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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP DURING COVID-19:

PRINCIPAL AUTONOMY AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP DURING CRISIS

Dissertation in Practice

by

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with Meredith Erickson, Sara K. Hosmer, Mario Pires

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by

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study examined the roles autonomy played in how principals in one Massachusetts district learned to prioritize curricular goals and to support instruction during a time of crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. A Communities of Practice (CoP) theory and the concepts of boundaries and brokering served as a theoretical framework to examine principal autonomy. Findings revealed that principals, as members of both their school CoP and the district CoP, existed in a state of multi-membership between the two. Principals then reconciled competing messages and demands between the district CoP and their school CoPs through bridging and buffering. Findings further demonstrated that principals struggled to see themselves as instructional leaders during the pandemic given logistical challenges. Principals also had to adjust their instructional goals to meet changing student social emotional needs and developmental gaps. Finally, data revealed that there was a shift in the roles of autonomy over the course of the three school years of the pandemic: district leaders supported principal autonomy, and the needed improvisation it brought to the district CoP, at the onset of the pandemic and during the second school year but returned to a more centralized calibration as the pandemic continued into the third school year. This research has implications for districts seeking to prepare for crises and suggests that districts might consider principal autonomy as a strategy for innovation.

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Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to my husband, Christopher Monks. Thank you, Chris. I couldn't have done it without you.

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CHAPTER ONE[1]

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 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).

While educational leaders should always be learning as their contexts change, crises accelerate the need for (and challenges of) this learning. The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis that presents a number of challenges for educators, chief among them the challenge 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).

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 school leaders from across the United States and in nine other countries during COVID-19, McLeod and Dulsky

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[1] 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.

(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

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?		
Pires: How do middle-level instructional leaders pursue and make sense of instructional leadership during times of crisis?	**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?	**Erickson:** During a time of crisis, how does a superintendent strive to increase the organizational commitment of their principals regarding instructional leadership?
Clark: During a time of crisis, what roles does autonomy play in how principals learn to prioritize curricular goals and to support instruction?		

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 2 Methodology[2]

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 instructional leadership, our first criterion was a district serving historically marginalized

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[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.

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	Percentage
Latinx	69.0
Black	7.9
Asian	7.4
White	12.3
Native American	0.3
English Learners (ELs)	36.3
Students with Disabilities	17.5
High Needs	85.8

In order to gather data from multiple members of the district CoP, we used purposeful sampling to identify participants. (Patton, 2015). 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 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. 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 H) 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 F).

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 codes. 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]

Principals are often described as key to a school's success, especially in schools with persistent gaps among diverse student groups (Weiner & Woulfin, 2017; Murphy, 2008; Peck et al., 2013). Consequently, a number of recent school reform efforts have centered on increasing principal autonomy by expanding school leader control over school operations and instructional practices (Weiner & Woulfin; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Honing & Urbanovič, 2013; Schleicher, 2012; Tulowitzki, 2013).

Yet that autonomy has been simultaneously diminished in the last twenty years by the accountability movement (Peck et al., 2013; Spillane et al., 2002). Principals work within school districts and state educational systems that impose external standards which functionally undermine school-based control (Weiner & Woulfin, 2017; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2012). Centralized management systems, standardization, competition, and a greater focus on assessment mean principal agency is constrained by fluctuating external performance guidelines (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020; Weiner & Woulfin; Higham & Earley, 2013; Honig & Rainey; Marietta, 2015; Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Recent research shows this diminished sense of autonomy leads to higher levels of principal dissatisfaction and greater turnover (Stone-Johnson & Weiner; Yanm 2020; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Chang et al., 2015; West et al., 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this tension between pressures to expand and curtail principal autonomy. External control from districts, arguably necessary to deal with the unprecedented challenges and safety concerns of this public health crisis, is increasing at the very time when we have a greater need for the autonomy that allows for principal initiative and creativity (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020). Understanding how principals' work is most

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[3] Chapter 3 was authored by Anne Rogers Clark

effectively organized and controlled, an understudied area of inquiry prior to COVID-19 (Stone-Johnson & Weiner), is thus particularly important during and after the pandemic.

If our goal is to create districts and schools that engage in deep learning to effect meaningful change, we need to understand how to optimally balance district authority with principal autonomy. The purpose of my individual study is to contribute to this understanding by answering this research question: During a time of crisis, what roles does autonomy play in how principals learn to prioritize curricular goals and to support instruction?

Literature Review

Instructional leadership is a prime arena for the negotiation of centralized control and principal autonomy (Weiner & Woulfin, 2017). Accordingly, two bodies of research frame this study: principal instructional leadership and principal autonomy.

Principal Instructional Leadership

As detailed in Chapter One, our collective study builds on research that defines leadership work focused on the improvement of teaching and learning, including work prioritizing curricular goals and supporting instruction, as *instructional leadership* (Hallinger, 2011; Seashore & Robinson, 2012). Empirical studies of principal instructional leadership from the 1970s and early 1980s describe the personal characteristics of principals in "effective schools" where historically marginalized students achieved notably high academic outcomes, seemingly as a result of the principal's exceptionalism (Robinson et al., 2008; Neumerski, 2012). Later studies in the 1980s shifted focus from personal characteristics to specific principal behaviors (Neumerski, 2012; Elmore, 2000). Hallinger codified this shift with the development of the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS), an instrument that defines 50 principal behaviors, such as "develops goals that are easily translated into classroom objectives

by teachers" (Hallinger et al., 2020). This instrument is still commonly used in empirical research (Neumerski, 2012).

In the 1990s and early 2000s there was a growing recognition that, beyond the principal, multiple individuals in both formal and informal positions assume instructional leadership roles (Neumerski, 2012; Spillane et al., 2003; Spillane et al., 2004; Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Hallinger, 2011). However, research that adopts this more expansive understanding of instructional leadership still concludes the principal is crucial. For example, McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) examined school-based teacher learning communities and found that the principal is "in a key strategic position to promote or inhibit the development of a teacher learning community in their school…[S]chool administrators set the stage and conditions for starting and sustaining the community development process" (p. 56). Hord and Sommers (2008) looked at professional learning communities and came to the same conclusion: "…it is clear that the role of principal is paramount in any endeavor to change pedagogical practice, adopt new curricula, reshape the school's culture and climate, or take on other improvements" (p. 6).

Since the 1970s, research has thus evolved its understanding of effective instructional leadership–from attributing it to a heroic principal, to describing it as a principal enacting specific behaviors, to an understanding that instructional leadership can be distributed across several educators (Gronn, 2000, 2002; Spillane et al., 2001, 2004). Yet one thing remains constant: the assertion that the principal is the lynchpin for impactful instructional leadership.

Principals' influence on student achievement, however, is mediated by teacher practice (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Robinson, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2010; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012; Davis et al., 2017). Thus, principals affect student academic outcomes by building the capacity of teachers and teacher teams (Hallinger, 2011). In a meta analysis of twenty-seven

empirical studies of the relationship between principal instructional leadership and student outcomes, Robinson (2008) found that five principal leadership practices focused on teachers had a significant effect on student achievement: establishing goals and expectations for teachers; allocating resources, including resources for teachers, strategically; planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum; promoting and participating in teacher learning and development; and ensuring an orderly and supportive environment. Similarly, Leithwood and Seashore Louis (2012) reported the results of a five-year quantitative study of instructional leadership practices in forty-three school districts and concluded that principals had the greatest impact on student learning by focusing on teacher knowledge, skills, motivation, and working conditions.

Instructional leadership also manifests through principals' messaging, including the ways in which principals interpret and communicate external policies. For example, in a qualitative study of the implementation of reading policies in elementary schools, Coburn (2001) found that principals built teacher capacity by prioritizing and disseminating certain policy directives in ways that encouraged specific kinds of teacher instructional activities. In successful implementation, "the principal […] played a key role in framing [...] messages from the environment: the nature of standards, the purpose of doing assessment, [and] the appropriate response to standardized-test pressure" (p.161). Principals lead teaching and learning in part by controlling the conversation about teaching and learning.

In sum, research details that effective instructional leadership depends in large part on the principal and highlights specific principal activities related to teacher development and messaging that define effective instructional leadership. Research also establishes, however, that principals rarely get the professional learning opportunities they need to develop effective

instructional leadership. Few principals receive high-quality, targeted pre-service training in instructional leadership (Rowland, 2017; The Wallace Foundation, 2016). Professional development for practicing principals is highly variable across different states and different districts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). When formal principal professional development for instructional leadership is in place, it frequently focuses on principals in their first two years of practice (Rowland, 2017; School Leaders Network, 2014).

In contrast, effective professional learning for principal instructional leadership embeds opportunities for reflection and refinement of practice over time and emphasizes continuous improvement (Rowland, 2017; Coggshall, 2015). District administrators contribute to principals' instructional leadership when their focus is on the development of the principals' individual capacity (Rogers, 2020; Eilers & Camancho, 2007; Casserly et al., 2013). For example, in a qualitative study of principal professional learning communities, Honig and Rainey (2014) found that district administrators maximized principals' learning for instructional leadership when the administrators used a teaching orientation, rather than using a directive or managerial approach, and when they engaged principals in specific kinds of activities: joint work; modeling, developing, and using tools; creating opportunities for all principals to serve as learning resources; and connecting principals to outside resources (Honig & Rainey, 2014). Districts that commit to these practices support principals to develop impactful instructional leadership.

Principal Autonomy

Alongside instructional leadership, the second body of literature framing my study is research on principal autonomy. This research defines autonomy as principal independence from district authority with respect to key decisions that enable schools to develop and implement approaches to teaching and learning that better build on their strengths and address the needs of

their students (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Weiner & Wouflin, 2017). Areas of principal autonomy relevant to instructional leadership include authority and control over operations; personnel; assessment (e.g., of teachers, students, and pedagogical practices); and structures for instructional and professional development time (Demas & Acadia, 2015).

Research shows that the culture and practices of the district have an enormous impact on principal autonomy. District leadership frequently constructs principal autonomy in opposition to district coherence (Demas & Acadia, 2015; Groth et al., 2017). And principals are often hampered by systemic barriers to school-level decision making (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Groth et al., 2017). Although autonomy can be an effective element of school practice when it is coupled with district-set measures of accountability (Demas & Acadia, 2015), fully supporting principal autonomy may require districts to adjust their policies and practices to be more "customer service" in their approach, with the district responding to school needs and requests rather than vice versa (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Charochak, 2018). Consequently, research has substantially documented examples of district authority overreach rather than positive examples of autonomy and authority in balance (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Weiner & Wouflin, 2017).

Research also shows that principals' perceptions of their own leadership and of their school context influence their perceived need for autonomy. In a case study, Spillane et al. (2002) examined how principals in three Chicago schools made sense of, constructed, and mediated high-stakes district accountability policy. They found key differences among principals' responses to district accountability based on principals' beliefs, personal histories, and agendas. They also found that principals' relationship to accountability was inextricably linked to principals' construction of their school context. Principals who described their high-needs student population as a "plausible explanation for declining test scores" passively accepted

district mandates, but principals who constructed increasing percentages of high-needs students in their school as a challenge to be proactively addressed perceived a higher need for autonomy (p.759). Principals who had a combative relationship with their teachers were more likely to pass on district directives, whereas principals who had a history of working collaboratively with teachers to determine their priorities for instruction at the school level were more likely to temper district messages of accountability (p.747).

Similarly, Weiner and Woulfin (2017), a qualitative study that relied primarily on principal interviews, examined how a novice group of principals conceptualized controlled autonomy, a condition in which school leaders are expected to both make site-based decisions and be accountable to district oversight. They found that the principals' sense of the amount of autonomy they needed adjusted according to the principals' perception of four factors: the district's efficacy, the principals' own proficiency or expertise, the principal's belief in their own agency or power in a particular context, and values alignment between the principal and the district (p.339). While principals were more amenable to district control of operations and overarching vision, principals were opposed to district control over instructional practices, often believing themselves to have appropriate knowledge and skills to address the school's and teachers' academic needs (p.345).

Both studies reveal that principals often experience autonomy as a complex process of negotiation rather than something they are simply granted or denied. Spillane et al. (2002) concluded that district accountability policy should be understood as a two-way interaction in which accountability policy "shapes and is shaped by the implementing agent and agency" (p.755). Rather than simply receiving and implementing directives from the district, their study showed principals re-shaping messages of district authority for their own purposes. Weiner and

Woulfin (2017) similarly determined that their findings suggest reformers should shift away from treating autonomy as a zero-sum game in which authority is either meted out or maintained and move to a more flexible understanding, in which there is an opportunity for school and district leaders to collaborate and negotiate autonomy across different domains of activity (p.346).

In conclusion, I draw from research on instructional leadership and research on principal autonomy to focus on what happens to both during a time of crisis. Informed by research on principal instructional leadership, my study focused on the role of the principal with an understanding that instructional leadership can expand beyond that individual. I examined how principals set goals, shaped professional development, used resources, evaluated curricular materials and instructional practice, and messaged external policies. I also looked for specific kinds of district-directed activities that supported principals' instructional leadership.

Informed by research on principal autonomy, my study attended to district administrators' attitudes and approaches to autonomy. I included principals' subjectivity and school context in my research design and methods. I explored the relationship between authority and autonomy beyond a zero-sum game by looking at specific areas of practice, how autonomy and authority were negotiated in those areas of practice, and the meaning and impact of that negotiation for principals.

Conceptual Framework

To guide my analysis of the roles autonomy plays in how principals learn to prioritize curricular goals and to support instruction, I draw on Communities of Practice (CoP) as a conceptual framework. The CoP framework (Wenger, 1998; Honig & Rainey, 2014) is commonly used in studies of teacher learning, yet underutilized to understand principal learning (Honig & Rainey, 2014). Our overarching study draws on 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). Building on research that describes how principal instructional leadership and autonomy are negotiated within schools and districts, my study also drew upon two specific concepts that emerge from Wenger's discussion of mutual engagement: boundaries and brokering.

Members of CoPs learn through social interaction: engaging with each other, working together, and negotiating new meanings. Over time the shared practices, artifacts, documents, concepts, and other forms of reification around which CoPs organize their interconnections become "boundaries" that define membership and competence within the CoP (Wenger, 1998, p.105). These boundaries also mark differences or distinctions between one CoP's history or ways of learning and another CoP's history or ways of learning.

Individuals participating simultaneously in more than one CoP exist in what Wenger calls a state of "multi-membership" (p.109). When people participate in CoPs that are competing or conflicting, they have to reconcile the tensions and inconsistencies between the CoPs they span. Wenger states that "[t]he work of reconciliation may be the most significant challenge faced by learners who move from one community of practice to another " (p.160). But this process of reconciliation also enables individuals with multi-membership to have a significant impact on learning in the CoPs in which they participate, as they can act as "brokers" between the CoPs (p.108). Multi-membership thus has constraints and affordances.

Brokers have two primary functions: "bridging" and "buffering" (Honig & Rainey, 2014). When brokers facilitate transfer, importing and exporting practices and knowledge, they are "bridging" one CoP with another. Conversely, when they are protecting their CoPs from a

potentially unproductive interference, brokers can be understood to be "buffering." Brokers thus sit at the intersection of the boundaries of CoPs, facilitating learning by controlling what is imported, what is exported, and what is guarded against. "Good brokers," Wenger explains, can play a crucial role in shaping the learning within CoPs as they "open new possibilities for meaning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 109).

These two concepts of boundaries and brokering serve as a conceptual grounding for my investigation of principal autonomy and instructional leadership during a time of crisis. Principals, as members of both their school CoP and the district CoP, exist in a state of multi-membership and must reconcile the inevitable competing messages and demands between the two. By analyzing what, if anything, principals import and export across the boundaries between the district CoP and their school CoPs, I examined the roles of autonomy in principals' learning for instructional leadership. In short, the roles of autonomy in how principals learn to prioritize curricular goals and to support instruction can be understood by analyzing principals' experience as brokers: when, why, and how principals bridge and when, why, and how principals buffer.

Research Design and Methodology

Our group study employed a qualitative, single site, bounded case study methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018) to examine how, during a time of crisis, educational leaders within a district learn to prioritize and to support curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Given that both our group research question and my individual questions centered on socially constructed learning, a qualitative approach was appropriate because a central premise of all qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

A bounded case study is a case study defined by certain characteristics (Yin, 2018). As discussed in Chapter Two, our group case study was bounded by specific conditions: a district where at least 50% of students are identified as "high needs;" a district where the superintendent has been in place for two or more years; and a district that is medium sized, meaning a district enrolling between 10,000-20,000 students. Following these criteria, we were able to identify a district we refer to by the pseudonym "Frederick."

In my specific study, I focused on seven principals and their school communities within the larger district. Because the research I reviewed indicates principals' perspectives are influenced by their personal experiences and the specific histories and cultures of their schools, I attempted to recruit a group of participants representing a range of levels (elementary, middle, and high); a range of years of experience; a range of years of tenure within the district; a diversity in gender, race, and age; and a diversity in the schools' accountability rating with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. As outlined in chapter two, I developed the list of principals to interview in collaboration with the superintendent. Ultimately, seven principals agreed to join the study (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Principal Participants

	School Level	Years in Education	Years in District	Years in Role	Gender	Race	Age	Percentage of High Needs Students	School Accountability Rating
Principal 1	K-5	24	23	5	male	Black	41-50	96.8%	Among the lowest performing 10% of schools
Principal 2	K-5	18	3	3	female	Latina	31-40	94%	71% - Substantial progress toward targets
Principal 3	K-5	30	30	3	male	white	51-60	97.8%	67% - Substantial progress toward targets
Principal 4	K-5	16	<1	<1	female	Latina	31-40	93.7%	51% - Substantial progress toward targets
Principal 5	K-5	23	10	10	female	white	61-70	93.7%	51% - Substantial progress toward targets
Principal 6	K-5	24	20	8	female	white	41-50	94.2%	79% - Meeting or exceeding targets
Principal 7	6-8	21	21	9	female	white	41-50	86.3%	64% - Substantial progress toward targets

Data Collection

My data collection, consistent with our group study's approach, included semi-structured interviews, observations, and document review (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2: *Overview of Data Collection*

Interviews	7 interviews with 7 principals 1 interview with a district administrator 1 interview with the superintendent
Observations	3 meetings in which district administrators communicated guidance regarding curriculum, instruction, and assessment
Document review	documents that are publicly available, such as DESE reports documents that principals received from district administrators regarding curriculum, instruction, and assessment; documents principals prepared for their school communities related to the same

Our research team conducted semi structured interviews with seven principals, one district administrator, and the superintendent. Semi-structured interviews were an appropriate methodology because they reflect our study's assumption that "respondents define the world in unique ways" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.110); questions were less structured so as to invite respondents to share their unique constructions. We conducted interviews both in person and online (through Zoom). We used variations of open-ended questions to elicit data and follow-up questions with probes to clarify or expand a response (Appendix A). We recorded and used a professional transcription service for all the interviews.

The team conducted observations of three meetings. The first was the August opening meeting with the superintendent, district administrators, and all principals. The second was a session led by Lynch Leadership on how to develop quality professional development for teachers. The third was a monthly principal and superintendent meeting, specifically focused on the Learning Management System. We attended the first two in person and the third through

Zoom. We used a protocol to organize descriptive and reflective notes (Appendix E). Prior to the start of each meeting, we took descriptive notes of the room and surroundings. During the meetings, we took note of the language used, the messages conveyed, and the body language observed. To support the integrity of each observation, immediately after leaving the event we recorded our individual impressions and then transcribed both the field notes and these impressions into a typed log (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Finally, in addition to publicly available documents as detailed in Chapter Two, I reviewed both documents that principals received from district administrators and documents principals prepared for their school communities. Using purposeful sampling to gather these documents (Patton, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I used two inclusion criteria. First, I only reviewed documents distributed within the timeline of the study and thus purportedly representing current learning. Second, I only reviewed documents that were distributed to more than one school within the district or to more than one teacher within a school, thus purportedly representing a more general perspective. I used a consistent protocol to analyze these documents (Appendix F).

Data Analysis

Our research team uploaded transcripts, field notes, and documents to a web application for coding. For data analysis, we used a constant comparative method, a qualitative data analysis approach that is inductive and comparative (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As outlined in Chapter Two, the research team agreed upon an initial analytical step to calibrate for codes: we selected one interview, each individually coded it, and then reviewed and discussed how each member of the team coded the transcript. We developed a common sequence for coding (Table 3.3). A-priori codes (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Maxwell, 2008) derived from our common conceptual

framework served as a starting point for the process (Table 3.3). As the coding process unfolded, each member of the team maintained a coding memo (Appendix G). Our research team met bi-weekly to solidify new common codes, update each other on individual code memos, and share data that is relevant to each other's studies.

Table 3.3: 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

Qualitative data analysis should be conducted along with, not solely after, data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For that purpose, I maintained a process memo to document the data collection and my initial impressions or analysis as I collected the data. Throughout the coding process, I also used memos and diagrams to reflect and consolidate my thinking. Strauss and Corbin (1990) state that memos and diagrams are "important elements of analysis and should *never* be omitted, regardless of how pressed for time the analyst might be" (p.198). I included these memos and diagrams in my process memo.

Validity and reliability

A major strength of case study data collection is the opportunity to use many different sources of evidence for triangulation (Yin, 2018). I ensured triangulation by employing multiple methods of data collection: for example, verifying what is said in an interview with an observation or a relevant document (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). When possible, using the resource of the team, I triangulated using investigator triangulation, verifying my findings with one or more of my colleagues in our bi-weekly research meetings (Merriam & Tisdell).

A key characteristic of qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A common critique of the case study approach is that researchers fail to address their own subjectivity in the collection and analysis of the data by being transparent about their shortcomings and prejudices that can impact the study (Yin, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell). In order to guard against this, I used the process memo to document my biases and assumptions both through the process of data collection and data analysis. More specifically, I interrogated my own experiences and views of instructional leadership and autonomy, as a sitting high school principal who also was working in a district in Massachusetts during this period of crisis.

Findings

I now turn to present evidence to answer my core research question: During a time of crisis, what roles does autonomy play in how principals learn to prioritize curricular goals and to support instruction? I organize my findings into two sections. I begin by summarizing how principals described the changing nature of instructional leadership during the pandemic and how they learned to be instructional leaders during this time of crisis.

In the second section–which forms the bulk of my findings–I detail the roles autonomy plays in principals' learning for instructional leadership using the concepts of boundaries and brokering. In this second section I first present data that speaks to how principals described the boundaries of the district and the boundaries of their school CoPs.

I then present data that illustrate how principals, as brokers, reconciled their multi-membership during the time of crisis through processes of bridging and buffering. I organize this data into four subsections: brokering before the pandemic, brokering in the spring of 2020, brokering in the 2020-2021 school year, and brokering in the 2021-2022 school year. Frederick went to remote learning in March, 2020. Then, like many districts in the Commonwealth, Frederick began with remote learning in the fall and moved to a hybrid model during the 2020-2021 school year. The 2021-2022 school year marked a return to full time, in-person learning. Delineating the data by school year reveals that the nature of boundaries and brokering, and thus the roles of principal autonomy, shifted significantly over the course of the crisis.

As will become clear in my findings, principals in Frederick had multiple perceptions of the roles autonomy played in how they learned to prioritize curricular goals and to support instruction. When asked directly whether their autonomy as instructional leaders increased or decreased during the pandemic, the seven principals gave a wide variety of responses. Four said autonomy decreased as the district moved toward "calibration." One said autonomy increased because district administrators' increased responsibilities during the pandemic meant they could not attend as closely to schools. One said autonomy was the same pre and post pandemic. Finally, one gave mixed responses. My analysis of how the roles of autonomy changed over the three school years of the pandemic helps unpack these principal perceptions.

Learning for Instructional Leadership During a Time of Crisis

Our interviews with principals took place in the third school year of the pandemic, and we asked principals to reflect on what they had learned cumulatively about instructional leadership during this period of crisis. Following the definition of instructional leadership we established in Chapter One, we focused our inquiry on dimensions of principals' work related to improvement of teaching and learning, including work prioritizing curricular goals and supporting instruction (Hallinger, 2011).

All seven principals reported that logistical hurdles of the crisis impinged upon their capacity to do what they saw as the more important parts of their job as instructional leaders. For example, one principal described their struggle to maintain focus on instructional leadership this way:

> We're not instructional leaders right now, we're managers... I need to be an instructional leader... My kids deserve that... And that's what's killing me because we've stopped that... just because we're triaging constantly... I don't want to contact trace, I don't want to reset passwords [for the Learning Management System]. I want to talk about instruction all the time because that's what we're here to do... Unfortunately I feel like it's not a priority.

Another principal, when asked what they learned about instructional leadership during the pandemic, emphasized the importance of perseverance and resilience: "Don't give up on being an instructional leader...I feel it would have been easy to say, 'I can't be an instructional leader. There are too many fires I'm putting out, too many things happening here.'"

All seven principals also described how the pandemic exacerbated existing student social emotional needs and brought on new ones that required an adjustment to instructional priorities. For instance, one principal recounted helping teachers understand that students have been

"undersocialized" as a result of the crisis: "these kids have been home…a year and a half…[teachers need to be] more mindful of the behaviors...and maybe not so quick to jump the gun about Johnny, [saying] I want him suspended because of X,Y, and Z." Another stated that they needed to shift what they emphasized with their teachers and focus on communicating``Let's get to know our children. Let's get the children to understand, again, the rules of being in a school and how we act with one another…We definitely had to take a step back." A third principal relayed the need to adjust instructional expectations given the gap between what teachers expected and students' demonstrated level of skill: "It's almost like developmentally [the students] lost a few years. So as a third grade teacher…they're not third graders sitting in front of you. They are literally first graders." Throughout our interviews, we heard multiple such examples of principals supporting teachers to adjust their curricular goals and priorities in order to meet students where they were.

In this sense, principals presented instructional leadership during the crisis as an ongoing process of calibration. They described adjusting to changing instructional modes (from remote, to hybrid, to in-person learning); to unanticipated logistical challenges; and to changing instructional needs. Principals further represented that the calibration grew more difficult over the course of the pandemic. The third year, they explained, was the most challenging in this respect because the return to in-person learning was not what they or their staff anticipated. One principal said: "So coming out of this summer, even over the mid summer, we're like 'All right, we're ready to rock and roll. It's going to be just like pre-pandemic. [But] this year, it's just a whole different thing." Another principal stated: "This is probably the hardest year that I've had yet as a leader. Most people probably would have assumed it was probably last year, but it

wasn't. This is just a very different year." The return to in-person learning clearly was not, for these principals, the return to pre-pandemic conditions for instructional leadership.

When asked to describe how they learned to be instructional leaders during COVID-19, principals most commonly responded that their personal learning process during the crisis was the result of improvising, reflecting with others in the school CoP, and adapting. One principal stated theirs was a process of "making mistakes…and when I've made mistakes, I've just been vulnerable to own them." Another said: "You learn from every experience, and I'm such a reflective person...I question everything I do...I go over it, replay it, I'll ask folks about it..did I do the right thing? What would you have done differently?" This collaborative dimension of reflection seemed an important aspect of principal learning during the pandemic.

Principals also talked about experimenting with new structures to support instruction during the crisis. For example, one mentioned a new family communication system they had developed during remote learning that arose out of necessity and that school staff would have thought impossible before the crisis given the transient nature of their community: "[Before Covid] we never had emails for our parents…Now I can send out a message and it goes to emails. That was a huge revelation for us." Another principal gave the example of experimenting with optional professional development sessions to meet the wide variety of teacher needs for support that have emerged during the pandemic. The level of participation varied widely, from one teacher present to twelve, but the principal said they learned to focus on the quality of the interaction with teachers rather than the quantity reached. They elaborated: "I had one teacher with me yesterday and it was so great to have one to one time, because we got to have a lot of conversations that were very specifically differentiated for them."

Although principals described their learning for instructional leadership primarily as a process of improvisation and reflection within the school CoP, there was some evidence that the district supported principal learning for instructional leadership during the pandemic by framing the work; offering timely, formative feedback; and providing meaningful, structured professional development experiences. Four principals stated that there was an explicit acknowledgement from district administrators that what it meant to be an instructional leader had changed significantly during the course of the pandemic. For example, one principal described a meeting where district leadership acknowledged the changing nature of the work and shared the struggle: "What's communicated by our deputy [superintendents is] the reality is that being an instructional leader this year is difficult… that was said." Two principals talked about their immediate deputy superintendent as helpful in their learning by engaging in reflective conversation. One principal stated "For me, the support is always there. My deputy is fantastic." Finally, three principals named professional development opportunities the district offered, specifically a session on how to develop quality professional development for teachers that our research team observed.

In sum, principals described instructional leadership during the pandemic as a process of adjusting priorities for curricular goals and supporting teachers through that adjustment. Principals characterized their learning to be instructional leaders as an experience of adaptation with some support from the district. These findings speak to principals' experience of instructional leadership during the pandemic in general. To more fully show the roles autonomy played in how principals learned to prioritize curricular goals and to support instruction, I now turn to consider their experiences with boundaries and brokering.

Boundaries and Brokering

In this second section of my findings, I describe how principals experienced the boundaries of the district CoP, how principals experienced the boundaries of their school CoPs, and how they brokered between the district CoP and their school CoPs over the course of the three school years of the crisis.

Boundaries of the District CoP

The evidence showed principals considered themselves to be learning with other principal colleagues and with district-level administrators in what could be considered a district CoP. Principals defined their membership in the district CoP by naming elements that could be understood as connected to mutual engagement, or the ways of interacting and establishing belonging in the district CoP. Principals described shared rituals and shared values that strengthened the principals' reliance on each other as supports for instructional leadership and connected these rituals and values specifically to the leadership of the superintendent.

For example, principals recounted rituals in Frederick that the superintendent created to foster a sense of community. At two district meetings I observed, the superintendent led an established gratitude ritual to open the meeting in which he provided roses for principals to give to acknowledge colleagues who had supported them. Another principal described a district-wide opening rally the superintendent organized for all principals and staff at a local stadium:

> We're sitting in a stadium, 18,000 people I think. Everybody in [Frederick]. And this is [the superintendent] just thinking outside the box. He's really, really good at that, bringing everybody before school for a kickoff. Like, 'We've got this. We're going to do this.'

Similarly, principals described the superintendent's infusing certain values for interaction into the district CoP. All seven principals talked about the superintendent valuing principal voice. By way of example, one principal stated:

> I feel, as a leader in this district, we have a voice. 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...Because our superintendent is actually very open...He will model: This is a safe space.

Another principal stated: "When [our superintendent] became superintendent, 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."

Three principals talked about the superintendent bringing to the district the value of "relationship before the task." One principal said "[the superintendent] says it all the time, relationships before the task. And we try to stress that here with our kids and build those true, genuine relationships. " Another stated: "Our superintendent is really good at saying the R before the T...and I genuinely think that that works."

The data suggested that the district CoP's emphasis on relationships extended to the adult relationships in the district as well. All seven principals talked about a shared value of collaboration and connection both between principals and district administratorship and among principal colleagues in Frederick. One principal stated "I feel I have really great relationships with all levels of administration throughout the district. I know I can call [the superintendent] and he'll pick up the phone, he'll answer me, he'll walk me through it, he'll brainstorm with me." Another principal stated:

> I really appreciate [in Frederick that] people reach out to you… I have to say that's a big
>
> deal. I came from a really huge district and I had four different superintendents. Not one
>
> of my superintendents ever picked up the phone and called me and that doesn't happen
>
> here.

A third principal, also contrasting their experience in Frederick to that in another district,

described the district's emphasis on connection and collegiality this way:

> That's the one thing that I have to say that I feel has been a very different part of my
>
> journey here than when I was in my previous district, is there's an opportunity to really
>
> foster strong relationships so that you know that you always have someone that can reach
>
> out to you and collaborate regularly.

The emphasis in principals' descriptions of the district was consistently on the connection and

the relationships, or in other words, on the mutual engagement. The principals' perceptions of

the importance of relationships and collaboration were further corroborated by the documents

our research team reviewed. For example, the superintendent's letter to the community on the

district website states "We work together so our students learn to thrive, advance, and impact the

greater community and the world. This collaboratively-developed vision captures the essence of

who we are."

Boundaries of the School CoPs

Where principals emphasized mutual engagement in their descriptions of their district

CoP, principals distinguished their individual school CoPs by describing boundaries connected

to joint enterprise (i.e., the common purpose or focus of the CoP) and shared repertoire (i.e., the

routines and practices learned).

Three of the seven principals made the point that schools in Frederick have varying student populations with divergent student needs. One principal stated that "[t]here's a huge difference between schools that are on the west side of [Frederick] and schools that are on the east side of [Frederick because] the demographics are drastically different." This assertion was confirmed by a review of DESE school profiles; while the overall percentage of high needs students in Frederick is 85.8%, individual schools can range from 100% high needs to 68%. Another principal expressed that these demographic boundaries then create different "contexts" for instructional leadership:

> The stuff that we deal with every day, that is the context in which we need to look at all of our work. Because it would be one thing if...you have one or two kids that you need to modify for, or two or three kids now you're thinking maybe this is a special ed thing. But usually, our kindergarteners, it's pretty much like it's a screening year for kids. You have kids in there…how did they even make it to this point with some of the difficulties they have? What kind of pediatrician let them get to this point without any early intervention?

This principal then explained that although they feel a collegial connection to all principals in Frederick, they will not reach out to all of them because they do not all share that same context: "I'll call certain other people who've had the same experiences." Differences in demographics, these principals seemed to suggest, led to distinct differences in joint enterprise: the work of their school CoPs, to address this higher level of student need, was a distinctly different project from the work of other school CoPs in the district.

The third principal went even further, making the case that the boundaries of their school's CoP were so distinct that they in and of themselves provided a rationale for autonomy. This principal stated that they "jumped on trying to get autonomy" as soon as they joined

Frederick. When asked what motivated that sense of urgency, they said autonomy was in their view crucial to their ability to address their students' specific and unique needs:

My school is a school of high need. [..] I'm super transparent with everyone about that. We have the most amazing students and families and we have some of the highest needs in the area. I feel like I just want to make sure that my students feel successful...I think that's really important, that not every school has the same make and model. Not every school has the same exact population. My needs are going to be different than other schools' needs...I feel a sense of urgency. I do feel like autonomy is needed.

The high level of student need, for this principal, created a boundary, and that boundary became a reason for autonomy.

In addition to boundaries related to joint enterprise, principals relayed boundaries related to shared repertoire. Five of the seven principals described an instructional tool or structure unique to their school CoP that supported instruction. One principal, for example, talked about a teacher handbook they created that communicates their school-specific "common language" and instructional expectations for teachers: "activators or summarizers or the components of your lesson plan, what needs to be in there about language objectives [...] anything instructional that we do here. That's unique to our school, even within our district." Another principal talked about the importance of communicating a set of core values in a visual form, as a kind of school crest. Walking me through the graphic they created, they explained: "These are our core values. This is us and this is our academic focus and what drives us instructionally." One principal described the instructional practice of guided reading in her school as " something that's very different than other schools in our district." Another talked about creating a distinctive meeting structure, where administrators take a direct role in instructional planning with curriculum leads.

The principal of the school in "turnaround status" with the state department of education for chronic underperformance communicated the strongest sense of boundaries around their school CoP. They described "turnaround status" as bestowing specific boundaries both in the area of joint enterprise and in the area of shared repertoire. With respect to joint enterprise, this principal explained that turnaround status led to a unique sense of urgency at their school CoP: "We don't have another second. Some other places can wait and teachers can just teach...We started day two [of this school year] assessing all of our kids. And I know in the district not everybody did that." Also connected to joint enterprise, the principal explained that, unique to their school, the curricular goals they prioritize come not from the district but from the state, saying "[our instructional focus] came from the work we've done in turnaround with the state...that led us to the trajectory to where we are." With respect to shared repertoire, the principal said that they were free to choose their own assessments, different from those used at other schools, to measure student progress because they are "under the guidance of the state." They also pointed to their changing the traditional responsibilities of a district coach to specifically fit their school's needs. They stated that rather than accept the role as constructed in other schools Frederick, they advocated for the district coach to be embedded in their school:

> I was strategic about staff...I [told district administration] I don't want a thing. I want a
> person.' Part of my plan was, can you give me [the district math coach in my school] for
> a year? They were like, 'We've never heard of such a thing... Nobody's done that before.'
> No one [else] asked for it.

When describing the curricular choices they made for their school, they stated that they had the autonomy to choose what worked for their student population independent of the district's usual curricular choices because of turnaround status, explaining that "[o]utside of turnaround, it's

usually not like that. Usually we have a program that we've all got, that the district uses." In effect, the principal described these boundaries as creating a buffer for autonomy from the district.

Taken together, these findings show that principals described clear boundaries to define their membership in both the district COP and their individual school CoPs. Principals presented the boundaries of district membership as related to mutual engagement (ways of interacting and establishing belonging). Principals presented the boundaries of school CoPs as connected to joint enterprise (a collective understanding of purpose and direction) and shared repertoire (shared routines, tools, and ways of doing things). In one case, a principal made the case that the boundaries of their school CoP related to student need were so distinct that they provided a rationale for autonomy. Similarly, the principal of the school in "turnaround status" described boundaries related to joint enterprise and shared repertoire and the autonomy those boundaries afforded. However, in order to fully detail the roles autonomy played in how principals learned to prioritize curricular goals and to support instruction during the pandemic, I now turn to how principals reconciled conflicting priorities between the district CoP and their school CoPs through brokering.

In the sub sections that follow, I trace brokering in four chronological periods: pre-pandemic; spring of 2020, at the onset of crisis and with the move from in-person to remote learning; the 2020-2021 school year, the year of remote learning and hybrid learning; and the 2021-2022 school year, the return to in-person learning. To represent the changing roles of autonomy in each time period, I depict the brokering dynamics at play through a metaphor of a pendulum that swings between principal autonomy and district control. The pendulum swings toward principal autonomy when one or more of the following conditions are true: there is little

bridging, there is increased bridging from school CoPs to the district CoP, and/or the principals perceive a decreased need for buffering. Conversely, the pendulum swings toward district control when there is increased bridging from the district CoP to the school CoPs and/or the principals perceive an increased need for buffering.

Brokering Before the Pandemic

In their descriptions of the relationship between schools and the district before the pandemic, principals described brokering in two directions: from the district CoP to their school CoP and from their school CoP to the district CoP. This brokering seemed to be a kind of negotiation, both a bridging and a buffering, that resulted in a balance between principal autonomy and district control (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1: Brokering Before the Pandemic

AUTONOMY

DISTRICT CONTROL

Before the Pandemic

- Little bridging *and/or*
- Increased bridging from the School CoPs to the District CoP *and/or*
- Decreased need for buffering

- Increased bridging from the District CoP to the School CoP *and/or*
- Increased need for buffering
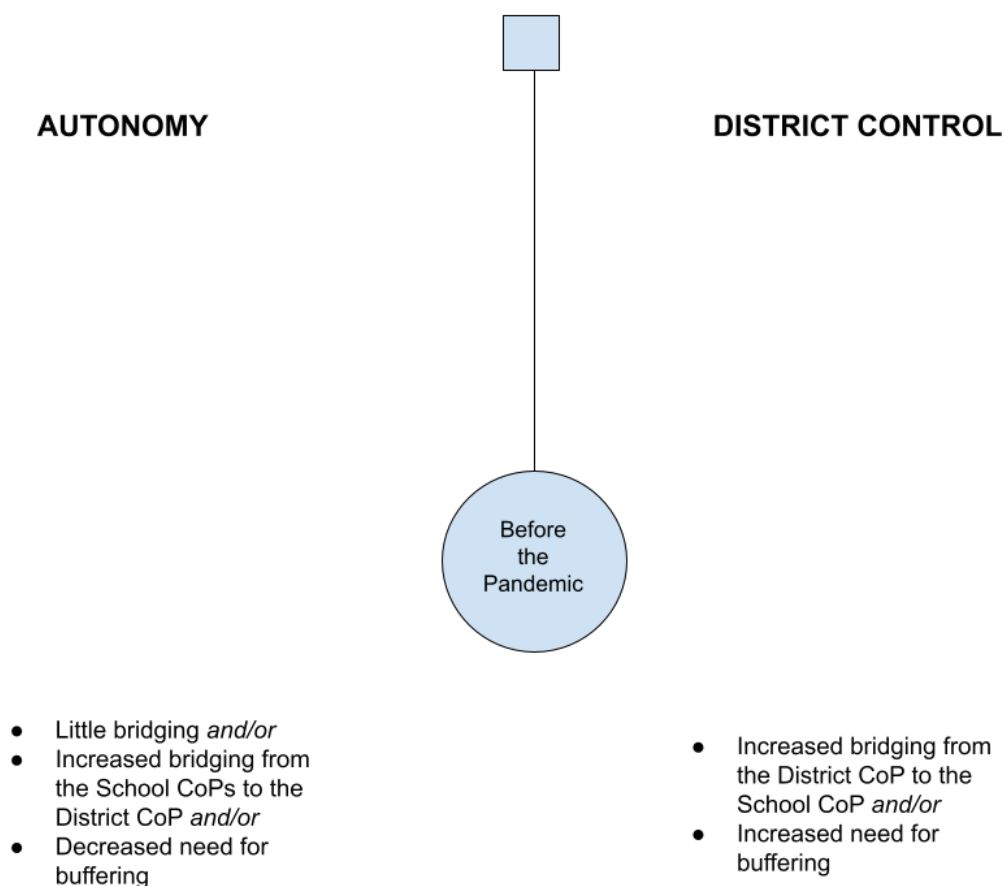
For example, both principals and district administrators described instructional priorities as an area where schools were expected to both bridge concepts from the district CoP and buffer those concepts when appropriate, adapting the concepts to their specific school CoP. Three principals echoed the specific 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." Another 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." A district administrator said that "each school looks at the district initiatives and then...looks at their own data and focuses on that. So there is an alignment, but it doesn't have to match exactly." The expectation seemed to be that principals would bridge what was applicable to their school CoP and buffer what was not.

Similarly, in their descriptions of unique tools or structures that formed the boundaries of their school CoPs, principals often talked about support from the district in a way that reflected balanced bridging and buffering. For example, one principal talked about their "framework for success model," a process of unpacking standards that led to a school-wide framework for breaking down standards and translating them into lesson plans. They described the role of the district this way:

> It was [a school-based decision] but it was in collaboration with some district personnel. An assistant director for math came out and shared data [and led the discussion]. What are we looking at? What does the data mean? What do we need to do to support learning in those areas, both in ELA and math? But the...building of modules, the [school] team put [that] together...to present to teachers in the training and the teaching phase. So that was really done in house and respected by the district to do that in house.

This dynamic seemed a combination of both bridging and buffering: bridging to analyze the data, but buffering to create the framework and design the training that would be unique to their school's CoP.

Both principals and district administrators also gave examples of innovative, autonomous 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. The principal explained that ILTs

> will be [a common practice in Frederick]. It's something that's slowly happening. I know
>
> that my school and one other school have an ILT...It is going to be something that is
>
> beginning to be launched throughout the district. It's a slow progress, but we started a
>
> couple years back...I started it because I am, unlike most of the leaders in the [Frederick
>
> district,] I am a leader that actually came from a different district. It was something that
>
> for me, I know in my role I cannot do this alone.

This principal, who described their autonomy as staying the same both before and during the

pandemic, described themselves as both highly aligned with district administrators and having

personal expertise with supporting English Language Learners (ELs) that the district saw as an

asset.

District leaders confirmed that in the years just prior to the pandemic they recruited a few

principals from other districts whom they knew would bring such innovative practice to

Frederick and gave them the autonomy to implement those practices. The district administrator

we interviewed stated that "We've got a couple of new [principals to our district] that are

bringing in new ideas, which we're like 'You know what? We want to listen to that, and we want

to foster that creativity.'" Similarly, the superintendent referred to seeking such principals as a

"strategic practice." He talked about recruiting three principals from his prior district with

innovative ideas that could then be bridged to the rest of Frederick, saying these principals have

a "skillset that principals elsewhere don't have … they are much better instructional leaders."

When asked if he had made his views on autonomy transparent to principals, the superintendent

responded that he had not as he viewed the granting of autonomy as "a process not an event." At

the same time that he recognized the connection between autonomy and innovation, he thought autonomy should only be granted to certain principals in certain circumstances: "[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." District leadership described their approach to principal autonomy before the pandemic as a kind of slow, controlled release.

Brokering in Spring, 2020: Onset of Crisis and Move from In-Person to Remote Learning

The onset of the pandemic, in contrast, brought a rapid increase in school autonomy (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2: Brokering in Spring 2020

AUTONOMY　　　　　　　　　　　　　　**DISTRICT CONTROL**

Spring
2020

Before
the
Pandemic

- Little bridging *and/or*
- Increased bridging from
  the School CoPs to the
  District CoP *and/or*
- Decreased need for
  buffering

- Increased bridging from
  the District CoP to the
  School CoP *and/or*
- Increased need for
  buffering
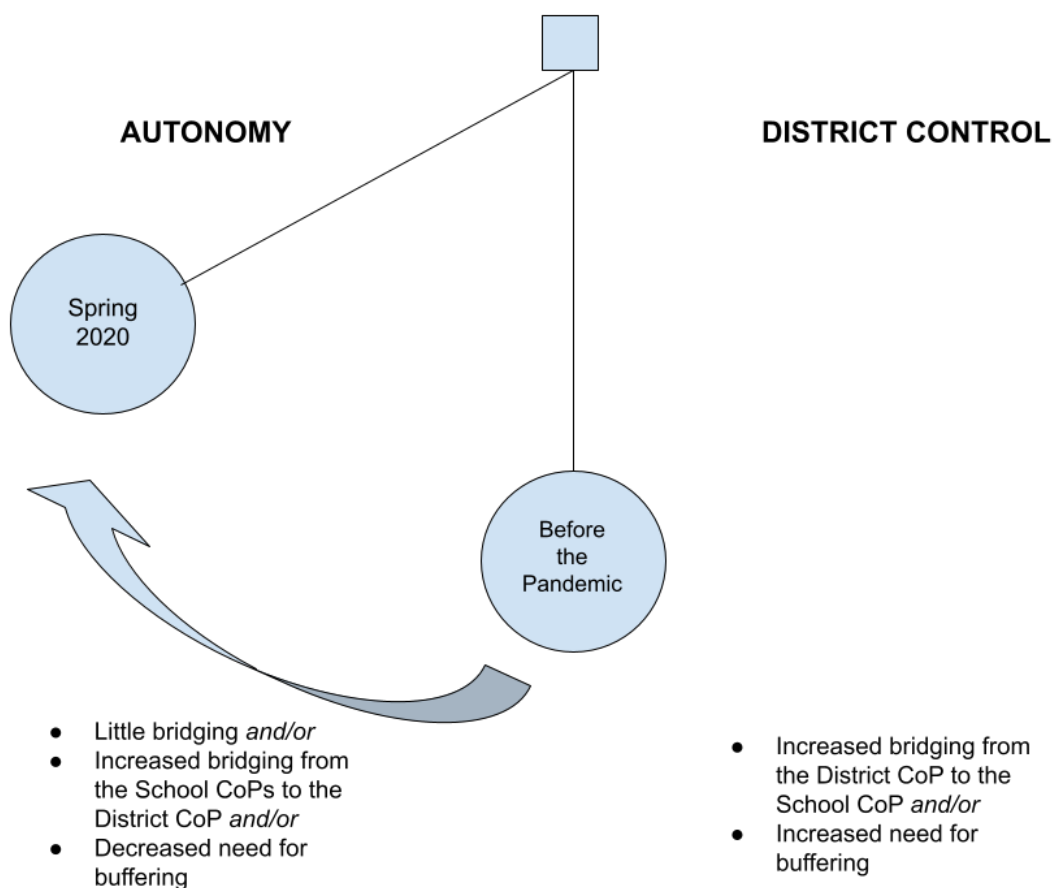
The superintendent described March of 2020 as a period in which schools were forced to

transition to remote learning quickly and with extremely limited resources. He said this was a

time of "no devices for teachers or students, no platforms, no [Learning Management System],

no nothing." Because the situation was extremely challenging, the district needed principals to

improvise:

> That was the prime time [when] I'm not gonna squelch innovation or ideas. I'm going to
>
> move out of the way...In those contexts where there's broad uncertainty and you have to
>
> change fast, you have to embrace autonomy. [Otherwise] it would slow things down.

The other district administrator who was interviewed described the spring of 2020 as a time of school-level experimentation when, faced with unprecedented challenges, district administrators would meet frequently with principals to gather ideas from school CoPs to disseminate:

> There were a lot more meetings, if not with all principals, then with pockets of principals...There were tons of questions, every time you turned around, you're like 'Oh, I don't know. Let's caucus a little bit, come up with some ideas, and then try to get the answer out.'

One principal confirmed this account, describing their participation: "We were trying to figure out a way to engage [remote learners] in lessons. I was part of planning sessions for different content areas." In these descriptions of the period, the limited bridging that occurred seemed to be from the school CoPs to the district CoP.

This period was described slightly differently by principals who presented their schools as having strong instructional foci before the pandemic. One principal stated: "After we created [our instructional] plan, when COVID came in March of that year. We did continue. Because people put in way too much time and work. And although it was a struggle, we...continued to work." Another principal relayed "When COVID hit…initially everybody's shocked, but we were still holding [Professional Learning Team meetings] and supporting that through Zoom and grade-level teachers were still meeting...the unpacking of the grade-level standards was still taking place during that." These principals described this period as one with lots of autonomy and a focus on their school CoPs' joint enterprise and shared repertoire.

Brokering in the 2020-2021 School Year: Remote learning and Hybrid learning

The 2020-2021 school year was the year of remote and hybrid learning. In their descriptions of brokering in 2020-2021, participants seemed to place the brokering dynamic

somewhere between pre-pandemic and spring of 2020 conditions. Participants described a great deal of bridging and buffering going both ways (from school CoPs to district CoP and vice versa) pre-pandemic and a great deal of autonomy (and little bridging) during the onset of the pandemic. In their descriptions of 2020-2021, however, participants provided evidence of bridging in both directions and no evidence of buffering (Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3: Brokering 2020-2021
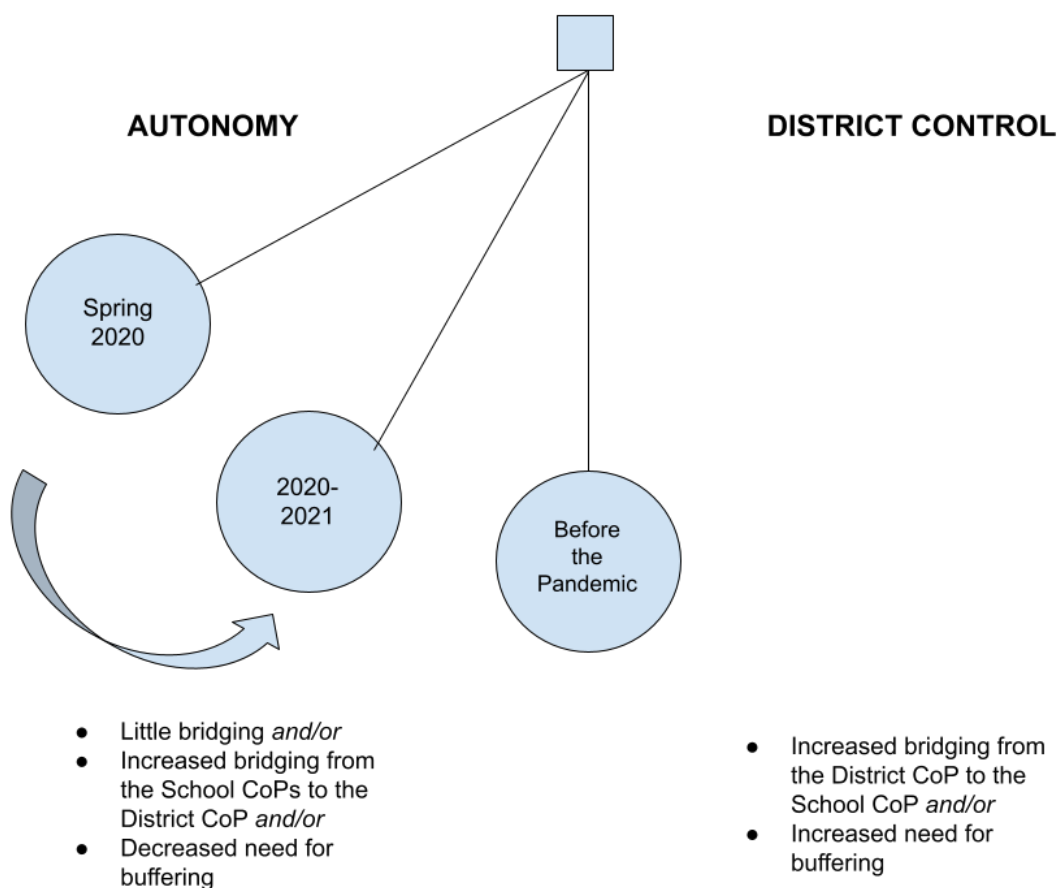
The superintendent gave three specific examples illustrating this shift. First, he stated that the district opened a dual language school in the 2020-2021 school year and relied on the expertise of that principal and the demonstrated practices at their school to set the structure. Frederick's Student Opportunity Act plan that confirmed this account. Second, he stated that the

district changed its approach to assessing the literacy levels of ELs and relied on the expertise

and demonstrated practice from school CoPs to inform their assessment choices. This statement

was corroborated by a principal interview, in which the principal previously discussed who had

expertise with EL instruction described their role in this effort: "There was dialogue, not just

with the members of our different departments and the heads of our department, but also [with]

different school leaders, [to] share what is happening …within our own school." Third, the

superintendent stated that the district relied on a principal who had a specific area of expertise

and had experimented with certain practices at their school to determine direction for the

district's Learning Management System (LMS). Although we did not review specific

corroborating evidence of the principal's role in the development of the LMS, we did observe the

principal's leadership in a district meeting about the LMS. The superintendent described all of

these initiatives as examples of principal autonomy that is "happening in a way that is thoughtful

and in some ways strategic." These three examples also illustrate the bridging of practice from

individual school CoPs to the district CoP.

Other evidence showed increased bridging from the district CoP to school CoPs. In their

descriptions of the 2020-2021 school year, principals spoke about intentionally bridging the

concept of "grace" from the district CoP to their school CoPs. One principal recounted that

"grace and compassion" were core to the "messaging" from the deputy superintendents in

2020-2021 given the challenges schools were facing. Another principal presented "grace" as

something the superintendent introduced to the district CoP in 2020-2021:

> [The superintendent] every year has themes…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 and bring it to my
>
> staff. So, [in 2020-2021] it was three words: forgiveness, something, and grace…I just

tried to wrap them into all the things I talked about. Like, 'How are we providing

grace?'... I try to take his district themes and roll them into what we do so we stay

connected in that way.

Interestingly, the superintendent had a different recollection. When asked to clarify what he meant by grace, the superintendent responded to me in an email that "the only time" he recalled "mentioning grace was in our conversations about teacher evaluations and with students around grades particularly at the end of SY 2019-2020." He continued " I think grace is important, but I'm super careful about using that word because some see it as lowering expectations."

Many principals, however, represented grace as a core concept of mutual engagement for the district CoP. In total, five principals evoked the word <u>grace</u> in their interviews. One principal, for example, said "There is a lot of dialogue across many leaders about what's effective right now…The word that we're using a lot is grace. We have to give grace to ourselves. We have to give grace to others and our colleagues." Another principal, when asked what they had learned most about instruction during the pandemic, responded "I've learned about just offering grace and having compassion for not only our teachers, but the students and their families."

In sum, 2020-2021 was described by both district administrators and principals as a period of the district CoP bridging to school-based practice and school principals bridging a core concept of mutual engagement, grace, from the district CoP to their school CoPs.

Brokering in the the 2021-2022 School Year: Return to In-Person Learning

Both district administrators and principals described the brokering that occurred during the 2021-2022 school year as significantly different from the brokering of previous school years, but they talked about it in different ways. District leaders talked about their introducing new

concepts of joint enterprise and shared repertoire, and principals talked about their increased

need to buffer (Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4: Brokering in 2021-2022
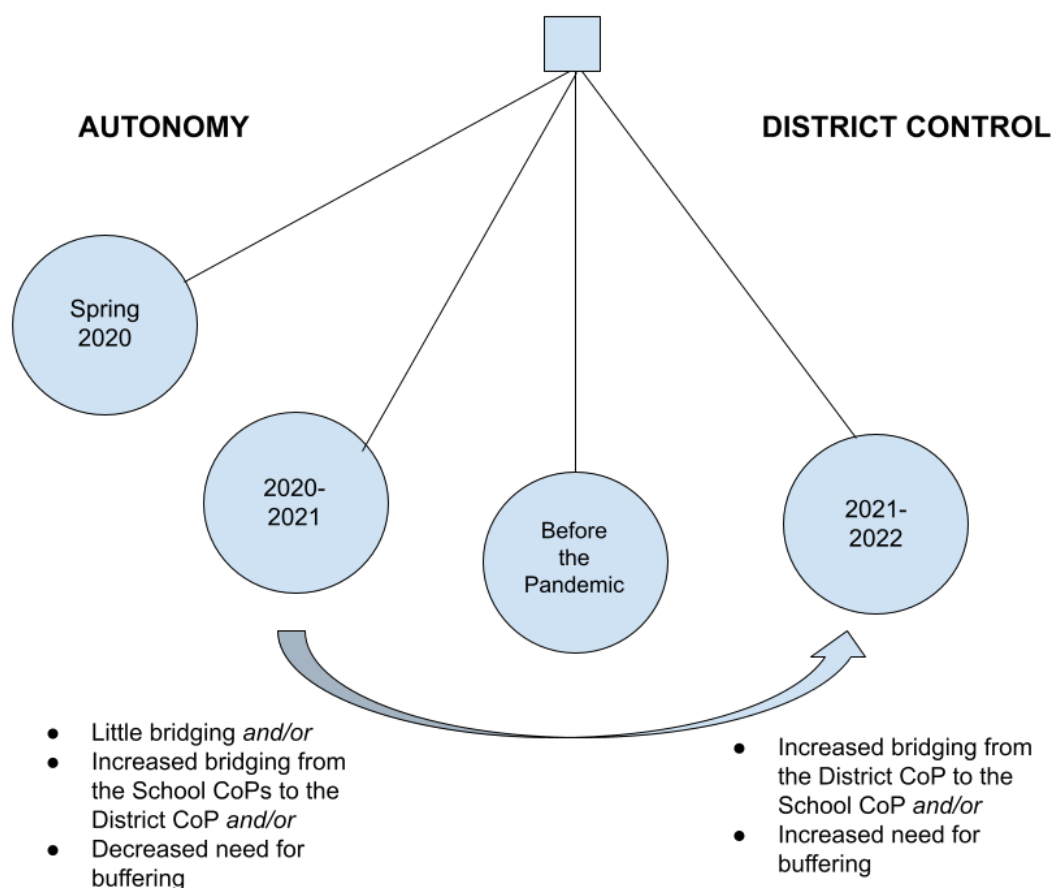
The superintendent acknowledged that principal autonomy was reduced in the third

school year of the pandemic, stating "We're not choking innovation and creativity [in the third

school year, but] yes from a leadership standpoint, it may have swung back...a little bit." This

was a telling phrase, suggesting that the superintendent perceived that the pendulum had swung

too far towards principal autonomy over the course of the pandemic and that it needed to swing

back in 2021-2022.

Most principals, six of the seven interviewed, agreed that the district exerted greater control in 2021-2022. Four principals represented this shift as something they needed to actively buffer against. These four principals pointed specifically to the implementation of two district-wide courses in 2021-2022: Blended Learning, a course integrating technology into the classroom, and Hope and Healing, a course on race, equity, and differentiated instruction. The two initiatives could be seen as attempts at framing joint enterprise and creating shared repertoire for the district CoP. These four principals, however, described the implementation of Blended Learning and Hope and Healing as something that was decided at the district level and then handed down, in a kind of required bridging. All four saw the two initiatives as infringing upon their school CoPs joint enterprise and shared repertoire. Consequently, these four principals talked about their instructional foci the same way: they had a particular focus that had been established through a school-based inquiry process before the 2021-2022 school year, and despite their desire to buffer, they were required to bridge district initiatives into their list of instructional priorities. One principal summarized the experience: "We've had a set of instructional priorities that we've had in place for a number of years. That was how I tried to align everything with regards to my school improvement plan and teacher professional practice goals...but that kind of shifted with district leadership." Another principal expressed their frustration with this dynamic:

> The district is telling us we need Blended Learning. You have to have...Hope and Healing...And they're not bad, but it's not what we're choosing. And [we're] sort of having to catch up because they're handing these things over to principals and saying, 'This is the framework, now bring it to your faculty.' So where's that ownership piece that we all talk about that's so important for our teachers? We're given something that

we're not sure we have ownership over and how do we teach it? How do we work with

that if we don't understand it and own it?

A third principal stated that "calibration...is a buzz word in our district...I think calibration may have taken a step a little too far and kind of put us in a box."

Relatedly, principals reported that in the 2021-2022 school year the district created a universal early release on Wednesdays so all teachers would have their Professional Learning Time [PLT] at the same time, in part to facilitate teachers' focus on Blended Learning and Hope and Healing. Paradoxically, however, it seemed that the district's attempts to expand resources for school CoPs (by giving more teacher time) in some ways constrained the school CoPs. The four principals who described their autonomy as instructional leaders as decreasing during the pandemic described this change as something that they were required to bridge into their school CoP that threatened their autonomy. While the principals acknowledged good intentions on the part of the district to create dedicated time for teacher professional development free from the challenge of creating that space with sub coverage, principals expressed a frustration with this district-imposed structure: having all teacher teams meet at the same time meant that they, as principals, were not able to attend every meeting. As one principal put it: "It's a gift and at the same time it's not." Prior to this year, PLTs for different grade level teams met at different times, which allowed principals to attend all the meetings and lead the instructional direction for all of their teams. One principal described this lost opportunity for instructional leadership:

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 the chance to have data meetings with teachers. And

that's something that I implemented, where I would work with teachers once a month. We

would have that one-on-one conversation about the students …how awesome was that?

And then during PLT, because we had that two hour time, we were able to bring data

meetings as a whole grade level...And that was super powerful. I haven't had time [this

year] to do that. And I feel that's been happening not just here, it's all over [the district.]

The district was trying to empower schools, yet the district imposed a structure that was

experienced by four principals as disempowering. In short, this change seemed a loss of

autonomy over shared repertoire four principals would have preferred to buffer against.

Two principals expressed a more nuanced view, expressing the positives in addition to the

challenges of this calibration. One explained:

I feel like there's some district initiatives that are put on us that happen during what

should be my time with teachers...I'm hoping to bring back what we need here and what

our focus is. [But prior to the 2021-2022 school year] everybody was in their own

little…world on their own. And I had no idea...what was happening across the city, in

another school. And then we get together and they're talking about this initiative they're

doing, or this curriculum that they have. And...you're sitting there and you're feeling

disconnected. I don't feel that way anymore, which is awesome. I feel like it's the same

language, whether you are in a middle school, in a high school or any one of our

elementary schools, it's the same language. So that's been powerful.

Another principal described both the positive and the negative impact very similarly: "It's the

same language. So that's been powerful, but on the flip side, it's taken away from our time [with

our staff]." While these two principals saw the demands to bridge from the district to the school

CoP as placing constraints on school CoP's use of time, they also saw the value in district

cohesion. It seemed these two principals made the choice to bridge rather than to buffer.

Finally, principals described the mutual engagement concept of "grace" that they bridged to their school CoPs as in tension with the district's communicated urgency to address perceived instructional gaps in 2021-2022. Principals talked about having to make daily choices about how much to push teachers and how much to buffer expediency. Four principals talked about the social emotional health of teachers as being a concern. One principal expressed the general sentiment: "Our own staff members are going through a lot. It's demonstrated in so many different ways." When asked how they are supporting teachers right now, this same principal stated: "There needs to be patience and grace," which they then described as a need to mitigate district expectations. Another principal expressed this tenuous balancing act more frankly:

> I think we are often sort of in this muddy space where we're like, 'Shit, it's urgent, we need to move this.' But then we're like, 'How much do we up the fire on teachers?' Because they're just going to leave. And then them just leaving presents another issue. So I sometimes feel guilt around not pushing enough. I'm just going to be honest about that. How much do I push?...How do we move this in a way that we're not going to have a mass exodus of teachers?

In response to this tension, principals talked about making their own decisions to buffer against district mandates, creating some flexibility, for example, within the district pacing guides. One principal described their agency in this regard this way:

> We have the [district] curriculum map [but] we're not going to go in each class and say 'Hey, listen, why isn't this done? This has got to get done right now, because the district is going to be all over my back for X, Y, and Z!' No, we're not like that at all. We're extremely supportive...You need a few extra days for X,Y, and Z for the water cycle? You got it...This has impacted us in so many ways here at the school.

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. It's okay to do that because they know
> that I'm really strict with schedules and being on task and with no interruptions, but it's
> different this year. And I think having that compassion for folks and giving them grace
> when they need it. My message here is less is more let's, let's just slow down.

These principals seemed to be constructing the mutual engagement concept of "grace" that they bridged into their school CoP's as a buffer to create autonomy over curricular expectations. In this sense, principals co-opted the concept of grace for their own purposes, and something bridged in the second school year of the pandemic became a buffer in the third.

In conclusion, the data suggested that over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, principals learned to prioritize curricular goals and to support instruction with shifting degrees of autonomy. Participants described the brokering before the pandemic as a kind of negotiation between the school CoPs and the district CoPs, consisting of equal parts bridging and buffering. Participants described the brokering in spring of 2020 as a swing towards principal autonomy, with little bridging and a focus on the school CoPs. Participants described 2020-2021 as a slight swing back, with bridging from school CoPs to the district CoP largely focused on shared repertoire and bridging from the district CoP to the school CoPs related to mutual engagement. Finally, in 2021-2022, both district administrators and principals represented a pendulum swing towards district control of joint enterprise and shared repertoire and away from principal autonomy.

Detailing the analysis in this way helps describe the variety of principal perspectives on the roles of autonomy during the pandemic. The principals who described their autonomy as

instructional leaders decreasing over the course of the pandemic focused their responses on the third school year, when they were required to bridge district initiatives into their school CoPs and were not as successful at buffering as they would have liked. The principal who described autonomy as increasing talked primarily about the spring of 2020 and the 2020-2021 school year, the period when school CoP autonomy was encouraged and district leadership sought innovative practices to bridge from the school CoPs to the district CoP. The principal who stated that their autonomy stayed the same focused on the boundaries of their school CoP that they saw as conveying an ability to buffer no matter the circumstances and on experiences where their expertise and autonomy had been encouraged. Finally, the principal who provided mixed responses represented the roles of autonomy very differently, depending on which period of time they were describing. In the final section of this chapter, I discuss implications of these findings for practice, policy, and research.

Discussion

This study examined the roles autonomy played in how principals in one Massachusetts medium-sized district learned to prioritize curricular goals and to support instruction during a time of crisis. Findings show that principals struggled to see themselves as instructional leaders during the pandemic given logistical challenges. Principals also had to adjust their instructional goals to meet changing student social emotional needs and developmental gaps. Data revealed that there was a shift in the roles of autonomy in Frederick over the course of the three school years of the pandemic: district leaders supported principal autonomy, and the innovation it brought to the district CoP, in the spring of 2020 and during the 2020-2021 school year but returned to a more centralized "calibration" in 2021-2022.

These findings connect to research on educational leadership and have implications for districts seeking to optimally balance district authority with principal autonomy during times of crisis.

Connections to Research

Although they emphasized the challenge to be instructional leaders in a time of crisis, principals in this study enacted instructional leadership in many ways that are consistent with previous research. Principals talked about establishing goals and expectations for teachers; planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum; and promoting and participating in teacher learning and development (Robinson, 2008). Principals also built teacher capacity by prioritizing and disseminating certain policy directives in ways that encouraged specific kinds of teacher instructional activities (Coburn, 2001). Finally, although principals described the degree to which they needed to focus on the social emotional needs of students as something remarkably different from their past practice, their work in this area is connected to creating a supportive learning environment, a well documented part of instructional leadership (Robinson, 2008).

Consistent with the literature about the learning for instructional leadership of experienced principals (Rowland, 2017; The Wallace Foundation, 2016), the principals in this study emphasized innovation, reflection, and adaptation in their learning rather than formal professional development. Data also revealed that district administrators best supported principals' learning with opportunities for joint work; modeling, developing, and using tools; opportunities for principals to serve as learning resources; and some instances where the district had connected them to outside resources, particularly through formal professional development (Honig & Rainey, 2014).

This study also confirms previous research on principal autonomy. Participants in this study described autonomy as authority and control over operations; over assessment of teachers, students, and pedagogical practices; and over structures for instructional and professional development time (Demas & Acadia, 2015). Access to autonomy correlated with principal subjectivity, the accountability position of their school, and the make-up of their student population (Spillane et al., 2002).

Most significantly, my findings affirm the research on negotiated autonomy. The majority of the data reflected that autonomy, rather than being meted out or maintained by district leadership, was negotiated between district leadership and principals across different domains of activity (Weiner & Wouflin, 2017). My data revealed one specific instance where a district message, the message of "grace," could be seen to both shape and be shaped by the implementing agent and agency (Spillane et al., 2002), as principals described co-opting that message in the third school year of the pandemic to buffer against district pacing guides. This dynamic speaks to a tension the superintendent raised: when is offering "grace" as an instructional leader by allowing teachers to adjust the pace of instruction the appropriate response and when does it mean lowering expectations? Principals seemed to be representing the idea that as the instructional leaders closest to the work, they were best able to resolve the tension between when to allow teachers to slow down and when to push.

Consistent with previous research (Weiner & Wouflin, 2017), participant principals' perceptions of their need for autonomy was also mitigated by several factors: the district's efficacy, the principals' own proficiency or expertise, and the principal's belief in their own agency or power in a particular context. Four principals, when talking about balancing grace with urgency, 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. One principal who constructed increasing percentages of high-needs students in their school as a challenge to be proactively addressed perceived a higher need for autonomy (Spillane et al., 2002). Principals also seemed to react most negatively to impingement upon their school CoP's joint enterprise and shared repertoire related to instruction, a finding that again echoes previous research (Weiner & Wouflin, 2017).

Implications for Policy

One potential new finding from my study was the connection between autonomy and the perceived need for innovation. Previous research (Demas & Acadia, 2015; Groth et al., 2017) shows both principals and district leaders construct principal autonomy in opposition to district coherence. But here both principals and district leaders also connected autonomy to bringing needed innovation to the district CoP.

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. These findings may suggest that to prepare for a crisis, districts should consider scaffolding principal autonomy by explicitly creating opportunities for principals to have that experience. 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.

Implications for Research

These findings point to the importance of carefully considering different dimensions of brokering–specifically the bridging and buffering dimensions–and how these dimensions shape the learning of educational leaders. These findings also beg the question: during a crisis, when, if at all, should a district shift from principal autonomy to district control? Both of these areas of inquiry could be further detailed through additional research.

Finally, these findings suggest that it was only in the period of remote learning, the period the superintendent described as a time without resources and "no devices for teachers or students, no platforms, no [Learning Management System], no nothing," when principal autonomy was fully supported. Research suggests that the organization of the district has a direct impact on the roles of autonomy (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Charochak, 2018). One interpretation of my data is that once the district CoP returned to in-person learning, it also returned to practices that limited principal autonomy. 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.

Conclusion

This individual strand explored the roles of autonomy in principal instructional leadership during a period of crisis. The findings in my study affirm several areas of previous research and suggest some areas for further inquiry. Each district is unique, and no one hopes for another global pandemic. However, this study may provide insight for district's seeking to best prepare for the next potential crisis.

Chapter Four[4]

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 instruction. Erickson (2022) studied how the superintendent can increase organizational

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[4] 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.

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?

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 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 districts recovering from the pandemic need 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

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

Interview Questions
I have two sets of questions

My first set of questions are about how you are thinking about instruction right now in your school.
- 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?

My next set of questions focus on your specific role in instruction.
- 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.

1. What is your professional title, pronouns or anything else you'd like me to know about you?
2. What are the instructional priorities in your school/district right now? How were those priorities decided?
3. Can you give me an example of a tool or language you use in your school/district to talk about instruction?
4. Who would you consider to be a strong instructional leader, what roles are they in? Why do you consider them strong instructional leaders?
5. 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?
6. How if at all has COVID-19 changed your conversations around instruction?

My next set of questions focus on your specific role in instruction.

7. How have you learned to be an instructional leader?
8. How do you define instructional leadership?
9. 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?
10. How connected do you feel to the district's priorities?
11. In what ways do you as a MIL contribute to the success of the district? How do you know your contributions are valued?
12. How can Lynn improve instructional leadership through the use of Middle-level Instructional Leaders?

Appendix D

TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

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

Interview Questions
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?
5. How has your teaching changed during your career?
6. What has impacted those changes?
7. How would you describe the school in terms of adult learning?
8. What have your experiences with professional learning been like?
   a. Tell me about PLT time and the early release days
9. What contributes to your engagement with learning? What turns you off?
10. How does your principal support adult learning?
11. 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 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 ❏ Body Language ❏ Unplanned event ❏ Specific comment/quote ❏ Non-verbal behavior ❏ Physical setting		
❏ Description of participant ❏ Description of activity ❏ Interaction ❏ Behaviors ❏ Body Language ❏ Unplanned event ❏ Specific comment/quote ❏ Non-verbal behavior ❏ Physical setting		
❏ Description of participant ❏ Description of activity ❏ Interaction ❏ Behaviors ❏ Body Language ❏ Unplanned event ❏ Specific comment/quote ❏ Non-verbal behavior ❏ Physical setting		

Impressions recorded immediately after leaving the event:

Appendix F

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS 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 Codes

Code	Example	Source/Justification
Joint Enterprise	An instance where there is an articulated collective understanding of what the community is about and its purpose	Wenger/ CoP
Mutual Engagement	An instance that reveals interactions and relationships, for example an instance of receiving or giving help	Wenger/ CoP
Shared Repertoire	A subject articulates histories, tools, or ways of communicating and learning as unique to a particular community	Wenger/ CoP
Boundaries	A subject articulates a difference or distinction between one community's history or ways of communicating and another community's history or ways of communicating	Wenger/ CoP
Brokering: bridging	A subject describes transferring some element of practice from one community to another	Wenger/ CoP
Brokering: buffering	A subject describes protecting a community from potentially unproductive interference	Wenger/ CoP
District's efficiency	A principal makes a statement is made about the district's efficiency in a particular area	Weiner and Wouflin
Principal's expertise	A principal makes a statement is made about a principal's expertise in a particular area	Weiner and Wouflin
Principal's power	A principal makes a statement about their power in a particular context	Weiner and Wouflin
Values alignment	An principal makes a statement about their alignment of values with the district	Weiner and Wouflin

District leadership: activites	A principal describes/ an instance that reveals the district leading principals in instructional leadership activities	Honig and Rainey
District leadership: tools	A principal describes /an instance that reveals the district leading principals in developing and using tools	Honig and Rainey
District leadership: learning resources	A principal describes/ an instance that reveals the district allowing principals to serve as learning resources	Honig and Rainey
District leadership: brokering	A principal describes/ an that reveals the district buffering or bridging to serve principals learning	Honig and Rainey

Inductive Codes

Code	Example	Date Created
Racial Dynamics in the District	A moment that reveals an important racial dynamic that needs to be attended to	Code emerging from data, added 10.24.21
Effects of Covid on the work	A moment where someone speaks directly to the effect of COVID on the work	Code emerging from data, added 10.24.21
Autonomy	A moment where someone speaks directly to an individual school/principal's autonomy	Code emerging from data, added 11.13.21
Calibration	A moment where someone speaks about the district needing to be all on the same page, particularly with regard to instruction	Code emerging from data, added 11.13.21
Grace	A moment where someone evokes the word grace	Code emerging from data, added 11.13.21
Urgency	A moment where someone speaks to the urgent need to do something (usually student learning gaps)	Code emerging from data, added 11.13.21

Calibration	A moment where someone uses the word <u>calibration</u> or talks about district coherence	Code emerging from data, added 12.01.21
Trust	A moment where someone uses the word <u>trust</u> or talks about trust	Code emerging from data, added 12.01.21
Year 2019/2020	A moment where someone makes a specific reference to something that happened in SY 2019/2020	Code emerging from data, added 12.01.21
Year 2020-2021	A moment where someone makes a specific reference to something that happened in SY 2020-2021	Code emerging from data, added 12.01.21
Year 2021-2022	A moment where someone makes a specific reference to something that happened in SY 2021-2022	Code emerging from data, added 12.01.21

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.