of the organization and district.

Designing for professional learning is a complex task, with significant costs if not effective. In this context, our study sheds light on effective professional learning practices within a district that support educational leaders to address the shortcomings of professional learning. Given that research situates effective adult learning and professional learning in a social setting, our study focuses on the quality of effective collaborative professional learning.

Professional Learning as a Social Endeavor

Professional learning that capitalizes on interactions in and amongst educators maximizes its impact. In a qualitative study of teacher collaboration and learning, Bannister (2015) found that when teachers built community over time, their learning and their instructional practices evolved. In an analysis of adult learning, Drago-Severson (2016) concluded that four pillars of collaboration supported professional learning and growth: teaming, shared leadership, collegial inquiry, and mentoring. Each of these pillars demands adult learners work together to develop new understandings. In a summative review of research on teacher professional development, Opfer and Pedder (2011) found that professional learning affected teacher practice if teachers from the same school, department, or year level participated collectively because learning then became an ongoing, collective responsibility rather than an individual one. In a qualitative study

of six principal professional learning experiences, Honig and Rainey (2014) found that providing principals the opportunity to learn alongside their colleagues resulted in strengthened instructional leadership practices.

Research also establishes that collaborative professional learning experiences lead to shifts in practice (Bruce, 2010; Slavit et al., 2011). In a mixed methods multiple instrumental case study comparing the impact of the same professional learning experiences of teachers in two different districts, Bruce et al. (2010) found that teachers who had prior collaborative learning experiences achieved greater efficacy and improved student results. Past professional learning experiences provided teachers with collaborative mechanisms (e.g. authentic dialogue, peer observation, and connection between formal training dates), strengthening their collective experience. Using measurements of teacher's self-efficacy and overall math outcomes for students, the study concluded that the district in which teachers had prior learning experiences started with lower baseline data but changed their practice significantly more than the teachers in the district in which teachers had no prior experience. Slavit et al.'s (2011) grounded case study of math teachers' changing practice similarly found that collaboration increased teachers' willingness to adjust and expand their pedagogy. Tracking the trajectory of collaborative professional learning, Slavit et al. (2011) found that teachers who engaged in collaborative learning used significantly more student-centered instructional strategies and increased their own efficacy as a result.

These research findings suggest that an investigation of educators' experiences with collaboration must be incorporated into our study's understanding of professional learning. The research's emphasis on the importance of educator's previous experience also suggests that the learning context in which learning is constructed is important.

Professional Learning Context: Structured Formally and Informally

Since learning is constructed through social interaction, where the learning is situated matters. The learner is informed by their environment and in turn, the learner contributes to their environment, causing the cycle of learning to evolve (Wenger, 1998). The more we know about the identity of the learner, the context of this learning, and the learning process itself, the better able we are to design for effective learning experiences (Merriam, 2004).

Social learning has significant implications for designing adult learning within a system, such as a school or school district, and effective design for learning can include both formal and informal elements. In a qualitative, single-case study examining secondary social studies teacher professional learning, Thacker (2017) found that professional learning is best structured when it is ongoing, situated in the environment relevant to the teacher, is focused on the content, and is experienced collaboratively. Thacker (2017) also concluded that informal professional learning provides rich opportunities to advance teachers' practice and growth. Building on these findings, we will examine the way both formal professional learning opportunities (such as district-designed professional development sessions) and informal professional learning opportunities (such as peer observations that are educator directed) support instructional leadership during a time of crisis.

Instructional Leadership

The final area of research framing our inquiry is instructional leadership. Instructional leadership is one of the most referenced leadership concepts in current literature (Wang, 2018). In a concept co-occurrence network analysis of 1,328 articles examining the theoretical groundings of educational leadership, Wang found distributed and instructional leadership to be the first and second most frequent leadership concepts, respectively. Compared to other concepts

of leadership, instructional leadership has what Hallinger et al. (2020) found to have "remarkable staying power" (p. 1629), that "has not only endured but grown into one of the most powerful metaphors guiding our expectations for school leaders...throughout the world" (p. 1645). In their meta-analysis of 22 published studies which compared the effects of transformational leadership and instructional leadership on student outcomes, Robinson et al. (2008) found the average effect of instructional leadership on student outcomes to be three to four times greater than student outcomes which resulted from transformational leadership.

Instructional leadership includes practices that have both direct and indirect effects on student achievement (Robinson et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2008; Hallinger & Heck, 1996). Hallinger (2011) later references and defines these practices as "leadership focus" (p. 129) or "avenues in which leadership impacts learning" (p. 129) including vision and goals, academic structures and processes, and people. Vision is established by the leader and articulates the direction the school is moving in whereas goals are the indicators that determine this progress. Academic structures and processes must be systemic to shape and enhance the practice of teachers. The last avenue through which to demonstrate instructional leadership is by building capacity in others to lead. All three avenues have an impact on multiple levels of leadership within an organization.

Instructional Leadership is More than the Principal

With the emergence of the accountability era, student achievement metrics became public, both assisting and constraining principals' efforts for school improvement (Neumerski, 2013). District-wide accountability pushed instructional leadership to become the responsibility of all leaders within the district (Hallinger, 2020). Distributed leadership was borne out of the realization that principals alone cannot be responsible for the achievement of students; in order to

meet accountability targets, leadership is spread over many actors to improve the teaching and learning experiences within the school (Gronn, 2000, 2002; Spillane et al., 2001, 2004).

Distributed leadership thus emerged as a lens to broaden the concept of leadership beyond the principal. District administrators, principals, middle-level instructional leaders (e.g., assistant principals), and teachers are collectively called upon to improve teaching and learning and their work is intertwined and interconnected (Spillane et al., 2004). Yet, much remains to be learned about how educators' interactions amongst many levels in a district contribute to instructional leadership. In her literature review of traditional instructional leadership literature, teacher instructional leadership literature, and coach instructional leadership literature, Neumerski (2013) found that across all three sets of research literature, further examination is needed about how educators' learning and work intersect in specific contexts to improve teaching and learning. Our study aims to contribute to filling this gap by analyzing the relationship between professional learning and instructional leadership amongst many leaders within a district.

Instructional Leadership and the Impact on Student Achievement

Literature on instructional leadership asserts that goal-related constructs (e.g. vision, mission, learning targets) must contain an academic focus (Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Murphy, 1988, 2005; Robinson et al., 2008). The importance of this focus has emerged because research has found that leadership has a mediating effect on student outcomes; leaders influence school processes that impact teaching and learning (Hallinger 2011, Day et al., 2016). For example, leaders can design for learning when creating the master schedule to protect time on learning.

Further highlighting the impact of school leaders, a national longitudinal and mixed methods study in England, Day et al. (2016) found that leaders directly and indirectly attained and maintained improvement efforts in schools. While Leithwood et al. (2008) determined that principal leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning, a more recent examination found that leaders at any level of the organization impact student learning by establishing conditions within the organization that focus on improved student outcomes and effective teaching (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Student learning is impacted by educational leaders' influence on classroom practice. In Robinson et al.'s meta-analysis (2008), five leadership dimensions were identified that influence student learning, the most significant dimension being "promoting and taking part in teacher learning" (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 657). With a strong effect size, "leaders' involvement in teacher learning provides them with a deep understanding of the conditions required to enable staff to make and sustain the changes required for improved outcomes" (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 667). The other four dimensions had moderate positive effects: (1) planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum; (2) establishing goals and expectations; (3) strategic resourcing; and (4) ensuring an orderly and supportive environment (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 657). The net effect of allowing principals to focus on these dimensions has been proven to have positive implications for improving student learning: "the importance of this finding should not be underestimated as it is based on a large body of research completed over a substantial period of time" (Hallinger, 2011, p. 134). This research suggests that in order for the educational leaders in a district to actualize the achievement goals they set forth, there must be a shared commitment to instructional leadership amongst all members of a district.

The broad body of empirical evidence shows that instructional leadership incorporates effective practices within specific dimensions that can be developed across school and district leaders. Instructional leadership calls upon all leaders to prioritize teaching and learning. When this focus exists, outcomes for students are positively impacted. These important revelations undergird our study as we seek to understand how instructional leadership is bounded and intertwined within a district (Harris, 2020).

Instructional Leadership During Crisis

Demands on school and district leadership expand exponentially during a crisis (Hannah et al., 2009). In a case study of the response to tornado devastation in Texas, Potter et al. (2021) found that school leaders must communicate effectively with staff and media; make operational, managerial, and logistical decisions quickly and under immense pressure; efficiently assess families' needs; manage the outpouring of philanthropy; and integrate parent and community voice in governance (Potter et al., 2021). In a case study of four elementary school principals' actions after the 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand, Mutch (2015) described three components of effective leadership response, all of which have to be executed rapidly: dispositional work, including demonstrating values and beliefs; relational work, including fostering collaboration and building trust; and situational work, including adapting to changing needs, thinking creatively, and providing direction for the organization (Mutch, 2015a). In a qualitative study of Lebanese principals and schools responding to the international Syrian refugee crisis, Mahfouz et al. (2019) found that administrators spend a disproportionate amount of time "'putting out fires', resolving urgent issues, and attending to basic needs that typically are taken for granted in other schools" in a normal schooling situation (Mahfouz et al., 2019, p. 24).

In sum, responsibilities shifted significantly during a crisis, and school leaders need to adapt rapidly to meet evolving demands (Smith & Riley, 2012).

Research also suggests the quality and nature of the social context before the crisis defines how the community handles the during and the after; it is difficult to build a culture of learning and collaboration during a crisis if it did not exist previously. In an empirical, interview-based study of teachers and principals post Hurricane Katrina, Carr-Chellman (2008) found that contextual challenges of the past may resurface in predictable and unpredictable ways, "but they must be dealt with for the system to move on. Thus, careful recognition and examination of the current and past larger culture, while they may seem luxuries, are essential to change in chaos" (Carr-Chellman et al., 2008, p. 36). Similarly, after examining the interconnectivity of the learning communities of elementary schools in Christchurch, New Zealand both before and after the earthquake, Mutch (2015b) found that schools with an inclusive culture and with strong relationships beforehand were better situated to manage the challenges that arise during and after a crisis. This research base provides us with a clear understanding that the structures of professional learning existing within the district of study during times before the pandemic will inform the schools' and district's crisis response to COVID-19.

Taking the literature into account as a whole, we gained a number of important insights for our study. Following the research on learning as a social endeavor, our study will help to develop an understanding of professional learning amongst educators as a combination of both individual and external factors. Following research that situates effective adult learning and professional learning in a social setting, our study focused on the specific qualities of effective collaboration and took into account educators' prior experiences in the learning context. Our

study assumes that instructional leadership emerges in the interactions among many educators in the district rather than centering on just the role of the principal. We employed a conceptual framework that allowed us to analyze how the learning that undergirds instructional leadership in the district is bounded and intertwined amongst leaders within the district, including both formal and informal opportunities for learning.

Conceptual Framework

Based on a socio-contextual theory of learning, the concept of a community of practice (CoP) provides our study with a useful framework for examining how learning in a district takes place at multiple levels through interconnected networks. A CoP is a group of people who share a common purpose and learn to pursue this purpose from one another (Wenger, 1998). Learning in a CoP is a negotiation between socially defined competence and individual experience; learning is not a solely individual process but a process of social participation. According to Wenger, this perspective has a number of implications for understanding and supporting learning:

> [F]or *individuals*, it means that learning is an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities; for *communities*, it means that learning is an issue of refining their practice and ensuring new generations of members; for *organizations*, it means that learning is an issue of sustaining the interconnected communities of practice through which an organization knows what it knows and thus becomes effective and valuable as an organization. (pp.7-8)

The focus is not on what is learned but rather how learning occurs: with and from others.

A number of empirical studies demonstrate CoP to be a useful framework for studying education communities undergoing change. Printy (2008) employed a CoP framework to measure the influence of high school principals and department chairpersons on teachers' developing learning, professional beliefs, and instructional skills. Through a CoP frame, Cuddapah and Clayton (2011) analyzed a teacher induction program and the interconnectivity of the learning of the teachers within the network long term. Scanlan (2012) used a CoP framework to describe how the interconnectedness within an elementary school both facilitates and interrupts, or frustrates, adult learning as the community works toward becoming a socially just school community.

CoPs exist in overlapping networks, and individuals within these networks learn not only within but also across CoPs in "constellations" that are loosely configured and interconnected (Wenger, 1998; Scanlan, 2012). Therefore, a school district, as a complex organization that relies significantly on relationships to improve practice and effectively meet the social and academic needs of students, could be a CoP. Individual schools within that district could also be CoPs. Individuals who work at an individual school could be part of both the individual school and the district CoPs--as well as part of many other CoPs, such as a team within the school or a state-wide curriculum group.

A group of individuals working together must exhibit three dimensions in order to meet the criteria of a CoP. These three dimensions (joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire) can be revealed through a set of key questions (Wenger, 1998) in Figure 1.2 below.

Figure 1.2:

Dimensions of a CoP

Dimension	Explanation	Key Questions
Joint Enterprise	Results from a collective understanding of purpose and direction.	How does the community establish goals and accountability? How does the community demonstrate a shared way of engaging and doing things together?
Mutual Engagement	Emerges through a kind of social capital generated by sustained relationships.	How does the community interact? How does the community define who belongs?
Shared Repertoire	Results when members share discourse styles, histories, and tools to make sense of the learning.	What are the concepts, language, and tools of the community that embody its history and its perspective? How self-conscious is the community about the repertoire that it is developing and its effects on its practice?

These three dimensions work together: “Without the learning energy of those who take initiative, the community becomes stagnant. Without strong relationships of belonging, it is torn apart. And without the ability to reflect, it becomes hostage to its own history.” (Wenger, 2000, p. 230). As we examined professional learning and instructional leadership in the district, these three dimensions of CoPs guided our collective analysis.

Individual members of our team drew upon nuanced aspects of CoPs in their individual studies (see Figure 1.3). Given that this study recognizes that learning must consider the individual, the context of the learning, and the nature of the interactions that occur, the four learning capabilities will be drawn upon to understand these concepts: Citizenship, Power, Partnerships, and Governance. Partnerships, Governance, and Power attend to the context of the learning and the nature of the interactions. Citizenship refers to the investment of the individual, including both previous and current experiences. Pires and Erickson used these learning

capabilities as an additional conceptual frame for their analyses of how middle-level instructional leaders learn to become instructional leaders and how superintendents strengthen principal's organizational commitment, respectively. Of the four capabilities, Hosmer used Citizenship, Power, and Partnership to examine teacher learning and how principals create the conditions for teacher learning. Each of the learning capabilities are fleshed out in our respective Chapter Threes.

Figure 1.3:

Group and Individual Conceptual Framework

Group Focus:

- What does professional learning and instructional leadership look like at various levels?
- How is the learning of instructional leaders in a district bounded and/or intertwined?

Group Conceptual Framework: Communities of Practice

Joint Enterprise, a collective understanding of purpose and direction.

- How does the community establish goals and accountability?
- How does the community demonstrate a shared way of engaging and doing things together?

Mutual Engagement, social capital generated by sustained relationships.

- How does the community interact?
- How does the community define who belongs?

Shared Repertoire, shared discourse styles, histories, and tools.

- What are the concepts, language, and tools of the community that embody its history and its perspective?
- How self-conscious is the community about the repertoire that it is developing and its effects on its practice?

Pires	Hosmer	Clark	Erickson
Focus: How middle-level leaders pursue and make sense of instructional leadership	**Focus:** Teacher learning and how principals create the conditions for teacher learning	**Focus:** How principals negotiate their membership in both their district and in their schools	**Focus:** How superintendents strengthen principal's organizational commitment
Key concepts: ● Citizenship ● Power: vertical and horizontal accountability ● Partnerships ● Governance: stewardship and emergence	**Key Concepts:** ● Citizenship ● Power: vertical and horizontal accountability ● Partnerships	**Key Concepts:** ● Boundaries ● Brokering	**Key Concepts:** ● Citizenship ● Power: vertical and horizontal accountability ● Partnerships ● Governance: stewardship and emergence

Within the broader concept of mutual engagement, the processes of boundaries and brokering describe how members transfer elements of practice from one community to another (Smith et al., 2017). Clark used the concepts of boundaries and brokering to describe how principals negotiate their membership in both their district and in their schools as they learn to be instructional leaders during this time of crisis. These concepts are discussed more fully in Clark's Chapter Three.

CoP provides our research team with a framework to interrogate, classify, and understand the goals, ways of doing, patterns of interaction, concepts, language, and tools of the communities we studied. Cumulatively, we aimed to describe the multiple complex layers of the learning process in these communities. We now turn to Chapter Two and a full description of our research design and methods.

CHAPTER TWO[2]

Research Design and Methodology

Our collective study investigated the relationship between professional learning and instructional leadership during a time of crisis. Our individual studies each focused on a particular community of practice within the district (see Figure 1.1). Erickson focused on the practices of the superintendent that establish principals' organizational commitment. Clark examined the roles autonomy plays in how principals learn to prioritize curricular goals and to support instruction. Pires explored the systems and socio-cultural influences that impact the learning of middle-level instructional leaders (MILs). Hosmer studied teacher learning and how principals create the conditions for that learning. Collectively, these different foci cohere to provide a rich description of the learning that exists within a school district and how it is bounded (has defined boundaries) and intertwined (has interconnection across boundaries).

To explore these interactions, we implemented a case study design. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define a case study as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 37). A qualitative case study was most appropriate for our study because in order to answer our two core research questions, we needed to capture participant views and perspectives, situated in their particular contexts.

Site and Participant Selection

We established three criteria for our site selection. Learning and opportunity gaps that have disproportionately affected historically marginalized students have widened during the COVID-19 global pandemic (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021; Eyles et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Because we were interested in a district trying to address inequity in academic outcomes through

[2] This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Anne R. Clark, Meredith Erickson, Sara K. Hosmer, and Mario Pires.

instructional leadership, our first criterion was a district serving historically marginalized students. We sought an urban district of medium size in Massachusetts where at least 50% of students are identified as "high needs" according to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) criteria. According to the DESE definition, "high needs" refers to "belonging to at least one of the following individual subgroups: students with disabilities, English language learners (ELL) and former ELL students, or low income students (eligible for free/reduced price school lunch)" (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.). Given that research has found that a superintendent may impact student achievement as soon as two years into their tenure (Waters & Marzano, 2006), our second criterion was a district whose superintendent has been in their role for at least two years so that instructional initiatives are in place. Finally, our third criterion was that the district be large enough to have enough MILs to support our study. We sought a medium size district, meaning a district serving 10,000-20,000 students.

Following these three criteria, we identified a district we gave the pseudonym "Frederick." The superintendent at Frederick has served four years in this role, and the district has a little over 15,000 students in twenty-five schools. Frederick, in Massachusetts, serves a diverse student population (see Table 2.1). For example, more than four out of five students are students of color, and more than one in three students are English Learners, more than triple the state average.

Table 2.1:

Student Subgroups by percentage

Subgroup	Frederick Percentage	State Percentage
African American	7.9	9.3
Asian	7.4	7.2
Hispanic	69.1	23.1
Native American	0.3	0.2
White	12.3	55.7
Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	0.0	0.1
Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	3.0	4.3
English Language Learners	36.3	11.0
Students with Disabilities	17.5	18.9
High Needs	85.8	55.6

We used purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) to gather data from members situated across two CoP types: the District CoP and school-based CoPs. Purposeful sampling is grounded in the idea that the researchers want to discover, understand, and gain insight on a phenomenon and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We met with the superintendent and representatives from his executive cabinet (members of the district CoP) to elicit their support in identifying department leaders and principals that met our selection criteria. To broaden our reach to the district and the key players that engage in instructional leadership, we then employed snowball sampling (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) to identify MILs and teachers (members of school-based CoPs). When we met with principals, we asked them to identify MILs and teachers; we also asked MILs to identify other MILs.

Data Collection

Members of the research team served as the primary instruments for data collection. In order to triangulate multiple data sources for "convergence of evidence," (Yin, 2018, p.129), our research team focused on three of the four possible data sources that Creswell and Guetterman (2019) outline: interviews, observations, and document review. In the summer of 2021, we attained IRB approval and began data gathering immediately. We completed data collection in January 2022.

Interviews

We gathered the majority of our evidence through interviews. Before interviews began, each member of the research team conducted a pilot interview with a trusted educational colleague, using their individually proposed interview protocol. Merriam and Tisdale (2016) state that a pilot interview provides an opportunity to "quickly learn which questions are confusing and need rewording, which questions yield useless data, and which questions…you should have thought to include in the first place" (p.117) This process highlighted where our individual questions had intersections, and we then agreed to create a common principal interview protocol (Appendix A). The common principal protocol allowed us to gather data related to both our group questions and members' individual research questions. Members of our research team also developed protocols for interviews with the superintendent, MILs, and teachers (Appendix B, Appendix C, Appendix D).

Our research team conducted a combination of face-to-face interviews and web-based interviews (via Zoom, an online video conferencing platform). Prior to the start of each interview, we shared our common informed consent form (Appendix L) and acquired informed consent from each participant. Interviews were semi-structured. Merriam and Tisdell (2016)

outline the benefits of a semi-structured interview and note that this format “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas of the topic” (p. 110). “We recorded interviews and used a professional transcription service. Members of the research team interviewed various educators depending upon the focus of their individual studies (Table 2.2); however, three members of the research team interviewed principals because the perspective of the principal is vital to each member’s focus.

In total, our team conducted 22 interviews. Our sample included the superintendent, central office personnel, principals, middle-level instructional leaders, and teachers. Collecting data through interviews across these multiple roles allowed us to gain a broad context of the district. By interviewing across roles, we were also able to calibrate our coding and analyze data with varied perspectives in mind.

Table 2.2: *Interview Subjects*

Participants	**Number**	**Interviewer(s)**
Superintendent of Schools	1	Clark, Erickson
District Personnel	1	Erickson
Principals	7	Clark, Erickson, Hosmer
Middle-level Instructional Leaders	8	Pires
Teachers/Teacher Leaders	5	Hosmer

Observations

Our research team completed observations as a second source of data. These opportunities provided a first-hand encounter with the learning of educational leaders engaged in instructional leadership and to see the nuances associated with the learning in the moment. For each observation, the researcher served as what Creswell and Guetterman (2019) call a "non-participant" observer (p. 215). During the observation, researchers captured notes on the physical setting, participants, activities and interactions, conversation, subtle factors, and their own behavior (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We developed a common observation protocol to ensure consistency of data collection (Appendix E). We observed four district-level leadership meetings (two in person and two via Zoom) and one meeting amongst MILs (via Zoom). In addition, we observed one teacher-facilitated planning meeting (in person). COVID-19 protocols restricted further access, a limitation we discuss further in Chapter Four.

Document Review

Finally, we reviewed documents as a third source of data. In order for the research team to assess collaboration before, during and after COVID-19, we reviewed documents that described curriculum and instructional priorities beginning with the 2018 - 2019 academic year (see Table 2.3 for internal and public documents collected). Public records included the Massachusetts' DESE District Review, the district and schools' improvement plans, and recently completed or approved grants. These records shed light on the instructional leadership initiatives taking place at the global level which will inform the team of key initiatives. Examples of internal records that were requested from the district include district and school professional development materials and superintendent goals. These documents provided key information on district initiatives, including who was involved, the timeline for implementation, and

measurements for success. These documents determined the subjects in the district who were most closely connected to instructional leadership, informing our purposeful sampling for our interviews. In addition, these documents uncovered nuances between what is shared publicly and what is for internal use. We used a common document review protocol to analyze these materials (Appendix J).

Table 2.3:

Documents Reviewed

Type of Document	Document Name
Private	"Framework for Success" Elementary Lesson Planning Template
	Frederick Organizational Chart
	SY 21-22 Leadership Institute Powerpoint Presentation
	SY 21-22 Secondary School P.L.C. Meeting Structure
Public	Frederick District and School Websites
	Frederick School Committee Policy - CA: Administration Goals/District Administration Priority Objectives
	Frederick School Committee Policy - CC: Administrative Organization Plan
	Frederick School Committee - video archive February 11, 2021
	Frederick School Committee - video archive February 25, 2021
	Frederick Strategic Plan 2019-2024
	Frederick Student Opportunity Act Plan 2021-23
	Frederick Superintendent Goals: 2018-2019, 2019-2020, 2020-2021
	FY 21-22 District Proposed Budget
	Massachusetts' Department of Elementary and Secondary Education District and School Profiles

Data Analysis

Given that a qualitative case study is “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single, bounded unit” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; pg. 233), the volume of data collected was expansive. To organize data, the research team created a shared virtual folder system on a secure hard drive. Data collection and analysis was a simultaneous process. As we interviewed respondents, observed sessions, and reviewed documents, we each wrote memos to capture personal thoughts, insights, hunches, or broad ideas or themes. These were also stored in our shared organized electronic folder system. The research team agreed on the use of date, initials of the researcher, and the role of interviewee as an initial organizational structure. Documents, field notes, and transcripts were uploaded into a coding secure, password-protected software, called Quirkos. To preserve the anonymity of our participants, we have used the singular they throughout this dissertation as endorsed as part of APA Style because it is inclusive of all people and helps writers avoid making assumptions about gender. We refer to the superintendent only by title and he and him pronouns.

As the team analyzed data, whether during data collection or after in subsequent cycles of data analysis, we each began to code. Saldaña (2013) defines a code as “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). Each researcher followed an agreed upon sequence as shown below in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4: *Common Coding Protocol*

Common Sequence to Code	
Cycle 1	*Code for common codes* a. Common a priori codes : Mutual Engagement, Joint Enterprise, Shared Repertoire b. Common codes that develop through open coding
Cycle 2	*Code for the researcher's own codes** a. The researcher's a priori codes b. The researcher's individual codes that develop through open coding **this cycle was conducted multiple times for each researcher*
Cycle 3	*Code for overall findings* a. Each researcher presented their own findings to the group b. Group members synthesized the collective findings to determine overall group findings

As researchers individually open coded, different types of triangulation occured. Researchers noticed similar codes across multiple data types (interviews, observations, and documents). In addition, the research team conducted triangulation data meetings twice weekly where members of the team shared the category constructions that they developed, also known by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as analytical coding (p. 206), in order to compare and inform future collection sessions. To calibrate for codes, we selected one interview and individually coded it. We then reviewed and discussed how each of us coded the transcript. This practice, similar to when teachers calibrate for assessment and grading, resulted in dialogue that further deepened our individual and collective understanding of how the data was connected to our group research questions as well our individual studies. During our bi-weekly meetings, all four group members shared coding memos and gained familiarity with each other's coding systems (Appendix G). Each member coded their individual data using three coding cycles (illustrated in Figure 2.4).

This multi-step process served two purposes. It supported our research focus on the ways in which educators' learning is bounded and intertwined within and amongst various educators across CoPs. In addition, it provided an opportunity for inter-researcher reliability.

Positionality

The research team responsible for this group study is composed of four educational leaders from public school districts across Massachusetts whose combined years of service at the end of 2022 academic year is 93 years. While some of the members worked in the same district at various points in their career, each currently have distinct roles, responsibilities, and titles. As full-time practitioners currently employed in a public school system during a pandemic, our own biases and experiences may influence the objectivity of data collection and analysis. We worked through this subjectivity by using a reflective journal. During our weekly triangulation data meetings, we reviewed each other's reflective journal to share insights, recognize biases, and provide each other with constructive feedback to critically reflect on how our positionality influenced the analysis and guard against any related negative effects (e.g., distortions, omissions).

CHAPTER THREE[3]

COVID-19 has added immense pressure on school districts and leaders to adjust for the loss of both academic and structural supports for students. Though the consequences on student learning will take time to determine (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2021; Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020), initial findings show greater academic loss in vulnerable student populations (Middleton, 2020; Engzell et al., 2021). School districts must respond to the impact caused by these unprecedented challenges.

To address these challenges, superintendents are developing and enacting district-wide improvement goals. Prior scholarship has showed us that in order to actualize these goals, districts must foster collaboration between central office and principals leading to increased alignment, shared ownership, and a greater probability of success (Rorrer et al., 2008; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012; Honig, 2004). This collaboration is particularly important during times of crisis as organizations assess impact and construct expeditious solutions (Gardner & Matviak, 2020; Middleton, 2020). Thus, research that examines how district-principal relationships influence principals' commitment can contribute to sustained district improvements.

As superintendents focus on the whole district and principals focus on their individual schools, the positionality of each actor may skew how goals are prioritized. The hierarchical structure of a school district can aid or hinder goal accomplishment as principals may choose to act on district directives out of investment or compliance (Xia et al., 2020). A principal may also choose to not act on a district directive. At times, frustration occurs when principals perceive district involvement to be unproductive or an overreach of district authority (Daly & Finnegan, 2010). This resistance exposes tensions in the vertical power structure between school-based and

[3] This chapter was individually authored by Meredith Erickson.

district leaders (Rorrer et al., 2008). Superintendents have to contend with these tensions to generate the buy-in crucial to the change process (Contu, 2014; Fullan, 2001, Xia et al.).

Principals' unique position within the district influences their individual level of investment (Glascock, 2001). While principals assume both a subordinate and superordinate role (Glascock, 2001), organizational commitment can still be strengthened. Principals provide important reciprocity for superintendents, confirmed by Bjork's (1993) claim that superintendents impact and are impacted by principals. Therefore, superintendents need to understand the conditions that motivate principals, build investment, and develop shared ownership.

My study aims to contribute to literature on how superintendents can create conditions to strengthen principal commitment to improvements. Specific to this interplay between superintendent and principals, I answer the question: during a time of crisis, how does a superintendent strive to increase the organizational commitment of their principals regarding instructional leadership?

Literature Review

To frame this inquiry, I draw on three bodies of literature. First I review research on the role of the district in instructional leadership. I then summarize studies on how change is enacted through leadership practices related to organizational learning. Third, since district instructional improvement requires principals to carry out school-level actions, I discuss research on the relationship between organizational commitment and principals' participation in district goals.

Instructional Leadership: The District's Role

Instructional leadership, once thought to be solely a function of the principal, has evolved to also include district leaders' impact on student learning. In a mixed methods study of 2,324

district and school leaders from 45 districts, Leithwood et al., (2019) tested nine district characteristics and their effect on math and English language arts achievement. They found seven characteristics to have a positive, significant impact on student achievement: (a) mission, vision and goals, (b) coherent instructional program, (c) uses of evidence, (d) extent of district alignment, (e) relationships, (f) professional leadership, and (g) learning-oriented improvement processes. This research suggests that districts should develop an approach to instructional leadership that includes all seven.

Similarly, Rorrer et al. (2008) found that districts assume four key responsibilities in facilitating educational change, the first of which is providing instructional leadership. Their narrative synthesis finds that districts serve as instructional leaders when they "generate will and build capacity" (p. 315) in order to create long-term change. Firestone (1989) defines building capacity as "the extent to which the district has the knowledge, skills, personnel, and other resources necessary to carry out [improvements]" (p. 157). Generating will, or the act of being committed to a decision, compels leaders to establish goals and to stay focused on student improvement (Rorrer et al.).

Superintendents may consider how to best support their principals, especially considering the principal is more proximal to the classroom and has a more direct effect on student learning. In a meta-analysis by Robinson et al. (2008) studying the impact of leadership dimensions, they found that the greater focus a leader has on teaching and learning, the more impact this will have on student results. In a subsequent study, Robinson (2010) suggested that to have the greatest impact, instructional leaders should develop " three interrelated capabilities: (a) using deep leadership content knowledge to (b) solve complex school-based problems, while (c) building relational trust" (p. 1). These findings suggest the district develop systems to minimize unrelated

initiatives that distract principals, and allow for focus on conditions that affect student learning.

In sum, the district's role in instructional leadership can be to develop a system oriented towards student achievement. This points to the importance of organizational learning, to which we now turn.

Organizational Learning

Organizational learning refers to how members of an organization cooperatively learn to increase their capacity and continuously improve the organization (Senge, 1990). This is particularly relevant to school districts as they can leverage systems thinking, shared vision, and team learning to strengthen the organizational culture. Organizational learning includes how districts design for learning among leaders in their organization (Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2013). In their action research case study on organizational culture, Smith et al. (2020) found that districts must build capacity and develop a learning culture vertically, between schools and the district. In such a learning culture, leaders work together as learners, engage in cross-functional teams, and develop a shared community.

Organizational learning may be impacted by leaders' dispositions towards genuine reflection, as well as how the leaders build the culture while taking honest appraisal of challenges. How an organization's leadership, in this case the district superintendent, models cogitation and develops a culture where honest reflection is valued, can impact the extent to which the organization learns. According to Fullan (2011), while most organizations do not learn, those that do so effectively utilize systems learning in two ways: leaders growing and working as a collective and through the personal attributes of the leader. Organizations that learn "are led by people who approach complexity with a combination of humility and faith that effectiveness can be maximized under the circumstances" (p.109). Senge (1990) further describes

the personal attributes of the leader as personal mastery, or the leader's growth, purpose, and commitment. Personal mastery leads to soliciting honest feedback in a psychological safe culture. Smith and colleagues (2020) hold that teams need for space whereby leaders can safely dialogue about problems, resulting in increased buy-in and empowerment as leaders work together vertically within layers of the hierarchy.

Finally, engaging all leaders in a shared vision can develop the organizational learning capacity of the system. A shared vision can build the district's culture and provide opportunities for stakeholders at all layers of the organization to contribute to organizational learning, and thus build capacity. Organizational learning, as a process, is not episodic. Instead, learning that leads to continual growth and improvement requires commitment, the third strand of this literature review.

Affective Organizational Commitment (AOC)

Organizational commitment is an important component of leaders' investment in the district. Organizational commitment is defined as the employee's psychological attachment to the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991). This can be measured by an employee's "identity with and involvement in" (Porter, 1974, p. 604) the organization. Studies find organizational commitment can be a predictor of an employee's willingness to accomplish goal-oriented activities (Meyer et., 2002; Chun et al., 2013) as indicated by a desire to put substantial effort into organizational goals (Mowday et al., 1979, 1982; Porter et al., 1974). Meyer and Allen (1991) identified three types of organizational commitment: affective, continuance, and normative. While the latter two types focus on external factors and thus do not pertain to this study, affective organizational commitment (AOC) is highly relevant.

AOC refers to an employee's desire to bond with and be involved in the organization.

Rather than participating in an organization out of need or a sense of obligation, individuals with high AOC have emotional bonds that impact their desire to be invested. Meyer et al. (2002) found AOC has the most favorable and strongest correlation with organizational outcomes.

Empirical studies have identified antecedents of organizational commitment, including AOC, in the workplace (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Mowday et al.,1982). Three specific antecedents of AOC intersect with the district's role in instructional leadership and organizational learning (see Table 3.1). The first is the district's approach to a shared vision and goals, specifically whether and how personal and organizational goals align (Reichers, 1985). When alignment is high, employees are more likely to act (even instinctively) to benefit the organization (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). AOC - which leads to an increased enthusiasm for participating in organizational improvements (Meyer & Allen, 1991) - contributes to this alignment. When superintendents engage principals in developing district goals, the principals are more invested personally. In a correlational study examining 455 teams from the same organization, Chai et al. (2007) found that leaders that support and promote a shared vision and goals positively impact AOC. Central office leaders empower principals when they invite them to co-construct a shared vision (Honig et al., 2017), increasing AOC (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

Table 3.1 *Antecedents of Affective Organizational Commitment (AOC)*

Antecedent
Alignment of Personal and Organizational Goals
Degree of Autonomy
Supervisor Support

A second antecedent of AOC is degree of autonomy (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Autonomy can be defined as the principal's decisional authority over key school improvement moves (Honig & Rainey, 2012). The balance between authority, accountability, and autonomy is relevant to leading a hierarchical organization (Contu, 2014). Senge (2016) argues that compliance is a consequence of hierarchical authority, rather than the desired authentic commitment. As such, literature reveals that principals perceive they have high degrees of autonomy, AOC is elevated. Using a quantitative research design, Chang et al. (2015) surveyed 1,501 principals finding perceived autonomy support was "significantly predictive" (p. 329) of principal AOC, because superintendents create the safe conditions for principals to share control.

The degree of autonomy granted may well depend on the individual principal. Collie (2021) found during COVID-19 that principals adjusted autonomy by encouraging contribution and commitment in organizational decisions as best suited for the individual teachers' need. It stands to reason that district leaders would apply this logic to supporting principals. Chang et al. (2015) posits the more autonomy granted, the higher the desire to commit to the organization. They overlook an important factor, however: autonomy should be differentiated based on each principal's needs. Too much autonomy leaves newer principals feeling overwhelmed and not supported (Weiner and Woulfin, 2017). Umekubo et al. (2015) studied relationships between the superintendent and 44 school principals within a single district and found differentiated levels of autonomy led to more sustainable and effective student outcomes.

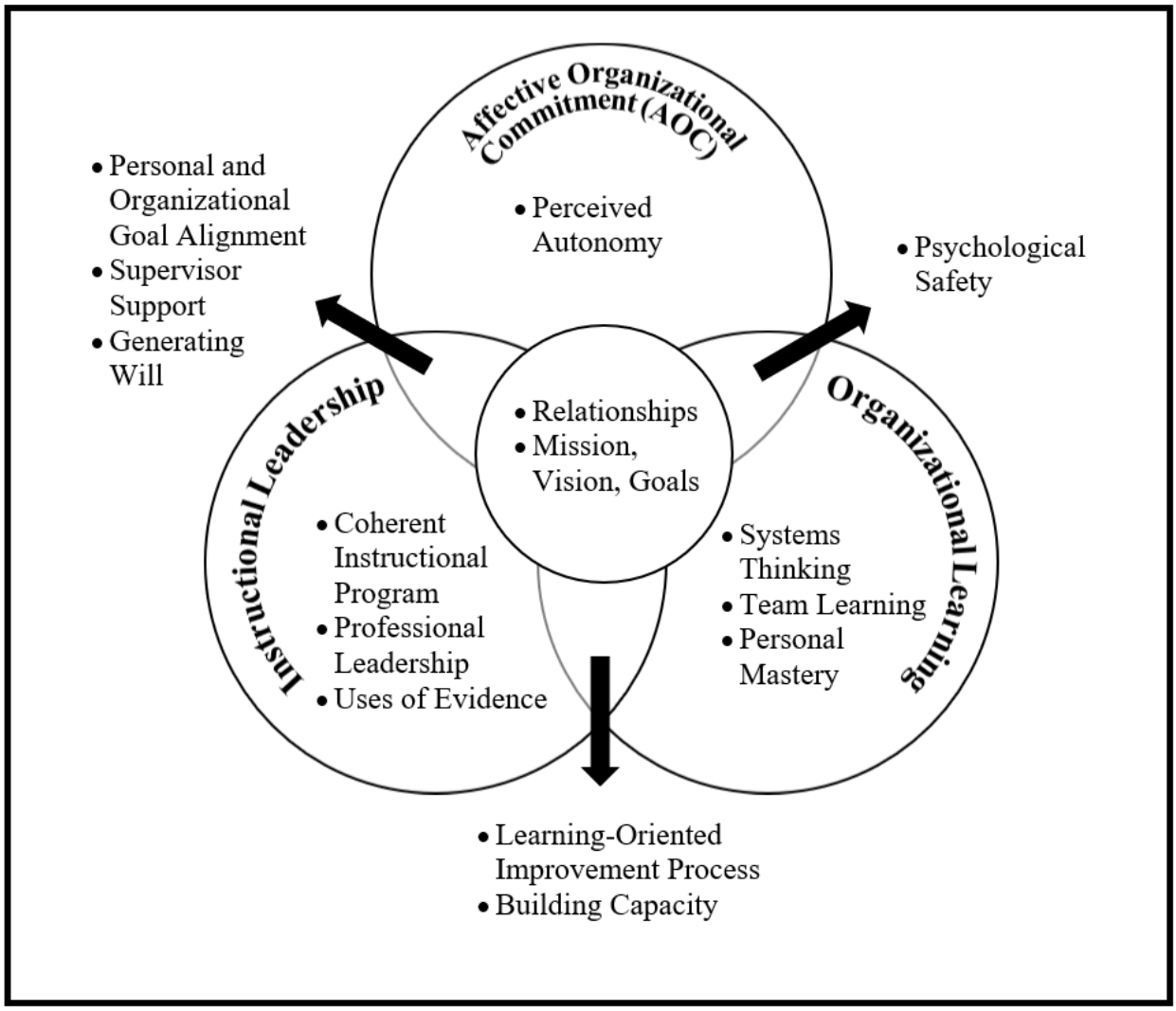
A third important antecedent of AOC is how superintendents develop supportive relationships and use their interpersonal attributes to support principals (Meyer & Allen, 1991). For instance, in an international quantitative study, Liu and Bellibas (2018) found mutual respect

to be the most important factor influencing principal commitment. Studies in other sectors also point to the importance of supervisor support in hierarchical leadership structures. In a causal-comparative study of 535 middle managers Hom et al., (2009) found AOC can be strengthened through employee-organization relations that satisfy middle managers' need for approval and emotional support. Additionally, how employees perceive their supervisor's ability, benevolence, and integrity lead to increased trust-in-supervisor which, in turn, predicted employees' AOC (Poon et al., 2006). COVID-19 has made the work of educational leaders up and down the layers of the organization increasingly complex, leaving districts to consider more support for principals.

From the literature, instructional leadership, organizational learning, and AOC each have key components that help describe that concept. Commonalities exist in these key components as illustrated in Figure 3.1. Here we see components exclusive to each concept listed in its respective large circle. Arrows point outwards towards components that are shared by two concepts, such as *psychological safety*, which is found in both AOC and organizational learning. At the nexus of all three are two components with broad applicability: 1) relationships, and 2) mission, vision, goals. There is a rich corpus of research that exists for each of these individual bodies of literature. Even so, less research exists where we see an intersection between AOC and another concept, particularly as it relates to principal AOC.

Figure 3.1.

Commonalities Between Instructional Leadership, Organizational Learning, and AOC



In conclusion, the paucity in research specifically examining these concepts has provided sparse evidence revealing how superintendents can strengthen principals'AOC. This provides me the warrant to ask my research question: during a time of crisis, how does a superintendent strive to increase the organizational commitment of their principals regarding instructional leadership?

Conceptual Framework

To examine how superintendents strive to strengthen their principals' organizational commitment, I utilized learning capabilities (Wenger, 2010) as a conceptual framework. The learning capabilities are particularly germane to my study because they describe the conditions for learning within a system, in this case a school district.

Theorizing how learning unfolds within communities of practice (CoPs), Wenger asserts that four learning capabilities are crucial characteristics of a social learning system. The learning capabilities offer a lens to examine both an individual's identity and investment in the learning of the community, as well as mechanisms consistent with systems learning, such as power, process, and relevance are negotiated within a system. Three of the four learning capabilities - power, partnership, and governance - describe system-level attributes, while one - citizenship - focuses on the individual as a member in the CoP (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2:

The Four Learning Capabilities

Citizenship	Power	Partnership	Governance
A focus on the individual identity and investment of each participant in a learning system.	A focus on both vertical and horizontal accountability structures in a learning system.	A focus on why and how participants come and work together in practice in a learning system.	A focus on the process by which a social system becomes a learning system.

Adapted from Wenger, E. (2010). Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems.

Citizenship connotes belonging. Building from this, learning citizenship relates to the individual identity of each participant and how they each manage their participation in and

across learning spaces. One's citizenship can be used to examine the value each member places in the community and their level of investment in the CoP. For example, principals engaged in studying a new literacy program to be implemented in their district have individual and varying ways of participating in the CoP. A principal who has a background in teaching reading may bring with them experiences and passions that inform their identity and thus confidence as a member of the CoP, whereas a principal who may have less personal experience may feel less competent and be more willing to observe and learn, rather than speak up in the CoP.

The other three learning capabilities are used to describe the opportunities and constraints within a learning system. Power identifies how accountability is distributed within the system Vertical accountability is manifest in traditional hierarchies, such as a "top down" initiative. Horizontal accountability is evident when members of a community hold each other accountable by committing to collective learning and determining how to negotiate what is relevant. An example of horizontal accountability would be principals working together to propose a solution to declining math scores, holding each other responsible as learners in the community.

Learning partnership describes why and how participants work together in practice, defining the dynamics of collaboration in the community.This is anchored in the belief that each member has the potential to contribute and be valued. For example, within an administrative leadership team composed of the superintendent and principals, partnership is at the nexus of how each person's experience can provide, contribute to, and partner in the praxis. Examining partnerships illuminates how relationships in and among principals and the superintendent provide for mutual engagement, focus on practice, and space for trust.

Finally, learning governance describes the process by which a social system becomes a learning system. Learning that drives governance can be categorized in two opposed, yet

complimentary, ways. Stewarding governance is driven by "seeking agreement and alignment" (Wenger, 2009, p. 13) whereas emergent governance holds space sacred for learning that emerges organically through the community as it "bubbles up from a distributed system of interactions involving local decisions" (Wenger, p. 13). For example, in proposing a solution that arises from a problem of practice, stewarding governance would involve consensus in comparison to emergent governance which would allow for a member of the community to innovate and let ideas surface without restraint or agreement.

These four learning capabilities provide a framework to help me analyze how the superintendent and principles learn together within the opportunities and constraints of a hierarchical system. They bring to light how the superintendent strives to strengthen organizational commitment during times of crisis and allowed me to determine the socio-cultural influences that impacted principals' AOC.

Research Design and Methodology

I used qualitative methods to examine how, in times of crisis, a superintendent strived to increase the AOC of their principals regarding prioritizing instructional leadership. Within a single school district I explored conditions the superintendent created to move principals to invest and act upon district improvement goals. I conducted a case study of this bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A single-case study design was appropriate as it allowed me to use in-depth data gathered over time generated in a real-world setting (Creswell, 2007) in order to make sense of lived experiences.

In alignment with our group's selection criteria detailed in Chapter 2, we studied a medium-sized urban school district in Massachusetts where at least 50% of students are designated high needs. As high needs students fit into two or more historically marginalized

subgroups, we posit that high needs students have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Relevant to my research question, the district had an existing leadership team, defined as all principals and district leaders, allowing me to examine the vertical structure between school and district. The superintendent had been in his role for four years, and worked in the district for seven years. This stability played into the site selection, as superintendent longevity has been found to positively affect student achievement (Hart et al., 2019; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Data Collection

My analysis began with a review of pertinent documents germane to this study, including district and school-level improvement plans, meeting minutes related to monitoring and evaluating goal progress or attainment, and superintendent goals. Many of these are public records, often presented at school committee meetings and available on the district website (Appendix F). Additionally, I inspected documents principals referred to during interviews that were pertinent to this study. Related documents provided data to analyze what alignment exists, if any, between the administrators in different layers of the organization.

I utilized semi-structured interviews as the primary data source; appropriate as "one-on-one interviews are useful for asking sensitive questions" (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 393). I interviewed the superintendent using the interview protocol and superintendent questions (Appendix B). Additionally, I interviewed the Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction, on the recommendation of the superintendent. Capturing principals' perceptions was an integral part of the data collection process. I used purposeful sampling to select principals in the district who are most likely to provide insights (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) as I sought to understand principals' perceptions of district leadership actions and the individual level of

organizational commitment.

In order to understand how superintendents strengthen principals' affective organizational commitment (AOC) during times of crisis, it was important to examine how the superintendent and district leaders interact with the principals they serve. Principals felt that specific actions influenced their commitment to the organization, therefore wanting to stay invested in improving the organization, even during turbulent times. Using Wenger's Learning Capabilities (2010) as a conceptual framework, I seek to make sense of how interactions between the superintendent and principals impact improvement efforts.

I used an interview protocol (Appendix A) which focused my collection of data on instructional leadership, organizational learning, and AOC. Many of these questions were adapted from Mowday et al.'s (1979) Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OQM) and Meyer and Allen's (1997) revised Three Component Model (TCM) Employee Commitment Survey, both of which have been used to measure employees' AOC. Table 3.3 outlines the frequency of interviews of the participant sample and observations conducted.

Table 3.3:

Interview Subjects Within the Leadership Team and Observations

Participants	Number of Participants
Interview: Superintendent of Schools	1
Interview: District Administrator	1
Interview: Principals	7
Observations: Leadership Team Meetings	3

In addition to the documentation and interview data, I collected data by observing three

leadership team meetings. Frederick defines the leadership team in the superintendent's entry plan as all principals and central office leadership (*Frederick Public Schools Entry Report*, 2018). These leadership team meetings focused on professional learning or agenda items related to advancing the districts' goals and/or support goal implementation. Using an observation protocol, I created field notes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to capture the climate, breadth of interactions and dispositions of participants present in these meetings (Appendix E).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was approached through an ongoing, iterative process guided by my conceptual framework. I coded for elements and themes that helped answer the research question regarding strengthening principal organizational commitment. Using our team's coding protocol, I engaged in cycles of coding (Figure 1). In addition to the *a-priori* codes (Appendix G), interviews were analyzed using open-coding; as themes emerged axial coding was employed (Saldana, 2015; Corbin & Strauss, 2015) that revealed new codes.

To answer my research question, I utilized a cycle of coding outlined in Figure 3.2, starting with identifying a-priori codes instructional that emerged in the literature review specific to instructional leadership and AOC. As analysis continued, open-coding provided additional codes cogent to answering the research question. A three-column matrix allowed for triangulation (Appendix I) to validate data among the different data sources. This matrix helped me analyze findings from across the different data sets: leadership team observations; interviews of the superintendent, executive director of curriculum and instruction, and building principals; and document reviews.

Figure 3.2

Common Sequence to Code

Common Sequence to Code	
Cycle 1	*Code for common codes* a. Common a priori codes : Mutual Engagement, Joint Enterprise, Shared Repertoire b. Common codes that develop through open coding
Cycle 2	*Code for the researcher's own codes** a. The researcher's a priori codes b. The researcher's individual codes that develop through open coding **this cycle was conducted multiple times for each researcher*
Cycle 3	*Code for overall findings* a. Each researcher presented their own findings to the group b. Group members synthesized the collective findings to determine overall group findings

Validity and Reliability

To ensure trustworthiness of the data, members of my dissertation team helped conduct an internal check to ensure that my analysis minimized bias. I named and was mindful of my positionality as a seasoned central office administrator throughout the study, including perceptions I had of superintendent-principal relationships I have observed firsthand in this role and as a former building principal.

All data was kept securely in password protected, secure desktop; all protocols and assurances required by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) were followed, including web-conferencing protocols that ensured confidentiality. Data was anonymized to protect participants' identity.

Findings

I now turn to present evidence of how, in times of crisis, a superintendent strived to increase the organizational commitment of their principals regarding instructional leadership. As described in my literature review, I focused my analysis in particular on affective organizational commitment (AOC), namely an employee's desire to bond with and be involved in the organization. Using the lens of learning capabilities (refer back to Table 3.2), I identified three themes impacting principals' AOC: supervisor support, perceived autonomy, and alignment of personal and organizational goals. I organize my findings into three sections. First, I describe how supervisor support affected the principal's sense of belonging, including their identity as members of and willingness to contribute to the leadership team CoP. I then discuss how principals' perceived autonomy influenced their connection to the district and how the superintendent provided for this in the midst of COVID. Lastly, I account for how the alignment of personal and organizational goals influenced investment principals made in instructional leadership and improvements measures.

Supervisor Support

The primary way the superintendent strove to increase principal AOC was by providing support. When analyzing principals' responses related to AOC, the greatest number of examples of how the superintendent impacted their sense of commitment referenced this. These accounts showed how the superintendent leveraged the learning capability of citizenship, which encompasses principals' identities as they invest in and make contributions in the CoP. Through this lens, I sought to understand how principals valued their participation and how they felt their participation was valued by the superintendent. I identified three categories of supervisor support: connection, candor, and capacity (Table 3.4).

Table 3.4

Categories of Supervisor Support

Categories of Support	Examples from the Frederick District
Connection	relationship building, accessibility, recognizing contribution
Candor	principal feedback (solicitation of and openness to)
Capacity	principal learning (district-designed or improvisational), mentoring

Connection: Building Relationships

To offer support that was tailored to the needs of each principal, the superintendent built relationships with intentionality and principals reported feeling strongly connected to the superintendent because of it. The superintendent explained the rationale behind his approach to supporting principals this way:

> I've said this to them…'I believe I can't be successful unless you're successful. I can't be successful by myself.' The building leaders have to be successful, and [for that reason I've been] thoughtful and intentional around meeting their needs and supporting them.

Principals corroborated receiving this support. For instance, two principals discussed that the superintendent worked to build strong relationships from the beginning, as they recalled how they felt when they first joined the district. One principal said: "It's the thoughtfulness of who our partners are, when [we are] first connected to the district. There's a lot of communication." Another principal, who had moved from a principalship in another district, described how the superintendent reached out via text: "'Hey...how are you doing? Hope you're having a great weekend watching a game or whatever.' It just makes you feel good." The same principal went on to detail that the superintendent's effort to foster a sense of belonging was meaningful because

they had not experienced such support in other districts. While these were personal descriptions, we observed interactions that bolstered this sense of connection during leadership meetings led by the superintendent.

In each of the three observed leadership meetings, the superintendent modeled relationship building and created space to strengthen connections both vertically (between the superintendent and principals) and horizontally (among principals). The superintendent would start meetings by acknowledging the support he has received from others, lifting up individual names and honoring a contribution they made to the district or to his own professional growth. A district administrator explained why this cultural norm is valuable: "[The superintendent] just makes a place for all that to happen. He will do things like that, I think, that really make people feel very good about themselves." With the torrent of uncertainties brought on by the pandemic, the Frederick superintendent influenced principals' AOC by accentuating that the leadership team was all in this crisis together. He explicitly used language that evoked a sense of belonging and collective cohesion, using terms like family, team, and huddle. During a January 2022 leadership team meeting, the superintendent adjusted his approach to reflect the more somber impact of the COVID Omicron variant, which added new stressors to an already taxed system. Where he typically facilitates with enthusiasm, his body language and tone reflected the severity of this new element within the ongoing crisis. He generated trust as he maintained mutual respect, conveyed a sense of community, and sought to ameliorate issues.

The superintendent developed cohesion beyond leadership team meetings, as principals described other examples of feeling recognized, seen, and part of a greater team. One principal confessed that this has been the hardest year they have experienced as an administrator and explained that the district would intentionally send messages of support: "Those positive

messages [let us] know that they're with us [and] makes a huge difference. Those are the kind of things that make me feel that I'm part of a team, that I'm not forgotten…a reassurance, it's really helpful." Another principal said, "[The superintendent is] really, really good at that, bringing everybody together before the school for a kickoff. Like, 'We got this. We're going to do this.'" Principals conveyed that this helped them to feel supported.

The superintendent consistently communicated that the district was available to help at any time, and principals affirmed the superintendent's accessibility. For example, most principals described access to the superintendent with phrases like "open door policy," "get right back to me," " call me right back," and "not hesitant to reach out." This act of being accessible and letting principals know that they are part of a larger team that can help pitch in if challenges arise, helped develop stronger feelings of connection to the district during the crisis.

Another way the superintendent builds connections is by creating opportunities for principals to contribute and be recognized for their contributions. To emphasize principals' identities in the CoP, the superintendent creates opportunities for principals to contribute and be recognized for their contributions. The aforementioned practice of thanking individuals at the start of each leadership meeting is just one example. Principals further described how they felt valued by sharing their expertise and opinions. Describing their involvement in work across schools, one principal shared, "[What] I can offer to other principals [...] that's been huge and that feels great, like knowing that they respect and value what I've done here and how I lead our school." Another principal said, "I know that my contributions are valued…I feel that I am effective and that I am appreciated, because I am asked to be part of different groups and important decisions…To me, that says a lot." The superintendent was cognizant of this. He reported that members of the leadership team "want to have impact…want to improve lives," and

that part of supporting principals was to “help people sort of get to a point of realizing their dreams.” To this end, the learning capability of citizenship was evident as principals' identities were respected which generated connection to and contribution in the CoP.

Candor: Openness to Feedback

A second category of support that principals described was the superintendent’s willingness to take feedback. Principals felt that their voices could be safely heard and that their feedback may inform decisions. The openness principals described was not always perceived as it is now, as one principal stated, “we've come a long way with communication with the district because we voiced how that [had] been such a concern of ours.” Similarly, another principal shared, “I think there is a lot of opportunity to be able to give feedback, and to share that and not feel uncomfortable about sharing that feedback.”

Regarding how the superintendent engaged principals in decisions related to instructional leadership, a principal recounted, “Our superintendent is actually very open as well. He will model, this is a safe space. We all know what's best for our students and I think just having dialogue and being open, and this is a year where we've had an opportunity to do that.” During one leadership meeting, principals shared frustrations with a district initiative around blended learning that was thwarted by technical barriers, like passwords and inconsistent WiFi. The superintendent expressed appreciation for the candor and agreed that as the superintendent, he had to fix this right away. In another leadership meeting that occurred after Christmas, principals were able to express concern for how a new post-holiday COVID surge was impacting learning. Staff and student attendance was impacting teachers’ sense of instructional momentum and principals shared these challenges openly. In response, the superintendent acknowledged the

tension and openly thanked the principals for their openness. The interaction provided evidence of principals feeling safe to share their feedback, which fostered partnership.

The superintendent was quick to discuss the culture they have worked to shape, specific to psychological safety. Describing his stance towards feedback, he asserted,“Inviting those honest conversations years ago, we talked a lot about psychological safety. What happens when people aren't having honest conversations and giving that constructively critical feedback? It's worse.” The superintendent then gave an example of a new principal privately sharing critical feedback about an agenda item that should have happened two weeks earlier; the superintendent expressed appreciation for that honesty.

In supporting principals, the superintendent explained that honesty invites the opportunity for the district to understand challenges and help offer expedient resources or solutions, qualifying why “that trust piece is so important.” The superintendent identified the characteristics of an effective relationship between the district and a principal: “one where there is mutual trust and where honest conversations can be had. Right. Where you can, disagree respectfully. You can hear feedback both ways—superintendent or deputy superintendent to principal and principal to superintendent or deputy superintendent.” This was corroborated by one principal who explained “[The superintendent], as you know, is very open. He wants our input. He asks for our input all the time. He expects our input.” Another principal also offered, “I have become more vocal, you know, in expressing our needs or what we need.” One principal explained how the superintendent’s openness served as an example; they described how the superintendent always sought to understand what was occurring in the schools within the district so he could strengthen systems of support. “He really is conscious of the temperature of what's going on and he really speaks well to that. And I try to take that [model] and bring it to my staff.”

Cultivating an honest flow of communication helped principals to feel safe to advocate for where support was needed. We now turn to how this provided valuable insights for the district to build their capacity as instructional leaders.

Capacity: Developing Principals as Instructional Leaders

A third category of support includes both intentional and improvisational opportunities for principals to build their capacity as instructional leaders. One effective professional learning structure the district established prior to COVID, the principal mentoring program, continued to support new principals appointed during the pandemic. Principals who served as mentors spoke about the pride of being entrusted to coach colleagues new to the role, as well as the reciprocal benefit for both mentor and mentee. One principal who expounded on this said that their mentee "push[ed] me to think in very different kinds of ways…I feel very blessed that I'm still learning. And hearing some newness to what can happen, that's the exciting piece about instructional leadership." On the other end of the equation, the mentee expressed desire to have the same impact as their mentor; they described, "[my mentor is] pulled into really good conversations at the district level and has relationships that make an impact beyond our school." One principal who had participated as a mentee in the program in the past affirmed this invaluable experience, stating that they "could have used it for a second year."

The superintendent discussed why he incentivized this form of professional learning: "We don't play games with the support for new principals. The model… shows appreciation and validation of the skill set of an existing principal, and then also for the person coming in, just a really solid welcome and support." Boasting that Frederick's principal mentor stipend was significantly higher than other districts' mentor compensation, the superintendent tied mentoring to the broader importance of developing principals' capacity as instructional leaders was vital to

carrying out district growth and improvement efforts. He said, “I believe 100% that a lot of the success that happens in schools will be due to the effectiveness of the building leader,” to communicate his personal belief in the importance of well-trained and supported school principals.

Another way in which the district sought to support principals and teachers adjusting to pandemic-related instructional challenges was through the district’s Blended Learning initiative. My review of documents revealed that the district planned specific steps to roll out this initiative, starting in 2020-2021. The steps the district took included: mobilizing early adopters to pilot and present their successes, establishing four (three elementary and one secondary) teams to create asynchronous resources that could be used districtwide, presenting to the school committee in February of 2021, and designing for district-wide learning for the 2021-2022 school year.

Despite this intentional design for learning, principals reported varying degrees of investment in the Blended Learning initiative. One principal explained how they helped their teachers to invest in the concept. With the intent of generating teacher buy-in, the principal described, “Even with the blended learning, this is new to all of us [and…] I'm on this journey with them. And I keep stressing…that we're doing [this] district-wide, but it's also something that we're taking on.” To a greater degree, a different principal felt more support was needed for principals to do the heavy lift of leading a district initiative at the school level. The principal explained, “[district initiatives are] not bad, but it's not what we're choosing…they're handing these things over to principals…that we're not sure we have ownership over…how do we work with that if we don't understand it and own it?”

Contrary to the stewarding governance the district hoped to achieve with Blended Learning, Frederick principals were quick to point out that opportunities for improvisational

learning were more beneficial. One principal explained, “You learn from every single experience, and then I'm such a reflective person that I'm constantly questioning everything I do…it's just like a teacher, it's on the job, you learn through experience.” Another principal said of their own learning, “I've made mistakes…but that's what I think made me a good leader [as] some of the hardest situations that I've been in have actually helped me grow.” Another principal framed, “I'm very active, so I'm right there with teachers. I modeled for teachers, I jumped in and…I'm going right along with them.” In this regard, the learning capability of emergent governance, or the opportunity for new learning to bubble up, was more meaningful to principals as they described when self-reflecting on their own growth.

Limitations of Supervisor Support

At times, the district was limited in how to support principals. In these cases the intent of support may have been there, but obstacles arose that caused a disconnect between intent and impact. Despite feeling strong supervisor support, principals were careful to draw out the differences between the COVID-informed realities as a school leader and the limitations of support that the district provided. One principal described feeling weighed down by deadlines that they referred to as “the other bucket of stress,” and emphasized that the demands for principals and teachers are “even more so than last year.” Another principal elaborated: “I know [district administrators] feel helpless…because how can you support me? You're not coming physically in here to chase a kid down the street. Right?” A different principal described an instance where their supervisor from the district popped into the school to help. The principal described that while the supervisor meant well, finding something to assign the supervisor to do became one more burden to manage during an already chaotic day. This draws out the disconnect between intent and impact.

Another instance where intent and impact may have not aligned was in how the district designed for early release days. The district aimed to support principals and teachers by creating weekly early release days, with the intent of freeing up time for professional learning: the district-wide Blended Learning training as well as school-based learning. While this was clearly a strategic move, principals' opinions of this structure varied. One principal stated, “Our district is ensuring that there is time available and space so that the priorities of the district and the priorities of our teams are met.” On the other hand, several principals noted that having time with teachers was a needed resource in order to manage the demands this year. One principal explained, “I appreciate the one-hour early release, but it's also more difficult to do what we need to do with our folks. I haven't had a chance to have data meetings with teachers…and that was super powerful.” Another principal agreed, saying:

> Do I think there's opportunity to improve those structures? Yes. I think that there was good intention behind that, but there's a lot of operational stuff that takes place that sort of eats away at that time that's really valuable…[it’s] difficult for school leaders to be present in all of those meetings when all of those meetings are taking place simultaneously. Would I like to be in meetings [with teachers] much more? Yes. And I think I can speak to the whole leadership team and say yes.

Thus, my analysis found that even when the district aims to provide support, there can be limitations to how this support is perceived or interpreted. This gap between intent and impact influenced how individual principal's felt supported by the district.

In sum, key to keeping principals invested, the superintendent leveraged support relationships. Principals reported that stronger relationships gave rise to a stronger sense of connection, impacting principal AOC. While principals, whose identities were most strongly

defined as instructional leaders, reported being generally willing to carry out new responsibilities the district needed help with, the message of district support was muddled by deprioritizing instructional leadership. Limitations in how some support moves were communicated or carried out caused a discrepancy between the intent of the district's support and its impact. I now segue from supervisor support to the role that perceived autonomy played in how the superintendent strived to strengthen principals' AOC.

Perceived Autonomy

A second theme of my findings regarding how a superintendent strove to increase the organizational commitment of their principals regarding instructional leadership involved how the principals perceived their autonomy. I sought to understand how control was distributed and instructional leadership was shared between the district and principals, and how autonomy impacted principal commitment. Data showed principals' perceived their autonomy during times of crisis in two ways: the trust their supervisor had in them as principals and the ways the district provided opportunity for principals to solve problems.

Trust In Principals

The pandemic rapidly increased the volume of work that leaders have had to respond to, affecting the perception of autonomy. When asked if autonomy had increased or decreased in this time of crisis, principals had varied responses: one felt that it had increased, four felt it had decreased, one said there was no change, and one offered varied examples. As one principal explained, "I think [autonomy has] increased because of the workload of even [our] supervisors. I think that they have to put a lot of trust in us to kind of do what we do." In contrast, another principal felt that so many tasks had been directed to principals that they perceived they have less autonomy. The principal detailed, "There are so many things that end up getting put back on us

that I ended up losing a little bit of that autonomy; unfortunately it's been more so through COVID."

While their perceptions of autonomy differed, all principals shared the perspective that their autonomy was linked to the trust the superintendent (or deputy superintendents) had in their abilities as a principal. For example, one building principal explained calling their deputy superintendent after an urgent building incident and described how their supervisor's reaction influenced their perception of autonomy. The principal recounted, "[I called my supervisor and] they go, 'I trust you. It's okay.' I feel like that [...] trust is huge. But the autonomy, obviously I felt like I could do all of this without first [seeking approval]." A different principal viewed autonomy as differentiated depending on the school and its needs: "Not every school has the same make, model [or] population. My needs are going to be different than other schools' needs. I do feel like autonomy is needed, but I also feel like our superintendents trust us as instructional leaders."

Turning from principals' perceptions to the superintendent's practice, the superintendent reported taking a measured approach to autonomy, differentiating where needed. Responding to the culture he inherited when assuming the role of superintendent, he explained that historically, the district used to be "highly centralized" and "tightly coupled" with less room for autonomy in instructional leadership. He recalled that the previous superintendent would say that "you get in trouble with autonomy." In contrast to his predecessor, the superintendent described his approach as "loosening," "thoughtful," and strategic." For example, the superintendent allowed a principal to select a schoolwide adaptive reading test that worked better for the school's unique demographics in lieu of the district-wide literacy assessment.

When asked if his view of autonomy is transparent to principals, the superintendent said "not fully" and that "it would be irresponsible for everybody to do what they want." He was quick to qualify this and said, "[W]e're aware autonomy doesn't work when your building leader's not strong, [...] You gotta have the right leadership in place in order for that to really be effective."

In sum, while principals' had varied impressions of the effect of the pandemic on their own autonomy, they were in agreement that being granted autonomy signaled their superintendent's confidence in their abilities as instructional leaders. This generated strengthened AOC as principals described feeling entrusted to make decisions and share control over aspects of instruction.

Solving Problems During Crisis

While supervisor trust in principals' abilities is one way that principals discussed autonomy, the other main contributor to principals' perception was the increased demand to solve problems in times of crisis.

Principals' perception of autonomy was hindered by mixed messages from the district about instructional leadership. Principals recounted that the many increased demands related to managing COVID pulled them from the focus on instructional leadership. For instance, at a leadership meeting, the district attempted to mollify principals' stress by taking instructional leadership off their plates for the 2021-2022 school year, prioritizing building-based operational tasks like contact tracing and technology. Principals differed in their reactions to this. One principal said they understood that this temporary redirection of principals' roles and responsibilities was a condition of the pandemic. "Are we being the instructional leaders that we want to be? No, and that's not by choice. I think that it's just the conditions that we're presently

living [in], honestly." Another principal described a more emotional response to the district's messaging: "I've heard so many times...we're not instructional leaders this year, we are managers…that's what's killing me…I need to be an instructional leader, my kids deserve that…it's difficult for me not to be in classrooms and giving more feedback." Described as a function of the pandemic, the district attempted to assuage stress but in doing so infringed on some principals' focus on instructional leadership. This was interpreted as an impediment.

Even with the district's efforts to relieve some of the stress caused by increased workload, principals were left to negotiate how to prioritize an excess of directives. One principal voiced concern that there are too many initiatives decided in the central office:

> With all of the other things we're doing, I think less is more. We…are always saying, wait, stop pushing out new stuff…[w]e can't even get a handle on stuff we started. [Central Office] just gave me something last year that we're just getting used to doing. And now you want me to do what? And so I think there's a disconnect from senior administration to middle [management] positions.

The principal clarified that the strain they felt existed, in part, due to needing to respond to top-down directives from the district while simultaneously mitigating the stress of teachers who were already overwhelmed with too many tasks. The principal emphasized, "we keep adding, but we don't add time. We add stuff for teachers to do. We never give them enough time because they're still working on the three things we gave them last week." Despite frustrations, the principal sought ways to leverage autonomy to solve problems during these trying times.

Grappling with challenges led principals to innovate. In the case of the principal above, proposing a creative "outside the box" solution fostered empowerment. They suggested using grant money to add a building-based instructional leader position and their supervisor supported

the idea by securing funding. This example of problem solving led the principal to describe, “that [this] kind of autonomy was a good thing.” That solution-oriented experience shifted the principal’s perceived autonomy and in turn the principal felt more in control of solving a problematic situation.

Though principals had varied interpretations of autonomy related to problem solving, some saw opportunities for innovation. One principal hinted at the district’s potential, stating: “Frederick is a district that very much likes to have their hands in everything, which sometimes doesn't necessarily feel equitable because what our school needs is not necessarily the same…I think there's a lot of room for discussion…for innovation.” However, accounts from other principals indicated that they had higher degrees of autonomy over instructional leadership as they identified having control over schedules, professional learning communities (PLCs), staffing configurations, and assessments. One principal felt that getting approval for innovative ideas was usually easy and outlined the process: “[If] I have some sort of novel idea that I would love to put into practice…I would go to my supervisor and …we would talk about [it, and] usually it would be something that's…okay.”

Two principals provided specific examples of how they have continued their roles as instructional leaders, feeling empowered to impact student learning. The desire to improve learning for students energized one principal who described, “I feel like I just want to make sure that my students feel successful. I am the kind of person that if I have a sense of urgency, that's it.” The other principal, who corroborated the cultural shift from the former superintendent to the current, said the shift towards more autonomy has personally allowed for increased control on how to best meet the needs of students. The principal described how they collaborated with another principal and together had the autonomy to add interventionist positions in their schools.

The principal said, “that's something that I've done this year…that is really seeming to work with my teachers. They love it. They feel so supported.” The principal explained that the interventionist role was designed to respond to the gaps in students’ learning and that these intervention positions have been effective. Conveying enthusiasm for these changes, she said, “[They are] really exemplary teachers that are in these intervention roles…we're going to start pulling…small groups of students based on the data.”.

In terms of the superintendent’s view of autonomy's role in innovation, he expressed that expedient resolutions are needed when problems arise. He recognized, “It's a tough time, but it's also fertile ground for innovation and people are trying different things and thinking about doing things differently.” When discussing autonomy over instructional choices, the superintendent said that educators were allowed to “use whatever they want to engage kids. We're not stopping, we're not choking innovation and creativity.” Documents reviewed confirm this, with numerous examples of innovations fulfilling the district’s strategic plan’s objectives. One example, a new innovative program established at the high school level was recognized in the superintendent’s 2020 evaluation, “[This] program is a thrilling, high-impact innovation and when combined with …thinking around the schedule, foretells huge progress at the secondary level.”

The superintendent shared that he believed it was the role of district administration, in part, to remove barriers. Coordinating and allocating resources, such as Frederick’s *Student Opportunities Act* funds, eliminated fiscal barriers and freed up to support new creative programming. The superintendent acknowledged that having a psychologically safe culture where principals felt free to risk-take and partner with central office was paramount. The superintendent stated, “I don't try to stand in the way of now….” Removing barriers and

increasing autonomy was evidence of how the superintendent leveraged the capability of learning partnership.

For principals who perceived they had autonomy for instructional decisions, they felt that they understood “the why” and “the how" of their work, and could speak to dynamics of how they entered into collaboration with the superintendent. Some principals made note of specific superintendent actions that supported their sense of partnership and fostered a psychologically safe dynamic. One principal said they could call the superintendent as a partner and described this feeling: “kind of trusting that, and knowing I have done it in the past, [I can] pick up the phone and say, ‘I need a thought partner and I don't necessarily want to talk to my partner deputy about this.’” Another principal further illuminated, “I know [the superintendent will]...walk me through and brainstorm with me.” During a leadership team meeting, we observed the superintendent review the leadership team’s norms, two of which conveyed the importance of problem solving: 1) be solutions oriented and 2) be willing to consider new ideas and have the courage to collaborate and problem solve.

Analyzing the accounts of principals’ feelings around how power is distributed and shared within the learning system helped answer how the superintendent leveraged perceived autonomy to strengthen the AOC of their principals regarding instructional leadership. Principals felt increased investment when they perceived the superintendent trusted their abilities and allowed them to make their own decisions. Additionally, when principals perceived they had autonomy, they were invested in solving problems, even in innovative and creative ways. The superintendent encouraged this innovation, providing a foundation to do so through what he defined as “psychological safety.” One principal described, “I feel, as a leader in this district, we have a voice…this is a safe space.” This led to a stronger sense of partnership to engage in the

work of leadership. However, some principals expressed frustration by mixed messages from the district that either implied a deprioritization of instructional leadership due to operational tasks associated with COVID, or added to the many district-driving initiatives that consumed principals' time.

Alignment of Personal and Organizational Goals

A third theme of my findings regarding how the superintendent strove to increase the organizational commitment of principals regarding instructional leadership involved how goal alignment worked between principals and the superintendent. In order to understand principals' commitment to district goal completion, it is important to understand how the superintendent approaches the goal setting process, and how this influences each principal's establishment of individual professional goals. I use two terms: district goals and superintendent goals interchangeably, as I found in Frederick they are one in the same.

The superintendent intentionally set his annual goals to align with the district's overarching strategic plan. The strategic plan includes the district's mission, vision, core values, and strategic objectives, in addition to the theory of action which elicits shared ownership from all stakeholders. The theory of action states, "If there are shared values related to meeting the needs of students, then there will be more cohesiveness and buy-in with the work we are doing. If we become more inclusive, then instruction will become more powerful and the social-emotional needs of students will be supported" (Frederick District Strategic Plan, 2019, p. 3).

The superintendent explained that the strategic plan development had allowed for the solicitation of ideas, insights, and critique from all stakeholder groups. As he had facilitated the process, he recalled receiving "tons of focus with feedback and survey feedback from teachers in

the development of that [strategic] plan." The superintendent also credited the experience for revealing "a lot about what the building leaders think is important, and what they think we've not been addressing and what they think about the direction of the district."

Principals corroborated feeling empowered and engaged in the strategic plan process. One principal associated the superintendent's credibility with an opportunity to be involved in the plan's development. They said, "when he was looking at district priorities and strategic objectives, he talked about having collective voice at the table. The difference was he just didn't talk about it, he really did have collective voice."

The superintendent described how principals have had increased investment in district goals because they come from the shared values and align with the strategic objectives that principals' collective voice helped define. He said, "They usually are very supportive and [have] bought into those goals…the goals align with the strategic plan, which reflects a deep, input driven conversation that was had three and a half years ago." Our research team observed how the superintendent unveiled his annual goals during an August leadership team meeting. He projected slides that linked each goal to a "strategic objective." Reviewing documents from the last three years, the superintendent's student learning goals have remained consistent and largely unchanged from before COVID, with the exception of modifying the target "benchmark" the goal is aiming to achieve. When asked about this, the superintendent said, "Everybody knows what the challenges are here—where we need to improve [...] I don't get a lot of 'what is he thinking with these goals?' kind of pushback."

The district's culture has woven within it an expectation for all educators—principals and teachers—to align their personal goals to the district goals. On one hand, it seemed as though the district encouraged flexibility and allowed for personalization in each educator's goals by

requiring “perceptible link” to one of the goals. However, some educators chose to select from an optional menu of suggested goals. One district administrator described that educators had choice, but that the expectation was a “throughline” and that there needn’t be exact alignment but a “thread” linking each team or individual's goals to one or more of the district goals. Principals substantiated this claim, providing evidence of stewarding governance.

The transition in superintendents caused the shift in expectations of goal setting and the practice of aligning personal and district goals. Educators and principals used to be able to establish their goals untethered to any district plan; whereas the current Frederick superintendent has ushered in more horizontal goal alignment. One principal explained, “we had a lot of autonomy [in creating our goals] before this current superintendent and I do love that [the superintendent] has kind of brought on a district-wide approach to things, which isn't a bad thing.” When asked how connected they feel to the district and superintendent’s goals, another principal said, “very connected…when we talk about rigorous instruction, high expectations, that's all part of [the superintendent’s] priorities.” This provided evidence of how the two forms of learning governance, though opposite, worked in complementary ways. Stewarding governance, which fostered consensus in the strategic plan allowed for aligning goals in and among layers of the organization. Emergent governance helped principals feel connected to these priorities but allowed for flexibility and agency in how they set their personal goals to contribute to the district goals. This helped identify how the district’s goal setting process strengthened principal AOC regarding instructional leadership.

In conclusion, by analyzing interviews, observing leadership team meetings, and reviewing documents, I was able to identify how during a time of crisis, the superintendent strove to increase the organizational commitment of their principals regarding instructional

leadership. First and foremost, the Frederick superintendent had adopted a supportive stance with his principals. Principals cited feeling supported by a variety of superintendent moves which included building relationships to foster connection, inviting candor and feedback from principals, and building capacity through both intentional and improvisational professional learning opportunities. The pandemic added demands to leaders at all layers of the organization, which accentuated limitations in how the district could support principals. Next, the superintendent utilized autonomy to generate investment and foster innovative solutions. Principals perceived a link between autonomy and the trust the superintendent had in their abilities. Some principals believed they had the autonomy to solve problems that would positively impact students, which allowed them to feel like they were making a difference amidst pandemic disruptions. Many principals expressed frustration by mixed messages from the district that implied that COVID operational tasks would be prioritized over instructional leadership. Several principals expressed that they understood that this was a temporary condition of the pandemic, but some felt overwhelmed when the district increased additional initiatives that principals were left to implement and lead at the school-level. Principals that sensed they had the autonomy to innovate and make improvements for their students and teachers felt empowered. Lastly, the processes that the superintendent enacted around annual goal setting were carried out with intentionality and clarity. Principals had agency to set personal goals as long as there was a "perceptible link" to the district goals, which allowed for alignment between layers of the organization. Agency over what those goals were led to an increase in principal AOC, as they defined the details of how they would contribute to the district improvement.

Discussion

The superintendent, once thought too far removed from classroom instruction to impact student outcomes, has been found to affect student achievement by creating conditions that allow principals to focus on teaching and learning (Leithwood et al., 2020; Robinson, 2010; Robinson et al., 2008). This suggests that district leaders should minimize distractions that pull principals away from their role as instructional leaders. Yet since the onset of the COVID pandemic, district and school leaders have experienced unprecedented challenges that have temporarily redefined their roles. This study examined the interactions between the superintendent and principals during this time of crisis, focusing on how a superintendent strove to increase the organizational commitment of their principals regarding instructional leadership. This case study revealed three key areas in which a superintendent impacted principals' affective organizational commitment (AOC).

First, the superintendent's interactions during times of crisis impacted principals' commitment to the district. Chief amongst these interactions were how the superintendent supported principals through connection (relationship building, accessibility, recognizing contribution), candor (soliciting and being open to principal feedback), and capacity (investing in principal growth and professional learning).

Second, principals' organizational commitment was impacted by their perception of autonomy. Autonomy signaled to principals that the superintendent had trust in their capabilities. In Frederick, the superintendent implied that more autonomy was granted to effective principals, aligning with findings from Umekubo et al. (2015) who found that a differentiated approach to principal autonomy has a greater impact on student learning, systemwide. Because leadership demands expanded exponentially during a crisis (Hannah et al., 2009), many principals described

opportunities to solve problems and innovate as a way that the district shared power and provided autonomy, increasing AOC (Chang et al., 2015). Some principals felt that the district infringed on their autonomy by adding too many initiatives or sending a mixed message about deprioritizing instructional leadership, which threatened some principals' sense of identity.

Third, the process the superintendent used to ensure that personal and district goals aligned. Research across all three areas of my literature review—the role of the district in instructional leadership, organizational learning, and organizational commitment—consistently points to the importance of developing a shared vision and goals (Hallinger, 2011; Robinson et al, 2008; Leithwood et al, 2019; Senge, 1990). In Frederick, the superintendent developed a multiyear strategic plan that captured "collective voice," and provided direction for his annual goals. He subsequently enacted a process by which all educators align their personal goals to district goals (Reichers, 1985). Principals felt very connected to the superintendent's goals, confirming alignment leads to more commitment and contribution to organizational goals (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986, Rorrer et al., 2008; Meyer & Allen, 1991). This alignment increased principal AOC.

Overall, these three key areas—supervisor support, perceived autonomy, and alignment between personal and the district's goals—complement existing literature. Mutch (2015a) identified three categories of factors that informed effective leadership during crisis: relational work, situational work, and dispositional work. Relational work, which encompasses, "building strong relationships, developing a sense of community, engendering loyalty, and fostering collaboration" (p. 192) aligns with how the Frederick superintendent demonstrated supervisor support through connections, candor, and capacity. The ways that the superintendent leveraged autonomy to solve problems aligns with Mutch's factors of situational work, including:

"adapting to changing needs, making use of resources, responding flexibly, [and] thinking creatively" (p.192). Likewise, dispositional work factors are inclusive of goal setting and communicating values and beliefs, which the Frederick superintendent consistently did to direct stakeholders to the strategic plan and annual goals.

Limitations of this study existed and are discussed in Chapter Four.

Implications

Findings from this study have implications for policy, practice, and research. I discuss these in the following sections, organized by my three main findings.

Supervisor Support

From principals' accounts, the Frederick superintendent had made intentional strides to develop relationships pre-pandemic that sustained principals' trust in leadership (Poon et al., 2006), and strengthened principals' AOC during this time of crisis. Additionally, the superintendent served as a powerful model for principals by soliciting their input and being open to feedback, implying that a culture of candor where psychological safety invites openness to feedback is key to increasing participant investment in any CoP (Smith et al., 2020, Fullan, 2011). To this end, districts can develop practices, build capacity, and provide tools to assist leaders as they develop a culture of candor.

Principals noted that their AOC increased when they felt they could make a difference and support their students. They noted how the urgency to support students' learning (academic and social emotional) and reconnect after returning from the remote learning model factored into their identity as instructional leaders. The superintendent and principals also expressed concern for the unprecedented number of social emotional needs students are displaying. Districts should then protect time for strengthening relationships and provide resources (professional learning,

principals CoPs, etc.) to build the capacity of leaders to understand how to support social emotional health in times of crisis.

This study also has implications for future research. The Frederick superintendent had been appointed in 2018, over 18 months from the onset COVID school closures in Massachusetts. He was able to build relationships, establish credibility, make cultural shifts and develop procedures that generated principals. Future research may wish to investigate how a new superintendent hired in 2020 or 2021, managed to build relationships and strengthen principals AOC entering into the role in the middle of a pandemic.

As schools are experiencing increased social emotional health concerns in both student and teacher populations, future research may focus on how leaders deal with the cumulative effects of managing support of their subordinates (such as compassion fatigue during crisis).

Likewise, examining the post-pandemic social emotional health needs of both principals and superintendents, who are often overlooked in research, may inform future studies on leaders' AOC. Researchers may wish to distinguish between "crisis as an event" and sustained crisis, like COVID. As the ongoing pandemic has caused cycles of hope and despair, research could capture leaders' reflections on how these oscillations informed their AOC longitudinally over the entire pandemic.

Perceived Autonomy

As Weiner and Woulfin (2017) have determined that too much autonomy can lead newer principals to feel overwhelmed. Superintendents could provide opportunities for principals who have not had experience with autonomy to do so with support, for example in a gradual release model or as structured through principal mentor programs. Policy in principal preparation

programs could help provide aspiring principals the opportunity to practice how autonomy or innovation can be leveraged.

Transitioning out of the pandemic will expose the need for new paradigms in education, one where autonomy can be a driver for equity and innovation. Asymmetries in students' instructional time will exert pressure on all educational stakeholders to retool systems of support for students. Among superintendents and principals, dialogue about autonomy can lead to clarity that strengthens investment and principal AOC. State departments of education may wish to incentivize innovation by offering grant funding or through flexibilities in mandates. One such program, the Massachusetts DESE's Innovation Pathways that supplements high school courses with real-world learning, is a first step towards engaging students, teachers, and leaders in reimagining the school experience. Agencies that establish standards, such as the National Policy Board for Educational Administration, which last published their Professional Standards for Educational Leaders in 2015, may wish to adjust their standards to galvanize innovation.

Future research may center on comparing schools from the same district, who have similar demographics and resources, to analyze how the degree of principal's autonomy impacts their individual AOC post-pandemic, as they work to develop crisis recovery and reconstruction.

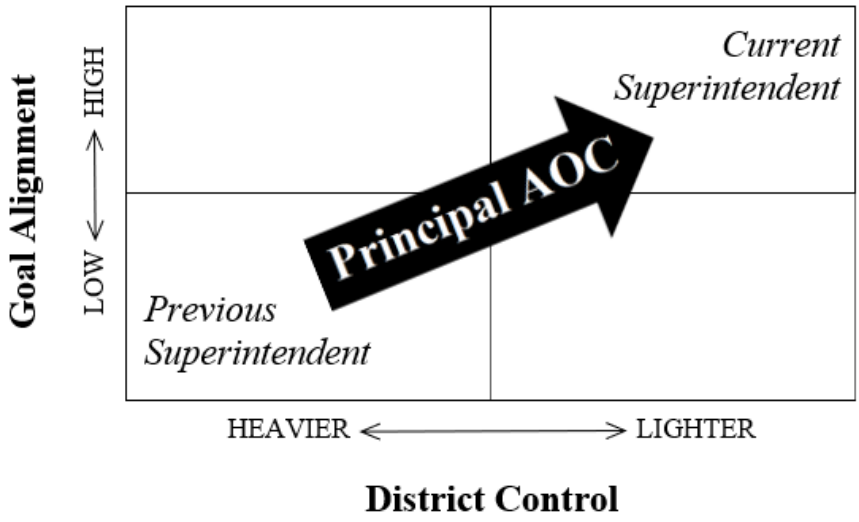
Alignment of Goals

Under the previous superintendent, principal autonomy in Frederick was limited and instructional leadership was highly centralized. However, principals had autonomy over personal goals. When the current superintendent was appointed, he allowed for more principal autonomy, but required that personal goals were linked to the district's goals, ushering in more coherence. As illustrated in Figure 3.3, superintendents striving to positively impact principal investment may want to increase alignment of personal and district goals and allow for a lighter degree of

district control. In Frederick, this shift led to greater principal autonomy, investment in contributing to district goals, and AOC.

Figure 3.3

Impact of Goal Alignment and District Control on Principal AOC



Using the analogy of planning a trip, the superintendent drives the district forward by creating a shared vision that defines a desired destination, but allows principals to determine the best route to take for their school's unique makeup. In the event that the journey for one school goes off course or a detour is needed, the district can provide more assistance for support.

School committees can support this transition by ensuring local policy allows for the superintendent to set multiyear goals and that aspects of instructional leadership that may require school committee approval, such as curriculum, allows for flexibilities that best meet the needs of students.

Future research may wish to examine how setting a more aligned goal structure could impact principals' AOC in districts with different contexts or size (scalability).

Conclusion

District leaders are tasked with leading improvements and rely heavily on principals to help fulfill goals. At no other time in recent history have superintendents and principals had to respond to rapid changes and unpredictable situations as during the COVID pandemic. Strengthening principals' organizational commitment during this time of sustained crisis was the result of specific superintendent interactions: supervisor support, perceived autonomy, and alignment of personal and district goals. It is my hope that this study has provided insights on how leadership teams (district CoPs) can plan for and improve outcomes for students during post-pandemic recovery and beyond.

CHAPTER FOUR[4]

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Our study explored the relationship between professional learning and instructional leadership during a time of crisis within the Frederick district. Given that school districts are quintessential examples of social learning spaces, we used social learning theory–namely Communities of Practice (CoP)–as a conceptual framework for examining professional learning and instructional leadership. We drew upon the three main components of a CoP: joint enterprise (a collective understanding of purpose and direction); shared repertoire (shared routines, tools, and ways of doing things); and mutual engagement (ways of interacting and establishing belonging). To ground our understanding of instructional leadership, we used Hallinger's (2011) definition, which includes three "avenues or paths" (p. 129) that connect leadership to learning: vision and goals, academic structures and processes that support classroom practice, and people whose leadership builds the capacity of others. Our study answered two questions. The first investigated what professional learning and instructional leadership look like at various levels of leadership within a district. The second examined how the learning of instructional leaders in a district was bounded and/or intertwined. Because we collected data in the fall of 2021, the third school year impacted by COVID-19, our research embeds crisis into our inquiry.

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of Frederick, each team member focused on a different level within the organization. Hosmer (2022) studied teacher professional learning and how principals create the conditions for that learning. Pires (2022) studied how middle-level instructional leaders (MILs) pursue and make sense of instructional leadership. Clark (2022) studied the roles autonomy plays in how principals prioritize curricular goals and support

[4]This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Anne Rogers Clark, Meredith Erickson, Sara K. Hosmer, Mario Pires.

instruction. Erickson (2022) studied how the superintendent can increase organizational commitment. This approach allowed us to consider connections and tensions regarding instructional leadership and professional learning amongst various levels in Frederick.

Our group case study was bounded by three conditions. We were interested in studying a diverse district trying to address inequities in the impact of the crisis; therefore, Frederick was appropriate because it is a district with a wide range of student demographics. We wanted to study a district where the superintendent had been in their role for at least two years so that instructional initiatives were in place; Frederick's superintendent has been in his role for four years. Finally, Frederick served as a strong site for this study because it was a medium-sized district with enough MILs to address or research questions.

In this chapter, we first discuss how the findings from our individual studies cohere to answer our two collective questions. We then describe implications for practice, policy, and future research.

RQ1: What do professional learning and instructional leadership look like at various levels of leadership within Frederick?

To answer our first research question, we return to Hallinger's three avenues for instructional leadership and detail what learning and instructional leadership look like for teachers, MILs, and principals within Frederick. Hallinger (2011) presents three avenues through which leadership is linked to learning. First, *vision* signifies where the school or district seeks to move; *goals* refer to benchmarks indicating progress toward the vision. The second avenue is the *academic structures and processes* that systematically shape teacher practices to improve classroom instruction. The third avenue, *people,* refers to building the capacity of individuals to carry the mission of improving student learning forward. These three avenues affect educators at all levels in a district. In the subsections that follow, we trace how goals and vision, academic

structures, and building capacity for professional learning influenced the experience of teachers, MILs, principals, and the superintendent in Frederick during the pandemic.

Goals and Vision

The data related to goals and vision revealed a traditional hierarchy from the district, or superintendent, level down to principals, MILs, and teachers. The district strategic plan in particular shaped the culture for both professional learning and instructional leadership. All educators – principals, MILs, and teachers – were expected to align their personal goals with the district's goals. More specifically, the district allowed flexibility and personalization in how each educator's goals were linked to the larger organization, but required a "perceptible link" to district goals. One district administrator described the expectation as a "throughline;" there needn't be exact alignment, but there should be a "thread" tying each individual's goals to one or more of the district goals. Principals substantiated this claim, providing evidence of stewarding governance. For example, one principal talked about the merits of the district ushering in more horizontal goal alignment. This principal said, "we had a lot of autonomy [in creating our goals] before this current superintendent, and I do love that [the superintendent] has kind of brought on a district-wide approach to things, which isn't a bad thing." Some principals thus affirmed the efficacy of clearly defined foci for joint enterprise to drive the district's instructional goals and vision.

To that end, district leaders consistently connected their instructional goals and vision to student achievement data, particularly data revealing the achievement of ELs. Documents reviewed revealed that Frederick has over 36% ELs during the current 2021-2022 school year (more than triple the state average). The 2021 data from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) revealed ELs performed below the state average in reading with

only 4% meeting or exceeding expectations in grades 3-8. When the superintendent developed his entry plan, he brought to light that "there is a noticeable gap in performance outcomes between English Learners and native English speakers…the gap among these groups persists in nearly every measurable category, but most notably in MCAS outcomes, graduation, and dropout rates." The superintendent talked about educators at all levels of the organization understanding what the vision and goals are, explaining, "everybody knows what the challenges are here." In his view, the goals and vision were clear at the district level at each level of the organization.

Consequently, the superintendent stated that he does not get pushback on goals, he attributed principals' investment to how goals were aligned with the strategic plan, as he expounded, "[Principals] usually are very supportive and [have] bought into those goals…the goals align with the strategic plan, which reflects a deep, input-driven conversation that was had three and a half years ago." The process in which the plan was developed valued feedback, buy in, and consensus. A review of the superintendent's student learning goals over the last three years revealed they were very similar (Frederick Superintendent Goals: 2018-2019, 2019-2020, 2020-2021). The consistency of goals over the course of the pandemic suggested that the superintendent recognized more time was needed to make progress because of the emergent demands of the crisis.

Over the course of the three school years of the pandemic, principals had varying levels of control over their goals and vision for instructional leadership and professional learning at the school level. March of 2020 was a period in which schools were forced to transition to remote learning, but to do so quickly and with extremely limited resources. The district relied on school leaders to improvise. As a result, principals had more control over the joint enterprise and shared repertoire of their school CoPs. In 2020-2021, the district leadership more intentionally sought

innovative practices to bridge from the school CoPs to the district CoP. In 2021-2022, both district leaders and principals described a pendulum swing back to district control of goals and vision for instructional leadership as the district introduced Blended Learning and Hope and Healing as instructional foci. Some principals appreciated the coherence, but others resisted the forced calibration.

MILs also played a crucial role in carrying out the district's goals for professional learning and instructional leadership. While DESE's authority over districts and administrators represents a strong hierarchical vertical power structure, internal structures influence the vision that MILs seek as well as the goals MILs set. These internal structures include the executive cabinet and principals. MILs validated the district's increasing stewardship and responsibility for driving the direction in which the district or individual school seeks to move. School-based MILs also noted the impact principals had on their work, also representing vertical accountability.

While most of the evidence showed that during this time of crisis, Frederick's strategic plan drove goals for professional learning and instructional leadership, one outlier in the data worth mentioning is the influence one MIL had outside of the strategic plan. This instructional coach, a district MIL, reported overseeing the district-wide Blended Learning initiative. Because he was responsible for professional learning in the district, he said he recommended this particular model of Blended Learning and wanted professional learning to be more asynchronous and differentiated. He further explained that this design was intentional, as he sought to model the practices and ideals most prominent in Blended Learning. The district endorsed his recommendation, although our data revealed many teachers, MILs, and principals questioned the efficacy of the approach.

Finally, data revealed that the district's strategic plan also shaped teachers' experience of professional learning and instructional leadership. Under the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System, educators define a student learning and a professional practice goal every one to two years, depending on their professional status.One teacher reported that the district provided goal options; teachers could choose one of those options or make their own goals as long as they were connected to district improvement goals. Participant teachers explained that even when they constructed their own goals, the goals reflected the district's shared focus, or joint enterprise. For example, three teachers talked about personal goals focused on literacy, particularly the needs of ELs. These goals were clearly tied to district improvement goals.

Academic Structures

Hallinger's (2011) second avenue for instructional leadership is the academic structures that "shape or enhance the practice of teachers" (p.133). The structures, or shared repertoire, existing within Frederick have distinct outcomes for each of the roles within our study and again shaped the experience of professional learning and instructional leadership at every level.

The structure most impactful for teachers and their instructional practices was the pacing map. During a grade-level observation and through interviews, our research team found that teachers identified district pacing maps (curriculum guides indicated when each standard should be taught) a key component shaping their decision-making. However, evidence showed attention to what would be taught and when, with little focus on how.

Our data also revealed that the district provided two additional structures created in response to COVID-19 that also influenced teachers' decision making and connected them to district approaches to professional learning. One, Blended Learning, was structured as independent learning modules. Some staff completed these modules in the summer, allowing for

time during the school year to focus on instructional planning, while other staff had to complete the modules during the school year. This difference in some cases created distance between teachers and instructional leaders.

The final, and perhaps least impactful structure on teachers' ability to create a shared repertoire that reflected district or school priorities for instructional leadership was school staff meetings. Pre-pandemic staff meetings included time for collaboration and discussion of school-based work. Teachers reported that during the pandemic, school-based staff meetings occurred inconsistently across Frederick and appeared to become more about information sharing than an opportunity for in-depth work on instruction.

Similar to the experience of teachers, the data revealed that there were both effective and ineffective structures in Frederick connecting MILs to professional learning and instructional leadership. MILs in Frederick across both the district and school-based CoPs demonstrated joint enterprise by describing their role in instructional leadership as one that supported teachers with instruction. However, district and school-based MILs pursued their work with teachers differently. District-based MILs were responsible for the procurement of resources and typically communicated new initiatives through the school principals. In contrast, most school-based MILs supported teachers through evaluation, coaching, or through mutual engagement in Professional Learning Time meetings. Teachers were participants within the structure, whereas MILs had a responsibility for implementing and shepherding the structure.

MILs highlighted coaching as an important structure for their work and for the advancement of teachers' instructional practices. Although the district has invested significantly in coaching through district coaches and school-based Curriculum Instruction Teachers, the role of coaches varies widely. At no time do MILs who provide coaching come together to share,

reflect, and refine their own practices in their own CoP. At the high school level, department heads are responsible for both coaching and evaluation; the resulting tension between these contradictory methods for providing feedback to teachers diminished school-based MILs' ability to effectively coach.

Principals made note of Blended Learning and the Wednesday early release days, and the majority of principals identified these structures as negatively affecting their work. Ironically, while the district's intent was for these structures to provide principals with time to support teachers' practice, principals experienced these structures as limiting, not enhancing, their ability to support teachers. This negative effect on principals' instructional leadership was corroborated by teachers, who reported that the district had a more significant impact on their learning than did building principals.

In addition, five of the seven principals defined the boundaries of their school CoPs by describing unique, building-based structures, such as instructional tools they independently developed that supported instruction. Principals also talked about experimenting with new structures to support instruction during the crisis, such as a new family communication structure or a new professional development structure. In this sense, while they connected to the district's larger structures for instructional leadership and professional learning, principals also asserted their own structures during this period of crisis.

This tension between district-driven structures for instructional leadership and professional learning and school-driven structures was a consistent theme in our data. While the superintendent identified the crisis of COVID-19 as a time for innovation, principals experienced initiative overload. Principals indicated that much of the work to be done was directed by the district, impacting their building-based decisions and making prioritizing needs a challenge.

Time, or lack thereof, became an obstacle for both teachers and principals as they navigated how to implement district initiatives and simultaneously be responsive to the student needs created as a result of the pandemic.

Building Capacity

Hallinger's (2011) third and final avenue for instructional leadership, people, refers to the professional learning that develops educators' ability to support student learning. Our research team found many commonalities among educators' learning experiences at different levels in the district, both in what supported and in what failed to support educators' learning.

Central to all educators' learning during the pandemic was the need to adjust instructional expectations because of students' social emotional needs. COVID-19 influenced how teachers prioritized the social and emotional health of their students. Similarly, MILs from across the district commonly spoke about attending to the social emotional needs of teachers and students as vital, to the point where this concern overshadowed other aspects of instructional leadership. Principals also described supporting teachers to adjust their instructional expectations given students' developmental gaps.

Educators at all levels in Frederick also emphasized the role of innovation and reflection in their learning during this period of crisis. Teachers referenced exploring social media to get ideas and experimenting with different instructional practices on their own. Similarly, principals characterized their learning to be instructional leaders as predominantly a process of improvising, reflecting, and adapting. Principals talked particularly about learning by experimenting with new structures, or shared repertoire, to support instruction during the crisis, as detailed above. MILs described learning through hands-on, workplace experiences that helped

them develop common language and expectations. MILs also talked about the importance of exhibiting creativity and taking the initiative to solve problems.

In contrast, principals and teachers reported that the district's structured professional development experiences had a limited influence on their learning. The district sought to build the capacity of all principals as instructional leaders by framing the instructional work; offering timely, formative feedback to principals; and providing meaningful, structured professional development experiences. Less than half of the principals interviewed described these supports as helpful. Principals also described Blended Learning as taking away from the instructional priorities and structures, or the joint enterprise and shared repertoire, that they had established in their school CoPs. Principals reported that mutual engagement activities supported their connection to the district CoP, but district-stewarded asynchronous initiatives hindered the learning of principals.

Similarly, teachers reported that formalized, district learning experiences had little significance to their learning. Only one teacher described Blended Learning as beneficial; all other teachers interviewed thought it not a good use of time. As stated above, Frederick has made a significant investment in coaching for teachers, but this investment has had questionable outcomes.

MILs had varying opinions on the effect of structured professional learning opportunities on their learning. Not all MILs had access to formal learning opportunities like the Lynch Leadership Micro Academy, and MILs expressed a desire for more formal opportunities to collaborate with their peers. Similar to other educators in the district, the MILs interviewed had disparate opinions about the efficacy of Blended Learning. Some MILs expressed enthusiasm for the initiative; others expressed concerns and described it as having limited impact. Finally, as

was the case with principals, MILs reported that opportunities to come together built mutual engagement within their CoP, however those opportunities were too infrequent.

In sum, professional learning and instructional leadership in Frederick during this time of crisis looked hierarchical in terms of goals and vision, had some effective and some ineffective academic structures, and some effective and some ineffective approaches to building capacity. In general, our research revealed that the district CoP demonstrated strong joint enterprise and mutual engagement, but a less coherent approach to shared repertoire. We now turn to answering our second research question.

RQ2: How is the learning of instructional leaders in Frederick bounded and/or intertwined?

Our research team's analysis of the data found learning to be bounded (to have defined boundaries) and intertwined (to have interconnection across boundaries) in three domains: Blended Learning, Rigorous Instruction, and Principal Autonomy.

Blended Learning

Blended Learning, a district priority introduced at a February 2021 School Committee, was described by the Superintendent as "a thoughtful integration of instruction in the virtual world along with traditional educational instruction." (School Committee, February 11, 2021). Starting in the 2020-2021 school year, four teams of teachers (elementary science, math, ELA, and secondary team) were trained and created blended learning units, asynchronous lessons, and resources that could be used districtwide. During the first half of the 2021-2022 school year, the district rolled out training for all educators. The majority of the professional learning consisted of asynchronous modules that educators completed on their own.

Our research team documented a tension around Blended Learning and the degree to which it created opportunities in Frederick for learning to be intertwined. District leadership and

some MILs felt Blended Learning was a strong approach for creating intertwined joint enterprise and shared repertoire. However, some MILs, the majority of principals, and all teachers questioned the approach.

Principals and MILs completed the modules in the summer before the 2021-2022 school year, whereas teachers completed it during the school year. The district instituted a universal early release for students on Wednesdays to give teachers the time to complete the modules; however, that time, according to the majority of principals interviewed, took away from time principals previously had to work with teacher teams on data inquiry and teacher practice. As a result, the majority of participant principals felt the Blended Learning initiative took away from school-based joint enterprise and shared repertoire.

This model also limited the opportunity for principals and MILs to mutually engage in instructional priorities with teachers, often creating a solitary learning experience. While teachers were not required to actively teach in this manner in 2021-2022, they were required to develop one lesson. Because some educators completed the training in the summer and others completed the training asynchronously during the school year, principals' and MILs' responsibility to support teacher implementation during the school year was unclear. Participant teachers described Blended Learning as mostly a waste of time. In sum, our research team found boundaries dividing teacher learning from leadership intentions as it relates to Blended Learning.

Rigorous Instruction

A second example of how learning of educators at different levels vis-a-vis instructional leadership is bounded and intertwined is the area of rigorous instruction. Frederick's improvement plan names "provid[ing]engaging, relevant, and rigorous learning experiences that support each student and educator in reaching their fullest potential" (District Strategic Plan,

2019-2024) as a core strategic objective. Our research team used the term “Rigorous Instruction” to refer to this priority. The data revealed that educators throughout the district made reference to this concept in varying ways.

For example, MILs had multiple ways of talking about rigorous instruction and included different routines and tools, which impacted the level of shared repertoire and mutual engagement. For example, “acceleration versus remediation,” a phrase that four MILs used reflecting a DESE tool provided to districts to support learning recovery during COVID-19, was one way MILs sought alignment across all classrooms to focus on grade-level content. Bloom’s taxonomy was yet another way a department head spoke to rigor, while a vice principal described rigorous learning as being “skills-focused.” A principal and a program specialist spoke to a “Framework of Success” as a way teachers interact with developing lessons that reflect grade-level expectations. On one hand, evidence suggested that rigorous instruction was an example of joint enterprise, since this concept was intertwined throughout the district. On the other hand, teachers, MILs, and principals all approached rigorous instruction differently, using different language and in some cases varying repertoire. Thus, we found practices for rigorous instruction bounded in terms of mutual engagement and shared repertoire.

As detailed above, one way the district attempted to steward rigorous instruction was by using pacing maps. At the elementary level, all five teachers talked about the high needs of their students and a commitment to supporting students in learning grade-level concepts. Teachers reflected that they meet students’ needs and support expected outcomes by focusing on the grade-level standards and by following district-issued pacing maps. There was a consensus among teachers that literacy was a priority, reflecting clear joint enterprise. Similarly, a district MIL described these maps as focusing on priority standards and keeping teachers on track.

According to the teachers interviewed, the principals were also intertwined with the district through the use of pacing maps, as one teacher noted "basically, everything that [the principal] puts in front of us, he gets from the district." The use of pacing maps demonstrates one way that rigorous instruction was intertwined throughout Frederick.

However, although the intention of the pacing maps in Frederick was that everyone used them, thus intertwining the learning among teachers (horizontally) and through layers of the district (vertically), we also found evidence that pacing maps were not an effective strategy for intertwining the learning of instructional leaders. There was no evidence that these maps were co-constructed or that they were created with teacher input. Some principals also spoke about adjusting pacing maps, providing "grace" when necessary. The superintendent told a member of our research team "I think grace is important, but I'm super careful about using that word because some see it as lowering expectations." However, principals talked about having to use "grace" and compassion to make daily choices about how much to push teachers and how much to buffer expediency. One principal described their agency in this regard: "We have the [district] curriculum map [but] we're not going to go in each class and say …'This has got to get done because the district is going to be all over my back' … We're extremely supportive." Another principal similarly stated: "I find myself giving people permission. It's okay if you've run into your science block and you need to extend the ELA a little longer. …having that compassion for folks and giving them grace when they need it." This finding further suggests that the pacing map tool was less effective at intertwining shared repertoire than intended.

In sum, rigorous instruction lent itself to both bounded and intertwined learning. While a collective purpose and direction was expressed to increase the rigor of the learning, a lack of

shared routines (shared repertoire) and inconsistent interactions (mutual engagement) complicated the ways the districts' learning was bounded and intertwined.

Principal Autonomy

Finally, our investigation of principal autonomy revealed multiple ways in which the learning in Frederick was both bounded and intertwined.

Principals defined their membership in the district CoP by naming elements connected to mutual engagement. All seven principals talked about the superintendent creating a culture that values principal voice and values collaboration and connection, both between principals and district administrators and among principal colleagues. Principals reported being asked to participate in district committees or to serve as principal mentors. These experiences allowed them to participate in intertwined experiences, between layers of the organization.

As discussed above, instructional goals for principals were both intertwined with the overarching goal of the district CoP and had distinct boundaries. Three principals echoed the language our research team observed the superintendent using in his August opening meeting: "principals have the autonomy" to personalize their instructional goals based on specific school data, but "there must be a perceptible link to the district's overarching strategic plan objectives." One principal stated that priorities are "handed down [from the] district level but within that [we adjust] to our needs...what we need as a school community as opposed to [another school] across the district." The expectation seemed to be that principals would bridge what was applicable to their school CoP and buffer what was not.

In their descriptions of their school's shared repertoire, the unique tools or structures that formed the boundaries of their school CoPs, principals often talked about support from the district in a way that illustrated how the school CoPs and the district CoP were intertwined. For

example, one principal talked about how the district assistant director for math helped shape their school CoP's framework for breaking down standards and translating them into lesson plans. Similarly, both principals and district administrators gave examples of innovative practices before the pandemic that started at the level of an individual school CoP and then bridged to the district CoP. For example, one principal stated that, having experienced the power of creating an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) in another district, they intentionally brought that structure to their school CoP, modeled it for others, and then supported its replication across Frederick.

Finally, our research documented that there was a shift in the roles of autonomy in Frederick over the course of the three school years of the pandemic that reflected varying degrees of bounded and intertwined practice between the school CoPs and the district CoP. Principals described the brokering before the pandemic as a balanced negotiation between the school CoPs and the district CoPs, consisting of equal parts bridging and buffering, both intertwined and bounded. Principals and district administrators described a swing towards principal autonomy, or more bounded rather than intertwined practice, with the onset of the crisis in the spring of 2020. In 2020-2021, both principals and district leaders described intertwined practice, with multiple examples of bridging between the school CoP and the district CoP. In 2021-2022, both district administrators and principals described a pendulum swing towards district control and away from principal autonomy. Some principals resisted the degree to which learning and practice were being intertwined in Frederick, particularly through the Blended Learning and Hope and Healing initiatives. Two principals expressed a more nuanced view, expressing the positives in addition to the challenges of this calibration. These principals appreciated the development of "common language." In general, principals welcomed bridging

related to mutual engagement and buffered district initiatives that impinged on school control of Professional Learning Time.

Limitations

This qualitative, single-case study examined what professional learning and instructional leadership look like at various levels of leadership within a district and how the learning of instructional leaders in a district is bounded and/or intertwined. Though our group and individual studies add to the body of research, limitations exist.

The most prominent limitation of the study is that research occurred during a global pandemic, and COVID-related implications informed every aspect of our data collection. Initiatives around professional learning that had begun prior to COVID were in some cases put on hold to prioritize pandemic-related demands. Because it was dependent on local health metrics and subsequent health and safety guidelines, our in-person access to the district was limited. Although we were able to conduct over 20 interviews, only seven were in person. We also did not have the opportunity to do many observations of practice in schools, which was part of our original study design. However, we also believe we turned this limitation into a strength, as our study made the crisis a focal point of our inquiry.

We note some additional limitations to our study. While our study included representation from the district and K-12 positions, the principal participant sample was limited, in part, due to additional increased work duties brought on by COVID. We interviewed one middle school principal; all other middle and high school principals were unavailable. Elementary principals were thus overrepresented in the study. In addition, the study was conducted over a six month period, limiting the scope of what was studied. If time were not a constraint, longitudinal research would reveal a longer-term body of data to analyze over several years. Finally, our study

was limited by context. We studied a medium-sized urban school district in Massachusetts where at least 50% of students are designated high needs. Thus, our findings may have limited application to districts with different socio-cultural or demographic contexts.

Implications

Our research team found three needs that emerged during the COVID-19 extended crisis: innovation, social emotional well being, and designing for professional learning. Within these three needs, we also identified tensions that emerged. Within the need for innovation, we found a tension between centralized initiatives and school-based autonomy. Within the need for social emotional well being, we identified a tension between high expectations and compassion, what many in the district referred to as "grace." Finally, within the need to design professional learning, we found a tension between asynchronous structures that fostered independent learning and structures that emphasized learning in and amongst other professionals. We came to understand these tensions as falling along a continuum. Thus, the primary implication of our study is for districts facing crisis to remain mindful of these tensions and seek to address needs with a balanced approach. In our discussion below, we apply this to policy, practice, and future research.

Innovation: Centralized Initiatives versus Autonomy

On one end of the continuum of innovation, our research team found district leadership attempting to bring cohesion to Frederick during the crisis by introducing new shared repertoire, namely Blended Learning, and by maintaining a focus on already existing joint enterprise, namely curriculum pacing maps and identified priority standards. Some principals appreciated the district unity in this moment of crisis.

However, many principals resisted these attempts at district-driven calibration, particularly in the third year of the pandemic. In addition, it seemed that Frederick relied to a certain extent on principals who had prior experience with autonomy to innovate, particularly at the onset of the crisis.

As an implication for practice and policy, Frederick and other districts facing crisis might consider the balance between district control and principal ownership. As school-based leaders sought to manage the impacts of the crisis on their individual school CoPs, many principals identified autonomy as an important element of their response. For example, four principals talked about mitigating the pacing of curriculum maps at the school level in response to student and teacher needs.

In addition, in order to prepare for a crisis, districts might consider creating opportunities for principals to practice autonomy. As stated above, Frederick's superintendent made the point that his views on principal autonomy were purposely opaque and that the granting of autonomy should be "a process not an event." There could be advantages to making that process, the when's, why's and circumstances of principal autonomy, more transparent and accessible so that more principals can develop the enterprising skills that were clearly valuable during this crisis. Relatedly, districts might consider the need for developmental supervision of teachers, building them to be more autonomous in their professionalism as well. In short, scaffolding autonomy for educators may be an effective strategy to prepare for crisis.

Finally, instructional leadership can be strengthened by the district strategically balancing opportunities for both central control and autonomy. Research suggests that the organization of the district has a direct impact on the roles of autonomy (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Charochak, 2018). It is possible that fully supporting principal autonomy would require fundamental changes

to the district CoP. Further research could explore the affordances and constraints of such a district structure.

Social Emotional Well-being: High Expectations versus Grace

Our findings suggest Frederick needs to make some strategic decisions about the pace of instruction. As in many districts across the Commonwealth, educators in Frederick were concerned about "learning loss" as a result of the pandemic and wished to address perceived gaps in learning. At the same time, principals acknowledged that teachers also had social emotional needs that emerged as a result of the pandemic, and principals were concerned about "pushing" too hard. When talking about balancing "grace," or compassion, with urgency, some principals talked about their belief in their agency given the specific context of their school, particularly their being in a position to best judge how much to push the teachers, and their preference to work collaboratively with teachers to adjust instructional goals.

This dynamic speaks to a tension the superintendent raised: When is offering grace as an instructional leader a necessary response, a reflection of the mutual engagement of the CoP, and when does it mean lowering expectations for joint enterprise? Going forward in their recovery from the pandemic, school districts will need to come to a consensus about how, if at all, to adjust the pace of instruction and who is in the best position to make the decisions about adjustment.

Another consistent theme in our research was the limited resource of time to address these tensions. Demands on school and district leadership expand exponentially during a crisis (Hannah et al., 2009). We found that for principals in our study, increased management responsibilities consistently impinged upon their instructional leadership. Further research might

explore how MILs could fill the gap in practice. Further research might explore how to best prioritize competing pressures in crisis and how to do so effectively and efficiently.

Designing for Professional Learning: Independent versus Social Learning

Professional learning opportunities are always important, but particularly critical during crisis. Educators need to be able to respond to the myriad needs that emerge during crises, and these needs require educators to learn and to adapt their practice. Learning within Frederick reflects both independent and collaborative learning opportunities.

Use of technology emerged as a means for independent learning, and the district seized that opportunity with individual modules for Blended Learning. There were several benefits of this model. Flexibility was one of the benefits as it allowed teachers to complete modules at a time that was most convenient for them. Another benefit included increased differentiation of professional learning. This differentiation allowed a variety of topics to be presented to educators and afforded them a choice. It also was an opportunity for district leadership to model for teachers the mode of instruction teachers would then use with students. Due to COVID-19 requiring social distancing and limiting the district's ability to bring large groups of educators together, technology-based learning was a way to ensure that learning did not cease during the crisis, but instead would continue in a new format.

However, our research found that though the independent technology-based learning opportunities provided benefits, there was also a strong desire for opportunities to learn together. Humans learn and develop behaviors by interacting with others (Bandura, 1977). Teachers, MILs, and principals identified the lack of mutual engagement due to asynchronous learning as a detriment to shared understanding, investment, and consistent implementation.

If a district decides to pursue an asynchronous professional learning structure such as Blended Learning, leaders must be intentional and balance independent learning with opportunities for educators to collaborate and learn with and through each other to maximize the benefits of CoP membership. Otherwise, learning will continue to occur in isolation, diminishing the opportunity to import and export learning through brokering which allows for best practices to develop in and across CoPs over time.

Our findings suggest the optimal balance of independent and collaborative learning may be an area for further research. Namely, a study could be done on how learning through the use of technology contributes to both individual and to social collaborative structures. As we detailed in Chapter One, professional learning during a crisis is critical to building capacity for practices that meet the needs of students and create sustained improvement (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Smith & Riley 2012; Mutch 2015). Crises spur rapid social change, and rapid social change requires efficient adult learning (Tusting & Barton, 2003). Research further establishes that professional learning that capitalizes on interactions in and amongst educators maximizes its impact (Bannister, 2015) and that collaborative professional learning experiences in particular lead to shifts in practice (Bruce, 2010; Slavit et al., 2011). Our research could shed light on the benefits of independent learning and the frequency with which collaborative learning should supplement independent learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our study investigated professional learning and instructional leadership by understanding a district as a CoP through individual layers within the organization. Our aim was to understand the interactions and interdependencies among the learning experiences of different educators within a district responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, in other words how learning

and instructional leadership are bounded (have defined boundaries) and intertwined (have interconnection across boundaries). Each crisis is unique, and we hope that educators will never again face the depth of challenge COVID-19 presented them. However, the lessons of COVID-19 could be useful to districts facing crises in the future.

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Appendix A: Principal Interview Protocol

Interview Questions ~ 45 Minutes

1. **My first set of questions are about how you are thinking about instruction right now in your school [20 minutes]**
   - **What are the instructional priorities in your school right now?**
     - How were those priorities decided?
     - How much was it a school-based decision vs a district decision?
   - **Can you give me an example of a tool or language you use in your school to talk about instruction?**
     - How shared/universal is that tool or language in your school?
     - Is it used in other schools in the district?
   - **We're interested in how educators in your school interact around instruction**
     - Structures? Common Planning?
     - How would you describe instructional leadership in your school?
     - Who are your strong instructional leaders, what roles are they in?
   - **We're interested in how educators in this district collaborate, particularly with respect to instruction**
     - Do you collaborate with other principals in the district?
     - How if at all do teachers from your school collaborate with teachers from other schools?
     - How if at all do you and your teachers collaborate with folks from central office?
   - **How if at all has COVID-19 changed your conversations around instruction?**

2. **My next set of questions focus on your specific role in instruction [20 minutes]**
   - **How would you describe your role in instructional leadership?**
   - **How have you learned to be an instructional leader?**
     - Has there been anything in particular you have learned during COVID-19 about instructional leadership?
   - **We're interested in how the district shares control and decision making around instruction with principals.**
     - Can you tell me about a recent instance where you felt you had autonomy as an instructional leader?
     - Do you think your autonomy has increased or decreased since COVID-19? In what ways?
     - How connected do you feel to the district's or the superintendent's priorities?
     - Tell me about your relationship with the district? Do you feel that's the right level/type of relationship with the district? Do you think it should be more/less/different?
   - **In what ways do you contribute to the success of the district?**

    - How do you know your contributions are valued?
- **In your opinion, what kind of teacher learning results in changed practice?**
    - How do you support or contribute to teacher learning?

Appendix B: Superintendent Interview Protocol

Introduction

1. Welcome and thank you for agreeing to this interview
2. As a reminder, the purpose of this study… "We are seeking to understand how various educators in the district make instructional choices post-Covid 19. This is not an evaluation of individual educators or schools in the district; it's a case study that is part of our doctoral work."
3. Your confidentiality will be maintained by anonymizing all information
4. I have a consent form that outlines the background of the interview. I want to give you time to review it before we begin, and I will need you to sign it please.
5. Would you confirm that it is ok for me to record this interview? The recordings will not be saved after I transcribe them or shared with anyone.

Background Questions

1. Name:
2. Years of Experience in Education:
3. Years of Experience in the District:
4. Years of Experience in Current Role:
5. *Gender:*
6. *Race:*
7. *Age Span 20-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 61-70+*

<u>Superintendent Semi-Structured Questions</u>

My first set of questions are about instructional leadership...

1. What are the/your instructional priorities right now? How were those priorities decided?

2. Can you give me an example of any particular tools or protocols or particular language you use in this district to talk about instruction?

3. Can you please describe how the district vision and goals are established and communicated?

    a. Regarding the goal setting process, how does this work among the different layers of the organization? How do you generate investment from principals and others in carrying out their part of the district's goals?

4. We're interested in how educators in the district interact around instruction. Can you describe how [bulleted list] interact around instructional priorities?
    - Teachers and principals
    - Middle level leaders (such as assistant principals, department heads) and teachers
    - Principals and central office staff

5. Please describe how the district knows if students are improving.

My next set of questions are about interactions with principals...

6. In what ways do you develop your principals (how do you *build capacity* and *generate will*)?

7. What strategies did you use specifically during COVID and this year to *generate will* and make principals "want" to be part of the Lynn family?

8. What has been your biggest leadership challenge in supporting principals during this time of crisis? Please explain what additional support(s) you felt principals needed during COVID-19 and how you assisted them?

9. In what ways do principals contribute to the success of the district? How do principals know their contributions are valued?

10. What do you think is the right level of autonomy for principals and why? How, if at all, do you provide autonomy for principals?

11. What are the characteristics you would use to describe the ideal relationship between the district and building leaders?

12. Can you think of the principal that you have the strongest relationship with and describe why it is strong?

Appendix C: Middle-level Instructional Leader Interview Protocol

Name, professional title, pronouns or anything else you'd like me to know about you

Two sets of questions. First set of questions are about how you are thinking about instruction right now in your school/district. [20 minutes]

- What is your professional title, pronouns or anything else you'd like me to know about you?
- What are the instructional priorities in your school/district right now? How were those priorities decided?
- Can you give me an example of a tool or language you use in your school/district to talk about instruction?
- Who would you consider to be a strong instructional leader, what roles are they in? Why do you consider them strong instructional leaders?
- We're interested in how educators in this district collaborate, particularly with respect to instruction. How do you as a MIL collaborate with other MILs? Who is your core?
- How if at all has COVID-19 changed your conversations around instruction?

My next set of questions focus on your specific role in instruction [20 minutes]

- How have you learned to be an instructional leader?
- How do you define instructional leadership?
- Can you tell me about a recent instance where you felt you had autonomy as an instructional leader? Do you think your autonomy has increased or decreased since COVID-19? In what ways?
- How connected do you feel to the district's priorities?
- In what ways do you as a MIL contribute to the success of the district? How do you know your contributions are valued?
- How can Lynn improve instructional leadership through the use of Middle-level Instructional Leaders?

Appendix D: Teacher Interview Protocol

Teacher Interview Protocol

1. Can you tell me about your role? Purpose? Typical day? Who evaluates you?
2. What are your instructional priorities right now? How were those priorities decided?
3. We are interested in how different roles collaborate.
    a. Who do you collaborate with within the school?
    b. Who do you collaborate with within the district?
    c. How much influence does the principal have with your role?
    d. How much influence does the district have with your role?
4. Can you give me an example of any particular tools or protocols or particular language you use in this school or district to talk about instruction?

Interview Questions:

1. How has your teaching changed during your career?
2. What has impacted those changes?
3. How would you describe the school in terms of adult learning?
4. What have your experiences with professional learning been like?
    a. Tell me about PLT time and the early release days
5. What contributes to your engagement with learning? What turns you off?
6. How does your principal support adult learning?
7. How, if at all, has your practice changed since the pandemic?
    a. Are there any instructional changes you have made due to the pandemic that you will maintain?

Appendix E: Observation Analysis Protocol

Date:
Time Start:
Time End:
Location:

Participants:

Description of Activity (what is being observed):

Descriptive notes of the room and surroundings taken prior to the start of the event:

Component	Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes
❑ Description of participant ❑ Description of activity ❑ Interaction ❑ Behaviors ❑ Unplanned event ❑ Specific comment/quote ❑ Non-verbal behavior ❑ Physical setting		
Literal Notes *(continue on to additional pages)*		

Impressions recorded immediately after leaving the event:

Appendix F: Document Review Protocol

Item Name:
Date of Publication:
Format:
Author:
Intended Audience:

Component	Details	Reflective Notes
❏ Description of message ❏ Description of tone or style ❏ Word choice ❏ Use of data ❏ Reference to other document		
❏ Description of message ❏ Description of tone or style ❏ Word choice ❏ Use of data ❏ Reference to other document		
❏ Description of message ❏ Description of tone or style ❏ Word choice ❏ Use of data ❏ Reference to other document		

Appendix G: Coding Memo

A-Priori Code	Example	Research Justification
Joint Enterprise	An instance where there is an articulated collective understanding of what the community is about and its purpose	Wenger (1998)
Mutual Engagement	An instance that reveals interactions and relationships, for example an instance of receiving or giving help	Wenger (1998)
Shared Repertoire	A subject articulates histories, tools, or ways of communicating and learning as unique to a particular community	Wenger (1998)
Practice: Learning Partnerships	A subject describes experiences of shared commitment to an open inquiry, candor and trust, deep dialogue, new learning and unlearning.	Wenger (2009)
Learning Governance:	Stewardship [A subject describes experiences where there are concerted efforts to move a social system in a given direction] or Emergence [A subject describes experiences whereby decision and/or governance bubbles up from a distributed system of interactions]	Wenger (2009)
Power: Vertical Accountability	A subject describes experiences where traditional hierarchies and decisional authority are evident	Wenger (2009)
Power: Horizontal Accountability	A subject describes evidence of experiences where engagement there is in joint activities, negotiation of mutual relevance, and commitment to collective learning	Wenger (2009)
Identity: Learning Citizenship	A subject describes evidence of their identity in the community, how they contribute to the community, explicit ways that leaders in the organization design for or experience innovation, motivation, and commitment	Wenger (2009)
AOC: Shared Vision or Alignment between personal and organizational goals	A subject describes evidence of their goals (written or otherwise promoted) and how this aligns with district improvement goals; a subject is able to discuss the shared vision of the district or its importance; a subject refers to district alignment	Reichers, 1985; Senge, 1990; Leithwood et al., 2019
AOC: Perceived Autonomy/Degree of Autonomy	A subject describes evidence of distributed control, shared ownership, role in decision making, opportunities for site-based decisions, differentiated support from district	Chang et al., 2015; Meyer & Allen, 1991
AOC: Supervisor Support	A subject describes evidence of mutual respect; supervisor approval, emotional support, and esteem; trust-in-supervisor (perception of supervisor's ability, benevolence, and integrity); structures within CoP or professional learning, access to individualized training	Meyer & Allen, 1991; Leithwood et al., 2019

New codes that emerged from the coding cycles include: openness to feedback, psychological safety, impact, innovation/problem solving,

Appendix H: Interview Consent Form

Boston College Consent Form
Boston College Lynch School of Education
Informed Consent to be in study Bounded & Intertwined - Professional Learning and Instructional Leadership During COVID-19
Researcher: Sara Hosmer, Anne Clark, Meredith Erickson, Mario Pires
Adult Consent Form

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. You were chosen to be in the study because **you have a leadership position within Lynn Public Schools**. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Important Information about the Research Study

Things you should know:

- The purpose of the study is to **understand how educators engage in instructional leadership within the district.** If you choose to participate, you will be asked to **interview** or to be observed. Interviews will take about **45 minutes.**
- The research team will share findings with the superintendent. The information you share will be anonymous.
- Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You don't have to participate and you can stop at any time.
- Potential risks from this research include a breach of confidentiality that could lead to a negative impact on subjects' psychological, social, or economic status. The steps we will take to minimize this risk are outlined below.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why are we doing it?

The purpose of the study is to understand **how educators engage in social learning within the district**. The total number of people in this study is expected to be at most **50.**

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to **participate in an interview between August 1st and December 31st, 2021, in a confidential space designated within your district (Lynn Public Schools). Audio/video recordings will be used**. We expect the interview to take about **45 minutes**.

How could you benefit from this study?

Although you will not directly benefit from being in this study, **your anonymized responses will allow us to deduct findings about how professional learning is bounded and intertwined within a school district, contributing to the future of the field we work in.** We want to learn from your time and energy spent participating.

What risks might result from being in this study?

As stated above, potential risks include a breach of confidentiality that could lead to a negative impact on subjects' psychological, social, or economic status. Examples of this can include an individual's perspective being identifiable, and this having an impact on one's future employment.

How will we protect your information?

In order to minimize the risk with participating in this study, the research team is committing to the following:

- All names, including school names and individual names, will be replaced with pseudonyms.
- All records of this study will be kept private. Hard copies of evidence will be kept in a locked filing cabinet; all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password-protected file.
- We will assign to each participant a unique, coded identifier that will be used in place of actual identifiers. We will separately maintain a record that links each participant's coded identifier to his or her actual name, but this separate record will not include research data.
- Only members of the research team will have access to audio or video tape recordings during the study. Following the study, hard copy documents will be destroyed by a shredder and electronic data will be permanently erased.

The results of this study may be published or presented publicly. The Institutional Review Board at Boston College and internal Boston College auditors may review the research records. State or federal laws or court orders may also require that information from your research study records be released. Otherwise, the researchers will not release to others any information that identifies you unless you give your permission, or unless we are legally required to do so.

What will happen to the information we collect about you after the study is over?

We will not keep your research data. We will not share your research data. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted.

How will we compensate you for being part of the study?

There will be no compensation for participation.

What are the costs to you to be part of the study? There is no cost to you.

Your Participation in this Study is Voluntary

It is totally up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you decide to withdraw before this study is completed, please inform the interviewer at any time. If you choose not to be in this study, it will not affect your current or future relations with the University.

Getting Dismissed from the Study

The researcher may dismiss you from the study at any time if it is in your best interests (e.g. side effects or distress have resulted) or the study sponsor decides to end the study.

Contact Information for the Study Team and Questions about the Research

If you have questions about this research, you may contact any of the following researchers:

Sara Hosmer

Anne Clark

Meredith Erickson

Mario Pires

Faculty Advisory: Martin Scanlan

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:

Boston College
Office for Research Protections
Phone: (617) 552-4778
Email: irb@bc.edu

Your Consent

Please state the following: I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

Appendix I: Triangulation Matrix

Claim/Emergent Theme	***Evidence from:***		
	Interviews	**Document Review**	**Observation**