An Examination of Principal Professional Learning through Transformative and Sociocultural Learning

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AN EXAMINATION OF PRINCIPAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE AND SOCIOCULTURAL LEARNING

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Educational Leadership

by
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August 2019

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

An era of higher academic accountability and standards-based achievement increased interest and concern in educational leadership (Hallinger, 2005; Public Law 114-95). Based on decades of continuous educational policy shifts, accountability demands have created a call for principals to be instructional leaders (Hallinger, 2005). Through revised principal professional learning, the district in this study actively worked to create an environment where principals worked in learning communities to increase their instructional leadership capacity and move along a continuum of professional learning to respond to the heightened policy shifts around them. Sociocultural learning and transformative learning theories both supported the propositions in this study. The study provided a glimpse of principal professional learning in one district through analytic generalization (Yin, 2018). This study was important because it provided evidence of practices in an underrepresented area of study in rural school districts and offered practical conclusions for practices and further study.
DEDICATION

Through my faith, family, and friends, this manuscript and learning process was an exceptional experience. Through the years of work on my doctoral degree, my faith has sustained me and given me the desire to be my best self and best educator. Without the support of my family, this whole process would not have been successful. God truly blessed me with my family. My husband, Jeff, has been my rock throughout this process. Without his continuous support as a husband, father, and best friend, this achievement would not have been possible. My boys, Dylan and Will, have encouraged me, given me hugs and kisses, and been very patient with me as I worked toward this accomplishment.

Their unconditional love and support has sustained my work. My parents, Nancy and Carroll Thompson, taught me the value of hard work and dedication. They have helped in countless ways to support me and my family throughout this process and I thank them sincerely. To my brother, extended family, and family in New Hampshire, thank you for being my cheerleaders throughout the process. Finally, my friends near and far, have asked about my progress, helped with my children, prayed for us, and been there when I needed a break.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A special thank you to my dissertation committee, Dr. Hans Klar, Dr. Frederick Buskey, Dr. Reginald Wilkerson, and Dr. Jaquelynn Malloy, for seeing me through this process. I thank Dr. Klar for pushing me and allowing me to grow as a scholar. I thank Dr. Buskey for words of affirmation and encouragement. I thank Dr. Wilkerson for always helping me keep things in perspective and making me think and I thank Dr. Malloy for believing in me and helping me find my way through the process. All of my wonderful professors at Clemson University have taught me many lessons about leadership and life and I have grown significantly through this experience.

Thank you to the many educators in my life that have inspired me to push myself towards this accomplishment. A special thank you to Dr. Cynthia Suarez who saw something in a young undergraduate student and continued to support me throughout. I am honored to wear your doctoral cap when I graduate.

I would like to acknowledge the added level of support from my colleagues in my school district. Without the help, generosity of time, and flexibility afforded to me, this process would not have been as rewarding. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the importance of my doctoral cohort members for sharing this journey with me. The relationships formed over the last several years will be lasting and I am a better professional and certainly a better person because of working with all of them.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

An era of higher academic accountability and standards-based achievement increased interest and concern in educational leadership (Hallinger, 2005; Public Law 114-95). A lack of research exists in the area of principal professional learning, particularly in rural school districts. This study was designed to research a rural school district who responded to the heightened interest and concern for leaders. First, this section delineates the significant policy shifts that situated the context that surrounded this case study. Next, the background emphasizes why the study was important and timely. Finally, this section highlights the key constructs used to frame and add depth throughout the study.

Beginning with A Nation at Risk in 1983 (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), the United States began to focus on statistical differences between our nation and other nations and recommended improvements in the overall health of the education system (Gardner, 1983). Based on decades of continuous educational policy shifts, accountability demands have created a call for principals to be instructional leaders (Hallinger, 2005). The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) in 2015, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), emphasized the role of the school leader and gave rise to the need for increased efforts in principal professional learning (Public Law 114-95).
Principals are increasingly asked to be strong instructional leaders in addition to fulfilling their traditional managerial roles (Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Urick, 2016). Paired with political and accountability pressures in education, models of instructional leadership emerged and evolved in response to the need for instructional leadership; however, many parallels remained at the center of good practice for principals as instructional leaders. Early models of instructional leadership, such as Hallinger and Murphy’s (1985) model, proposed three functions of instructional leaders that included defining the school mission, instructional program management, and promotion of a positive school culture. In later work, Hallinger (2005) delineated these three dimensions into ten leadership functions as the definition and the body of research on instructional leadership grew. Hallinger (2005) synthesized the literature from the 1980s to the early 2000s and gave a general overview on the focus of an instructional leader. The different areas of focus included the need to attend the following:

- create a clear purpose with clear goals;
- foster continuous improvement through cyclical development planning;
- develop a climate and culture of high expectation geared toward innovation and improvement in teaching and learning;
- coordinate the curriculum and monitor student learning;
- shape the reward structure in line with the school’s mission;
- organize and monitor a wide range of activities of staff development; and
be a visible presence that models desired values of the school’s culture.

(Hallinger, 2005, p. 233)

In a more recent model developed by Wahlstrom, Seashore, Leithwood, and Anderson (2010), comparable and compatible instructional leadership functions included setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program. In their meta-analysis, Robinson et al. (2008) found that the effect size estimates for the impact of instructional leadership were three to four times greater than that of transformational leadership and slightly greater than the third category that encompassed other types of leadership. However, Robinson et al. (2008) encouraged interpreting the data with caution due to the “considerable range of effects for instructional leadership” (p. 658). Case studies such as the one presented in this dissertation assist with the interpretation of data in specific contexts and give significance to research in defined constructs.

These examples, including the caution regarding data interpretation, showed the complexity of the instructional leadership landscape that school principals continue to encounter. In order to increase instructional leadership capacity, this study focused on the support needed for principals to be engaged in learning experiences through research-based strategies. Building from the data of a pilot study in a rural district in South Carolina (Brink, 2018), this study communicated the efforts of a district that structured principal professional learning to expand and refine their professional learning (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2018).
Research on instructional leadership has been predominantly focused on teacher professional learning and professional development (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2018; King, 2014; Marzano et al., 2005; Prothero, 2015). Principals, as adult learners, need the same level of effective professional learning experiences as those of teachers and have many of the same needs as teachers in terms of reflective practices and collaborative work (Prothero, 2015). In creating effective contextually-responsive professional learning for principals, district leaders must attend to understanding transformative and sociocultural learning (Knapp, 2008; Wenger, 2000), which goes beyond the basic stage of staff development to a higher level of continuous experimentation and reflection (Glickman et al., 2018; Mezirow, 2000).

Using key theoretical constructs, this study investigated the gap in principal professional learning in rural school districts. This study used practicing principals in one rural school district involved in intentional learning geared toward increased instructional capacity of principals. This study investigated the learning communities, critical reflection, critical discourse, and collective actions of participants through the lens of adult learning, in the form of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000) and the sociocultural learning (Knapp, 2008; Wenger, 2000). This study used Mezirow’s (2000) frames of reference using habits of mind and points of view as a basis for understanding the collaborative efforts of the principal learning communities through critical reflection and discourse. Through a revised process of principal professional learning, the district in this study actively worked to create an environment where principals participated in learning communities to increase their instructional leadership capacity. In addition, the
district sought to move along a continuum of professional learning to respond to the heightened policy shifts around them.

**Statement of the Problem**

A principal is critical to the success of a school and research highlighted the districts leaders as essential in creating research-based and responsive practices for determining principal professional learning (Hattie, 2012; Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Leithwood, 2010; Prothero, 2015). With the convergence of literature surrounding the importance of principal leaders and the need for principals to possess the instructional leadership capacity to meet the demands of the profession, more information is needed to support the phenomenon. While some research exists on the subject of principal professional development and learning (Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Miller, Goddard, Kim, Jacob, Goddard, & Schroeder, 2016; Prothero, 2015; Zepeda, Parylo, & Bengtson, 2014), less research is devoted to principal professional learning specifically in rural school districts (Honig & Rainey, 2014; Johnston, Kaufman, & Thompson, 2016; Spanneut, Tobin, & Ayers, 2012).

Because rural school districts experience differences from their urban counterparts (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009; Hansen, 2018; Johnston et al., 2016; Wood, Finch, & Mirecki, 2013), it is not safe to assume that previous models of principal professional learning in urban districts were indicative of the needs for school district leaders in more rural settings. Exploring principal professional learning in one rural school district committed to improvement helped address the shortage of information in this area for use by practitioners and researchers (Rowland, 2017). This study conducted
follow-up research from a previous pilot study (Brink, 2018) to assess how district leaders provided support for principals through sociocultural and transformative learning to increase instructional leadership capacity (Hallinger, 2005; Robinson et al., 2008).

**Purpose of the Study**

The first and primary purpose of this study was to explore transformative and sociocultural learning (Knapp, 2008; Mezirow, 2000; Wenger, 2000) in principal professional learning in one rural school district in response to the instructional leadership capacity needs of its principals. A second purpose of this study was to understand how district leaders supported the process of transformative and sociocultural learning for principals in their district. A final purpose of this study was to show how learning community frameworks and theoretical propositions are malleable and contextually applicable for principal professional learning in other districts.

**Significance of the Study**

This study provides significant contributions in several areas. The data collected in this study provided evidence of whether or not sociocultural and transformative learning in the established learning communities increased instructional leadership capacity of principals (Hallinger, 2005; Mezirow, 2000 Robinson et al., 2008). It contributes valuable insight for leadership practices and sheds light on an area of underrepresented research in rural principal professional learning. In addition, it supports federal legislation, which highlights the need to attend to principal professional learning and development (Prothero, 2015; Public Law 114-95). This study also used well-researched practices of principals as instructional leaders (Hallinger, 2005; Hattie, 2012;
Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2005; Robinson et al., 2008; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Urick, 2016) paired with the well-established theories of sociocultural learning (Wenger, 2000) and transformative learning (Cranton, 2016; Mezirow, 2000). Sociocultural learning and transformative learning aligned to observe the instructional leadership capacity growth of principals. In addition to highlighting learning communities for principal professional learning, the results of this study contributed to the body of research stemming from adult learning theory.

Zepeda et al. (2014) summarized the importance of applying adult learning theory to principal professional learning and noted,

While this analysis showed that the principal professional development experienced by the participants possesses most of the characteristics of adult learning, it does not reveal whether the intention of the creators of principal professional development purposefully designed experiences that were tied to the principles of adult learning. (p. 311)

It was evident from Zepeda et al.’s (2014) work that adult learning theory had promising constructs and significant implications for research and practice. Zepeda et al. (2014) noted, “No studies were found that examined existing principal professional development through the lens of adult learning theory” (p. 296-297). To add to the significance of this study, a foundational pilot study provided data that precipitated further study and conclusions concerning principal professional learning (Brink, 2018). Through a specific study using transformative learning and sociocultural learning in a rural setting, the data collected and analyzed helped identify how the model was applicable to not only one
small district, but how it could also be flexible enough to use in other rural settings. Therefore, the model offered a unique lens to conceptualize the research.

**Definitions of Terms**

This section defines terms used in the study in order to heighten the readability of the study and to delineate between terms used throughout the study. In addition, the literature behind the terms listed guided data collection protocols and analysis.

**Critical Discourse**

Critical discourse is dialogue devoted to assessing reasons presented in support of competing interpretations, by critically examining evidence, arguments, and alternative points of view (Mezirow, 2000).

**Critical Reflection**

Critical reflection is the use of frames of reference to critically assess assumptions, expectations, and work with others to transform practices for the intended purpose (Mezirow, 2000).

**Frame of Reference**

According to Mezirow (2000), a frame of reference is a way in which to interpret an experience.

**Habits of Mind**

Habits of mind are a set of assumptions that are broad, generalized, and orienting predispositions, which act as filters for interpreting the meaning of experience (Mezirow, 2000).
Instructional Leadership Capacity

Instructional leadership capacity is defined as the ability to attend to clear goal setting, developing people, creating opportunities for continuous improvement, and managing the instructional program (Hallinger, 2005; Robinson et al., 2008).

Learning Communities

A learning community is a group of people who work collaboratively through collective responsibility to focus on instructional leadership capacity by engaging in critical discourse and critical reflection to create actionable results (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Hallinger, 2005; Kruse, Louis, & Byrk, 1995; Mezirow, 2000; Robinson et al., 2008).

Points of View

Points of view are a combination of expressions of habits of mind (Mezirow, 2000).

Principal Professional Learning

Principal professional learning is any experience that involves relevant and integrated learning opportunities that expand and refine professional learning (Glickman et al., 2018; Peterson, 2002).

Sociocultural Learning

Sociocultural learning refers to the interactions among individuals, or collective practices, rather than within individuals that contribute to learning (Knapp, 2008; Wenger, 2000).

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning is the process by which we transform our frames of reference through reflection and discourse in order to generate more justifiable beliefs and opinions to guide action (Mezirow, 2000).
Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Transformative learning is constructivist in nature, owing its process to meaning making within individuals who construct meaning from experience and then “validate it through interaction and communication with others” (Cranton, 2016, p. 18). As can be seen in Figure 1.1, the foundation for this study was transformative and sociocultural learning. For the purpose of this study, transformative learning and sociocultural learning combined during learning communities (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow (2000) wrote,

The possibility of transformative learning must be understood in the context of cultural orientations embodied in our frames of reference, including institutions, customs, occupations, ideologies, and interests, which shape our preferences and limit our focus. We need to become critically reflective of their assumptions and consequences. (p. 24)

Figure 1.1 shows the conceptual framework used for the study. It includes the need for district leaders to facilitate principal professional learning through sociocultural and transformative learning. Using these theoretical lenses, the instructional capacity of principals can be effectively increased.
In response to policy demands, district leaders can create opportunities for principals to learn using research-based practices. In such learning communities, principals who engage in critical reflection, critical discourse, and action are more likely to increase their instructional leadership capacity (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow’s (2000) transformative learning coupled with sociocultural learning (Knapp, 2000; Wenger, 2000) offered a solid theoretical model in which to view the same type of adult learning with principals in this study.

**Research Design**

The research question that guided this study was “How can rural school principal instructional leadership capacity be developed through transformative and sociocultural learning in a learning community?” A case study design was chosen to investigate the phenomenon in this district. The choice to use a case study stemmed from the research question (Yin, 2018). The research question was designed to “seek to explain some
contemporary circumstance” (Yin, 2018, p. 4) and study the gap in literature related to principal professional learning in rural districts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). Data collected analyzed the significance of the current practices of one rural school district. Using semi-structured interview questions, (Glense, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) all six principals and two district leaders were asked a series of questions to probe into practices of the principal learning community in the school district. Observation data, interview data, and document review triangulated the qualitative data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A central research question guided the overall study and data analysis focused on the perceptions and experiences of each participant to examine the case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). In addition to the central research question, theoretical propositions guided the construction of the study. The theoretical propositions for the study are as follows:

1. A principal’s main role is as an instructional leader;
2. Educational policy shifts have brought to light the need to have new principal professional learning geared toward meeting the need of principals as instructional leaders;
3. Examples from urban contexts have shown responsiveness to this need/research-based practice;
4. One research-based practice in particular that shows promise is learning communities;
5. Theoretical support is given through transformative and sociocultural learning; however,
6. A gap exists in rural district settings for principals.

**Limitations**

This study, like other empirical studies, had limitations. Research conducted in one school district represented a small sample size, thus, the results are not highly generalizable (Yin, 2018). Therefore, the study sought to expand and generalize theories through analytic generalization rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 2018). There is a need to extend the body of literature on principal professional learning therefore; the expansion from a previous pilot study gave this study more depth than would a stand-alone study. Finally, the limited period of the study provided merely a glimpse of principal professional learning in one district. The study was not intended to be representative of experiences of all rural or small school districts or even the experiences of these participants themselves.

**Delimitations**

The delimitations determined by the researcher in this study sought to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon in a rural school district where little other research was found using the proposed constructs. The data and analysis from this study attended to the gap found for rural school principal professional learning. In order to gain an understanding into the practices of principal professional learning this particular school district, using a broad framework, supported by previous literature on the topic, guided the study. The school district studied was chosen based from findings in a pilot study (Brink, 2018) which revealed the district had actively acknowledged the need to attend to the instructional leadership capacity of their principals. A final delimitation was
the timeframe of the study. The school district began to readjust principal professional learning prior to this study; however, the researcher relied on interview data, observations, and other data sources to draw conclusions for the purpose of the above research question (Glense, 2016; Yin, 2018). The study’s timeframe allowed the researcher to investigate the perceptions of the participants during initial phases of the shift in principal professional learning. Because the study took place after the district changed its principal professional learning process, the participants were able to base their discussion with the researcher on their previous experiences and current practices. This allowed the research to triangulate evidence presented through interviews, observations, and document review.

**Assumptions**

The study included the following assumptions: a) the selected participants provided truthful responses concerning their perceptions about principal professional learning; b) the selected participants understood the definition of terms and concepts associated with the theoretical and conceptual framework; c) the data collected measured the principals’ perceptions of transformative and sociocultural learning in the current practices of principal professional learning in their district (Knapp, 2000; Mezirow, 2000; Wenger, 2000); and d) the interpretation of the data by the researcher was designed to apply valid and reliable protocol (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018).

**Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is separated into five chapters. The chapters describe the research background, literature, findings, analysis, and implications. The first chapter
includes the background of the study, statement of the problem, statement of the purpose of the study, significance of the study, definitions of relevant terms, theoretical framework, research question, limitations and delimitations, assumptions, and organization of the dissertation. Chapter 2 presents a literature review divided into headings and subheadings. The headings include educational policy shifts, instructional leadership and educational policy shifts, learning communities, and sociocultural and transformative learning. Chapter 3 includes the methodology chosen for the research study. It describes the selection of participants, specific instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 reports the study’s findings. Included in Chapter 4 are results of data analysis through coding and thematic analyses. Chapter 5 concludes the study with a discussion of the findings, implications of findings for theory and practice, recommendations for further research, and conclusions. This study offered analytic generalization using developed theories to compare the empirical results, to gain insights, and to guide implications for further research and practice (Yin, 2018).

**Conclusion**

In Johnston et al.’s (2016) study concerning district size and its relationship to principal professional development, the participants shared an important conclusion. Participants from larger districts reported more accessibility to formal, district-provided mentoring and principal-focused professional development, particularly in response to their instructional leadership needs (Johnston et al., 2016). Responding to the need for research on smaller, more rural principal professional learning processes, a pilot study was conducted to research superintendent support for current principal learning (Brink,
The pilot study produced examples of superintendent support for principal professional learning and superintendents’ desires to improve instructional leadership capacity for principals in the studied districts in South Carolina (Brink, 2018). For this study, a return to one of the districts included in the initial pilot study offered a more in-depth look at the practices adopted for principal professional learning aimed at improved instructional leadership capacity, adult learning, and contextual-responsive practices (Bredeson & Klar, 2008). This study is important because it provides evidence of leadership development practices in the underrepresented area of study of rural school districts. The study also offers practical conclusions for practice and further study.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This case study of principal leadership was imperative. An era of higher accountability and standards-based achievement has increased interest and concern on instructional leadership roles and functions (Hallinger, 2005; Public Law 114-95). In meeting these accountability demands, school principals are not only tasked with being the traditional managers of schools, but are also at the forefront of instructional leadership (Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2005; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Urick, 2016). The policy shifts gave rise to the heightened interest for superintendents and district leaders to attend to principal professional learning. The study was framed by the literature pertaining to the theories, contexts, and research as it relates to, and extends this research.

This chapter begins with a synthesis of the educational policy shifts and the relationship that the policies have for an increased onus on superintendents and district leaders to attend to principal professional learning, specifically learning geared toward instructional leadership. Next, a review of the literature and research pertaining to principals as instructional leaders is connected to the need for district leaders to create professional learning focused on developing increased capacity for principals’ instructional growth (Hallinger, 2005; Robinson et al., 2008). Running parallel to increased policy demands was the need to provide research-based strategies to meet the
needs for principals. Research and literature pointed to the creation of learning
communities grounded in solid theory to create actionable results. This chapter concludes
by discussing sociocultural learning as well as transformative learning as it relates to the
theoretical propositions for this study (Cranton, 2016; Knapp, 2000; Mezirow, 2000;
Wenger, 2000).

Educational Policy Shifts

Over the last several decades, educational policy shifts brought to light the need to
have new principal professional learning geared toward meeting the needs of principals
as instructional leaders (Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Robinson et al., 2008; Zepeda, Parylo,
& Klar, 2017). Zepeda et al. (2017) concluded their study of leadership for learning by
writing,

While the current accountability environment has created a great number of
challenges for school and central office leaders, it has also served as a catalyst to
encourage educators to examine their practices with more scrutiny and to search
for innovative ways to improve teaching and learning. (p. 241)

Superintendents and district instructional leaders must take action bearing in mind contextual factors. The use of such research frameworks as transformative and sociocultural learning in specific contexts (Honig & Copland, 2008; Knapp, 2000; Mezirow, 2000; Wenger, 2000; Zepeda et al., 2017) is a way to respond to the heightened sense of accountability for principal instructional leadership capacity (Leithwood, 2010; Zepeda et al., 2017). This study posited that leaders must look at professional learning of
principals through a different lens in order to respond appropriately to provide the right structure.

In order to serve the instructional leadership needs of principals and to support their skills to lead successful schools, strategic planning by district leaders must be at the forefront. Honig and Copland (2008) emphasized the need to have district central offices restructure their traditional roles as they relate to instructional learning support. From their research, they identified central office roles generally found among a small group of central office administrators who worked closely with school leaders. Honig and Copland (2008) reported that the leadership model should accomplish the following between district leaders and school leaders:

- identified “problems of practice” that impeded student work and find strategies to help schools, central offices, and communities that addressed learning for students at high levels;
- co-developed actions that gave a rationale for a course of action that may help improve learning in their own contexts;
- developed central office and school policies and practices that were consistent with the course of action developed;
- continuously revisited and refined theories of action, policies, and practices to build on lessons learned and other evidence; and
- hold each other mutually accountable for results. (p. 3)

In planning to respond to the needs of principals, drawing from sociocultural and transformative learning (Cranton, 2016; Knapp, 2008; Mezirow, 2000; Wenger, 2000)
gave merit to the research conducted (Cranton, 2016; Mezirow, 2000). While educational policy has long been a part of the country’s fabric, the last several decades have given rise to the heightened need for further study into principal professional learning. The following section outlines general educational policy that shaped the need for attention to principal instructional leadership capacity growth.

* A Nation at Risk* (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) ushered in an interest in accountability for school districts and leaders beginning in the 1980s. It highlighted statistics that brought to light international comparisons of student achievement in the United States, literacy rates, technological data, and other data meant to show the dire educational state of the nation. This report also focused on recommendations for standards and accountability for students to improve education in the United States to the level of the rest of the world. In a reflective article on the decade that followed *A Nation at Risk* (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1993), Secretary of Education Bell addressed eight areas he believed the nation should address to continue to meet the nationwide goals set forth. Of those eight goals, leadership was included and he wrote, “Leadership, especially at the school level, has begun to attract more attention as a key ingredient in any successful school reform. In the next decade, school improvement will require increasingly more sophisticated and insightful principals and superintendents” (p. 597).

As sentiments around student achievement data and accountability measures grew, the recognition of the importance of school leadership sparked new emphasis on the measures needed for the growth and development of principals. As the nation
continued to focus on national accountability, President Bill Clinton passed Goals 2000: Educate America Act in 1994 (Public Law 103-227). This law worked in concert with the *Improving America’s Schools Act* that reauthorized the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) of 1965 and constituted an era of standards-based curriculum frameworks (Heise, 1994). This further defined an emphasis on a national consensus for educational improvement. For school leaders, this signaled the transition from the traditional managerial role of school leaders to a more active instructional leadership role (Heise, 1994). The Act indicated the federal government’s heightened interest and involvement in educational reform, as well as a step toward systemic instructional practices and development (Heise, 1994).

On the heels of *Goals 2000*, President George W. Bush signed into law the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001 (Public Law 107-110). NCLB started to shift the accountability framework in the national spotlight to an increased sense of state and local control for educational effectiveness (Jorgensen & Hoffmann, 2003). With greater accountability, NCLB offered more flexibility to use federal funds for “teacher retention, professional development, and technology training that best suits their needs without having to obtain separate federal approval” (Jorgensen & Hoffmann, 2003, p. 6). Still, instructional programs were geared predominantly toward teacher practices; however, more research began to surface that called for school reform aimed at effective leadership (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Most recently, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) (Public Law 114-95, 2015) reflected the accountability theme of the past decades; however, ESSA placed
more focus on assessments to show student growth, and supported evidence-based interventions and college and careers standards. Through ESSA, even greater flexibility was given to states to design accountability and instructional programs to meet the needs of their populations. The *Every Student Succeeds Act*, highlighted, challenged, and specifically gave onus to districts and states to “prepare, develop, and advance effective teachers and principals in America’s schools” (Executive Office of the President, 2015, p. 9). Revisions to Title II under ESSA provided an example of how the body of research on the impact of principal leadership gave more refinements for states and districts to consider principal professional learning. Though not exhaustive, the following list illustrates changes made between ESSA’s Title II and NCLB that are applicable to this study:

- increased the percentage of Title II funds state agency can use to support teacher and principal effectiveness from 2.5% to 5%;
- allowed states to reserve up to an additional 3% of Title II funds to be used to support activities targeted to support principals;
- provided states with assistance to provide high-quality professional development activities for programs;
- provided states with assistance to improve skills of principals to help them identify students with specific learning needs;
- provided states with training for school leaders, coaches, mentors, and evaluators on multiple processes in order to inform decision-making about professional development, strategies, and personnel decisions;
• provided states with activities to increase knowledge base of principals on instruction in preschool and the transition to elementary school; and

• provided states with activities to increase training and knowledge with developing professional development and comprehensive support systems for principals for high-quality instructional leadership. (Haller, Hunt, Pacha, & Fazekas, 2016, p. 6-7)

An increasing focus on measuring accountability for student achievement surrounds the history of federal legislation concerning educational improvement. The tide of provisions from federal educational laws focus predominantly on student achievement levels, standards-based systems, and teacher professional evaluation and development (Rowland, 2017). With the impact and continued complexity of accountability due to ESSA, school leaders face an ever-growing need for support (Haller et al., 2016; Prothero, 2015; Rowland, 2017). Districts have continually focused their professional development efforts, funds, and practices on teachers because of their direct link to student achievement (Glickman et al., 2018; King, 2014; Marzano et al., 2005). However, ESSA not only targeted teacher professional development, but also principal professional learning as a means to reflect the important role that principals play in school improvement (Haller et al., 2016; Rowland, 2017). Policy shifts that have resulted from ESSA now require new principal professional learning to increase instructional leadership capacity. Rowland (2017) wrote, “The shortage of information and rigorous research on principal professional development should not leave states paralyzed. They can move forward on what the early evidence and best practice in adult learning suggest,
and evaluate approaches for continuous improvement” (p. 11). With a strong focus on the need for principal professional learning, the rest of this chapter sets the stage for increasing the instructional leadership capacity of principals through learning communities using research-based strategies.

**Instructional Leadership and Educational Policy Shifts**

The following sections describe the need for instructional leadership for increased capacity as defined previously. In addition, this section describes the need for learning communities and the importance of contextual considerations for learning communities. Finally, examples of research based on learning communities in urban districts gives support for the need to fill the gap for research in rural districts.

**Instructional Leadership for Increased Capacity**

Previous research points to both direct and indirect links of principals on student achievement and school improvement (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Hallinger, 2011; Hattie, 2012; Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2004). A plausible explanation for the measured success of some principals is strong instructional leadership (Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013). In order to support principals, a study by Louis (2008) affirmed that professional learning opportunities should provide learning structures that meet the growing demands of instructional leadership. Fink and Resnick (2001) wrote that professional development was not a separate entity in a principal’s responsibilities, rather “professional development is the centerpiece of administering a district committed to continuous improvement in student learning” (p. 606).
While several well-research models of instructional leadership have emerged and evolved (Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Murphy, 1995; Robinson et al., 2008), the core principles of good practice for principals have remained similar. This study did not seek to revise the definition of instructional leadership; rather, the study sought to identify how one district was using research-based models to attend to the instructional leadership needs of principals to increase their capacities. Hallinger (2005) concluded his study of instructional leadership with a reconceptualization of instructional leadership that helped to define instructional leadership capacity for this study.

DuFour and Marzano (2011), in a discussion of failed educational policy, cited three ways to improve professional practice and thereby develop the capacity of educators. Key among those practices were focused improvement efforts on building collective capacity to meet the challenges faced. DuFour and Marzano (2011) outlined what collective capacity building required through professional learning. The commitment to this improvement included the following characteristics:

- ongoing and sustained work;
- job-embedded practices;
- professional learning specifically aligned with school and district goals;
- focused on improved results rather than projects and activities; and
- collective and collaborative instead of individual. (p. 20)

Given the need for research-based practices that enhance principal professional learning, understanding structures that support that type of learning help created environments for sustained work.
Demand for Professional Learning

In realizing a structure to support the higher demands for accountability and student achievement, DuFour and Marzano (2011) posited that implementing professional learning communities (PLC) was a sound, research-based strategy to structure professional learning; however, support from the district was essential for success. They wrote, “The willingness to articulate fundamental goals, the strategies for achieving those goals, and the indicators that will be used to monitor progress toward the goals are vital to effective district leadership” (p. 29). Further, DuFour and Marzano (2011) expressed that there was often a gap in the specifics of bringing a strategic vision to a school district for instructional growth. Having a well-researched plan for meeting the demands of policy shifts to structure professional learning was important to creating successful processes (Louis, 2008). In the proceeding sections, the conceptualization of learning communities, examples of successful principal learning communities in urban districts, and the gap that exists in contextual needs for principals in rural districts is outlined.

Learning Communities

Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis (2010) reported there were three essentials to school improvement that specifically targeted improvement elements for struggling high school principals. These essentials included state capacity building, district vision, and principal leadership. Bottoms and Schmidt-Davis wrote, “Plainly put, the problem is this: Districts and states are failing to create the conditions that make it possible for principals to lead school improvement effectively” (p. ii). Learning communities are research-based ways
in which districts create conditions for principals to increase their instructional leadership capacity (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Hallinger, 2005; Kruse, Louis, & Byrk, 1995). In Louis’ (2008) work on professional learning communities (PLC), she wrote, “Principals need to be part of PLCs of their own” (p. 8). The remainder of this section is devoted to understanding previous research and defining learning communities used for this study.

As mentioned previously, a key component in this study was the expansion of the previous examination of support for principal professional learning from district level leaders. From the pilot study previously conducted (Brink, 2018), it was clear the superintendent participants were keenly aware of the instructional leadership needs and importance of the principals in their districts. In order to address the changing needs for principals, superintendents and district leaders must be willing to re-structure professional learning in research-based ways that are contextually responsive to their needs (Rowland, 2017; Zepeda et al., 2017).

The term learning communities used for this study resulted from several studies using derivations of the term. Kruse et al. (1995) used the term professional community to describe the work of teachers in urban schools. Kruse et al. (1995) contended that a professional community “holds several potential advantages for schools” (p. 2) and shared five defining characteristics including, “shared values, reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, focus on student learning, and collaboration” (p. 6). While these five characteristics described the work of teachers, the potential benefits of professional communities, as listed by Kruse et al. (1995), could also be applied to principal professional learning. The benefits listed were empowerment, personal dignity,
and collective responsibility for student learning (Kruse et al., 1995, p. 5). Kruse et al. (1995) listed structural conditions as well as social and human resources that supported professional communities. Structural conditions of support included time to meet, physical proximity, interdependent teaching roles, communication structures, and teacher empowerment and school autonomy. Social and human resource supports included openness to improvement, trust and respect, access to expertise, supportive leadership, and socialization. Kruse et al.’s (1995) framework gave comprehensive foundational work for those that followed.

Wenger (2000) used the term communities of practice to describe the “interplay between social competence and personal experience” (p. 227). Wenger (2000) defined competence for communities of practice by having a sense of joint enterprise, or mutual accountability, having mutual engagement, and having a shared repertoire. The concept of community of practice has been applied to business, economic organizations, civic life, government, education, technology associations, and other areas where there are “opportunities to engage with others who face similar situations” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 9). Bredeson, Klar, and Johansson (2009) researched communities of practice from the perspective of the school superintendent. Of the six categories of professional development defined in the study, all of the superintendents overwhelmingly agreed that interacting with their colleagues was their preferred method of professional learning and the method they found most valuable (Bredeson et al., 2009).

Hord’s (2009) research also supported research-based practice for principal learning through a constructivist approach to professional learning communities. Hord
(2009) supported the collaborative and collective efforts of professional learning communities, of participants learning together to make sense of information and experiences, and conditions for success. Similar to communities of practice, and building on the work of Hord (2009), DuFour and Marzano (2011) used some of the same tenants applied specifically to education to define professional learning communities (PLC). While PLCs were defined in terms of school-based teams to study student data to drive instructional practice, concepts of a PLC were applicable to adult learning at a leadership level. The three main ideas of PLCs included a fundamental purpose to ensure that all students learn at high levels, collaborative work in a collective effort, and results-oriented educators who responded appropriately (DuFour & Marzano, 2011).

Extending DuFour and Marzano’s (2011) work, Honig and Rainey (2014) conceptualized principals in professional learning communities (PPLC) that centered on practices within communities to support principals’ learning. This study provided a definition for learning communities based on previous research. For this study, learning communities are defined as a group of people who work collaboratively through collective responsibility to focus on instructional leadership capacity by engaging in critical discourse and critical reflection to create actionable results (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Hallinger, 2005; Kruse et al., 1995; Mezirow, 2000; Robinson et al., 2008).

Some large, urban districts have facilitated professional learning and development through learning communities (Honig, 2008; Honig & Rainey, 2014). However, there is less literature and support for rural school leaders, particularly that which is focused on
how learning communities increase instructional leadership capacity of principals (Johnston et al., 2016).

**Contextual Considerations for Learning Communities**

Districts face contextual challenges of all sizes. Specific to this study, however, was the recognition of contextual features of small, more rural districts that affected principal professional learning experiences (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009; Enomoto, 2012; Wood, Finch, & Mirecki, 2013). Understanding the context in which a principal must lead is essential for successful adult learning and instructional leaders. Cruzeiro and Boone (2009) wrote,

> Being a rural school principal is not for everyone. Many superintendents believe that it takes a special individual, one who truly values a small town and can tolerate a high degree of visibility, who demonstrates that he or she wants to be close to the community and to students, and who understands the educational challenges a small district faces. (p. 7)

In a study of the support needed for superintendents in rural districts, Lamkin (2006) identified barriers faced by superintendents that made services in their districts and roles less attractive. These barriers included “isolation, limited resources, and community resistance to change” (p. 17). Additional studies echoed financial concerns and limited resources (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, & Slate, 2008; Manna, 2015), which underscored the need for districts to become creative in planning and implementing principal professional learning opportunities to meet the needs of their specific contexts. Rural school leaders often face additional barriers such as lower salaries (Hansen, 2018; Wood
et al., 2013), geographic isolation (Hansen, 2018, Wood et al., 2013), fewer professional resources (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009; Wood et al., 2013), a multiplicity of duties (Hansen, 2018), and professional isolation (Hansen, 2018).

What persists in research literature as a common theme in many urban principal professional development structures was the availability of district leaders and resources to develop and sustain leadership development (Honig & Rainey, 2014; Johnston et al., 2016; Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, & Portin, 2010). Central to Johnston et al.’s (2016) research was the finding that all principals studied highly valued the professional development they received related to instructional leadership. This study further highlighted the importance of district leaders’ support for principal professional learning to increase instructional leadership capacity (Enomoto, 2012; Johnston et al., 2016).

Knapp et al. (2010) concluded that the onus was on district leaders to recognize contextual features of their districts and to plan to meet the shifting accountability and instructional leadership demands on the principals. In recognition of the needs for principal professional learning, structuring learning communities must encompass relevant, integrated practices that expand and refine principal learning. Examples of learning communities in urban contexts show responsiveness to the need for research-based practice. Through the application of sociocultural learning and transformative learning, this study offered an opportunity to provide a relevant example of practices that showed means of action through critical discourse and critical reflection (Knapp, 2008; Mezirow, 2000; Wenger, 2000). Principals involved in these processes were more readily
able to participate in action-oriented leadership (Mezirow, 2000) which led to schools
and a district with stronger instructional leaders with heightened capacity.

**Learning Communities in Urban Contexts**

Professional growth, development, and learning encompass all aspects of what
 principals need to meet the growing demands of their jobs (Grissom & Harrington, 2010;
Johnston et al., 2016). District office leaders must recognize their prominent role in
strategically planning for the professional growth of their personnel. Knapp et al., (2010)
conducted a multi-year study in three urban districts to research progress toward goals of
school leadership, resource investment, and central office transformation. Their findings
linked all three of these goals together, though investigating them individually in three
different districts. Not surprisingly, two findings were especially important in relation to
instructional leadership. The first was the existence of an instructional cadre within the
school and the second was “the dedication of specific central office staff, sometimes
supplemented by staff from third-party organizations, to help school leaders strengthen
their instructional leadership” (Knapp et al., 2010, p. 12). This finding also connected
with their finding that district leaders had to reimagine their work with principals to
improve their instructional leadership through one-on-one roles, networked groups, and
other activities to transform the quality of instructional leadership in their districts
(Knapp et al., 2010). Finally, the researchers indicated that these practices were
differentiated and responsive to the needs of schools, district office personnel, and
principals. Knapp et al. (2010) concluded by underscoring the challenges faced by urban
districts and the need for responding to the contextual challenges faced by leaders to
assume and maintain a learning focus. Relating the findings of this study to rural districts, one could argue that the need for contextual specification was the same. This study helped represent the need to study similar conceptual frameworks in a new light.

Similar to Knapp et al.’s (2010) research, a study conducted by Honig and Rainey (2014) highlighted one midsized urban district that implemented instructional leadership directors (ILDs) focused on strengthening principals’ instructional leadership. This research derived its conceptual framework from the ideas of communities of practices and revealed how these activities were, at least theoretically, conducive to principal learning (Honig & Rainey, 2014). In addition, the researchers outlined several important implications from this study. Practices consistent with sociocultural learning (Knapp, 2008; Wenger, 2000), discussed further in this literature review, were revealed which included: “focusing on principals’ instructional leadership as joint work, modeling, developing and using tools, creating opportunities for all principals to serve as PPLC earning resources, and brokering” (p. 39). To conclude this chapter, an in-depth look at sociocultural and transformative learning in principal professional learning grounds the concepts to established theory and sets the stage for the methodology of the study.

**Sociocultural and Transformative Learning**

The conceptual framework presented in Chapter 1 showed a visual representation of the theories that informed this study. Described below are research-based theories from sociocultural and transformative learning theory. In addition, this section reflects how these theoretical perspectives inform learning communities in this study.
Sociocultural Learning

Sociocultural learning theories focused attention on learning as a collective social process rather than an individual one (Knapp, 2008; Wenger, 2000). Wenger (2000) characterized social learning by applying the concept of communities of practice. Wenger wrote, “By participating in these communities, we define with each other what constitutes competence in a given context” (p. 229).

An area of sociocultural learning theory particularly applicable to this study related to individuals and communities learning together to “gradually transform[ing] their practice through the ongoing negotiation of meaning” (Knapp, 2008, p. 527). This was important to the study of professional learning and the communities in which instructional learning occurred as adults worked and learned together in different contexts. Knapp (2008) used several constructs to help understand school district reform through the sociocultural lens. They were as follows:

- participation in activity: recognition that learning was fundamentally social and “since learners are participants, the analyst pays less attention to what individuals “think” and more to how they participate in activity settings” (p. 527);
- practice: emphasis on participation for the analyst to attend to practice;
- communities of practice and joint work: logical context for learning where members shared joint work, had common vocabulary and repertoire for approaching their work (Lave and Wenger, 1991), and were organic so as to reflect the lived relationships among coworkers;
• reification and tools: participants develop tools, as a product of member participation that help to make abstract ideas concrete and easily accessible by others; and

• appropriation and the transformation of participation: participants actively internalized and embodied the practice or activity in which they were involved.

(Herrenkohl & Wertsch, 1999, p. 527-528)

Extending learning from individual to collective interactions, such as those found in learning communities (Knapp, 2008), was important in the growth of principal professional learning. By using a sociocultural lens, paired with other theoretical frameworks, Knapp (2008) commented, “connections among these communities of practice, operating at different levels of the organization, become an important site for understanding how the district as a whole grapples with reform challenges” (p. 531).

Like Knapp (2008), Gallucci (2008) linked sociocultural learning to professional learning through organizational support and districtwide instructional reform. On the heels of NCLB, coupled with the accountability pressures it brought to districts and teachers, Gallucci (2008) used sociocultural learning as a framework for her research. Gallucci posited that sociocultural learning can be used to “trace the connections between district professional development structures as sources of and support for individual learning processes, individual and collective participation in those processes, and subsequent district decision making regarding new and revised supports for professional learning” (p. 548). While Gallucci (2008) specifically described the learning needs of
teachers and the district supports associated with these needs, her definition was applicable to this study.

Gallucci (2008) analyzed data using a system of cyclical quadrant system of learning. This cyclical quadrant was referred to in Gallucci’s research and represented “four phases of a process through which cultural practices are internalized by individuals, transformed in the context of individual needs and uses, and then externalized (shared) in ways that may be taken up by others” (p. 548-549). Quadrant one included the introduction of new ideas about instructional practice. In quadrant two, practitioners may “try on” (Gallucci, 2008, p. 549) new ideas that others may not through appropriation. The second quadrant led to transforming practices in quadrant three as practitioners reinterpreted the concepts. Ultimately, quadrant four led to a potential for individual or organizational learning leading to future policy or practice change. Gallucci’s (2008) study was meaningful and useful to this study because it showed that policy shifts toward higher accountability for school districts and adult educators were valued and linked to professional learning to increase instructional leadership capacity. In her findings, she stated, “The framework suggests that learning is a social process, that individuals can take up new ideas through participation in public activities, transform those ideas in the context of their own practice, and demonstrate their learning” (Gallucci, 2008, p. 569).

Sociocultural learning linked to this study because superintendents and other district leaders must understand the learning needs of their principals and the contexts in which they lead in order to structure professional learning geared toward collective adult learners. Building upon the quadrants described by Gallucci (2008), Drago-Severson
(2011) studied professional learning and concluded that integrating theories, research, and human learning helps to produce meaningful pathways for professional adult learning. For this study, understanding adult learning, contextual theories and research, and professional learning needs and supports helped construct continuous growth opportunities for rural school principals.

In support of a sociocultural, professional learning model, Glickman et al., (2018) identified three stages of typical professional development: (1) orientation, (2) integration, and (3) refinement. In the orientation stage, “benefits, responsibilities, and personal concerns about involvement in staff development are addressed” (Glickman et al., 2018, p. 290). The integration stage involved learners applying their previous learning to a specific situation. Finally, in the refinement stage, learners move from “basic competence to expertness through continuous experimentation and reflection” (Glickman et al., 2008, p. 291).

While Glickman et al. (2018) referenced these stages in relation to teacher professional development, like Gallucci’s research (2008), the model was applicable to effective professional learning for principals as adult learners. These models showed the effects and orientations of sociocultural learning on professional experiences for adult learning. Many staff development programs do not go beyond the orientation level, which causes them to be ineffective (Glickman et al., 2018). As noted, in an earlier study, Bengston et al., (2014) remarked that understanding the unique needs of the principals in the district while simultaneously considering the needs of the system and understanding
the continuous nature of a professional development process were more effective, yet the most challenging process for districts to help maintain effective principals (p. 299).

Understanding sociocultural learning and its effects on learning communities, coupled with transformative learning, can create responsive professional learning opportunities for principals. Mezirow (2000) summarized that adult learners, as part of organizational learning and change, seek out others who share commonalities, in this case, other leaders, to participate in collective learning opportunities. He concluded, “With social or organizational change as objectives… they become active agents of cultural change” (p. 30). In the next section, adding the intersection of transformative learning with sociocultural learning adds theoretical depth to the study of principal professional development (Knapp, 2008; Mezirow, 2000).

**Transformative Learning in Learning Communities**

Mezirow (2000) began his study of adult learning in the 1970s by studying women returning to postsecondary study or the workforce after an extended time away (Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 2000). Theorists such as Kuhn, Freire, and Habermas influenced much of Mezirow’s early work on transformative learning. Similar to sociocultural learning, Mezirow said that adults use frames of reference to define their world (Mezirow, 1997). According to Mezirow (2000), frames of reference are ways to interpret experience that include habits of mind, which are a set of assumptions that are broad, generalized, orienting predispositions that act as filters for interpreting the meaning of experience. Sociocultural learning focused attention on learning as a social
process in particular contexts, so frames of reference that an individual learner has, and brings to a learning community, are important for the learning process.

Mezirow’s theory underwent several revisions (Kitchenham, 2008). However, Mezirow’s adult learning centered on a “focus on who is doing the learning and under what circumstances [in order] to understand the transformative learning process” (Mezirow, 2000). Having a contextual understanding in creation of practices for adult learning is important for leaders to continue to recognize and make meaning of new learning. As adult learners, Mezirow found it was essential to transform learning to fit learning and work-related contexts. Learners should be “formulating more dependable beliefs about experiences, assessing contexts, seeking informed agreement on meaning and justification, and making decisions on the resulting insights” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 4). This concept is central to the professional learning of school principals and those who support their learning.

DuFour and Marzano (2011) reported that collaborative practice was beneficial to educators; however, they concluded, “The transformation from a culture in which individual educators work in isolation to one in which they work as members of interdependent collaborative teams remains a formidable challenge” (p. 68). As adult learners and instructional leaders, it is important principals accept the challenge to move beyond the orientation stage (Glickman et al., 2018) and that a district provides processes for them to do so.
Characteristics of Transformative Learning

Mezirow (2000) argued that adult learning consisted of critical reflection and critical discourse to produce actionable results. According to Mezirow (2000), critical discourse is dialogue devoted to assessing reasons presented in support of competing interpretations, by critically examining evidence, arguments, and alternative points of view. In learning communities, dialogue is critical to creating action for principals as instructional leaders. As part of the professional learning process, contextual awareness and understanding are central to transformative learning. The who, what, when, where, and how, of professional learning (Mezirow, 2000) must remain at the center of the theory; however, it should not drive the process.

The importance of context for adult learning relates to the realization that learning is a process of negotiation of beliefs and opinions, assessments of reasons, and justification of meaningful learning (Mezirow, 2000). As part of that process, Mezirow (2000) described discourse as a means of consensus building which required an ongoing, collective process, much like that of a learning community, where “a best (or more dependable) judgement is always tentative until additional evidence, argument, or a different perspective is presented that may change it” (p. 12). In adult learning theory, reaching consensus occurred as an ongoing process accomplished through critical discourse (Mezirow, 2000). Mezirow (2000) identified the ideal conditions for participants to take part freely and fully in discourse. He said that participants must have:

- more accurate and complete information;
- freedom from coercion;
• openness to alternative points of view; empathy and concern about how others think and feel;
• the ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively;
• greater awareness of the context of ideas and; more critically, reflectiveness of assumptions, including their own;
• an equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse; and
• a willingness to seek understanding and agreement and to accept a resulting best judgement as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence, or arguments are encountered and validated through discourse as yielding a better judgement. (p. 13-14)

Mezirow (2000) wrote, “The claim is that if everyone could participate in discourse under these conditions there would be a consensus supporting them as norms. These ideal conditions constitute a principle; they are never fully realized in practice” (p. 14).

Hord (2009) supported Mezirow’s conditions for critical discourse by applying conditions for success in a constructivist learning community of professionals through the following characteristics:

• community membership was constructed so the participants decide to how to go about their learning and their structure provided a common purpose;
• leadership in supporting and leading collaborative dialogue was key to the effort;
• time to enable educator learning;
• space for learning;
• use of data to support learning; and
participants’ need to have shared power, used appropriate conversation modes, selected the best decision-making model for the needs, and engaged in conflict resolution was equally important. (p. 42-43)

Using the tenants of critical discourse coupled with the components of successful professional learning communities, this study examined ways that participants constructed knowledge through their dialogue.

Mezirow (2000) stated that critical reflection was a vital part to individual adult learner. He wrote, “to assess and fully understand the way others interpret experiences requires discourse, and to understand and assess the reasons for their beliefs and understanding requires the ability to become critically reflective of their assumptions and our own” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 15). Mezirow (2000) used frames of reference to understand consensus building, critical reflection, and the measurement of refinement of practice. In transformative learning, frames of reference refer to framing, or defining, a problem to make it more dependable in generating opinions and interpretations that are more justified (Mezirow, 2000). This is important to learning communities for principals because if they participate in critical reflection and discourse, they are also participating in consensus building toward action. Within frames of reference, Mezirow (2000) defined two dimensions: habits of mind and points of view. The first dimension, habits of mind, is defined as a set of assumptions which are broad, generalized, orienting predispositions that act as filters for interpreting the meaning of experience. A point of view is the expression of our habits of mind (Mezirow, 2000).
Important in sociocultural learning and for adult learning communities is the understanding that “we change our point of view by trying on another’s point of view” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 21). Brookfield (2000), referring to Mezirow’s critical reflection, made a point to delineate that effort does not, in itself, make reflection critical (p. 126). He argued that in order for transformative learning to occur, including critical reflection, a participant must engage in “some sort of power analysis of the situation or context in which the learning is happening” (Brookfield, 2000, p. 126). For the purpose of this study, the definition used for critical reflection was the use of frames of reference to critically assess assumptions, expectations, and work with others to transform practices for the intended purpose (Mezirow, 2000). In learning communities, frames of reference are important to the successful function of the group. Mezirow (2000) commented that because a person’s frames of reference includes values and a sense of self, when a person offers points of view, he or she could strongly defend his or her position. Figure 2.1 reiterates the conceptual framework for the study and how the literature presented in Chapter 2 supported the need for the study. Using this conceptual framework, readers can see the interplay between sociocultural learning provided through learning communities and transformative learning through critical reflection, critical discourse, and action. In addition, the framework shows the onus for school district leaders to create sociocultural and transformative learning processes in order to result in increased instructional capacity of principals. Finally, the framework is defined by rural contexts in order to give a narrower lens in which to study the phenomena.
Conclusion

It is important to understand structures of current practice to understand better how to fill the need for quality principal professional learning. The ESSA (Public Law 114-95) stipulated that states and schools should use research-based practices for professional development of principals, yet rural school principals still report that they are not receiving the types of training needed nor the delivery method most beneficial (Leithwood et al., 2004). While rural and smaller school districts face geographic, budgetary, and staffing constraints, district leaders must place priority on finding ways to mitigate those constraints in order to support the learning of principals in their districts (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009; Enomoto, 2012; Wood et al., 2013). Rowland (2017) concluded that the country “needs more research on principal professional development as well as case studies that illustrate this work in various contexts” (p. 11). She underscored the need to move forward even when a state has early evidence of best
practice in adult learning in order to learn from what was being currently pursued (p. 11). Rowland’s (2017) conclusions support the research question and methodology for this study.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine how rural school district leaders built the instructional leadership capacity of principals through sociocultural and transformative learning. The research question that guided the study was “How can rural school principal instructional leadership capacity be developed through transformative and sociocultural learning in a learning community?”

Because a secondary interest in the learning community was the support offered to principals, I analyzed data through the lens of participation in, and perception of, principal professional learning and the support given to principals from district level leaders. The structure of this study used explanation, description, and interpretation to find theoretically significant recommendations for this phenomenon to offer to the field of education (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018).

Yin (2018) defined a case study as an empirical inquiry that “investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). Exploring the boundaries between the case and theoretical propositions in a rural district led to data collection and analysis. I used theoretical constructs to ground the research, and, while there was research available on learning communities, there was a need for more in-depth research conducted in rural school districts. In particular, the phenomenon of study was a
learning community in a rural district focused on principal instructional leadership through professional learning. Conducting a single case study allowed me to describe the characteristics of a specific case and to “understand the experiences and perceptions of each participant” (Glense, 2016, p. 290).

**Methodology**

The study of principal professional learning in rural school districts is an underdeveloped topic; therefore, it was important to choose a district that identified the issues at hand and took intentional action steps toward improvement. Using evidence from a pilot study (Brink, 2018), one such district identified actions to address principal professional learning. Selecting a single case study was appropriate through clear propositions, supported through research, and conducted in a setting where the propositions had the conditions right for “testing the theory… [and to] confirm, challenge, or extend the theory” (Yin, 2018, p. 47). This chapter provides a summary of the research context as applied to the methods, participants selected for the study, instruments used in data collection, and procedures used in data collection and analysis.

**Research Context**

The rural district under study was in transition concerning principal professional learning in response to an acknowledge need for increased instructional leadership capacity. In an effort to respond to that shift, the superintendent and district leaders adopted a revised and intentional approach to principal professional learning to enhance instructional leadership capacity (Brink, 2018). The approach included intentional
monthly meetings focused on the instructional capacity growth of principals. The monthly meetings, known as District Leadership Team (DLT), restructured past practices. In addition, a principal academy was established for novice principals in the district within their first two years.

At the time of this study, the DLT meetings were in the first year of restructure. Observations, interviews, and document review were conducted in the second half of the first year of implementation. During this period of study, district leaders placed intentional focus on instructional leadership of principals during the first half of monthly DLT meetings. The principal academy for novice administrators met monthly either as a group or as individuals with the assistant superintendent. Two of the six principals participated in the principal academy during the time of study. One elementary principal in her first year as principal and the single middle school principal, in his second year as principal.

The purpose of this study was to identify how district leaders created principal professional learning in a rural school district aimed at increased instructional leadership capacity of principals through learning communities. I designed a qualitative study to understand how the district leaders and principals interpreted their experiences, constructed meaning, and attributed the meaning to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I drew from the perspectives of Merriam & Tisdell (2016) and Yin (2018) to conduct a single, descriptive case study to study the phenomenon of principal
professional learning. Both Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Yin (2018) believed that case study research occurs in particular contexts. In a comparative article on case study stances, Yazan (2018) described Merriam’s primary assumption of a researcher as the ability to “understand the meaning or knowledge constructed by people” (p. 137). While Merriam’s definition of a case study was broader than Yin’s, both are compatible (Yazan, 2018). For this case study, I used likeminded propositions from both researchers; however, as seen in data analysis, I used Yin’s (2018) affinity for a more rigid design and methods in data collection and analysis. Yin described five components that were especially important to case study research. Those components included:

- a case study’s question;
- its propositions, if any;
- its case(s);
- the logic linking the data to the propositions; and
- the criteria for interpreting the findings. (p. 26-27)

This case study described changes in principals’ instructional capacity that occurred when the district recognized and restructured its principal professional learning initiatives. Important components and contextual considerations gave district leaders the opportunity to create growth through the implementation of principal professional learning opportunities. The case study participant selection, setting selection, and demographic information for participants is explained in the proceeding sections. In
addition, I describe the theoretical propositions and the criteria for interpreting the findings in this chapter to support the structure of the case study.

**Research Participants**

To investigate transformative and sociocultural learning in principal learning communities, I used purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). At the conclusion of a pilot study (Brink, 2018), one school district from the study presented itself as unique opportunity to study the phenomenon of principal professional learning in rural school districts. This particular school district identified areas of weakness in principal professional learning and sought ways in which to transform instructional leadership practices through monthly DLT meetings and principal academy meetings. Research participants included all six principals in the district and two district leaders; the superintendent and assistant superintendent.

**Participant Selection and Description**

Based on the theoretical and conceptual framework, the district chosen for study fit the definition of rural defined by the United States Census Bureau (2010). According to 2017 data, the school district in the study had between 75-80% poverty and had a very slight increase in overall enrollment during the reporting period (South Carolina Department of Education). The student population was approximately 3,000 and the district had one high school, one middle school, and three elementary schools (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017). The school district added an early childhood elementary school 2017.
The unit of analysis for the case study was the principal learning community (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To determine the unit of analysis, I considered the topic researched. By determining whether I analyzed individuals, programs, processes, or organizations, I determined that best unit of analysis to study was the learning community in place for principals (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In line with the research question, the study aimed to investigate learning communities, directed by district leaders, in order to gauge how rural school principals’ instructional leadership capacities developed through transformative and sociocultural learning.

The district met the following criteria: (a) represented a unique sample (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018); (b) rural as defined by the United States Census Bureau (2010); and (c) represented a sample district from which to draw previous data. I chose the size of the sample within the case based on the phenomenon being studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To increase the depth of the case study, having data from each principal in the district was essential. The school district included three elementary schools, one child development center, one middle school, and one high school. The district-level instructional leadership team consisted of the superintendent and the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction.

Unique features about some of the participants added to the complexity of findings and implications. Of the six principals and two district office leaders, seven participants had worked in this rural school district for 16 years or longer. Those five principals worked in various capacities prior to their appointment at their current school.
The following characteristics are interesting to note as related to the study context [all names are pseudonyms]:

- Principal Fraley at Suarez Early Childhood was the principal of the same school when it housed kindergarten through fifth grade and helped to close the elementary school when enrollment decreased. She returned to an assistant principal role for one year prior to establishing the early childhood program that was currently operating in the district;

- Principal Jenkins from Cothran Elementary School indicated that she had also been the principal at other three elementary schools prior to current position;

- Principal Schultz was in her first year as a principal at D.W. Elementary School; however, prior to her appointment as principal, she had not had elementary school experience. Principal Schultz served as the assistant principal at the middle school and high school levels;

- Principal Nash at Thompson Middle School was in his second year in the school district during the study; however, his only experience in this particular rural district revolved around his two years as a principal. He was hired from an outside school district as a first-year principal;

- Principal Cooper had been the principal at Parker High School for eight years, but prior to the completion of the study, she had accepted a principal position in a neighboring school district for the next school year; and

- The superintendent was in his role for seventeen years and the assistant superintendent was in her position for three years.
Table 3.1 gives a visual of the principals, their roles, and years in the district and current position.

During the initial pilot study (Brink, 2018) I interviewed only the superintendents of two rural school districts. Therefore, the inclusion of the principals and additional district-level instructional leaders in this study extended the understanding of the transformative and sociocultural learning of the district and its move toward incorporating learning communities. Table 3.1 details the demographic data for the principals and district office staff interviewed for the study. Participants’ were given pseudonyms for the study that are reflected in the table.

Table 3.1 Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Number of Years in the School District</th>
<th>Number of Years as a Principal at current school</th>
<th>Numbers of total years as a Principal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linda Fraley</td>
<td>Suarez Early Childhood</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Hardy</td>
<td>Edwards Elementary</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle Jenkins</td>
<td>Cothran Elementary</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Schultz</td>
<td>D.W. Elementary</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Nash</td>
<td>Thompson Middle</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie Cooper</td>
<td>Parker High</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon Connor</td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin Howe</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Steps of Access

In order to obtain access to the appropriate study participants, I submitted an application to the Clemson University Internal Review Board (IRB) to amend the study design and protocols used in the pilot study (Brink, 2018). After approval of the amendment, I followed the protocol established for contacting the district’s superintendent. Per the IRB protocol, I provided all participants with a consent to
participate form as well as information pertaining to the study. The following IRB
documents are found in the appendices:

**IRB protocols included:**

- Appendix A: Informed Consent to the Superintendent;
- Appendix B: Informed Consent to the Assistant Superintendent;
- Appendix C: Informed Consent to the Principals;
- Appendix D: Recruitment Email to the Superintendent;
- Appendix E: Recruitment Email to the Assistant Superintendent;
- Appendix F: Recruitment Email to Principals;
- Appendix G: Interview Protocols for the Superintendent and Assistant
  Superintendent; and
- Appendix H: Interview Protocol for Principals

**Data Collection Methods**

Because the study was qualitative, I was the primary instrument for data
collection and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data collection involved multiple
sources, including document review, interviews, and observations (Yin, 2018). After
gaining IRB approval to continue the study, I used the following protocol during data
collection:

- multiple sources of evidence;
- a case study database; and
- a chain of evidence. (Yin, 2018)
Interviews and observations were set up with principals and other district level participants. I scheduled observations of three events to add depth to data collected through interviews and document review. Two observations were District Leadership Team (DLT) meetings and one observation was of the principal academy. The DLT meetings lasted approximately 3-4 hours and the academy was one hour in length.

Communication of dates and times of interviews and observations were ongoing with all participants. A researcher-designed protocol (see Appendices A-H) guided the access and data collection during the study (Glense, 2016). A case study database was created to organize a data set that included artifacts, transcripts of interviews from participants, and notes from interviews and observations (Yin, 2018).

I maintained a chain of evidence to organize and make available the relevant portions of the case study protocol followed (Yin, 2018). The chain of evidence for data collection acknowledged the following characteristics:

- data analysis and conclusions had sufficient citation to the relevant portions of the case study protocol;
- the database contained the actual evidence and the circumstances under which it was collected for the case study; and
- the circumstances under which the data was collected were consistent with procedures and study questions outlined in the protocol. (Yin, 2018)

This combination of multiple sources of evidence, a case study database, and a chain of evidence enhanced the reliability and validity of the study.
Table 3.2 outlines the constructs of instructional capacity. To help organize the data set for this study, I combined instructional leadership literature from Hallinger (2005) and Robinson et al. (2008) to characterize principal’s instructional leadership capacity. In the data analysis, I used these categories to outline the deductive codes. I kept an inventory of all data throughout the study and generated memos during observation and interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018).

### Table 3.2 Instructional Capacity Constructs for Principal Professional Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear Goal Setting</td>
<td>Clear goal setting creates a shared sense of purpose and a focus and alignment on student learning which is well communicated and aligned to school and district goals.</td>
<td>Dufour and Marzano (2011); Hallinger (2005); Robinson et al. (2018)</td>
<td>Document Review, Interview, Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing People</td>
<td>Fostering the continuous, collaborative, and collective improvement of the school through cyclical learning in which the leader participates in learning as a leader, learner, or both.</td>
<td>Dufour and Marzano (2011); Hallinger (2005); Robinson et al. (2018)</td>
<td>Document Review, Interview, Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating Opportunities for Continuous Improvement</td>
<td>Organizing and monitoring a wide range of ongoing and sustained activities aimed at continuous staff development and improved results</td>
<td>Dufour and Marzano (2011); Hallinger (2005); Robinson et al. (2018)</td>
<td>Document Review, Interview, Observation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Managing the Instructional Program

Developing a climate of high expectations and school culture aimed at innovation and improvement of teaching and learning with active oversight and coordination of the instructional program.

Hallinger (2005); Robinson et al. (2018)

Document Review, Interview, Observation

Observations

I used a method of direct observation in the natural setting of the case (Yin, 2018) to participate in three observations. The observations included one principal academy meeting with the Thompson Middle principal who was in his first two years in the district as well as two district-level principal professional learning meetings, called District Leadership Team (DLT) meetings. A timeline of observations is outlined in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3 Summary of Observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February 28, 2019</td>
<td>Principal Academy (Thompson Middle principal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 13, 2019</td>
<td>District Leadership Team meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 10, 2019</td>
<td>District Leadership Team meeting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I chose these observations because they centered on principal professional learning and addressed the overall research question. Based on the suggestions of Glense (2016) on observing in natural settings, I sought to accomplish the following goals during observations:

- understand the setting, the participants, and their behavior;
- observe carefully and take thick descriptive notes during the observation;
• focus on research participant’s perspectives and behaviors; and
• observe carefully and systematically experience the many aspects of the situation.

(p. 67-68)

These goals guided the observation and are reflected in the protocol development and analysis of data. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) listed common elements likely to be present while conducting an observation that I used during each observation for consistency. Many of these elements could be linked to the data collection constructs seen in Table 3.2. The elements from Merriam and Tisdell (2016) included noting:

• the physical setting: context, space, resource allotted, and physical environment;
• the participants: how many people, their roles, relevant characteristics, and patterns;
• activities and interactions: sequence of activities, norms and structures typical or atypical;
• conversation: content of the conversations, verbal and nonverbal behavior, and transcripts (recorded or field notes of conversations);
• subtle factors: informal and unplanned activities, symbolic and connotative meanings of words, nonverbal communication, and unobtrusive measures; and
• my own behavior: how does my role affect the scene observed. (p. 141-142)

Validity and reliably in addition to researcher positionality follow in this chapter. These sections specifically describe my own behavior through observation and interview.
My positionality is explained in order to parallel how my role affected the observations. In addition, observation protocols provided specific context for subsequent discussion in follow-up interviews and allowed me to observe occurrences firsthand and use my “own knowledge and expertise in interpreting what is observed rather than relying on once-removed accounts from interviews” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 139). Observation of principals involved in learning communities and other activities associated with the purpose of the study provided specific incidents, behaviors, and triangulated findings in interviews and document review (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

**Interviews**

Interviews were one of the most prevalent and robust data points of the study. I planned in-depth interviews for each participant. Follow-up questions and interviews were scheduled as necessary based on observations. I followed up with participants through emails or phone calls to provide documents related to the information shared during the initial interviews. Table 3.4 shows an interview and follow-up timeline.
Table 3.4 Summary of Interviews and Follow-up Conversations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February 20, 2019</td>
<td>Interview with Parker High principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 21, 2019</td>
<td>Interview with Edwards Elementary principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 21, 2019</td>
<td>Interview with Cothran Elementary principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 21, 2019</td>
<td>Interview with Thompson Middle principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 22, 2019</td>
<td>Interview with Suarez Early Childhood principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 22, 2019</td>
<td>Interview with assistant superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 22, 2019</td>
<td>Interview with superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 8, 2019</td>
<td>Interview with D.W. Elementary principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 30, 2019</td>
<td>Follow-up email to Thompson Middle principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 30, 2019</td>
<td>Follow-up phone call with superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 30, 2019</td>
<td>Follow-up phone call with Parker High principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 30, 2019</td>
<td>All participants received a copy of interview transcripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 1, 2019</td>
<td>Follow-up email to superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2, 2019</td>
<td>Follow-up email to assistant superintendent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I interviewed all participants individually using a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendices G-I: Glense, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) that were audio recorded for transcription. To heighten validity of interview questions, faculty members with expertise in qualitative research vetted questions and interview protocols. This assisted with the creation of strong case study protocols that acknowledged the types of data collected and any other potential issues or bias that arose (Yin, 2018). I audio recorded the interviews and created memos to assist with data collection and analysis. Prior to the interview, I had a predetermined and reliable method to record responses for later transcription.

I conducted an initial round of interviews with all six principals and two district leaders prior to observations. The initial round of interviews consisted of 10 questions per
participant and lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. I conducted additional rounds of interviews and follow-up questions after observations as needed to enhance or clarify what I observed. I used stimulated recall to structure the follow-up interviews from observations (Stough, 2001). Stimulated recall occurs when a participant is reminded of an event that occurred and are asked to describe their perceptions, thinking, or actions as that event occurred. Stough (2001) wrote that stimulated recall used in other studies had increased “self reflection, while it circumvents automaticity in expert educators” (p. 4).

Interview questions were derived in an attempt to create a synchronic report to find themes or patterns (Weiss, 1995). Interview questions were formulated around the conceptual framework for the study so that it will “make sense as an entity as well as in its items of information; its parts should fit together; it should have coherence” (Weiss, 1995, p. 42). Appendix I gives supporting literature for interview questions that guided deductive themes. The characteristics of instructional capacity structured data analysis while leaving the iterative nature of coding open to inductive findings.

**Document Collection**

I collected documents as artifacts throughout the study as needed to triangulate data and corroborate interview and observation data. During the interviews with principals, the line of inquiry was not appropriate for interrupting the questioning to ask for specific documentation. Instead, I requested documents after the initial round of interviews and before and after observations. When I determined a document was relevant to the study, I considered whether or not it contained information that was
relevant to the research question and if it could be acquired in a systematic manner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

As a means of member checking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), each participant received a copy of their interview transcript for review. This occurred for two purposes; the first purpose was to offer clearer insight into any area requiring further detail from the interview. Secondly, participants could provide any document that they felt supported their claims. While the district under study used a prescribed program and this study was not constructed as a program evaluation, analysis of the documents pertaining to the prescribed program gave useful insight into the overall study. While document collection was selective and based on availability, it created a credible data source that added complementary data to the collection (Yin, 2018).

**Procedures for Data Analysis**

Data analysis followed the strategy of relying on theoretical propositions (Yin, 2018). I established theoretical propositions, based on previous research, to frame the study. The study propositions were as follows:

1. A principal’s main role is as an instructional leader;
2. Educational policy shifts have brought to light the need to have new principal professional learning geared toward meeting the need of principals as instructional leaders;
3. Examples from urban contexts have shown responsiveness to this need/research-based practice;
4. One research-based practice in particular that shows promise is learning communities;

5. Theoretical support is given through transformative and sociocultural learning; however,

6. A gap exists in rural district settings for principals.

I based the theoretical propositions for the study on previous research and gaps in research that provided the foundation to guide the research question. The propositions shaped the data collection, the type and frequency of data collection, and how the data were analyzed (Yin, 2018). The intended purpose of this study had several components supported through the theoretical propositions established. The purposes of this study were to:

- explore transformative learning practices in principal professional learning in one rural school district in response to the instructional leadership capacity needs of its principals;
- understand how district leaders supported the process of transformative and sociocultural learning practices for principals in their school district; and
- show whether learning community frameworks were malleable and contextually applicable for principal professional learning in other districts.

These propositions shaped the literature review and study protocol; therefore, they shaped my “data collection plan… [and gave] priorities to the relevant analytic strategies” (Yin, 2018, p. 130). While few actual case studies existed that centered on principal
professional learning in rural school districts, relevant studies and previous theories supported the research question and propositions.

In addressing the principal’s role as an instructional leader, educational policy shifts brought to light the need to have new principal professional learning geared toward meeting the need of principals as instructional leaders. Examples from urban contexts showed responsiveness to this need and research-based practice. One research-based practice in particular that showed promise was learning communities. Sociocultural learning and transformative learning theories supported these propositions. A gap existed in rural district settings for principals, thus creating a need for further study and supporting the need for this study in particular.

As Yin (2018) advised, the goal “is to analyze your case study data by building an explanation about the case” (p. 178). Yin (2018) outlined the iterative nature of explanation building with data analysis in a case study. This type of data analysis occurred both deductively and inductively. Deductive analysis relied on statements, propositions, and theories asserted at the onset of the study. Inductive analysis occurred through the data collection and analysis process. Because this was a single case study, Yin (2018) stated, “The procedure would not necessarily end conclusively” (p. 180), but the information provided from this study shed light on an underrepresented data point that could be revised and applied to further study.
Levels of Analysis

Four levels of coding guided data analysis and led to a categorization of themes that would address the research question that guided the study (Saldana, 2016). Figure 3.1 provides a visual representation of how data sources were integrated in the process of this analysis.
**Level I: Data Cleaning.** After I transcribed interviews and observation data, I thoroughly proofread each transcript for errors that could have skewed the data analysis. Additionally, I conducted line-by-line coding through the first round (Saldana, 2016) as a means of becoming familiar with, and interacting with, the data. Data cleaning assisted with creating memos throughout the data to record my observations, notes, and thoughts from fieldwork (Yin, 2018).

**Level II: Deductive Coding.** A theoretical framework guided coding and allowed for a holistic understanding of the case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I gave analytic
priority in data analysis to the foundations set from the theoretical propositions of the study by using *a priori* codes for deductive rounds of coding (Yin, 2018).

Using deductive coding, I sought to answer the research question by addressing whether or not the principal professional learning in which the principals engaged enhanced instructional capacity through transformative and sociocultural learning. The deductive coding round included the following codes as operationalized in Chapter 2 and found in Appendix I:

- clear goal setting;
- creating opportunities for continuous improvement;
- developing people; and
- managing the instructional program

I used each of these codes to categorize the observation data, interview transcripts, and documents collected to identify pattern occurrences (Yin, 2018).

**Level III: Text Query.** During the third round of coding, I searched key words and their synonyms found in the data sets to support the established research to undergird the deductive codes for instructional leadership capacity. For this round of coding, I used NVivo software for a Level IV comparison of the NVIVO findings with the Level II findings (Yin, 2018). Definitions used for the study of each of the constructs of instructional capacity assisted in identifying key words. I employed the text query feature of NVivo to identify key words in data related to the deductive codes.
Specifically, I used the following key terms to categorize findings during the second round of coding associated with the deductive codes:

- clear goal setting: goal, purpose/direction, focus, and communication;
- creating opportunities for continuous growth: improvement/better, organization/direction, monitor/coordinate/administer; and continuous/continue
- developing people: improvement/better/growth, development/training, leader/leadership, and learner; and
- managing the instructional program: expectations/information/direction, culture, innovation/initiatives, improvement, oversight, coordination, and instructional/learning

**Level IV: Comparative Analysis.** In this final round of analysis, I compared data from the second round of deductive coding to that of data found in the text query search. This process allowed me to find overlapping data, this is, data that emerged in both the researcher-coded and NVIVO-generated analyses.

Following a determination of overlapping data from the deductive codes, I explored the data that were not included in the deductive codes to be open to inductive findings that showed exceptions to the established deductive codes. These inductive findings were those that were considered to be relevant to the research question, important for describing the phenomenon being studies, or contributing to the implications of the findings. These inductive codes were organized in NVIVO in a
separate parent code and explored during the building of themes in addressing the research question.

**Validity and Reliability**

In order to establish construct validity for the study, I used previous theories to ground the study. The use of transformative learning showed how adult learners, as part of organizational learning and change, sought out others who shared commonalities to participate in collective learning opportunities through critical discourse, critical reflection, and action (Mezirow, 2000). I operationally defined critical discourse, critical reflection, and action for use in data collection and analysis. Further, sociocultural learning was defined as understanding adult learning practices in context (Wenger, 2000) in order to support professional learning to construct continuous growth opportunities (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2018).

These two well-researched theories supported the study outcomes by presupposing that a combination of these assisted with principal instructional capacity. I also defined instructional capacity for the study. The study did not seek to redefine concepts that had already been well defined; rather, the study identified measures that matched concepts in previous studies (Yin, 2018) and applied them to under-developed phenomenon. This single case study sought analytic generalization whereby the use of a small body of specific research generalized to broader theories (Yin, 2018).

I used multiple sources of evidence in data collection through interview, observation, and document review. This data triangulation increased validity (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 1984; Yin, 2018). When analyzing data, I checked emergent
findings with existing research as they related to the proposed research question to increase validity by creating theoretical coherence (Miles et al., 1984, p. 292). In addition, this study was a continuation of a pilot study, which established a chain of evidence to support the analysis of data (Yin, 2018). In creating procedures for data collection, scheduled interviews and observations assisted in the creation of a set of operational measures that guided data management (Yin, 2018). The interview questions were vetted by faculty members from Clemson University with depth of experience in qualitative studies. In addition to construct validity, external validity was increased prior to, and in preparation for, data collection by creating a conceptual framework to guide the study method (Yin, 2018).

I attended to the risk of prescriptive and normative applications of the theory when analyzing data (Knapp, 2008). Knapp (2008) wrote, “[a] far more generative theoretical goal is to enrich our pictures of how districts learn and what learning means in the context of instructional reform initiatives” (p. 535). I sought to accomplish this by allowing alternative perspectives, labeled as outliers or exceptions, to occur outside of the deductive coding schemes established through the theoretical framework. Finally, I used member checking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to increase the overall validity of the case study.

**Researcher Positionality**

In order to address myself as a researcher, it was important to address any biases that existed prior to the study and the importance of understanding how to be a good case study investigator (Yin, 2018). I had been in the education field for sixteen years at the
time of the study. I had spent ten of those years as a school administrator. For three years, I was a school principal in both the elementary and middle school settings. Additionally, I worked in both rural and urban school districts; however, I was raised in a rural school district and spent the majority of my time as a school administrator in smaller, more rural school districts.

A required skill for a case study researcher is to be unbiased by preconceived notions. Using information gathered from a previous study helped to determine the study site in which I continued my research on principal professional learning. As a principal myself, this is an area of high interest for me; however, I used data from another study as evidence to continue my research in the field. This assisted me as an investigator to be “sensitive and responsive to contradictory evidence” (Yin, 2018, p. 69). Using this evidence allowed me to continue to study an area of high interest while attending to bias that may exist as a principal myself.

Yin (2018) stated that a good case study investigator asks good questions and is a good listener. Setting up the study to ask interview questions prior to observations with the ability to ask follow-up questions as the study continued, gave me the flexibility to continue to be adaptive and malleable in my study. As a novice researcher, I listened to initial interactions with participants that helped me understand the particular opportunities to expand upon how the study was constructed. In order to make sure that I accounted for my position as a principal and the topic of study, I incorporated case study protocol that assisted me as an investigator and assisted my audience with the interpretation and understanding of the findings.
Study Context

I reported the findings using the theoretical perspectives surrounding the study to mirror the underpinning of the study. Findings addressed the following: how research informs intentional practice; attention to individual principal’s needs within the collective process; evaluation of current learning and creation of ways to continuously evaluate learning; structuring principal professional learning that is relevant and integrated; and the creation of a learning communities with openness and trust to facilitate learning.

When compiling the demographic data of the school principals in the study, I gained additional insight that assisted in data discussion and implications. According to the conceptual framework for the study previously established, understanding the surrounding context of the school district was important to understanding data collection and analysis. The school district studied was a rural district (United States Census Bureau, 2010) and therefore, viewing the data from that perspective necessitated this study and generated findings, conclusions, and implications. In an interview with the Superintendent Howe, he commented on current research on principals in rural district and said,

I think for us, there is not clarity and there is not the research in terms of those practices yet in rural districts. I really don’t. I think rural is such an obtuse definition that to each rural district, they will encounter and define it similarly, though somewhat differently. It's in the difference that the confusion occurs... We're just beginning to launch into initiatives that would focus on it.
Because the effect of leadership on student learning was second only to teacher influence (Leithwood et al., 2010), this descriptive study was timely. In analyzing the data, the use of thick descriptive quotations and the results of observation and document review combined to show intentional rural principal professional learning.

**Summary**

Yin (2018) first defined a case study as an empirical inquiry that “investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). Investigating principal professional learning drew on the broader phenomenon of professional learning and sought to investigate a particular context, in this case, a rural school district. Yin’s (2018) research on case studies indicated that the research inquiry wrestled with technically distinctive situations that had variables of interest that outweighed data points. Therefore, multiple sources of evidence, such as document collection, observations, and interviews, were included. In addition, and important to the data analysis of this study, Yin (2018) said that case study inquiry “benefits from prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis” (p. 18). The propositions established for the study shaped the data collection plan and yielded analytical priorities for findings. This study added to what was currently a small body of literature on the topic and helped guide discussion and further research to inform practice. This study was meant to unearth what was at the heart of transformative and sociocultural learning (Knapp, 2000; Mezirow, 2000; Wenger, 2000) practices in one rural school district to inform further study and practice.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this single case study was to understand how rural school principal instructional capacity developed through transformative and sociocultural learning in a learning community. The district in the study made intentional efforts to restructure their principal professional learning to increase the instructional capacity of their principals. The nature of this study presupposed that characteristics of sociocultural learning through interactions among individuals in collective practice, and characteristics of transformative learning through critical reflection, critical discourse, and action were present in the intentional restructuring of principal professional learning. In addition, contextual aspects of the rural school district were important to answering the research question. Findings described in this chapter point to the presence of transformative and sociocultural; however, the findings also highlight the challenges faced by rural school districts where aspects of the intentional shift were still developing.

The research question asked the following: How can rural school principal instructional leadership capacity be developed through transformative and sociocultural learning in a learning community? Table 4.1 outlines the constructs used to define instructional capacity and guide findings and Appendix I shows the connection to previous research. The constructs included clear goal setting, developing people, creating opportunities for continuous improvement, and managing the instructional program. Each
section incorporates findings associated with these constructs and addresses inductive findings as exceptions to the deductive findings. Because the findings presented were derived from the iterative nature of coding and sought to explain the phenomenon presented through the research question, the discussion of findings was guided by the explanation found in Yin’s (2018) work. Yin wrote, “the eventual explanation is likely to result from a series of iterations:

- making an initial but tentative theoretical statement or explanatory proposition;
- comparing the data from your case study against such a statement or proposition;
- revising the earlier statement or proposition;
- comparing other details of the case against the revision; and
- repeating the process with other cases as many times as needed.

Chapter 4 is organized to present evidence found in each level of data analysis. In addition, the discussion of data incorporates how each data source contributed to findings. Finally, this chapter concludes with revising the earlier theoretical propositions (Yin, 2018). In order to build the explanation to answer the research question, I structured the findings to reflect the transformative and sociocultural learning in the district and how findings influenced the instructional capacity of principals. Attention was given to other plausible explanations, described as outliers or inductive findings, in order to refine the original propositions of the study (Yin, 2018).
Table 4.1 Instructional Capacity Constructs for Principal Professional Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear Goal Setting</td>
<td>Clear goal setting creates a shared sense of purpose and a focus and alignment on student learning which is well-communicated and aligned to school and district goals.</td>
<td>Dufour and Marzano (2011); Hallinger (2005); Robinson et al. (2018)</td>
<td>Document Review, Interview, Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing People</td>
<td>Fostering the continuous, collaborative, and collective improvement of the school through cyclical learning in which the leader participates in learning as a leader, learner, or both.</td>
<td>Dufour and Marzano (2011); Hallinger (2005); Robinson et al. (2018)</td>
<td>Document Review, Interview, Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating Opportunities for Continuous Improvement</td>
<td>Organizing and monitoring a wide range of ongoing and sustained activities aimed at continuous staff development and improved results</td>
<td>Dufour and Marzano (2011); Hallinger (2005); Robinson et al. (2018)</td>
<td>Document Review, Interview, Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing the Instructional Program</td>
<td>Developing a climate of high expectations and school culture aimed at innovation and improvement of teaching and learning with active oversight and coordination of the instructional program.</td>
<td>Hallinger (2005); Robinson et al. (2018)</td>
<td>Document Review, Interview, Observation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 lists the participants and school pseudonyms. Each principal and school in the district are represented in the table. Also included are the superintendent and assistant superintendent, who are the district leaders most directly charged with developing the instructional leadership capacity of principals. These pseudonyms are used throughout Chapter 4 to provide qualitative evidence to support the research question.
An important aspect of this study was to determine what actions within the newly formed learning communities provided evidence of transformative learning, specifically critical discourse and critical reflection. Based on research, these areas combined will elicit increased instructional capacity of principals if incorporated into a district’s professional learning fabric. The superintendent expressed thoughts on the past practices as compared with the current state. In describing the transformative practices in managing the instructional program, he said in his interview, “When we did not have the supports in place, when we did not have the conversation in place, where we did not have the collegiality in place, we did not have the clarity in place.” (Superintendent Howe).

While some participants expressed different perspectives about the new initiative, interview and observation data supported the intentional change.

Because the theory of transformative learning is not new and this study did not seek to redefine it, the question remained whether or not this study uncovered the use of

Table 4.2 Participant Information and Location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Number of Years in the School District</th>
<th>Number of Years as a Principal at current school</th>
<th>Numbers of total years as a Principal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linda Fraley</td>
<td>Suarez Early Childhood</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Hardy</td>
<td>Edwards Elementary</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle Jenkins</td>
<td>Cothran Elementary</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Schwartz</td>
<td>D.W. Elementary</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Nash</td>
<td>Thompson Middle</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie Cooper</td>
<td>Parker High</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon Connor</td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin Howe</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
this established learning and to what extent it improved instructional capacity for principals. Evidence from the data analysis showed that aspects of transformative learning were present in some facets of the professional learning for principals, while in other areas, data pointed to areas of need. In order for district leaders to develop the instructional leadership capacity in principals, they must foster levels of critical discourse and reflection, provide additional supports for individual principals, and evaluate the practices that foster transformative learning.

**Foster Levels of Critical Discourse and Reflection**

In merging data sets to investigate the transformative learning through critical discourse and critical reflection, it became clear that specific activities were used to foster critical discourse and critical reflection. Because the district had intentionally restructuring principal professional learning and they were still within the first year of the shift, the data elicited findings that included some level of critical reflection and critical discourse. However, evidence also confirmed that the leaders were in the early stages of transformative learning.

Because perspective transformation was an important aspect of the transformative practice identified by Mezirow (2000), it is important to note that in evidence collected through interviews and observations, it was apparent that participants were engaged in activities that were designed to challenge their habits of mind through specific actions aligned to the instructional goals of the district.

**Critical discourse.** The assistant superintendent aptly stated during her interview,
Research says that teachers need a voice in what happens in their classroom to make a difference for students. So that same philosophy should work, that administrators need that voice in impacting their schools and their student achievement. (Connor)

The research uncovered a district on the edge of transformative learning. Supporting this finding were the examples given by some participants of discourse during learning communities as well as how those specific activities filtered down to the school level. Though the superintendent did not attend the instructional portion of the DLT meetings, in his interview, he supported the use of conversation when asked about critical discourse. In comparing past district practices to current learning practices he stated, “When we did not have supports in place, when we did not have the conversation in place, where we did not have the collegiality in place, we did not have the clarity in place” (Howe). The superintendent went on to say, “I don’t know how others operate, but we’re small enough, in our case, there’s a large likelihood of continuous conversation in the district” (Howe).

District leaders focused on conversation and questioning which showed the stage of critical discourse in the district and how the leaders were fostering transformative learning. The superintendent’s comment specifically identified past practices had not facilitated the level of conversation that was currently present in the district. However, the depth of conversations and discourse researched during the study had not reached the critical level that is required to elicit transformative learning in all participants, particularly in the frequency of opportunities to engage in critical discourse.
According to the superintendent and assistant superintendent, the principals’ participation in conversations was important to foster a commitment to instructional capacity growth. All principal participants who were present were verbally active during the two DLT meeting observations. However, some principals were considerably more vocal than others were and seemed more open to actively internalizing and embodying the practices set forth by the district. For example, Principal Jenkins from Cothran Elementary School participated vocally during all discussions of DLT centered on instruction. She commented in her interview that during her time in the rural district she had been the principal at all of the other elementary schools prior to obtaining her current position. This seemed to add richness and experience to her comments surrounding the district’s goals during DLT meetings and during her interview.

Contrasting her involvement, the principal from Edwards Elementary was less verbally vocal; however, he actively participated in the activities during the learning communities. In addition, he was the only principal that came to the first DLT meeting with a video recording of a school-level learning community to share with colleagues. By comparing observation and interview analysis through the rounds of coding, the level of vocal participation did not always confirm transformative learning.

During her interview, the assistant superintendent commented on critical discourse and dialogue currently in district learning opportunities. She said she assisted in discourse with principals by, “asking questions” and wanted to understand “what are those specific things to get you to the next level… what are the basics that you have to have and we ask that they take it from us, to them, to their teachers” (Assistant
Superintendent Connor). Observation data confirmed what the assistant superintendent stated in her interview. During a monthly DLT meeting, the assistant superintendent asked the principals, “Let’s talk about your journey. Your journey in your schools, our journey as a district. Tell me about your journey” (Assistant Superintendent Connor). The four elementary school principals present at the first DLT all responded to the questions posed. Linda Fraley, principal of Suarez Early Childhood began the discussion and shared,

It doesn't have to be a rush. We are so used to fixing, that this is the problem, this is what we're gonna do to fix it and then it'll be gone. You really have to go through a longer process to one determine if it really is a problem, how much of a problem it is and then how you're gonna address it…. coming back to the teachers have to be much more involved, we're still leading, we're still running it, and kind of directing what we're doing and how we're doing.

Principal Jenkins corroborated Principal Fraley’s comments about the learning community process at the school level and said,

I think the one thing that we realized was that when we did that same activity… most of our teachers agreed with the leadership team. We did it first the leadership team and that gave me a hint that we were all at least looking at the same things, what we saw as positive and growth and that kind of thing.

In comparison to the other schools, Principal Hardy commented,

The process has been a positive for us, we have five different groups who meet during the day on Wednesday and Thursday's and pretty much I try to attend all of them if I can. But
there's a lead teacher in most of the groups that basically helps to lead it and the academic conversation that's going on has definitely been a positive thing for us.

Principal Schultz described her learning at the school level and added,

You know I feel like at the beginning of the year, well obviously we were all a little bit hesitant we didn't really know, I mean I felt like I was going into it blind but it was just unchartered territory and I heard a conversation in the 1st grade… where a teacher, it was very obvious that 3 of the 4 teachers their data that they brought back, their students were making gains and one was not… And those are really hard conversations. I mean it was very obvious and we just have to be comfortable with having that conversations.

The different perspectives on professional learning from principals illustrated the importance of critical discourse and pointed to the desire for district leaders to move principals toward more critical dialogue and reflection. Notably absent from the DLT observation were comments from the middle school and high school principals about how their journey in professional learning was the same or different because both were absent from one and two meetings, respectively. This conversation represented the initial stages of what district leaders hope will become more critical discourse as they continue to restructure principal professional learning for instructional leadership.

Extending the discussion from the DLT meeting, evidence pointed to how the district fostered critical discourse in principals through school-level examples from participants. Multiple principals indicated that they were using the structure established
for their instructional growth to create opportunities for critical discourse at their individual school level. In a discussion of the resulting conversations at the school level, the Suarez Early Childhood principal said,

"Probably the biggest challenge I have is when I look at data, I see something different than what they see. It’s been hard to get them to go in that direction in terms of professional learning. I’m really having to coach them through that and ask those questions. Then go back and give them the support they’re going to need. (Principal Fraley)"

Paralleling observation evidence suggesting that the teachers at Suarez Early Childhood were engaged in critical discourse, Linda Fraley shared a videotaped session at the second observed DLT meeting of a teacher learning community in which she also participated. The principal commented on the importance of discourse in order to achieve different perspectives among her teachers. Linda Fraley explained to her colleagues during the DLT observation, “I think what stood out… is that every single person in the room was participating because it was something they were comfortable with.” This gave a powerful example of how Principal Fraley engaged her teachers in critical discourse. In turn, it elicited a deeper level of discourse when it was shown at a DLT meeting.

In a follow-up conversation to the video shared by Principal Fraley, another elementary principal shared similar sentiments about critical discourse at the school level. Principal Jenkins from Cothran Elementary said, “You have to pick and choose which ones to do the deep dive on because you cannot do a deep dive on every single one.” Michelle Jenkins continued the discussion of dialogue at the school level by discussing
her biggest challenge. She said, “I think the biggest thing we fail, we as administrators, is that we don’t do it with them” (Principal Jenkins). The assistant superintendent supported Michelle Jenkins’s thoughts on principals in the district during the first DLT observation when she said,

A few of my schools, I do think that professional learning community… has done some pretty powerful things in how their teachers have become such a part and the principals have been sitting there with them and learning. So it’s great to listen to their conversations. (Assistant Superintendent Connor)

These examples from participants showed how the district created an intentional structure that fostered activities for discourse and where those efforts were manifesting.

Through multiple rounds of coding, the exception to the finding for fostering critical discourse at the school level was evident by the comments from the middle school principal during the principal academy meeting with the assistant superintendent. He expressed that, in structuring opportunities for conversations with teachers in his school,

I just said, “Y’all [teachers] are going to have to meet after school or before school. I’m sorry. If we’re going to improve, that is what we have to do. I’m not trying to get rid of everybody, but, you know. We’ve got to develop. The more people that are involved in the shared leadership process, the better for me. That’s why we’re building those teams. (Principal Nash)

The sentiment expressed by the middle school principal during the principal academy seemed to contrast the other participants’ perspectives of how they fostered critical discourse. Because the middle school principal did not attend the DLT meeting
where principals discussed their individual school journey, this data showed the perception of the principal for the intentional restructure.

Examples provided by participants at DLT meetings in conjunction with observation data reflected the level of commitment from the participants. The high school principal was absent from both meetings and the middle school principal was absent from one meeting. As mentioned previously, the superintendent was not present for the DLT meetings because he taught a high school history course each morning. Because these participants were absent from the professional learning activities, it was unclear through observation data how these participants fully engaged in critical discourse. In addition, while the middle school principal was active during conversation in the second DLT meeting, his interview data did not support transformative parallels.

Follow-up interviews were conducted with the middle school principal and high school principals as well as the superintendent to support findings and discuss their absence from the meetings. Both principals sent representatives in their place and both acknowledged that they debriefed with their representatives after the meeting occurred. The middle school principal said that his assistant principal discussed with him the activities from the instructional portion of the DLT meeting, but he had not been debriefed on any other aspects of the meetings. The high school principal also sent a representative to both meetings and said that she discussed with those representatives the meeting agenda.
In the follow-up conversation with the superintendent, he expressed more specific ways in which he stayed connected despite his absence from the monthly DLT meetings. The superintendent expressed that he stays,

Up-to-date with instructional decisions through the [assistant superintendent]. I meet with her to discuss instructional personnel once per week; I meet with her once per week to weave the instructional/operational fabric necessary for cohesion. (Superintendent Howe)

In addition, he stated,

In a district our size, a lot of what I get is from a now-outdated organizational strategy (marvelously suited for abstract random thinkers like I am): MBWA...Management by Wandering Around. It is very qualitative in nature and inquiry based. It has been my go-to strategy since I was the assistant principal. (Superintendent Howe)

During the follow-up conversations with all three participants, the superintendent expressed a more specific way in which he stayed in touch with instructional practices in the district. The middle school and high school principals only addressed communicating with their representative once after the meeting to debrief from the meeting. This further supports the importance of involvement from all participants in order to foster critical discourse in a learning community.

**Critical reflection.** The district also structured activities to foster more critical reflection from participants. These activities were observed predominantly during DLT meetings. The assistant superintendent asked principals to reflect on school-level
progress during the second DLT meeting. The Thompson Middle principal responded, “We’re taking baby steps… we’re not really there yet” (Principal Nash).

A major strategy noted in the rural district for reflection in instructional leadership for principals involved the use of technology. District leaders provided cameras for principals to use at the school level to record and upload examples professional learning videos. In addition, the district used an online platform that allowed principals to comment and reflect on segments of videos as well participate in overall reflection of the process. District leaders facilitated discussions during the observed DLT meetings concerning recording leadership teams, teachers, and learning communities to foster reflection. For example, during the first observed DLT, the assistant superintendent relayed that the goal for each principal was to successfully upload a pre-made video they brought to the meeting in order to “add some comments for reflection and then… share it with someone else in the room” (Assistant Superintendent Connor).

As part of increasing principal reflection, the assistant superintendent challenged principals to use technology to record instructional leadership team meetings or teacher team meetings for self-reflection. During the first DLT observation, the assistant superintendent gave a specific assignment to the principals. She instructed the principals to “Make sure you do a video… to send to me [and] also send it to a peer. I want you to self-reflect at the beginning before you send it” (Assistant Superintendent Connor).

In addition to the use of technology to enhance reflection, the assistant superintendent highlighted the incremental nature of reflection activities of the district and conveyed,
That’s why I want us to spend a year of starting to collect this data. This isn’t something we can create overnight. You started this year, this is our initiate year, to me. Next year we move to improve and my hope is that we’ve made an impact by year 3, by the time they come that we’re gonna have enough evidence that we’re gonna be between improve and impact. So don’t lose what you’ve done this year, file it away, keep it.” (Assistant Superintendent Connor)

Interview data showed some examples of activities geared toward fostering reflection on the part of some participants; however, the level of reflection needed for transformative learning was still in the early stages of formation. When asked about reflection, participants did not provide substantial examples of district-level reflection activities beyond what was observed during DLT meetings. For example, the principal of the Suarez Early Childhood commented that individually, “I reflect on things all the time, but that really went to a deeper level of self-reflection” (Principal Fraley) when she described a previous principal learning experience outside of the district. When asked about reflection as a principal, the Thompson Middle principal commented, “The reflection part… so much of these first two years has just been skiing down hills without poles” (Principal Nash).

Examples from participants showed that the district was intentionally engaged in activities to foster critical discourse and reflection. Both critical discourse and critical reflection are processes and therefore, findings show that in order for district leaders to develop principal instructional capacity, it is important to provide opportunities and activities for transformative learning. While findings pointed to evidence that discourse
and reflection were present, findings also highlighted the initial stages of activities in which the principals were involved as well as the individual participants’ perceptions and use of discourse and reflection.

**Provide Additional Support for Individual Principals**

In addition to the need to foster levels of critical discourse and reflection, findings indicated to the importance of additional support for individual principals. As seen in the evidence presented for activities to support critical discourse and critical reflection, individual perceptions can vary and additional support provided for instructional capacity growth can facilitate the transformative learning.

To contrast the data that highlighted the absence of the middle school principal at one DLT meeting as well as the outlying data from his interviews, one area of additional support observed for him involved the principal academy in the district for novice administrators. I observed the middle school principal during one principal academy meeting with the assistant superintendent. During this meeting, Principal Nash presented his individual goals as they related to district initiatives and received feedback from the assistant superintendent. During the principal academy observation, Principal Nash presented his proposal for instructional improvement to the assistant superintendent. This allowed for more depth in conversations between the principal and the assistant superintendent to examine the goals presented by the principal in the form of school performance data, arguments for the new processes, and alternative points of view.

During the principal academy, stronger evidence suggested a focus on critical discourse and reflection. This smaller setting provided a space for more specific
conversation related to the specific contexts surrounding the middle school principal’s decisions. In comparison to the middle school principal’s participation at the DLT meeting and the principal academy meeting between him and the assistant superintendent, a deeper level of discourse occurred during the principal academy. This was evidenced by the interaction between the two participants in the principal academy meeting. For example, the assistant superintendent asked specific questions and gave specific comments for critical reflection and critical discourse. Examples of her comments and questions from the instructional discussion, while taken as excerpts from the principal academy, show more individual support for a deeper level of discourse and reflection. Examples from the assistant superintendent’s discussion with the middle school principal included:

- I challenge you to have conversations. I sat in the instructional leadership team for [elementary school] yesterday afternoon. They're working on think aloud… and thinking aloud for contextual understanding, and making inferences and things like that. It might be really interesting to see;

- When you walk in, you're kind of expecting that. Are you saying you want teachers 100% to have the same lessons?

- So who's going to make that decision?

- I just need you to understand really the district mandates for you are those three areas…. That math is making it a balanced math program. ELA is making it a balanced literacy program, and school culture we've just got to
build an environment that is student friendly, teacher friendly, where kids want to be here, and teacher want to be here. Respect; and

- Your teachers need to have a clear focus of this is, what I'm going to do to make that happen. So, just remember that as you have conversations. Yes, in your head you have all of these things, but help them understand if I'm a math teacher, my focus is getting that balanced math program down in my classroom. We're going to work together. I'm going to know what I'm teaching. I'm going to know that I have a partner in crime to help us do common assessments. We're going to have all this to support each other.

(Assistant Superintendent Connor)

In turn, examples of questions and comments from the middle school principal showed that providing individual principals with additional support fostered critical discourse and critical reflection that supported instructional capacity growth. Examples from the middle school principal’s conversation with the assistant superintendent included:

- Measuring implementation, classroom walkthroughs, our literacy snapshots, observations, lesson plans, map progress when we get to the first of April, and then later one. That's our first activity. Second activity was hiring dedicated reading interventionist;

- With our curriculum team that's forming for school improvement, that should be something that they discuss of what that's going to look like, and they're going to get data from the teachers; and
And there's stuff we're not writing in the plan that's all part of the school improvement model that we're going to be revamping PLC… and there is some research and polling. But, ironically, it's probably going to go back somewhere to what I tried to install last year, is just going to be team decided not me saying this is what you're going to do. (Principal Nash)

These examples identified an area of critical discourse and reflection that was present in the district and the importance of providing additional support for principals. During the principal academy observation, the middle school principal was able to focus solely on his goals for his school and was able to have a more in-depth dialogue with the assistant superintendent and reflect on her comments. In addition, the assistant superintendent was able to give specific strategies, such as the use of consistent language, discussion surrounding instructional practices at the middle school, and the need for the principal to attend to school culture to align with the district structure.

**Evaluate Practices that Foster Transformative Learning**

In order to have successful transformative learning, district leaders must evaluate the processes in place for the learning to occur. The findings presented thus far show evidence of the stage in which the district found themselves in relation to the characteristics of transformative learning. Transformative learning is a process, therefore, the findings from this particular district show examples of which characteristics are present as well as areas where they need to be strengthened in order to lead to actionable results.
Through observation data, interview transcripts, and document review, it was evident that the process set up by the district instructional leaders sought to engage principals in activities that fostered learning communities that had critical discourse and critical reflection so that they could do the same in their schools. In addition, the assistant superintendent commented on the coordination and oversight of principal professional learning in the district. She said,

I am the professional development coordinator… It takes research and trying to figure out what's going to make a difference. But my role is from the moment of implementing it through progress, monitoring it, through evaluating it, and reviewing. Is it making difference or not? All of those roles come to me and land on my shoulders. (Assistant Superintendent Connor)

The findings point to the actions of the assistant superintendent to provide professional learning that is ongoing and relevant to principals while acknowledging the importance of evaluating and reviewing the process. While the findings suggested the district still had areas to continue to work on to incorporate conducive circumstances for critical discourse and critical reflection to increase the instructional capacity of principals, the study confirmed that the district evaluated past practices in order to implement transformative learning. Because the participants identified the intentional change from past practices, it was also evident from different data points that the district was still on the cusp of critical discourse and critical reflection as needed for transformative learning to take place. In order to continue to develop principal instructional capacity, district leaders must continue to evaluate current practices for continuous improvement.
Sociocultural Learning

Sociocultural learning attends to the nature of interactions among individuals that contribute to collective learning. The study offered a look at the perceptions of principals, guided by district leaders, through activities for collective instructional capacity through sociocultural learning. The study found the interactions among individuals contributed to the learning of principals in the district. Findings indicated that sociocultural learning was present through the intentional establishment of District Leadership Team (DLT) meetings. Through multiple rounds of coding, the results also pointed to important inductive findings that led to a revision of propositions as well as implications for practice and further research described in Chapter 5. In order for district leaders to develop the instructional leadership capacity in principals through sociocultural learning, they must support openness and trust to facilitate leaders as learners, recognize the importance of district leaders, and acknowledge individual interactions in collective practices.

Support Openness and Trust to Facilitate Leaders as Learners

Important to sociocultural learning, some of the participants identified openness and trust as catalysts for a successful learning community. During interviews, the researcher defined professional learning as relevant and integrated as characteristics for further discussion. Therefore, the conditions expressed by participants were notable to the study findings and further implications. These findings support the need for well-
designed sociocultural learning that included openness and trust to extend instructional leadership capacity.

Examples of the importance of trust and openness occurred through interviews and observation. The assistant superintendent commented in her interview that, “There’s still gaps. I wish I could say we were perfect, but we’re not. I still think there’s a trust factor” (Assistant Superintendent Connor). During the first observation of the District Leadership Team (DLT), the assistant superintendent supported her interview comments when she conveyed to the principals, “We have to trust our team. We gotta build trust” (Assistant Superintendent Connor). In his interview, the superintendent stated, “We’re working on clarity and communication and collegiality. That involves time. It develops over time with trust; it develops over time with resilience” (Superintendent Howe). In his interview, John Hardy also supported the collective nature of the principals and said, “We have just a sense of trust here. People don’t mind sharing with one another.” John Hardy also said,

But as long as everybody's open, and everybody's trusting. Really we're all in it for the same reason, although there's a competitive part to it. But to me, we're all in it for those children, wanting them to succeed.

The principal of Suarez Early Childhood, Linda Fraley, stated, “We [principals] have that openness between most of us, among most of us. Not all, but most.” Paralleling her comment about openness between most of the principals, she said, “We’ve all been here, other than one, been in the district a long time.” This statement supported the
demographic data presented in Table 4.2, which referenced the participants’ years in the district. All participants, with the exception of the Thompson Middle principal, worked in the district for 16 years or more. While James Nash, the Thompson Middle principal, was an exception in some findings in this chapter, he concurred with other participants about working together collectively. He stated during his interview,

I think all the principals are very good at working together, because… we all have the same kids. They all come to my middle school, and they all go to the high school. I think there’s a generalized understanding of that we all serve the same kids, and we need to make sure we’re doing what’s best for all of them.

(Principal Nash)

Interview data surrounding openness and trust show the importance of leaders as learners in collective efforts. While the data collected identified the perceived driving force behind the principal professional learning shift as the assistant superintendent, the structure of, and communication of, DLT meetings and the work of the principals supported professional communities. The findings pointed to the necessity to provide an environment supportive of openness and trust in order to facilitate leaders as learners.

In order to foster leaders as learners, districts must create opportunities for the continuous improvement of principals through openness and trust. While this finding also connects to collective goals, it also supported the intentional restructure for principal professional learning to incorporate sociocultural learning. The superintendent gave the
example of a ziggurat to visualize the instructional leadership within the collective strategies. He said,

It builds. It’s a ziggurat, it’s a pyramid. Have the goals, then the next step, logically, the second point you mentioned…. That [managing the instructional program] becomes the least time consuming because it’s done organically, dynamically, within a system that is self-perpetuating. (Superintendent Howe)

In order to create successful sociocultural processes, providing environments of trust and openness are essential for instructional capacity growth. In providing those supports, understanding the instructional capacity of principals is important. In the interview with the superintendent during this study, he reflected,

You can’t presume capacity. You cannot presume it, you cannot… They don’t know. Just because a person is a principal, it does not mean they are an astute, instructional leader, however they can develop to become a better one.

(Superintendent Howe)

Principal Jenkins from Cothran Elementary paralleled the sentiments of the superintendent and said, “We assume that everybody walks into this position are instructional leaders and they’re not” (Principal Jenkins). Jenkins said later in her interview, “If you want your district to get better and stronger, then they need to become instructional leaders” (Principal Jenkins). To support this comment, Principal Jenkins commented in one DLT observation, “The other thing I notice about school is that if the
teachers don’t believe you, if you can’t walk the walk and talk the talk, then it doesn’t matter what you present to them [teachers]” (Principal Jenkins). This was an important realization for principals toward their growth as instructional leaders who managed the instructional program and participated in the learning community established by district leaders.

Of the six principals interviewed, five of them expressed their role as the instructional leader in their school buildings. The Thompson Middle principal identified his weakness in instructional leadership. In conjunction with managing the instructional program, the middle school principal said, “You have different types of principals. I’m an operational principal. I’m very much management, building operations… That’s why I have an assistant principal who is instructional” (Principal Nash).

While all of the participants had some level of acknowledgement of collective learning provided by the district, not all had the same perceived level of participation in, and commitment to, the learning community to foster their instructional capacity. Because several participants commented on openness and trust, the data suggests that in order for district leaders to facilitate instructional capacity growth, principals must first know the importance of instructional leadership and feel support and openness to develop that capacity.

**Recognize the Importance of District Leaders in Sociocultural Learning**

Based on the conceptual framework and theoretical propositions for this study, district leaders should provide opportunities for principal professional learning in order to
increase instructional capacity. This indicated that the oversight and coordination should originate with, and be facilitated by, district leaders. Several participants indicated in their interviews that the assistant superintendent was the driving force behind the change in principal professional learning.

District leaders should actively seek to use sociocultural learning as part of the framework for principal professional learning. During her interview, Sharon Connor, assistant superintendent, expressed her role as a district leader and said, “It takes research and trying to figure out what’s going to make a difference. But my role is from the moment of implementing it through process, monitoring it, through evaluating it, and reviewing.”

The superintendent commented in his interview,

I think that Sharon Conner being our assistant superintendent in curriculum and instruction, she decided that our focus needed to be on training principals to be better instructional leaders because there was a discrepancy between every school.

(Superintendent Howe)

In her interview, the principal of Cothran Elementary supported the assistant superintendent’s comment by saying, “she [Sharon Connor] decided that our focus needed to be on training principals to be better instructional leaders because there was a discrepancy between every school” (Principal Jenkins). Principal Jenkins described the discrepancy in terms of the need for principal professional learning in collective terms.

The principal of Thompson Middle supported other’s claims in his interview and
commented, “I think Sharon Connor is driving a lot of growth… the forward-minded progress that this district’s trying to make” (Principal Nash).

The findings concerning openness and trust as well as the confirmation that the assistant superintendent was the catalyst for the intentional shift in principal professional learning point to the need to attend to additional factors of collective learning. Sociocultural learning must attend to individual perceptions within the collective effort in order to create a successful learning community. The remaining findings show the level to which sociocultural learning heightened the learning of individual participants’ instructional capacity.

**Acknowledge Individual Interactions in Collective Practices**

In order to attend to the instructional capacity of principals, district instructional goals should be clear and lead to evidence of collective goals and practices. In addition, individual interactions within the collective practices must be acknowledged and developed. The discussion of findings as related to goal setting sought to describe the nature of the strategies used for principal professional learning and its effect on collective goals. In the interview with the assistant superintendent, she remarked, “This year we focused on developing district wide priorities” (Principal Connor). Based on interview data, all six of the principals expressed that they perceived the school district was moving in the right direction toward a learning community that would benefit their instructional leadership capacity.
Through observation, interviews, and document review, examples of common threads were noted in district goals. These common threads included literacy, the use of data for instructional purposes, and learning communities. The responses from the participants showed some variation in the purpose and focus for the school district. However, each participant’s response showed the interactions among the individuals of the district and the collective practices toward instructional capacity. In relationship to the fundamental purpose and alignment on student learning, the participants agreed on similar district goals related to student achievement and instructional improvement. The following individual sections discuss the individual interactions in collective practices to support the findings.

**Literacy.** Four of the six principals commented on the district’s goal of literacy directly in their interview while the remaining two actively participated in the District Leadership Team meetings that centered on literacy practices as seen through observation. In addition, documents including the agendas for the DLT meetings that were observed and agendas from previous DLT meetings not observed showed a continued focus on literacy instruction for principals as a collective district goal.

Data revealed a literacy focus; however, it was clear that the activities in the DLT meetings still grappled with meeting the individual context and grade-level needs of principals. For example, during the second DLT observation, participants participated in a close reading activity, a literacy standards-based activity surrounding a text on a third grade level, and continued with a text-dependent analysis activity also on the third grade
level. During conversation, the presenter referred to cross-grade level comparisons of standards; however, there was a predominant focus on elementary school literacy. This shows the importance of planning for individual interactions in collective processes.

**Data Use.** The superintendent and assistant superintendent specifically cited data use in their interviews, and through observation, the principals explained how the data of learning communities in their schools increased the success of their overall instructional program. Superintendent Howe explained the collective effort to “recreate a program by which we stay focused on student achievement… but it’s all based on the acknowledgement of data, the use of data, and the continued mining for what the data says.”

Commenting on previous practices and school goals, the Principal Hardy from Edwards Elementary stated in his interview, “For many years it was like the schools did their own kind of thing… every school is unique in what they need and things, based on their data.” These factors showed the congruency of district goals while acknowledging the individual participants’ perceptions of district goals.

**Learning Communities.** Each participant recognized the intentional shift of learning communities for the district. All six principals acknowledged the intentionality in creating learning communities for principals. However, not all principals did not exhibit the same level of participation and enthusiasm. Further data on intentionality will be described later in this chapter.
Further supporting sociocultural learning as a collective effort that principals could engage in as individuals, Assistant Superintendent Connor stated, 

“You’re supposed to be working on those things that your school’s struggling with in order to make progress… your instructional leadership team has identified areas and you’ve got to provide professional development.”

Before the observation, the assistant superintendent expressed in her interview, “We asked principals to utilize the same priorities and goals in their plans” (Assistant Superintendent Connor) that the district set forth. Because the data presented showed congruency in district plans, it supports the need to attend to individuals within collective practices in order to create successful sociocultural learning.

Beyond the congruent data shown above, some participants commented on areas of individual struggles while district leaders sought to support collective processes. During the second DLT meeting, the assistant superintendent further stated, “Our hope is that you will be able to communicate with the network that they have already developed. And be able to design, develop, and grow your program” (Assistant Superintendent Connor). The assistant superintendent referred to the individual school-level instructional programs during this discussion.

Data from the middle school and high school principals concerning communication gives evidence that their absence at one or more DLT meetings may have affected the development and growth of their instructional capacity. In her interview, the Parker High principal summarized the communication of the district by saying,
They [district leadership] want it to get there, and I think it eventually will, and when we do we will be much more aligned, and I feel like they will make bigger strides with professional development and achievement overall, and communication of what those goals are. (Principal Cooper)

The high school principal also indicated in her interview that communication, at the school level, was a struggle for her even though she was able to clearly articulate what she felt were the district’s goals for the school year (Principal Cooper). Concerning communication of clear goals, Marie Cooper commented,

As far as them [goals] being ingrained in everything that we do, I don’t know that it’s to that level yet. We are communicating, communication at different times, but as far as are we living those goals and really pulling them in? I think we haven’t gotten to that step yet, but I think that’s the next step.

While the Parker High principal indicated some disconnect in communication of goals, the Thompson Middle principal expressed a negative perception of the communication. When asked about communication in his interview, the Thompson Middle principal stated,

So there tends to be sometimes a lapse, I think, in the way that they rollout initiatives. There’s not a very good communication plan involved. They know what that they want, but there’s not always a good communication plan for how they want to roll it out. (Principal Nash)

In further interview data, the Thompson Middle’s principal also indicated that communication was a struggle for him as a leader. He said that, “I think I have a very
clear vision of what I want to happen. My struggle sometimes is communicating it to the staff” (Principal Nash). This data and their attendance at DLT meetings pointed to the need for district leaders to use sociocultural learning to not only attend to the collective learning, but to develop a system whereby principals have opportunities to address differentiated perceptions and needs.

Principal professional learning driven by district leaders offered a level of congruency and consistency of goals for the district; however, the two principals that missed one or both of the monthly DLT meetings expressed disconnectedness with communication of the district’s process. During the observation of the second DLT conference and in conjunction with interview data, the middle school principal did not openly share the same enthusiasm for the intentional efforts. In contrast to the other principal participants, the principal at Thompson Middle commented in his interview, “There’s not support for developing us, we’re pretty much told. Which means we have to go… All the principals are going to that [principal conference], and that’s part of a district initiative” (Principal Nash). During the discussion concerning professional learning in his interview, the middle school principal commented, “I know they want it to come from us and say, ‘This is a district initiative and we’re supporting here and this, that and the other thing,’ but then they don’t equip us to support it here” (Principal Nash). Further, during the second observation, the Thompson Middle principal commented his school was still at the lowest level of implementation of the district common initiative.
The outlier findings associated with the middle school principal point to the importance of acknowledging individual learners as part of the collective sociocultural learning structures of professional learning. It was clear from the findings that the middle school principal did not share the same perception of professional learning in the district as a joint, collective effort. During both DLT observations, district leaders directed principals through close reading activities, writing activities, and district instructional standards. Principals participated in collective discussions surrounding district goals and their growth as leaders and learners. While the participants of the study acknowledged their initial stage of principal professional learning communities, observations and interview data pointed to a deliberate attempt to increase aspects of developing people and creating opportunities for continuous improvement. Inductive findings revealed the different perceptions of principals within the study as they related to the opportunities for principal professional learning.

Additional Findings for Principal Professional Learning

In reporting the findings for the study to answer the research question, evidence of intentionality and the effects of rural context on the process are important to the discussion of how district leaders used transformative and sociocultural learning to increase instructional capacity of principals. In addition, the evidence of accountability demands shaped the intentionality of principal professional learning and the context in which the demands occur. Therefore, intentionality, accountability, and contextual
considerations support a more robust presentation of findings surrounding transformative and sociocultural learning.

**Organize Intentional Structures for Principal Professional Learning**

The district in the study intentionally restructured principal professional learning, which prompted further exploration through this case study. This initiative was a cornerstone in how the district addressed principal professional learning. While the participants agreed that the district had intentionally restructured their principal professional learning, findings supported the assertion that the district was in the initial stages of implementation of revised principal professional learning. Even though the district in the study found itself in the initial stages of intentional professional learning for principals, taking an intentional step in creating structures is a key finding. The Superintendent Howe said in his interview, “Developing people is done through these intentional meetings and professional development. The training that we have, the days that we have… We are giving ownership and we’re giving investment choice.” In his description of the intentional principal professional learning, the superintendent commented in his interview, “I think a good metaphor would be we’re an iceberg. We’re just beginning to uncover… we’re only at the surface of what is a much more vibrant and likely much more enriching experience two years from now” (Superintendent Howe).

Five out of the six principals interviewed identified the intentionality of the change for principal professional learning in the district. By making principal professional learning intentional, district leaders took the first step in changing how they
developed leadership capacity of principals. The exception to that finding was the middle school principal. The remaining principals expressed different perceptions on the process of change in the district. In his interview, the principal of Cothran Elementary said about the past process, “It used to be that our district leadership team meetings were a sit and get. Just administrivia, they gave you information and dates” (Principal Jenkins). The principal of the Suarez Early Childhood paralleled that statement when she commented in her interview, “DLTs used to just be each person at the district office gave a report, you took notes… so they’ve made efforts to improve that” (Principal Fraley). Likewise, the principal of Edwards Elementary said,

Every time we went to DLT… everybody from the different departments would give an update, and so we weren’t being fed… I think they realized that and in the same sense of trying to get us all together, there was something that needed to be done. (Principal Hardy)

Through document review of four agendas for DLT meetings held in November 2018, January 2019, March 2019, and April 2019, the first part of the meeting was devoted to instructional learning for principals. To collaborate the observation and document review, the Assistant Superintendent Connor stated,

We’ve put it in the mornings now, they’ve asked for time. We’ve worked hard to change our principal meeting to the first part of it as solely instruction. To practice reading articles, to practice what it should look like when they go into the classroom. To look at examples of student work and analyze.
John Hardy, principal at Edwards Elementary said in his interview, “It’s better now than it’s ever been, as far as for us through the district. I mean, I think that we could probably do more, but I think that we’re on the right track.” To support Mr. Hardy’s thoughts, the principal at Cothran Elementary noted on the change from past practices, “I think the structure we have now is much better than it’s been. I’m in 18 years and the last three years have been better than it’s ever been” (Principal Jenkins).

Lisa Schultz, the first-year principal at D.W. Elementary also stated, “We’re not there yet in providing as much professional development for principals as needed, but I feel like Sharon has been a huge proponent.” In addition, the superintendent supported the intention, particularly from the assistant superintendent, and stated in his interview,

I think the communication is ongoing, I do think it is clear. I think it is maybe not as clear as it will be, but it’s clearer than it ever was because prior to Sharon coming, instruction occurred, but there wasn’t a rational effort of pushing systems in place with intention. (Superintendent Howe)

To further support the depth of intentionality, data revealed that intentional practices at the district level filtered down to school levels through principals. This shows evidence that most principals supported the intentional efforts aimed at learning through transformative and sociocultural learning. The principal from Edwards Elementary described in his interview how he incorporated the practice at his individual school. He said, “I think this is one of the best things we’ve done… because our group meetings, they find what things are working… then we try to replicate that and let everybody try it,
and come back and talk about it” (Principal Hardy). The principal from D.W. Elementary also supported the process at the school level during a discussion in a DLT meeting and commented, “I’m seeing the fruits of our labor now and I’m seeing teachers that are bringing student work every single week and talking about student work, and looking at the data” (Principal Schultz). District leaders used the intentional restructuring of principal professional learning to begin to develop principals as instructional leaders capable of replicating the process in their own schools.

Another important finding showed the importance of acknowledging individual leaders within the intentional organization of principal professional learning. For example, during his interview, the Thompson Middle principal commented on the district’s push for capacity growth through professional learning and commented, “It’s similar to what I’ve seen in other things. We just have a particular language they want to use around it… which that’s one of the parts I’m resistant to” (Principal Nash). When discussing the initiative further, James Nash stated, “These are the… things the district said. And we’ll try to make sure that whatever we’re trying to do in our plan does not counteract what the district’s doing.” In considering alternative points of view, in the case of this study the change in principal professional learning, the Thompson Middle principal said,

What I see and what I hear from my teachers, is that they [initiatives] will stick around for a while, and then things don’t get followed up on. That’s kind of been my view of what I’ve seen so far. (Principal Nash)
Interesting to note through data analysis, the superintendent commented on his perspective of principal openness to the intentional shift for principals. He said,

What they [principals] do… is they just wait you out. “This will change; we will be here when you’re long gone.” They then go into a siege mentality of “you can launch your weapons at us if you wish, put the catapults in and bring the battering rams, but we’re going to wait you out and you’re not going to starve us out.” It’s not to be seen as adversarial. That’s the thing that we’re trying to do, is we’re not condemning people for opinions, we’re trying to open them up to what practices can be to prove to them that learning occurs. (Superintendent Howe)

These two comments from the middle school principal and the superintendent show the challenges faced in making these intentional changes. While the comments from the middle school principal and superintendent were gathered in separate interviews, they seemed to complement each other and show that district leaders should attend to the individuals within the sociocultural structure in order to ultimately transform learning.

Extending the comments from the superintendent, he expressed that most principals were open to new ideas; however, he shared his biggest problem with principal professional learning. He said,

The biggest problem that ever comes is when a principal chooses to allow him or herself to go on auto pilot and say that the direction has been set by the district. That becomes… The district may in fact be setting some flight patterns, but the pilot still has multiple means by which to get to the airport. For us… they can fly at different altitudes, but when you go on auto pilot, that to me is the most
frustrating thing… they deflect to the district. “District is making us do it” which then sets a negative tone to the teachers. (Superintendent Howe)

Acknowledgement of the change from past principal professional learning practices supported the need for intentional changes; however, not all participants were as supportive of the intentionality principal learning.

In addition to intentionality, the rural context of the district helped answer how districts structure principal professional learning. Framing the research in a rural setting added significance to the findings as well as identified and confirmed challenges faced in rural districts. Concluding the significance and challenges of principals in rural settings, findings identified additional evidence of a principal’s extended instructional role in rural schools and how leaders can address those contextual challenges.

**Recognize the Importance of Contextual Factors**

In order to understand the analytic generalization of the study, additional findings that recognize the importance of the rural context for this district added a deeper level of discussion and implications for practice and further research. Several participants commented on the significance of being a rural school district that are important to distinguish in the study’s findings. The superintendent commented, “I think rural is such an obtuse definition that to each rural district, they will encounter and define it similarly, though somewhat different” (Superintendent Howe). The superintendent also remarked,

In a community our size we also have to realize the dynamic of life. I see things very organically. Things occur. Life happens. We’ve got these plans and
sometimes you have to moderate the plans based on where you are.

(Superintendent Howe)

The assistant superintendent commented in her interview, “What happens unfortunately in rural districts a lot of the times; they continue to do the same old, because it’s what’s always been done. And we will never see the gains that we need to see” (Assistant Superintendent Connor). The superintendent echoed similar sentiments. The superintendent referred to an often “entrenched element that is resistant to change” (Superintendent Howe) and commented, “The population that by nature is rural and pastoral, gives this idea of resistance to change that often is very difficult for principals to encounter. What they do… is they will just wait you out” (Superintendent Howe). In order to address how to structure principal professional learning, leaders must be willing to incorporate how the context of a district affects the overall learning processes of leaders.

Addressing challenges of rural principals. The multiple rounds of coding confirmed the challenges faced by rural school principals. Based on the contextual considerations and challenges expressed by participants, having intentional principal professional learning helped to structure the characteristics of transformative and sociocultural learning for a rural school district despite the challenges faced. Identification of challenges faced in rural districts assisted district leaders in continuous improvement for principal professional learning.
Results from interviews and observations showed the importance of how a district’s context affects aspects of managing the instructional program. For example, during her interview, the Parker High principal commented, “Trying to manage school and get the instructional focus on and given the appropriate attention is difficult” (Principal Cooper). Congruent with research, isolation was a challenge the district faced. Principal Cooper also commented, “It’s difficult because we are so small… it’s hard to have an instructional meeting that addresses all levels” (Principal Cooper). The assistant superintendent paralleled that statement and said, “I think we’re limited. I have one high school, one middle school, and three elementary, and one 4K.” (Principal Connor). In addition, some schools have only the principal as an administrator on campus. The principal of Edwards Elementary stated, “That’s one thing, me being the only administrator here, so I don’t have a lot of support” (Principal Hardy).

Collective interaction is vital to the sociocultural learning of principals. Data collected pointed to the willingness of most principals to participate in collective interactions, but showed additional challenges faced by principals. These factors must be considered when districts structure activities associated with principal professional learning to increase instructional capacity. The principal from D.W. Elementary commented, “I think one of the challenges is just for us, because we are so small, that we don’t have the network of principals that we can get together and team” (Principal Schultz). In addition, because the district had only one middle school and one high school, they seemed to struggle more with collective interactions.
The findings have already highlighted an important observation of principal absence in DLT meetings that led to evidence of further perceptions of isolation. The high school principal was absent from both observed DLT meetings and the middle school principal was absent from one of the observed DLT meetings. In addition, with the noted absences of the high school principal and the middle school principal, it was unclear to what extent these two participants truly internalized the intentionality of change for principal learning and overcame some of the challenges associated with rural school contexts. Findings showed the need to have structures in place to highlight the importance of activities geared toward instructional capacity growth in order to portray their importance for district priorities.

Other aspects faced by the school district expressed through the findings of the study, and congruent with previous research, included funding and attracting quality leaders and teachers. Through interview data, the middle school principal identified funding as one of the major challenges for the district. Paralleling the challenge of attracting quality leaders, the superintendent said, “I think sometimes it’s very hard to attract the quality of leader or teacher to a rural district that, in some cases, as other districts with a cosmopolitan, metropolitan, urban flair for teach” (Superintendent Howe). Through an observation of the principal’s academy with the Thompson Middle principal, James Nash illustrated the difficulty in attracting candidates to a rural district when he said, “We’ve only had one person apply for the reading interventionist position so far, so that is a work in progress.” Having a clear understanding of the challenges in a rural district and being able to apply them to the practices in the district can better equip
district leaders to create structures for transformative and sociocultural learning for principals.

**Rural principals and multiple perspectives.** Important to transformative and sociocultural learning is the existence of multiple perspectives within the collective group. Because the district only had one middle school and one high school, discourse, reflection, and action centered predominantly on elementary schools. For example, the agendas from the DLT meetings showed close reading activities as well as writing prompts from elementary level books and articles. During one such activity, the principals were engaged in a close reading activity using an excerpt from the book *Bud, Not Buddy* that is a third grade level text. The activities that used reading passages during the observed DLT meetings did not go above an elementary level. Some discussion occurred about the standards across grade levels, but predominantly, the focus was at the elementary level. Evidence pointed to the need to address the multiple levels of principals in a rural district, particularly when there is only one principal at a level such as the case with the middle school and high school principals. In this case, the district made some efforts to differentiate the focus and content of the activities; however, it was clear from activities during the DLT that most activities were focused on the elementary school level.

**Attend to Accountability Demands**

Because accountability demands were important to the theoretical propositions for this study, it is important to note the use of the accreditation cycle language to guide the
district’s process for principals. Accountability demands paired with contextual considerations must be addressed in order to transform practice in sociocultural learning structures.

During the first DLT observation, the assistant superintendent used the language from the district’s accreditation cycle to describe the process the district adopted to help structure its process. She said, “My goal is to be out of initiating… we need to be down in that improve and impact stage and what does that mean when they come to review” (Assistant Superintendent Connor). The assistant superintendent explained the different levels of the accreditation cycle and how each of those – initiate, improve, and impact – were important to the present practices for principal learning.

Interviews, observations, and document review showed the alignment of the district goals and priorities with the district’s focus on the state accreditation process. The principal of Edwards Elementary commented in his interview, “Before too long we’ll have [the accreditation cycle] coming up. And so the district set their goals” (Principal Hardy). The Parker High principal further commented,

We do start out each year with… our three goals that we’re working on, they come straight from [the accreditation cycle], and we build whatever we need to with professional development for schools, and then also for ourselves off of those goals” (Principal Cooper).

To support the proposition concerning increased accountability demands, the Parker High principal offered insight into the work of learning communities paired with
accountability demands. This summarized one alternate point of view on the new initiative through the lens of accountability. She said,

> It [the accreditation cycle] is a system, but being able to see that system and then put those pieces in place to make that happen that’s where you get that synergy and things really start moving, but they are definitely on track for that. But I think that’s where the disconnect is right now. (Principal Cooper)

In contrast, the Thompson Middle principal wrestled with the district’s initiative in conjunction with other accountability measures. He commented in his interview that the district’s model is “very similar to the state’s model… We [district] have a particular language they want to use around it… which that’s one of the parts I’m resistant to, because my teachers don’t care about acronyms right now ” (Principal Nash).

The findings associated with the district’s accreditation cycle show how sociocultural learning results from the interaction of individual participants in order to contribute to collective goals and learning. The collective goals of the district were expressed through the congruency with the state accreditation process as well as how the district leaders manifested that to produce an intentional effort for joint learning for principals. This is relevant to sociocultural learning in that it establishes a collective goal for individuals to work toward. In addition, accountability demands shaped the activities in which participants engaged that were designed for transformative learning.
Summary

This case study was used to investigate the phenomenon of one rural school district whose district leaders restructured principal professional learning in order to be responsive to principal instructional leadership needs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The findings were presented in such a way as to mirror the theoretical foundations used for the study. Transformative and sociocultural learning are natural allies to study principal professional learning; however, results from the study were broken out into each category to highlight the distinctive characteristics. The findings also show the interplay of learning communities infused with transformative learning to influence instructional leadership. Data presented showed the degree to which sociocultural and transformative learning was occurring in the work of the rural school district. While the participants were engaged in the dynamics of sociocultural and transformative learning at different levels, it was evident that findings showed promising aspects of how the district leaders addressed principal professional learning.

Chapter 5 will begin with the revision and extension of theoretical propositions and summarize findings and implications provide the basis for further practice and research. The discussion in Chapter 5 represents data synthesis to assist with implications for practice in the educational field and implications for further research.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

The primary purpose of this study was to explore transformative and sociocultural learning (Knapp, 2008; Mezirow, 2000; Wenger, 2000) in principal professional learning in one rural school district in response to the instructional leadership capacity needs of its principals. The discussion of the findings centers on the evaluation of current practices, continuously evaluating principal learning, and creating learning that is relevant and integrated. A secondary purpose of this study was to understand how district leaders supported the process of transformative and sociocultural learning for principals in their district. Discussion for this purpose focuses on how research informs intentional practice. A final purpose of this study was to show how learning community frameworks and theoretical propositions are malleable and contextually applicable for principal professional learning in other districts. The discussion for this purpose describes the need for attention to be given to individual principal needs within the collective process as well as the importance of a learning environment that has openness and trust.

Discussion

Understand How Research Informs Intentional Practice

Research on transformative and sociocultural learning informed the findings and discussion for the study. Collective learning was evident throughout the study through the
nature of the intentional efforts of district leaders to support principal professional learning. Aspects of transformative learning were also present in the study; however, the level of critical reflection and critical discourse varied. The district’s principal professional learning had characteristics of both transformative and sociocultural learning. Transformative and sociocultural learning occurred jointly as shown in aspects of the intentional activities aimed at increasing the instructional capacities of principals. However, the initiative was not as successful at establishing trust and openness. Attending to the characteristics of transformative and sociocultural learning could have increased the growth of principal instructional capacity (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Hallinger, 2005; Kruse et al., 1995). A discussion of critical discourse, critical reflection, and collective learning will tie the research and findings together.

**Critical Discourse.** Critical discourse is dialogue devoted to assessing reasons presented in support of competing interpretations, by critically examining evidence, arguments, and alternative points of view (Mezirow, 2000). Through observation and document review, district leaders intentionally provided activities during District Leadership Team (DLT) meetings that sought to engage principals with evidence, arguments, and alternative points of view. However, the absence of some principals at DLT meetings paired with the stage of implementation of principal professional learning highlighted the need to continue to hone in on the activities structured for more critical discourse.

Dialogue at DLT meetings predominantly focused on the presentation of district leaders’ responses to activities, rather than engaging the principals in dialogue that
critically examined evidence, arguments, and alternative points of view. Therefore, critical discourse had not yet been accomplished. Glimpses of more critical discourse were seen in conversations surrounding each principal’s journey through professional learning, how professional learning was manifested at the school level through principal leaders, and during the principal academy for novice leaders. It is important to note, however, that the dialogue at DLT meetings became more critical over time, as noted by the Assistant Superintendent Connor.

Mezirow (2000) outlined certain conditions that are ideal for participants to “freely and fully participate in discourse” (p. 13). The professional development offered mixed results in meeting these conditions. Concerning communication, the initial stages of principal professional learning were in place to assist with the presentation of more accurate and complete information, though there were some discrepancies in communication identified by participants. While coercion was not an expressed or observed issue in analyzing data, there was insufficient data to substantiate that there was complete freedom from it during analysis of interactions among participants. It should be noted that participants did not choose the reading topics, therefore dialogue that was observed was predominantly focused on elementary level literacy. The choice to use elementary level materials may not have benefited the non-elementary school level principals and therefore, this may have contributed to the middle school and high school principals perception of usefulness. This observation could also reflect the absence of the high school principal at both DLT meetings and the middle school principal at one meeting.
Data was inconclusive as to whether the ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively was present in participants; however, participants seemed open to discussion with other principals through their interview comments. For example, as presented in Chapter 4, Principal John Hardy also supported the openness to discussion when he commented, “We have just a sense of trust here. People don’t mind sharing with one another.” Even though the middle school principal was an outlier in multiple findings, he also commented, during his interview,

I think all the principals are very good at working together, because… we all have the same kids. They all come to my middle school, and they all go to the high school. I think her there’s a generalized understanding of that we all serve the same kids, and we need to make sure we’re doing what’s best for all of them.

(Principal Nash)

As visible through observation, an equal opportunity to participate in the various types of discourse was present through DLT meetings and principal academy meetings. The participants in the DLT meetings were respectful to each other during the discussions and the district leaders structured questions to assist participation.

The final condition posited by Mezirow (2000) for critical discourse was the willingness to seek understanding and agreement and to accept a resulting best judgement as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence, or arguments yield a better judgement. While interview data confirmed the principals’ willingness to communicate with each other as colleagues and with district leaders, the study did not yield conclusive evidence that principals truly accepted the resulting best judgement in all cases. Further
discourse and reflection as the principals continue this professional learning may yield a higher level of acceptance and participation in the research and activities surrounding the process. Participation in discourse was present in the district; however, as Mezirow points out, “These ideal conditions constitute a principle; they are never fully realized in practice” (p. 14).

**Critical Reflection.** Critical reflection is the use of frames of reference to critically assess assumptions, expectations, and work with others to transform practices for an intended purpose (Mezirow, 2000). According to Mezirow (2000), a frame of reference is a way in which to interpret an experience, and habits of mind are a set of assumptions that are broad, generalized, and orienting predispositions, which act as filters for interpreting the meaning of experience (Mezirow, 2000). While not the centerpiece of the resulting findings from this study, habits of mind and frames of reference reflected the stage of implementation of professional learning provided in the opportunities for growth.

Mezirow (2000) described transformations in habit of mind as either “epochal, a sudden, dramatic, reorienting insight, or incremental, involving a progressive series of transformations in related points of view that culminate in a transformation in habit of mind” (p. 21). The district in the study was in the first year of intentional shifts in principal professional learning that parallels the process of incremental transformations. The activities seen through observation link to a progressive series of transformations for critical reflection, even though the district was in the initial stages. One such example came in the form of the platform that allowed principals to record professional learning
and reflect on the practices seen. These types of activities, if continued, could lead to transformations of habits of mind.

**Collective Learning.** Consistent with previous research (Knapp, 2008), the district created collective learning opportunities to support connections in learning communities. In addition, the variations in the deductive codes and inductive findings substantiated the belief by DuFour and Marzano (2011) that collaborative practice is beneficial to educators; however, as the findings showed, transformation to such practice is a challenge.

Collective learning is instrumental for districts engaged in reform (Knapp, 2008). This district created an intentional focus during DLT monthly meetings that showed evidence of collective learning. The activities observed during DLT meetings were structured to help principals actively internalize and embody district goals to enhance their instructional capacity (Herrenkohl & Wertsch, 1999).

Extending learning from individual to collective interactions, such as those found in DLT meetings (Knapp, 2008), were important findings for discussion. The activities seen during DLT meetings were in line with the district goals of literacy; however, the activities were geared predominantly to elementary schools. The conversation surrounding the topics helped principals address gaps in literacy identified by district leaders; however, as the district continues to incorporate activities for principal learning, the leaders need to make a more concerted effort to address multiple levels. In response to accountability pressures, the district communicated common goals and continued to
move toward ongoing and contextualized professional learning for their principals, though they had not yet implemented their process fully.

**Attend to Individual Principal’s Need within the Collective Process**

Each individual must be integrated into the collective nature of the district in order for the system to be successful (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). A clear outlier in the study was the middle school principal. He identified his struggle when commenting, “My struggle sometimes is communicating it to the staff” (Principal Nash). He also identified himself as an operational leader in comparison to the other principals who identified themselves as instructional leaders. In addition, he was more critical of the communication deficiencies at both the district level and in his own school than were other participants in the study. This data and the absence of the middle school and high school principals at one or more DLT meetings pointed to the need for district leaders to use sociocultural learning to not only attend to the collective learning, but to develop a system whereby principals have opportunities to address differentiated perceptions and needs.

**Evaluate Current Learning and Create a Way to Continuously Evaluate Learning**

In order to evaluate current learning and create ways to continuously evaluate learning, district leaders must first be committed to the learning. The study revealed intentional efforts on the part of district leaders. Because the work of principals continues to be multifaceted (Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2005; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Urick, 2016), district leaders must intentionally attend to principal professional learning (Fink and Resnick, 2001; Honig & Copland, 2008; Prothero, 2015)). Findings established
the importance of district leader support in the implementation of intentional principal professional learning as the first step in continuous improvement. Participants consistently commented on the assistant superintendent as the catalyst for the opportunities available for principals. This indicated that the district leaders took an active role in principal professional learning and the direction for the district.

This study showed that the district was in the initial stage of implementation of intentional efforts geared toward principal professional learning. Glickman et al. (2018) categorized professional development in three stages – implementation, integration, and refinement. Because the district was within the first year of implementation, the findings showed the opportunities for continuous improvement. In order to improve, district leaders must first evaluate current learning and then create a way to continuously evaluate learning. While the district in this study had not yet reached the refinement stage, where learners participate through experimentation and reflection, findings showed that the district had a long-term improvement plan to increase refinement (Glickman et al., 2018). This finding also elicited implications for practice and further research

**Structure Principal Professional Learning that is Relevant and Integrated**

The data from this case study confirmed that in order for principals to prepare for, and continue to be instructional leaders, district leaders must create opportunities for principals to understand expectations and instructional capacity. In addition, district leaders committed to improvement should create ongoing and sustained work (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). The district studied showed a commitment to improvement in principal instructional capacity as seen through the intentional restructure of professional learning.
The activities in DLT meetings were specifically aligned with school and district goals as seen in the study. The activities were tied to how principals can improve results, though the researcher did not have specific evidence that the activities had produced results yet. To continue to build capacity in principals, the district created a principal academy that met at individual principal’s schools. Though it was not specifically job-embedded, the principal academy did focus on activities and content that were more relevant to the individual principal. As previously established, evidence was clear that principal professional learning was predominantly collaborative instead of individual. Attention to these and other research-based practices showed professional learning geared toward more relevant and integrated collective activities for principals.

Consistent with the recommendations of previous researchers, the professional learning for principals was relevant and integrated. It was clear that those with less experience, particularly those with the least amount of experience in the district, needed the most support. In response, the district instituted a principal academy for novice administrators. In addition, district leaders must recognize the leadership types of principals and how they understand the social and contextual environment of the school district (Peterson, 2002).

One principal in particular, the middle school principal, expressed that the district did not develop him. He identified himself as an operational leader as well as having a deficiency in communication. In contrast, the elementary principal with the most experience did not explicitly identify any differentiation for professional learning. This further supports the notion that opportunities for learners should be ongoing, relevant,
and integrated to address candidate needs (Peterson, 2002; Prothero, 2015; Rowland, 2018).

Finally, evidence of relevant and integrated professional learning was highlighted as it coincided with accountability demands in the district. Multiple participants mentioned accountability measures, particularly district accreditation, as a foundation for district and school goals. Findings of the study also indicated some discrepancy in the clarity of goals with some principals. The accountability terminology used reflects research from Zepeda et al. (2017) by incorporating the current accountability structure with professional learning. This reflects the use of the accountability terminology expressed during observations and a catalyst for the shift in the district’s principal professional learning.

Accountability played a central role in the findings from this study. The district used the stages of state accreditation to help facilitate principal professional learning. The language used from the accreditation cycle was congruent with the stage of implementation for the district’s initial revision of professional learning. By combining the accreditation language with the professional learning, common goals and purposes helped drive the commonalities seen in the study. In order to attend to increased instructional capacity for principals, district leaders must attend to the sociocultural and transformative learning, the pressures of accountability, and other factors such as openness and trust within the chosen structure for principal professional learning.
Create Learning Communities that have Openness and Trust to Facilitate Learning

Important to the context of this study, rural districts have unique features to attend to in order to create a more successful principal professional learning process. Openness and trust were identified in this study as important features to professional learning. One participant identified that there was trust “among most of us” (Principal Fraley) which indicated that there was some level of mistrust still in professional learning. Further, recognition of these factors by the superintendent and the assistant superintendent relayed challenges the rural district faced. The superintendent and assistant superintendent both mentioned the importance of building trust in the district during their interviews and the assistant superintendent shared at a DLT observation, “We have to trust our team. We gotta build trust” (Assistant Superintendent Connor).

Wieczorek and Manard (2018) posited that principals must be prepared to be “fully woven into the fabric of the community… to enact deep and meaningful instructional leadership in their buildings” (p. 15). The Thompson Middle principal, a novice principal by Wieczorek and Manard’s definition, was at the lowest performing school based on state reporting measures and continued to show alternative and outlying perceptions through data collection and analysis. In addition, he presented himself as the least open to the new principal professional learning initiative. In rural districts, having one outlier among only six principals can affect the collective improvement effort for instructional capacity.

Rural districts have additional challenges that may affect openness and trust among the principals and district leaders. Those contextual challenges include isolation
(Lamkin, 2006), lack of resources (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, & Slate, 2008; Lamkin, 2006; Manna, 2015), attracting quality leaders and teachers (Manna, 2015), funding (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, & Slate, 2008; Manna, 2015), and the need for differentiation in professional learning (Prothero, 2016). This research supported the challenges through the isolation visible from the middle school and high school principals because they were the only leaders at that level. In addition, Principal Thompson commented on the difficulty of attracting teachers to his building. To further substantiate the challenges, the need for differentiation in professional learning was visible through interviews and observations, particularly different career-stages and leadership styles of principals.

The remainder of Chapter 5 centers on the implications of this study for structuring professional learning and how the tenants of this study can guide further study using the same or similar constructs and theoretical propositions. In addition, the inductive findings that came from data analysis in this study are important features to attend to when structuring further study and applying implications from the data presented.

**Explanation of the Model**

Figure 5.1 presents a logic model as a visual to mirror the purposes of the study, reflect the extended theoretical propositions, and support implications for practice and further research. The circle around principal professional learning in Figure 5.1 represents the construct of sociocultural learning to negotiate successful learning communities. Within the sociocultural circle, characteristics of transformative learning
work within the collective effort. This model supports implications for intentional structures in principal professional learning. Cranton’s (2016) research on transformative learning expressed that those individuals who construct meaning from experience “validate it through interaction and communication with other” (p. 18). This is mirrored in the attention to individual principal learners. To support findings and implications related to monitoring professional learning and creating clarity in goals and communication, constructs used to frame the study were added to both the district leadership and increased instructional capacity for principals to promote consistency and clarity. Finally, the model is framed by the rural context to highlight the need to create contextually relevant and ongoing professional learning.

Figure 5.1 Logic Model for Discussion
Implications for Practice

Implications for practice were derived from practical suggestions based on findings. As outlined in the description of the model, each area pertains to research findings and how they function in concert to create increased instructional capacity of principals. In addition, the implications for practice mirror the findings of research in order to heighten congruence.

Structure Intentional Shifts in Principal Professional Learning

Principal professional learning needs to take into account both external (accountability) and internal (structures) contexts. As outlined in the review of literature and discussed earlier in Chapter 5, the continued impact and complexity of accountability due to ESSA gave rise to the need for school district leaders to facilitate the support provided for principal professional learning (Haller et al., 2016; Prothero, 2015; Rowland, 2017). Accountability plays a key role in the intentionality of principal professional leaning in the study. This study showed the importance of what Zepeda et al. (2017) concluded in their study of leadership, which is that accountability “has also served as a catalyst to encourage educators to examine their practices with more scrutiny and to search for innovative ways to improve teaching and learning” (p. 241). In addition, accountability is supported through this study in the sentiments from Superintendent Howe when he said, “Developing people is done through these intentional meetings and professional development. The training that we have, the days that we have… We are giving ownership and we’re giving investment choice.”
Weaving the accountability demands that public schools face with structures that support intentional shifts to increase instructional capacity will guide district leaders. The use of the language and structure required for district accountability assisted with clarity of goals and expectations. As seen in this study, district leaders who seek to not only meet accountability demands, but also choose a professional learning initiative that is in line with district goals creates a higher chance of clarity in instructional capacity expectations (Knapp et al., 2010).

One area that produced an example of innovative practices (Zepeda et al., 2017) came from not only a restructure of the professional learning, but also the use of technology to enhance learning and facilitate reflection. Further innovation may include, but is not limited to, working with consortium districts to expand principal networks in rural districts, having mentors for principals, creating career-staged learning, and continuously evaluating practices for improvement.

As reflected in this study, the district leaders should also attend to how accountability measures may affect other district efforts in order to support and improve professional learning beyond simply using the language and activities to frame meetings and discussion. An area that district leaders can improve for practice lies within a deep investigation into the facets of accountability in their district and how instructional and procedural initiatives complement each other. Accountability measures have different effects on districts with different contextual aspects. In addition, and addressed in the next implication for practice, attention to individual principal learners and the support
needed for individuals in the collective effort can facilitate more integrated professional learning

**Attend to Individual Principal Learners**

Implications on the contextual support needed for principals showed not only support needed for rural school districts, but also support for different types of leadership styles within small school districts. In order to assist individuals with the learning process, it is important for district leaders to understand the leadership styles of their principals and the frames of reference (Mezirow, 2000) that they bring to their role that shapes their habits of mind (Mezirow, 2000). This was most evident in the perceptions of the outlier principal, Principal Thompson, who spent the fewest years working in rural districts. Different principal leadership styles are supported by Cruzeiro and Boone’s (2008) research on the importance of acknowledging the complexities of being a rural school principal.

The outlier data from Principal Nash had additional implications for practice. As noted in his interview, Principal Nash plainly stated, “You have different types of principals. I’m an operational principal. I’m very much management, building operations… That’s why I have an assistant principal who is instructional.” This statement was substantiated in the comment by veteran principal Jenkins, who said, “We assume that everybody walks into this position are instructional leaders and they’re not.”

The superintendent expressed similar sentiments about instructional leadership as Principal Jenkins. This has an important implication for practice in terms of how individual principals are supported to increase collective efforts. If specific deficiencies
are identified by district leaders or principals themselves, additional support can be given through district mentors, additional professional learning, peer-to-peer mentoring, or programs such as the principal academy observed during this study. If a principal has identified a weakness and does not reflect often, does not participate in the critical discourse necessary, and the evidence of his or her instructional capacity shows little growth, then instructional capacity will not move in a collective manner.

In addition to leadership styles of principals mentioned earlier, another implication for practice from this study was the importance of individuals in different career stages. The only example revealed in this study that supported career stages for principals was in the creation of the principal academy for novice principals. While two of the six principals were involved in this academy, what was absent, and substantiated through data, was the need to attend to those principals who were veteran leaders. Small districts can find career-stage professional learning challenging because of limited resources and smaller numbers of schools; but could also see improved results by supporting principals based on their experience (Bengston et al., 2014).

The constructs used for successful principal professional development included goal setting, developing people through creating opportunities for continuous improvement, and managing the instructional program (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Hallinger, 2005; Robinson et al., 2018). Because constructs of increased instructional capacity have been revised as educational policy changed, the constructs used for this study can be used to heighten specific learning for different leadership styles and career stages of principals.
Monitor Professional Learning

Building on the implications for intentional professional learning that also attends to individuals within the collective initiative, district leaders must evaluate the progress of their professional learning process. This was illustrated in the inclusivity of instructional duties expressed by the assistant superintendent in her interview, when she said, “My role is from the moment of implementing it through progress, monitoring it, through evaluating it, and reviewing. Is it making difference or not? All of those roles come to me and land on my shoulders” (Connor). In line with DuFour and Marzano (2011) and reflected in this study, clear indicators to monitor professional learning are vital to effective professional learning driven by district leaders. Not only should goals be clearly articulated, but also the process by which goals will be addressed should be clear to all participants. Using research concerning stages of professional development, as well as pairing the structure with accountability measures such as those seen in this study, can assist with a clear and cohesive way to monitor professional learning.

Glickman et al. (2018) highlighted the importance of formative and summative program evaluation. Implications from this study point to the need to not only attend to the needs of the participants, but also to the needs and processes of the program. If the program is not producing intended results or shows discrepancies in a clear focus and purpose, district leaders must continue to engage in formative evaluation of the process to improve (Glickman et al., 2018). This is highlighted in the communication lags identified by both the middle school and high school principal. While they both identified communication of the professional learning initiative as “disjointed,” it is also important
to reiterate their absences from the District Leadership Team meetings. Attention to how communication is integrated into the evaluation of the learning program will have further positive effects on practice for districts.

In conjunction with formative and summative program evaluation, district leaders must evaluate past practices, current practices, and the future practices used for transformative and sociocultural learning in principal learning. District leaders seeking to shift principal professional learning should engage in evaluation (Glickman et al., 2018) to determine the current processes associated with learning and identify the evidence supporting the need for change. The constructs can be used to identify areas of strength and areas of needed improvement for instructional capacity growth and support evaluation of program initiatives.

In this case, it was clear that the district was in the initial stages of implementation. The stage in which the district found themselves is an example of how formative and summative evaluation can inform professional learning. This is congruent with the research presented by Glickman et al. (2018) concerning stages of typical professional development, which include orientation, integration, and refinement. Building on the implications for practice in attention to accountability measures, the accreditation cycle the district used included initiate, improve, and impact. Glickman et al. (2018) found that many staff development programs do not go beyond the orientation level, which ultimately renders them ineffective. Therefore, implications from this study would surmise that the district leaders should be acutely aware of where they are in the
process of developing transformative and sociocultural principal professional learning to realize continuous improvement.

**Create Clarity in Goals and Communication**

As already established, the findings of this study indicated that the district was in the initial stages of its plan for meeting the professional learning needs of its principals. Therefore, participants relayed mixed perceptions in relation to the clarity of communication. This was substantiated by the “disjointed” communication expressed by the middle school and high school principal. While the district had recently begun its plan for meeting the needs of principals, the shift supports research that this district “can serve as examples for others seeking to retool their school improvement efforts” (Rowland, 2018, p. 11).

DuFour and Marzano (2011) expressed that there is often a gap in creating a specific strategic vision for instructional growth in a district. This study shows the importance of having a clear focus and goals for district initiatives to promote instructional capacity. In addition to a clear focus and goals, all participants involved in the initiative should have a high level of commitment to the process. This can be done through open communication, fostering trust, and being explicit about the purpose. There is often a gap in communication of vision for instructional capacity growth (DuFour & Marzano, 2011); however, having a well-researched way for meeting the demands of the district and its leaders can fill that gap (Louis, 2008).
Create Contextually Relevant and Ongoing Professional Learning

The creation of contextually relevant and ongoing professional learning not only attends to instructional capacity needs, but also openly recognizes the context of a district. This supports a substantial finding from Cruzeiro and Boone (2009) concerning the rural principalship. Cruzeiro and Boone (2009) highlighted the challenge of being a rural school principal, and this study was consistent with their findings. Implications for practice should attend to the context of a district and how ongoing professional learning should be structured.

While Salazar’s (2007) research reported that there is no singular way to structure professional learning, contextually relevant and ongoing professional learning must be present. The implication from this study remains that district leaders must attend to well-established adult learning theories in order to structure contextually relevant professional learning. In this case, sociocultural and transformative learning built a good foundation from which to structure the different facets of the learning.

This single case study provides one example of how theoretical foundations can facilitate principal professional learning. In addition, an implication for practice in similar districts pointed to the need to study how funding at the district level can be aligned to support the instructional leadership capacity of principals (Leithwood, 2010). Further, Cranton (2016) identified that a change in behavior should be evident if transformative learning is occurring. Changes in behavior were visible in this study, however, in order to continue toward transformative learning, district leaders must attend to what practices
work to increase instructional capacity and what practices either prevailed or failed to facilitate changes in behavior.

Data, findings in this study, and previous research are integrated to support the implications presented from the study. Specific practices, such as those that foster sociocultural and transformative learning, must be in place in order for principal professional learning to yield intended outcomes. Using contextual considerations, asking questions through evaluation, and creating structures to promote discourse and reflection is an ongoing process may look different in different situations. Each district will have different needs, however, evaluation of the structures in place is key in transformative and sociocultural learning. In addition, the study demonstrated that trust and openness among participants was important to relevant and integrated practice. The participant data concerning trust and openness parallels Kruse et al.’s (1995) social and human resource supports needed to create successful learning. Understanding the foundational principles of transformative learning can assist districts in creating similar structures that meet their individual district needs. This discussion leads to implications for further study to enhance the analytic generalization.

**Implications for Further Study**

In addition to the implications for practice, the results of this study have implications for further research. These include further study on the effects of rural school contexts on principal professional learning, different leadership styles of principals, and examples of contextually appropriate practices from rural school districts.
Each of the implications for further study reflect the implications from practice in addition to outlier data presented.

**Research**

Further research using similar constructs would extend the generalizability of this study. In addition, further study should incorporate data collection methods such as a longer period of time and a larger sample of districts, particularly rural districts. Further research could correlate principal learning to the impact on student achievement in specific schools. Finally, a follow-up study in this same district could yield additional information concerning how sociocultural and transformative learning practices have assisted with principal professional learning and the degree to which they guide overall practice.

**Further Case Study Research in Rural Districts**

The implications from this study make it clear that more research should be devoted to principal professional learning, specifically in rural districts, in order to provide evidence of effective practices used to improve instructional capacity. The data collected reiterated the need for district leaders to be contextually cognizant when developing learning for principals. This finding supports Salazar’s (2007) finding that principal learning should be continuous in order for them to update effective practices. Using well-researched practices, further case studies could illustrate how district leaders are attending to contextual considerations (Bredeson, Klar, & Johansson, 2009) which support the learning of their principals through learning communities (Kruse et al., 1995;
Louis, 2008), communities of practice (Wenger, 2000), and/or professional learning communities (DuFour & Marzano, 2011).

Finally, research on how to use limited resources in small and rural districts to address the individualized needs of principals and their career stage would provide practical knowledge for districts. Practical ways to help individual principals shift their focus from managerial to instructional practices would provide evidence of the effect of that shift. Further research should include such theories as place-based leadership (Budge, 2006) to address the difficulties of rural school principals and those that choose to be principals in small schools (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009).

**Important Characteristics of Professional Learning**

Based on the importance of openness and trust discovered through this study, further research should be devoted to understanding how to cultivate those characteristics. In addition, strategies that encourage openness and trust would lead to examples of practices for principal learning. Additional case studies that show district leadership support, specific cultural and social (Kruse et al., 1995) characteristics of professional learning, and the evolution of trust and openness would be vital for districts.

Specific characteristics of individual principals within principal learning communities is also an area that bears further research. The inductive findings in this study pointed to the need to attend to the individual learner as part of the learning community.
Limitations

This study, like other empirical studies, has limitations. This study sought to expand and generalize theories through analytic generalization rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 2018). As such, there is a growing body of literature on principal professional learning and the expansion from previous knowledge of a rural school district’s role in principal professional growth gave this study more depth than would a stand-alone study without previous work. Through this study, other practitioners and researchers can use the analytic generalizations from this study to structure practices in specific contexts and provide a framework to conduct further studies using the same or similar constructs.

While an additional limitation included the extensive use of self-reported data, established protocols framed the research. Furthermore, multiple perspectives from participants and multiple sources of data, including participant observations, helped to corroborate and triangulate findings. Finally, the limited period of time for the study provided merely a glimpse of principal professional learning in one district and is not representative of experiences of all rural or small school districts.

Conclusions

The primary purpose of this study was to explore transformative and sociocultural learning (Knapp, 2008; Mezirow, 2000; Wenger, 2000) in principal professional learning in one rural school district in response to the instructional leadership capacity needs of its principals. A secondary purpose of this study was to understand how district leaders are supporting the process of transformative and sociocultural learning practices for
principals in their school district. The final purpose of this study was to show how learning community frameworks are malleable and can be contextually applicable for principal professional learning in other districts. This study offered analytic generalizations using developed theories to compare the empirical results, to gain insights, and guide implications for further practice (Yin, 2018).

In conclusion, findings from this study provide a descriptive case of one district in transition. The case study revealed implications for practice and research that were congruent with findings. The findings, discussion, and implications from this study can be used to support current principal professional learning practices as well as guide districts who are working toward increased instructional capacity for principals.
APPENDICES
Appendix A: Informed Consent to the Superintendent

Information about Being in a Research Study

Clemson University

Principal Professional Learning through Transformative Sociocultural Practices

Description of the Study and Your Part in It

Anna Brink and Dr. Hans Klar are inviting you to take part in a research study. Dr. Klar is an educational leadership professor at Clemson University. Anna Brink is a doctoral student at Clemson University, running this study with the help of Dr. Klar. The purpose of this study is to investigate how one rural school district is responding to the needs of the principals by creating learning communities.

Your part in the study would be to participate in multiple in-person or over-the-phone interviews concerning professional learning for principals, learning communities, and leadership practices that support principal learning and increased instructional leadership capacity of principals. The interview will be audio-recorded. You will also be asked to share any documents you feel are relevant to the purpose of the study as well as to advise the researcher of observable principal professional learning opportunities. If you agree to participate, each interview will take up to one hour to complete.

Risks and Discomforts

We do not know of any risks or discomforts to you in this research study.

Possible Benefits

Though there are no direct benefits for you, your participation in this study will contribute to research on principal professional learning in rural school districts.

Protection of Privacy and Confidentiality
Potentially identifiable data will be collected during this study. However, every effort will be made to protect your identity, the identity of any school district, and the consortium. Data that is collected will be de-identified and stored on password-protected computers belonging to Mrs. Brink and Dr. Klar and will be kept for a period of at least five years, in accordance with Clemson University policy. Pseudonyms will be used when reporting the findings of the study.
Choosing to Be in the Study

You may choose not to take part and you may choose to stop taking part at any time. You will not be punished in any way if you decide not to be in the study or to stop taking part in the study.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at 864-656-0636 or irb@clemson.edu. If you are outside of the Upstate South Carolina area, please use the ORC’s toll-free number, 866-297-3071. The Clemson IRB is a group of people who independently review research. The Clemson IRB will not be able to answer some study-specific questions. However, you may contact the Clemson IRB if the research staff cannot be reached or if you wish to speak with someone other than the research staff.

If you have any study related questions or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Hans Klar at Clemson University at [removed] or hklar@clemson.edu. You may also contact Anna Brink at [removed] or abrink@clemson.edu with any further questions concerning this study.

Consent

By participating in the study, you indicate that you have read the information written above, are at least 18 years of age, been allowed to ask any questions, and are voluntarily choosing to take part in this research. You do not give up any legal rights by taking part in this research study.
Appendix B: Informed Consent to the Assistant Superintendent

Information about Being in a Research Study

Clemson University

Principal Professional Learning through Transformative Sociocultural Practices

Description of the Study and Your Part in It

Anna Brink and Dr. Hans Klar are inviting you to take part in a research study. Dr. Klar is an educational leadership professor at Clemson University. Anna Brink is a doctoral student at Clemson University, running this study with the help of Dr. Klar. The purpose of this study is to investigate how one rural school district is responding to the needs of the principals by creating learning communities.

Your part in the study would be to participate in multiple in-person or over-the-phone interviews concerning professional learning for principals, learning communities, and leadership practices that support principal learning and increased instructional leadership capacity of principals. The interview will be audio-recorded. You will also be asked to share any documents you feel are relevant to the purpose of the study as well as to advise the researcher of observable principal professional learning opportunities. If you agree to participate, each interview will take up to one hour to participate.

Risks and Discomforts

We do not know of any risks or discomforts to you in this research study.

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Consent
By participating in the study, you indicate that you have read the information written above, are at least 18 years of age, been allowed to ask any questions, and are voluntarily choosing to take part in this research. You do not give up any legal rights by taking part in this research study.
Appendix C: Informed Consent to the Principals

Information about Being in a Research Study

Clemson University

Principal Professional Learning through Transformative Sociocultural Practices

Description of the Study and Your Part in It

Anna Brink and Dr. Hans Klar are inviting you to take part in a research study. Dr. Klar is an educational leadership professor at Clemson University. Anna Brink is a doctoral student at Clemson University, running this study with the help of Dr. Klar. The purpose of this study is to investigate how one rural school district is responding to the needs of the principals by creating learning communities.

Your part in the study would be to participate in multiple in-person or over-the-phone interviews concerning professional learning for principals, learning communities, and leadership practices that support principal learning and increased instructional leadership capacity of principals. The interview will be audio-recorded. You will also be asked to share any documents you feel are relevant to the purpose of the study as well as to advise the researcher of observable principal professional learning opportunities. If you agree to participate, each interview will take up to one hour to complete.

Risks and Discomforts

We do not know of any risks or discomforts to you in this research study.

Possible Benefits

Though there are no direct benefits for you, your participation in this study will contribute to research on principal professional learning in rural school districts.

Protection of Privacy and Confidentiality

Potentially identifiable data will be collected during this study. However, every effort will be made to protect your identity, the identity of any school district, and the consortium. Data that is collected will be de-identified and stored on password-protected computers belonging to Mrs. Brink and Dr. Klar and will be kept for a period of at least five years, in accordance with Clemson University policy. Pseudonyms will be used when reporting the findings of the study.
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If you have any study related questions or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Hans Klar at Clemson University at XXX-XXX or hklar@clemson.edu. You may also contact Anna Brink at XXX-XXX or abrink@clemson.edu with any further questions concerning this study.

Consent

By participating in the study, you indicate that you have read the information written above, are at least 18 years of age, been allowed to ask any questions, and are voluntarily choosing to take part in this research. You do not give up any legal rights by taking part in this research study.
Appendix D: Recruitment Email to the Superintendent

Dear [Superintendent],

Dr. Hans Klar and I are inviting you to take part in a research study. Dr. Klar is an educational leadership professor at Clemson University and I am a doctoral student at Clemson University, running this study with the help of Dr. Klar. The purpose of this study is to investigate how your rural school district is responding to the needs of the principals by creating learning communities.

Your part in the study would be to participate in multiple in-person or over-the-phone interview concerning professional learning for principals, learning communities, and leadership practices that support principal learning and increased instructional leadership capacity of principals. The interview will be audio-recorded. You will also be asked to share any documents you feel are relevant to the purpose of the study as well as to advise the researcher of observable principal professional learning opportunities. I have attached a letter with more information about the study. If you agree to participate, the each interview will take up to one hour to complete.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please let me know when a convenient time for me to call you would be.

I look forward to talking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Anna T. Brink
Appendix E: Recruitment Email to the Assistant Superintendent

Dear [Assistant Superintendent],

Dr. Hans Klar and I are inviting you to take part in a research study. Dr. Klar is an educational leadership professor at Clemson University and I am a doctoral student at Clemson University, running this study with the help of Dr. Klar. The purpose of this study is to investigate how one rural school district is responding to the needs of the principals by creating learning communities.

Your part in the study would be to participate in multiple in-person or over-the-phone interviews concerning professional learning for principals, learning communities, and leadership practices that support principal learning and increased instructional leadership capacity of principals. The interview will be audio-recorded. You will also be asked to share any documents you feel are relevant to the purpose of the study as well as to advise the researcher on observable principal professional learning opportunities. I have attached a letter with more information about the study. If you agree to participate, each interview will take up to one hour to complete.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please let me know when a convenient time for me to call you would be.

I look forward to talking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Anna T. Brink
Appendix F: Recruitment Email to Principals

Dear [Principal],

Dr. Hans Klar and I are inviting you to take part in a research study. Dr. Klar is an educational leadership professor at Clemson University and I am a doctoral student at Clemson University, running this study with the help of Dr. Klar. The purpose of this study is to investigate how one rural school district is responding to the needs of the principals by creating learning communities.

Your part in the study would be to participate in multiple in-person or over-the-phone interviews concerning professional learning for principals, learning communities, and leadership practices that support principal learning and increased instructional leadership capacity of principals. The interview will be audio-recorded. You will also be asked to share any documents you feel are relevant to the purpose of the study. If you agree to participate, each interview will take up to one hour to complete.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please let me know when a convenient time for me to call you would be.

I look forward to talking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Anna T. Brink
Appendix G: Interview Protocols for the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent

1. First, please begin by telling me about the major goals set for principal professional learning in your district.

2. How were these goals set and how do you make sure these goals are communicated to principals in your district?

3. What led your district to shift in how you designed learning experiences for your principals? (Probe: Ask for specific examples)

4. If principal professional learning is defined as relevant and integrating, what evidence would you share that your professional learning has those components? Are there gaps that you feel still need to be addressed?

5. What challenges do you think rural districts have in providing professional learning support for principals? (Probe: Do you have examples of ways in which you have seen your district try to overcome challenges?)

6. What opportunities do principals have to discuss and debate ideas in their professional learning?

7. What are examples of how you create opportunities for principals to use their professional learning to:
   - Create clear goals?
   - Develop people?
   - Create opportunities for continuous improvement? and
   - Manage the instructional program?
   (Probe: are there documents that are representative of district and/or school instructional capacity growth that you can share?)

8. In what ways do you facilitate critical reflection with your principals on their instructional capacity in the four areas from the previous question? Have learning communities shaped this reflection?

9. What is your role in management, or active oversight and coordination, of the instructional program?

10. Is there anything else about principal professional learning that I have not asked that you would like to share with me at this time?
Appendix H: Interview Protocol for Principals

1. First, please begin by telling me about the major goals set for principal professional learning in your district.

2. How were these goals set and how are these goals communicated to you as a principal?

3. What led your district to shift in how principal learning experiences were designed? (Probe: Ask for specific examples)

4. If principal professional learning is defined as relevant and integrating, what evidence would you share that your professional learning has those components? Are there gaps that you feel still need to be addressed?

5. What challenges do you think rural districts have in providing professional learning support for principals? (Probe: Do you have examples of ways in which you have seen your district try to overcome these challenges?)

6. What opportunities do principals have to discuss and debate ideas in their professional learning?

7. Tell me about a time when your thinking or perspectives changed as a result of your professional learning opportunities in your district?

8. What are examples of how you, as a principal, use your professional learning to
   - Create clear goals?
   - Develop people?
   - Create opportunities for continuous improvement? and
   - Manage the instructional program?
   (Probe: are there documents that are representative of the instructional capacity growth in any of the areas in which you have shared?)

9. How do you critically reflect on your instructional capacity as a principal in the areas discussed in the previous question? Have learning communities shaped your reflection as a principal?

10. Is there anything else about principal professional learning that I have not asked that you would like to share with me at this time?
### Appendix I: Supporting Literature for Interview Questions to Guide Deductive Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supporting Literature</th>
<th>Characteristics of Instructional Capacity</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Participant</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DuFour &amp; Marzano (2011); Hallinger (2005); Robinson et al. (2008), Zepeda et al. (2017)</td>
<td>Clear Goal Setting</td>
<td>First, please begin by telling me about the major goals set for principal professional learning in your district.</td>
<td>Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Principals</td>
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<td>DuFour &amp; Marzano (2011); Hord (2009)</td>
<td>Clear Goal Setting</td>
<td>How were these goals set and how do you make sure those goals are communicated to principals in your district?</td>
<td>Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DuFour &amp; Marzano (2011); Hallinger (2005); Robinson et al. (2008)</td>
<td>Clear Goal Setting</td>
<td>How are these goals set and how are these goals communicated to you as a principal?</td>
<td>Principals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knapp (2008); Knapp et al. (2010); Wenger (2000)</td>
<td>Clear Goal Setting; Developing People; Creating Opportunities for Continuous Improvement; Managing the Instructional Program</td>
<td>What led your district to shift in how you designed learning experiences for your principals? (Probe: Ask for specific examples)</td>
<td>Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Principals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glickman, Gordon, &amp; Ross-Gordon (2018); Johnston et al. (2016)</td>
<td>Developing People; Creating Opportunities for Continuous Improvement</td>
<td>If principal professional learning is defined as relevant and integrating, what evidence would you share that your professional learning has those components? Are there gaps</td>
<td>Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Principals</td>
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<td>Peterson (2002)</td>
<td>that you feel still need to be addressed?</td>
<td>Cruzeiro &amp; Boone (2009); Enomoto (2012); Wood, Finch, &amp; Mirecki (2013)</td>
<td>Managing the Instructional Program</td>
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<td>Hord (2009); Mezirow (2000)</td>
<td>Developing People</td>
<td>What opportunities do principals have to discuss and debate ideas in their professional learning?</td>
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<td>DuFour &amp; Marzano (2011); Hallinger (2005); Robinson et al. (2008)</td>
<td>Clear Goal Setting; Developing People; Creating Opportunities for Continuous Improvement; Managing the Instructional Program</td>
<td>What are examples of how you create opportunities for principals to use their professional learning to: create clear goals? Develop people? Create opportunities for continuous improvement? And manage the instructional program?</td>
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<td>DuFour &amp; Marzano (2011); Hallinger (2005); Robinson et al. (2008)</td>
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<td>What is your role in management, or active oversight and coordination, of the instructional program?</td>
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</tr>
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<td>References</td>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Respondent</td>
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<td>Glickman, Gordon, &amp; Ross-Gordon (2018); Mezirow (2000)</td>
<td>Developing People; Creating Opportunities for Continuous Improvement</td>
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<td>Principals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glickman, Gordon, &amp; Ross-Gordon (2018); Mezirow (2000)</td>
<td>Creating Opportunities for Continuous Improvement</td>
<td>In what ways do you facilitate critical reflection with your principals on their instructional capacity in the four areas from the previous question? Have learning communities shaped this reflection?</td>
<td>Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DuFour &amp; Marzano (2011); Hallinger (2005); Kruse, Louis, &amp; Byrk (1995); Mezirow (2000); Robinson et al. (2008)</td>
<td>Creating Opportunities for Continuous Improvement</td>
<td>How do you critically reflect on your instructional capacity as a principal? Have learning communities shaped your reflection as a principal?</td>
<td>Principals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clear Goal Setting; Developing People; Creating Opportunities for Continuous Improvement; Managing the Instructional Program</td>
<td></td>
<td>Is there anything else about principal professional learning that I have not asked that you would like to share with me at this time?</td>
<td>Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Principals</td>
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