

Practices that Constitute Successful School Superintendent Leadership:
Perceptions from Established Rural School Superintendents

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PRACTICES THAT CONSTITUTE
SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT LEADERSHIP:
PERCEPTIONS FROM ESTABLISHED RURAL SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine which leadership practices are the most crucial in helping school superintendents be successful as school leaders. This is a qualitative study in which six rural Missouri superintendents were interviewed to determine the answers to the following research questions: (a) What leadership practices are perceived by established school superintendents to be crucial to successful school leadership? and (b) What do established superintendents perceive are the leadership practices that warrant the most attention from the school superintendent?

A review of the literature identified nine commonly used research practices: vision, communication, visibility, inspiring followers, shared leadership and collaboration, professional growth, ethical behavior, political awareness, and building relationships. The qualitative interviews focused on the impressions, the perceptions, and the experiences of the superintendents as answers were sought concerning which leadership practices were considered the most crucial. Once the interviews were completed and the data were analyzed, the findings provided evidence to support recommendations for superintendents concerning communication, having an ethical focus, being effective managers, and utilizing combinations of leadership practices.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Background

To be a successful school superintendent, one must have an understanding of what it means to be an effective school leader and put that understanding in to practice. This requires continuous preparation and study, sound decision-making, a wide range of expertise, an understanding of cultural and political implications, good communication skills, and being competent to carry out various administrative duties. To practice good leadership in the superintendent's office, one must oversee personnel, finance, academics, and community relations; as well as establish the school's direction, develop people, and must help others commit to agreed-upon ideals (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Sergiovanni, 2007; Wilmore, 2008). In addition, schools are pressured to perform better so students can become skilled and knowledgeable employees (Marzano, et al., 2005).

If superintendents were interviewed about what they believe is necessary to be school leaders, one might speculate whether they would mention some of the items cited in the previous paragraph, or if they would list other important practices, or if they might mention some of each. With that in mind, this dissertation was a qualitative study to determine recommended leadership practices for school superintendents. It included a careful examination of the literature regarding school leadership and an examination of the results of interviews with rural Missouri school superintendents. The review of literature includes desirable practices for superintendents as school leaders (according to what is required on superintendent assessments and on the consensus of the literature on

school leadership). School leadership research emphasizes the ideas of constructing and implementing an ongoing vision, building trust, having ongoing training, setting and reaching organizational goals, keeping the organization focused, building relationships, establishing collaboration, monitoring instruction, innovating, and providing motivation (Hemmen, Edmonson, & Slate, 2009; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001).

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

When a person becomes a school superintendent for the first time, he or she likely has a background in educational training and school administrative experience in some capacity. Regardless of that preparation, however, new superintendents may not be fully prepared. The demands on superintendents have never been greater, as they are expected to be very thorough and efficient in managing the school district (Pardini & Lewis, 2003). Many new superintendents often seek additional training and also rely on the advice and experience of former superintendents or of superintendents currently working in other school districts. There is little available in the way of formal superintendent mentorship or superintendent coaching (Colorado Association of School Executives, 2003). As a result, first-time superintendents may feel inadequately prepared, and may need to learn much more about how they may successfully carry out their duties. In Missouri, the Missouri School Boards' Association helps school districts seek applicants to fill superintendent vacancies, and while there is no shortage of applicants, it may be that the number of qualified applicants has decreased (J. Denney, personal communication, February 24, 2010). Deficiencies in qualifications among superintendent applicants vary, depending upon the background of the applicant. Many new superintendents are uneasy in dealing with the intricacies of school finance, and many are also surprised at the

amount of political issues they must be involved with at the state level (G. Wright, personal communication, February 24, 2010). If a representative from such a statewide organization perceives there are not enough qualified applicants, and if research exists that there are inadequacies in superintendent preparation (Colorado Association of School Executives, 2003) this suggests that new research on how to be effective as a school superintendent might be helpful.

The research problem of this study was to examine the perceptions of established rural school superintendents about what prevailing leadership practices are crucial to school superintendent effectiveness. The research problem was, “What leadership practices are perceived as necessary in helping superintendents?” The study involved three steps. First, there was a thorough review of the literature on school leadership. Second, interviews were conducted with school superintendents from rural school districts about leadership practices. Third, the interviews were transcribed, prominent themes were identified, and the findings of the study were written.

The following research questions were examined during the study:

1. What leadership practices are perceived by established school superintendents to be crucial to successful school leadership?
2. What do established superintendents perceive are the leadership practices that warrant the most attention from the school superintendent?

Purpose of the Study

As stated previously, school superintendents must address a variety of issues to provide good school leadership, and much has been written on the various school leadership responsibilities (and will be featured in the following chapter). With such

heavy expectations placed upon superintendent leadership, it is important for practitioners to stay abreast of the latest research. With that in mind, this study joins the conversation about leadership practices that are the most important for school superintendents. It details effective leadership practices recommended for school leadership and identifies leadership practices used by school leaders. The purpose of this study was to focus on the aforementioned research problem: “What leadership practices are necessary in helping superintendents?” The research included six interviews with rural Missouri school superintendents in an effort to identify the most useful leadership practices. A comparison between the recommended leadership practices and the interviews with the superintendents was done with the intention of producing conclusions for school superintendents to consider in improving their own leadership ability.

Rationale and Justification for the Study

The basis for this study was examining the leadership practices recommended for school superintendent leadership. The qualitative research was intended to identify practices that contribute to the success of school superintendents as school leaders and to examine those practices in the study’s findings. The study can be justified because of its focus on the situation in Missouri and its potential to be beneficial to aspiring superintendents and those in programs to prepare them. Much has been written on leadership in general and on school leadership. Specifically, there have been dissertation studies done on the beliefs, practices, and characteristics desirable in the office of the school superintendent (Charlton, 2009; Wright, 2009) but this particular study will focus on specific superintendents in rural school districts within the state of Missouri.

Gardner (2000) wrote about the characteristics of good leaders, including the ability to think long-term, see the big picture, and emphasize a vision. He discussed several examples of successful leadership from history, including Winston Churchill, General Douglas MacArthur, and General Dwight D. Eisenhower. This is not a study on historical leadership; nor is it a study on characteristics or tendencies. It is a study about leadership practices. Nevertheless, Gardner's detailed discussion on leadership helped inspire this study. By contrast, the views of Donaldson (2008) emphasize the experiences and actions of leaders as they carry out their duties. He wrote that much of a leader's knowledge is not gained "from the book" but from his or her experiences. What leaders do is a result of what they have learned from their own actions. Hence, the emphasis of this study on leadership practices is conceptualized more by Donaldson (2008) than by Gardner (2000).

Delimitations of the Study

Researcher bias is always a possibility in qualitative research, so precautions must be taken to prevent it. In this study the temptation exists to make assumptions about what the superintendents will say about the leadership practices they utilize. Merriam (1998) cautioned against the researcher allowing theoretical positions or biases to interfere in analyzing data. It is important that researcher bias does not interfere in analyzing the data. The role of the researcher should not prevent the data from speaking for itself, and the data should not be presented to fit preconceived ideas. In this particular study, the researcher sought to examine findings to see if they are congruent with what has been written on school leadership. If findings emerged that did not agree with existing school leadership literature, an effort would have to have been made to recognize the possibility

of error, but also of the potential for new knowledge, not examined in previous literature, to emerge.

The ontological assumption of the researcher was intended to be objective, that is, the researcher sought to be objective in gathering, interpreting, and writing about the data, even though qualitative research has a subjective approach. While seeking to be completely unbiased, it was recommended that the researcher mention any possibilities of bias based upon a particular frame of reference or worldview. The researcher's assumptions and theoretical orientations should be stated (Merriam, 1998) and there should be a recognition of the frames of reference that dominate the researcher's view of reality (Grbich, 2007). To claim to be able to enter this study with a complete blank slate was not realistic; human experiences and interests influence our thoughts, so no one can be 100 percent objective. One cannot assume to have no preference or no direction in the research whatsoever. The fact that the researcher even had an interest in this particular study indicates that some type of perspective exists.

Having noted these preconceptions, it must be mentioned that the researcher is idealistic with a belief that there are absolutes and that objective truth exists. The researcher has a positivist mindset that is highly objective, and has selected to pursue this study because of an interest in the possibility that research of leadership practices have something of value to inform superintendent leadership. The positivist frame of reference is one that advocates the idea that knowledge and reality exists and can be apprehended by an individual (Sleeter, 2000-2001). In this study, the researcher maintained a belief in the possibility that particular leadership practices help school superintendents be more effective as school leaders.

The belief in the usefulness and validity of the leadership practices that emerge could have been viewed as having a form of researcher bias at the beginning of the study. That was not the intention of the researcher, but it must be acknowledged. Every effort was made to not approach the study with pre-determined expectations about the results. Such preconceived notions are likely to result in research that overlooks important data. Booth, Colomb, & Williams (2003) wrote:

When you seek to support a particular answer, you quickly spot data and arguments that confirm it, but you'll be tempted to overlook or reinterpret data that contradict or even just qualify it. And when the data are ambiguous, you'll be tempted to resolve ambiguities in your favor. You have to guard against those biases... (p. 91).

Honesty and straightforwardness with the reader of the research was considered crucial. According to Booth, et al. (2003), Grob (2004), and Herr & Anderson (2005) if there are biases or inclinations; if there is a weakness in an argument; if there are shortcomings that are not acknowledged; or if data exists that supports an opposing view; the researcher should explain that information to the reader.

There is also the chance that bias may be present in the minds of those being interviewed. Each superintendent was to be answering questions based upon his or her interpretation of events as seen through his or her prism of experiences. This was both desirable and undesirable. It was desirable because the outcomes of this study were based upon what superintendents said works best in their own leadership experience and within the context of their school district. It was undesirable in that the lens of personal experience sometimes limits one's view. It was hoped that each person interviewed objectively looked at how his or her experiences fit in to the overall picture and provided

answers that reflected this understanding, and also produced information applicable to other settings and circumstances.

In addition, there were limitations specific to a study of this nature. First, this study was intended to produce findings relevant to school leadership. The author did not pretend, however, to make generalizations that apply to every school. Conclusions were reached as a result of comparing what the literature says with information gained from superintendent interviews. While the interview process in this study was limited, at the very least, the study's results should be worth considering in an educational setting. Second, the review of literature in this study could not be exhaustive. To try to manage a literature review that includes all of the books and research projects on school leadership would not have been realistic. Certainly it would have provided a longer and more detailed piece of work, but it would not have furthered the purpose of this study. Nor would it have provided any guarantee of added depth or different findings. Instead, the review of literature identified prominent authors in the field, as well as research results on school superintendent leadership, and presented the general consensus of what leadership practices are important in the office of the school superintendent.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that if this study was replicated it might generate slightly different results. If this occurs, the findings of this study will not be discredited, but it should be recognized that different interpretations can be made of the same data. The findings generated in this study, as in all qualitative studies, are reliable unless contradicted by new evidence (Merriam, 1998). In addition, if this study were replicated the very fact that interviews would be conducted with a different pool of

superintendents provides a certain level of subjectivity and allows for variations to emerge in the data and the findings.

Assumptions

There is an ontological assumption that qualitative research is subjective because the research focused on the experiences and vantage points of the participants. The epistemological assumption is that the researcher interacted with the research. While the researcher in this study demonstrated an objective approach, there is an understanding that a qualitative study such as this can be highly subjective in its design, its implementation, and in the interpretation of the findings.

In addition, it was assumed this study would generate findings to supplement the existing body of knowledge on school leadership and worthy of further discussion. It was uncertain what specific findings would be discovered, and how prominent any of them would be in the conversation about effective practices for school superintendent leadership. More specifically, there were similarities identified that are common in the literature on school leadership and the interviews with school superintendents. The findings were expected to determine those similarities and what the significance of each might be in light of the literature and the information generated from the interviews.

Definitions of Terms

School leadership. Often used to describe leadership by school administrators, including principals, assistant principals, superintendents, and assistant superintendents. In this study, however, school leadership refers primarily to the office of the school superintendent.

Leadership practices. The term “leadership practices” is used throughout this study to refer to specific actions that are taken to achieve objectives. One might use terminology such as leadership tendencies, leadership strategies, or leadership characteristics. The term “leadership practices” has been selected because the focus is on what leaders *do*, and not a leader’s personal characteristics or traits. Much of what a leader learns and accomplishes is based upon experience; the key is in the doing (Donaldson, 2008). As a result, the term “practices” is more accurate in depicting what is being examined in this study.

Leadership. Leadership seeks to guide, focus, and advance the objectives of the group or the organization. It mobilizes individuals to reach the goals held by both leaders and followers (Burns, 1978).

Established. The word “established” is used in the research questions and elsewhere in the study to describe school superintendents who have gained at least three years of experience in the position. The word established, as it is used in this study, refers to a school leader who is experienced. In fact, the words established and experienced can almost be used interchangeably. An assumption is not being made, however, that an established superintendent is effective or successful. Nothing is being assumed in this study that equates longevity with success. An established or experienced superintendent is one qualified to speak about what is important according to his or her perspective, and that perspective is grounded in his or her superintendent leadership experience. A superintendent with less than three years in his or her position has limited experience, and for the purposes of this study, is not considered established.

Prevailing. In this study the word “prevailing” is used to describe the most prominent or the most effective leadership practices, as in “prevailing leadership practices.” “Prevailing,” in the course of this study is used to describe those leadership practices that are the most visible during the coding process of the qualitative research. The word “prevailing” is also used to identify only those leadership practices deemed to be the most prominent. The study will not attempt to examine every leadership practice that exists in the literature or in the research, but only those that emerge consistently in the themes identified by participants.

Communication. Leaders communicate by accurately getting their concepts and ideas to both supervisors and subordinates, and this should be done in more than one way (Yukl, 2006). The transmission of ideas is crucial to leadership.

Vision. A leader with vision is able to communicate the organization’s objective, mission, and focus. Vision is important in that it gives individuals within an organization a focus on what must be accomplished. The leader with vision thinks through the organization’s mission and articulates it for the followers. The vision enables the leader and followers to be united in their common work and common goals (Drucker, 2001; Burns 1978).

Inspiring followers. Leaders who are able to inspire followers do so by encouraging them, boosting their confidence, increasing the level of participation, and getting them to be committed to the cause (Donaldson, 2001).

Ongoing training. In this study, ongoing training refers to the practice of continuing to learn and improve in one’s field. It may be completed on the individual level, in groups, or throughout an organization. It is related to study, preparation, and

planning. Training and development must be ongoing (Drucker, 2001). It is sometimes referred to as organizational training, professional development, professional growth, continuous learning, or continuing education.

Politics. Politics is making decisions to determine how resources are allocated while working with the concepts of scarcity and competing interests (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

Instrumentation and Methodology

This study used a qualitative methodology, involving interviewing, recording the data, interpreting the data, getting a general sense of what the data says, identifying prominent themes in the interview data, coding and categorizing the information according to the themes, reflecting upon the meaning, and writing the results (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 1998). The researcher considered questions about what lessons can be learned from the data before writing results, as recommended by Creswell (2003). Qualitative methods were particularly helpful in this study on two levels. First, common themes were identified in the review of literature and described in detail. From these themes, questions were developed for interviews with rural superintendents. Secondly, as is typical in qualitative research, the interview transcripts were analyzed and the prominent themes were identified. Those themes and how they compare with the literature on school leadership were used to produce a thorough description of the findings of the study. In short, qualitative methods of coding the information in to themes were utilized with the literature on superintendent leadership and with and the interviews with the school superintendents. This was done in an attempt to generate information about leadership practices that are helpful for school superintendents.

This study is a phenomenological research design in that it sought to make sense from the recorded experiences of the school superintendents about what leadership practices are crucial to school leader effectiveness. A phenomenologist researcher cannot keep from using his or her own point of view, but must attempt to see other viewpoints (Sleeter, 2000-2001). This study is also phenomenological in that it attempted to: (a) discover the essence of phenomenon experienced by a group (the school superintendents), (b) identify and describe the essence of the phenomenon (the leadership practices), and (c) operate with the assumption that the leadership practices exist. Phenomenological research is subjective, based upon experiences and the interpretation of those experiences.

Anticipated Outcomes

The anticipated outcomes of this study have been mentioned: common themes were expected to emerge about school superintendent leadership, specifically in the area of identifying leadership practices employed by school superintendents in rural school districts. The themes that emerged in interviews and the discussions they generated could not be seen until after the data were analyzed. In the absence of specific information in the beginning, it was still relatively safe to assume that the study would focus on common leadership practices useful in school leadership. It is also possible that the discussion that emerged in this study will encourage further research on how leadership practices are helpful in school superintendent leadership.

Subsequent Chapters

This study followed a format with five chapters. The first chapter has been introductory in nature. Chapter 2 is the review of literature on school leadership practices

and is crucial to providing understanding for this area of study. Chapter 3 specifies the methods for data collection and the analysis of the data. Chapter 4 includes a presentation of the findings of the qualitative analysis, and Chapter 5 includes a summary, findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

When leadership is discussed—whether it is school leadership or any other form of organizational leadership—descriptive terminology includes leadership traits, tendencies, characteristics, qualities, behaviors, and practices. Leadership research benefits business, government, the military, schools, and any number of organizations. This study, however, narrowed the focus by examining the leadership practices crucial in effective school superintendent leadership. This review of literature examines what the literature says are the most prominent practices recommended for effective school leadership; it includes the broad spectrum of organizational leadership as well as the literature on school leadership.

Research Questions

Two research questions were addressed within the context of this study:

1. What leadership practices are perceived by established school superintendents to be crucial to successful school leadership?
2. What do established superintendents perceive are the leadership practices that warrant the most attention from the school superintendent?

School Superintendent Leadership

School leadership is addressed in the review of literature with two categories of leadership literature: (a) the literature that includes practices for organizational leadership in general, and (b) the literature that discusses leadership practices as they specifically pertain to school leadership. One might question whether both bodies of leadership

literature—one for organizations and one for schools—are necessary in the first phase of this literature review. The fact that both organizational leadership and school leadership are alluded to in the literature, however, suggests that a distinction has already been made and that both are useful. Sergiovanni (2007) contends that schools have special circumstances and need special leadership because of their unique political realities, cultural implications, and government requirements. In addition, as schools seek to meet the needs of students they must answer to parents, local businesses, and other stakeholders. Schools also have unique dynamics in that they are staffed by professionals who do not embrace the ideas of bureaucracy and hierarchical leadership, ideas common in business. Sergiovanni makes a case that school leadership is different from leadership in other organizations, but stops short of claiming the literature on organizational leadership has nothing to inform practice in a school setting. Donaldson (2001) also contends that schools are unusual organizations, having a distribution of power, a focus on professional judgment, and a sense of morality about their mission. Leithwood and Duke (1999) made a similar distinction, writing about “two major sources of insight” concerning school leadership: identifying a body of educational literature about school leadership and an alternative source on leadership from various other sources (p. 45).

Nevertheless, many of the principles emphasized in the literature on organizational leadership are the same as those mentioned in school leadership literature. Those principles include practices such as articulating a vision, collaborating with others, providing ongoing training, and acting with integrity and fairness. Furthermore, Warren Bennis, who has written extensively on organizational leadership, is often cited by those who write about schools and school leadership (Donaldson, 2001; Marzano, et al., 2005;

Wilmore, 2008). Those citations are a part of a larger picture which suggests that there is a great deal of overlap with literature on organizational leadership and the literature on school leadership. As a result, both bodies of literature help provide valuable insights for this study.

Principles used in Evaluating Leader Effectiveness

The literature is rich with studies explaining a variety of qualities and practices of effective leadership, and there is much agreement on what the general areas of competency are. When practices are identified that are likely to result in effective school leadership, then recommendations can be made about what school leaders can do to help ensure their own success. For the purposes of this study, leadership attributes or behaviors were referred to as leadership practices. Yukl (2006) wrote “conceptions of leadership effectiveness differ from one writer to another” (p. 9); when one evaluates leadership effectiveness the results will vary, depending upon the criteria selected. Different individuals select different criteria depending upon their values and objectives.

There are various lists of leadership behaviors or practices considered the most desirable. Recent dissertation studies identify practices such as having a vision, providing training and professional support, communicating, implementing public relations strategies, implementing collaborative efforts, and developing relationships with stakeholders (Culotta, 2008; Morgan, 2000; Sovine, 2009). In one study (Maxfield, Wells, Keane, & Klocko, 2008) respondents were asked which superintendent behaviors are the most important in supporting teacher leadership. The behaviors were ranked in to three categories—essential, important, and desirable—based upon their frequency from the respondents (with essential being the most necessary category). Superintendent

behaviors rated as important or essential were: promotes a collaborative community, expectations of teacher leadership, seeks to remove barriers by working with the teacher union and the board, aligns the system to support teacher leadership, provides support and recognition, supports growth focused on professional evaluation, and is committed to professional learning (Maxfield et al., 2008).

A focus group survey of Colorado school superintendents produced its own list of characteristics that are desirable in the position of the school superintendent. The superintendents were asked to identify the qualities of an effective superintendent, and their list included: flexibility and adaptability, visibility, excellent relationship building skills, good communication skills, honesty, strong personal and professional mission, ability to motivate people, passion, politically astute, leadership skills, constant learner, ability to work with diverse racial and socioeconomic populations, knowledge of budgets, curriculum, and other important components of running a school district, strong listening skills, and perceptive (Colorado Association of School Executives, 2003). According to school leadership standards and the practices identified in this study, this list is a good summation of what it takes to be an effective school superintendent. In fact, each item on the list can be categorized under the general headings of the school leadership standards or the practices that will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Others have detailed superintendent duties as well. Lambert (2003) identifies several areas of superintendent leadership, including (a) developing a shared vision of excellence, (b) taking steps to ensure collaboration, (c) having communication that is transparent and multilayered, (d) educating and engaging board members to understand vision, policy, learning, and management of resources, and (e) securing essential

resources. Danielson (2009) wrote school leadership skills include a focus on vision, having a purpose, being persuasive, having an ethical base, and developing an ongoing dialogue with teachers. The aforementioned areas of superintendent leadership are summed up well in the standards used to evaluate individuals wanting to enter the superintendency, and those standards are discussed next.

School Leadership Standards

Professional standards for school leaders provide a good starting point in determining what the most crucial school leadership practices are. Professional standards for school leaders such as those established by the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) and by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) clearly state that the standards exist so school leaders can promote the success of students. (Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008, 2008; Wilmore, 2008). The very existence of school leadership standards implies that they are goals towards which all school administrators should aspire, and their emergence is the result of agreement in the educational community about what makes successful school leadership. Wilmore (2008) wrote that the standards have been used as a model for administrator preparation and as a guide for performance-based evaluation of administrators, and that they have been revisited to answer the question about what constitutes a highly qualified administrator. Clearly, the standards reveal a professional consensus about what makes an effective school leader, and they should be considered in any discussion about what practices are necessary for effective superintendent leadership.

There are seven ELCC leadership standards: (a) a vision of learning, (b) student learning and staff professional growth, (c) management of organizational resources, (d)

collaborating, (e) practicing integrity and ethics, (f) understanding the political and cultural context, and (g) practicing in a superintendent internship (Wilmore, 2008). There are six ISLLC leadership standards, and they are similar to the ELCC standards. They focus on: (a) a vision of learning, (b) student learning and staff growth, (c) management of resources, (d) collaborating and communicating, (e) practicing integrity and ethics, and (f) knowing the politics and culture of the community (Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008, 2008).

Standards for the superintendents within the state of Texas are divided in to three domains including ten competencies and are closely aligned with the ELCC standards. The three domains are leadership in the educational community, instructional leadership, and administrative leadership. The ten competencies deal with ethics, a vision of learning, communicating, collaborating, local political context, curriculum and assessment, professional growth, evaluation, budgeting, use of resources, and facilitation of change (Wilmore 2008).

The Mississippi Department of Education has superintendent standards which do not directly coincide with the ISLLC standards or the ELCC standards; nor are they as specific. Mississippi's five superintendent performance standards say an effective superintendent: (a) develops and leads an organization that focuses stakeholders on academic success, (b) develops a customer-focused school system, (c) develops the human resources within the school system, (d) manages a school system efficiently and effectively, and (e) manages resources prudently and to the benefit of the instructional program. The Mississippi Department of Education also lists 16 positive practices for superintendents to follow, which include a vision of learning, monitoring, evaluating,

involving stakeholders, supporting innovation, communicating high expectations, and spending time in schools (Mississippi Superintendent Appraisal System, 2003).

Taken together, the ISLLC standards, the ELCC standards, and standards from states such as Mississippi and Texas help identify the standards that are commonly accepted as crucial to effective superintendent performance. In the following pages, we will see that much of what is written in the literature deals with practices that coincide with these standards, but does not produce an exact copy of the leadership standards. Recurring practices in the literature are: (a) vision, (b) communication, (c) visibility, (d) inspiring followers, (e) collaboration and shared leadership, (f) professional growth, (g) ethical behavior, (h) political awareness, and (i) building relationships (Colorado Association of School Executives, 2003; Morgan, 2000; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004; Wilmore, 2008; Yukl, 2006).

Vision

In school leadership, as in leadership in any organization, it is important to influence followers to become committed to ideas and values (Drucker, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2007). Generating this commitment is an important component of having a compelling vision. Teachers are school professionals who, for the most part, will commit to ideals and noble aspirations of their profession more than they will commit to the authority of an administrator. Part of the key to communicating the educational mission of the school is influencing individuals to become committed to the convictions they share about the importance of education, rather than forcing them to submit to the wishes of their supervisor (Sergiovanni, 2007). In other words, it is easier for teachers to submit

to a set of ideals that they hold to be important, rather than to follow an administrator's directives.

Sergiovanni (2007) refers to leadership that calls for a commitment to the mission "idea-based leadership" (p. 2). With such leadership, it is important for the school superintendent to provide meaning about the mission of the school and to rally individuals to the common cause of the school vision. The idea of individuals following the ideas articulated in the vision is far more desirable than having teachers unquestionably carrying out administrative directives. With the latter, they are prone to feel their contributions matter little. With the former, teachers are more likely to feel as a vital part in the school's vision and mission. They are also more likely to be motivated when the vision of the leader is congruent with their own values and identities (Yukl, 2006). Sergiovanni made an important distinction between subordinates and followers when he wrote, "Subordinates respond to authority; followers respond to ideas" (p. 70). Leaders are not to simply impose their will on followers, but to work with them to create "a shared sense of purpose and direction" (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 3).

The vision of an organization must be orchestrated by the leader, or as Bennis (2003) put it, leaders must "manage the dream" (p. 186). This involves creating a compelling vision that gives individuals a perspective of what must be accomplished. To be an effective leader one must think through the organization's mission, define it, and visibly establish it (Drucker, 2001). The vision should include well-articulated ideals and beliefs and should be clearly and consistently communicated to all in the organization. Patterson (2000) wrote, "Even though as superintendent you might feel that you know the direction in which the district needs to go, knowing it as superintendent is not enough.

Other people have to come to know and believe in this direction too” (p. 70). Articulating the vision is as important as putting the vision in to place. Everyone in the school district must know what takes place in regard to the vision, and it should be the basis on which decisions in the district are made (Wilmore, 2008). Thus, communicating the vision of the school is vitally important for school superintendents.

Communication

Communication goes hand-in-hand with articulating the vision of the school, because the vision is the message that the school leader must often be communicating. The success of the vision is directly related to how well it is communicated; as a result, it should be communicated in a variety of ways to all stakeholders (Yukl, 2006). In addition to communicating the vision, leadership requires clear communication to clarify roles, tasks, goals, expectations, and objectives. People must know what to do and how they are expected to do it. A very reliable teacher or administrator may fail to carry out his or her duties if confusion exists about what those duties are. Clear communication on the part of the superintendent will eliminate confusion about what the responsibilities are. According to Yukl (2006) many studies have confirmed that effective leaders clarify work expectations.

The school vision must be communicated to those within the school district and those outside of the organization as well. Waters, et al. (2004) wrote school leaders must be involved as an advocate for the school to all stakeholders. Patterson (2000) added, “New superintendents must build strong relationships with multiple constituencies to lay a solid foundation for district success” (p. 64). While the school superintendent must be the school’s representative in the community, he or she should also utilize the media to

promote the school district. Superintendents must be forthright with the media, cultivate good media relations, and build a partnership with the media so that the district's vision and goals can be effectively communicated (Patterson, 2000; Wilmore, 2008).

Visibility

It is recommended that school leaders be visible to have high-quality interaction with teachers and students. In fact, leader visibility in schools is one of the leadership responsibilities shown to have a positive impact on student achievement (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). In addition, visibility on the part of the school leader demonstrates his or her interest in the educational objectives to be carried out and provides more opportunities for discourse to take place between school administrators and teachers. Specific ways to increase visibility include making regular classroom visits and having frequent contact with students (Waters, et al., 2004; Marzano, et al., 2005). A study of five school districts in California detailed specific ways superintendents were effective and showed instructional leadership. Each superintendent in the study was highly visible throughout the school district by making regular classroom visits and reporting their observations to the building principals (Pardini & Lewis, 2003). Leaders in schools carry out their responsibilities in conjunction with being visible among teachers and students. As managers, they are around subordinates, soliciting ideas and discussing issues (Donaldson, 2008; Danielson, 2009). A school leader's presence—his or her visibility—is important in helping inspire others in the school district.

Inspiring Followers

At some point, and on some level, effective leaders must inspire followers to a higher level of commitment to their work and to the organization. If the leader is

passionate about what he or she does and communicates optimism, it brings hope and inspiration to others (Bennis, 2003). In schools, the leader should mobilize teachers to meet school objectives. This is done by fostering relationships that encourage participation, ownership, and commitment (Donaldson, 2001). In the literature this is often referred to as transformational leadership, where followers are motivated by feelings of trust, loyalty, admiration, and respect towards the leader. In this way, they are inspired to work towards shared objectives. Transformational leadership is applicable to schools because of how it calls people to high ideals and connects them to each other through a kinship about the worthwhile aspirations of learning (Sergiovanni, 2007; Yukl, 2006).

Marzano et al. (2005) wrote of the importance of the school leader being optimistic and setting the best emotional tone, referring to the leader as the optimizer. As an optimizer, the leader is to inspire others to greater accomplishments, to be the driving force for initiatives, and to communicate a positive attitude about the abilities of the staff to reach school objectives. In other words, the leader should inspire and lead new and challenging innovations. Inspired followers become more dedicated to their work because they are doing it based upon their deeply held feelings about its importance (Sergiovanni, 2007).

Collaboration and Shared Leadership

The school superintendent as a leader should encourage collaboration on two different levels. One is collaboration with others in the community, and the other is collaboration and teamwork within the school district (which includes the aspect of shared leadership). To help achieve educational objectives, school superintendents must

build partnerships with key individuals or organizations within the community. In one study of rural California schools, the ability of the school leader to establish “linkages with multiple community sources” proved to be crucial in helping the school accomplish its mission (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009, p. 15). In addition, research has demonstrated that building a good working relationship between the school and community resources has a positive impact on student learning (Wilmore, 2006).

Participative leadership allows others to be involved and have an influence over the leader’s decisions (Yukl, 2006) and is a departure from the traditional approach of looking to the leader for all of the answers. Educational leadership has evolved to the point where collaborative activity between the superintendent and others in the school district is expected, and is often more effective (Heifetz, 2006). Research has confirmed that effective superintendents will involve relevant stakeholders in establishing school goals (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Schools are in the business of developing people, which requires having adults work interpersonally. School leaders must work to develop collaborative efforts by being receptive, building relationships, encouraging participation, and building consensus (Donaldson, 2008).

Shared leadership and collaborative thinking is best cultivated when teachers and school leaders attempt to concentrate on the same issues together. Several studies have confirmed the positive benefits of shared leadership, consensus building, and using leadership teams (Marzano et al., 2005). To lay the groundwork for collaboration within the school district, educators must be encouraged to look at the overall school district, and not simply the world within their own respective classrooms. Teachers do not always have the advantage of having a wider perspective in the school district, but they should

try to see the overall picture in the same way their school administrators do. This should be done for the good of the entire educational community and is necessary for teachers to take part in shared leadership (Donaldson, 2001).

Professional Growth

In all organizations, individuals must be given the opportunity to learn and grow so they can be best prepared to adapt to changing needs. Drucker (2001) wrote, “Every enterprise is a learning and teaching institution. Training and development must be built into it on all levels—training and development that never stop” (p. 11). Leaders must continually improve their respective organizations so that organizational growth can always be a reality (Senge, 2006). In schools, administrators must look for ways to improve by examining the research, looking at data, and emphasizing professional growth as learning communities (Donaldson, 2001; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999). Funding must be set aside for professional development that is coordinated, extensive, ongoing, and accessible (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

The rationale for ongoing training for educators is built upon the belief that the best teachers never stop being learners themselves, and also the idea that educators should be committed to life-long learning, just as their students are expected to be. Educators are expected to keep up with new research and best practices. Through regular professional development educators must continue learning, changing, and evolving, both personally and professionally (Wilmore, 2008). Effective leaders develop and empower individuals to take on new responsibilities and to be a part of change efforts. Continuous learning and innovative ideas are crucial for organizational growth, and effective leaders must encourage and facilitate the necessary collective learning efforts (Yukl, 2006).

Many school leaders admit that they learn a lot about how to do their job from informal conversations with other school leaders and by their own experiences. Those methods of learning are to be encouraged as a part of professional growth, along with opportunities for further training (Donaldson, 2008). In addition, school leaders must take time to think about and reflect upon their experiences, their formal training, and their practice and to engage in dialogue about it with their colleagues (Donaldson, 2008; Spillane, et al., 2001).

Ethical Behavior

Ethical leadership involves treating individuals with fairness, dignity and respect and fostering an atmosphere characterized by mutual respect, trust, and cooperation. This helps individuals within the school district to respect and appreciate each other's contributions. A working environment such as this will help individuals have more personal satisfaction at work and more commitment to reaching objectives. The superintendent leads the way to establishing such a desirable working climate by acting in the best ethical manner. This is done by practicing honesty, respecting confidentiality, appreciating diversity, and respecting individual rights. In addition, the superintendent must not only practice sound ethics, but should explain why decisions were made. When the school district is characterized by mutual respect and shared work values, it results in a higher level of collegiality among the staff, which produces increased commitment and improved performance (Sergiovanni, 2007; Wilmore, 2008; Yukl, 2006).

Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (2000) wrote about the importance of moral leadership, in which the focus is on the values and ethics of the leader. They wrote "...authority and influence are to be derived from defensible conceptions of what is right

and good” (p. 10). Bolman and Deal (2003) wrote that leaders are needed in organizations who can communicate purpose and direction “rooted deeply in values and the human spirit” (p. 432). Yukl (2006) gave several characteristics of what constitutes ethical leadership, including developing a vision based upon follower input, disclosing important information, uses critical evaluation to come up with better solutions, implements training to gain improvement, and making tough decisions even when it may involve personal risk.

Political Awareness

According to Bolman and Deal (2003) there is a definite political component for organizational leaders which requires setting an agenda, identifying key players, building coalitions, and working with both friend and foe alike. The agenda must be established by the leader and based upon his or her specific vision and strategy. The leader must also know which individuals have power and which ones may provide the most resistance. This process is referred to as “mapping the political terrain” (Bolman & Deal, p. 207). Furthermore, leaders must be able to manage politics in such a way that relationships are established, networks are utilized, and coalitions are strengthened. The leader or manager needs “friends and allies to get things done” (p. 210) but also needs to be able to negotiate with adversaries. Negotiating through political realities requires the leader to have a vision, collaborate, and use ethical principals.

Leaders must also understand the politics involved in promoting and defending the organization and in helping secure resources needed for the support of organizational objectives. School superintendents in particular need to manage the political aspect of their job to identify constituents who affect the education of the students and get them

engaged in helping reach educational objectives. This is sometimes difficult to do, but it is very important. In addition, the politics of involving key community members or organizations is related to the earlier discussion on collaboration. It is important that superintendents work with as many community groups as possible to help meet the needs of students and families within the school district (Heifetz, 2006; Wilmore, 2008; Yukl, 2006).

Building Relationships

One of the most desirable qualities for a superintendent is excellent relationship-building skills (Colorado Association of School Executives (CASE), 2003). Politically speaking, leaders must utilize alliances, networks, and coalitions, and “learn how to manage relations with both allies and opponents” (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 204). In the work place, individuals are able to trust a leader who is consistent, reliable, and has integrity (Bennis, 2003). Bolman & Deal (2003) wrote that individuals do not simply cooperate with a leader or a manager simply because they are told to do so, but they will follow if they feel the person in authority is “credible, competent, and sensible” (p. 210).

This is true in the politics of organizations, in the politics of the workplace, and in the building of individual relationships. The idea of the leader needing others to complete tasks and reach goals was mentioned in the previous section on political awareness.

According to Bolman & Deal (2003) in order to gain the support of others “you need to cultivate relationships” (p. 210). Healthy relationships are established when leaders express confidence in others, encourage others, inspire others, and make emotional connections through face-to-face interaction (Marzano, et al., 2005; Yukl, 2006). For the school superintendent to be successful, it is crucial to build good relationships with

school board members and with various constituencies in the school and community (Patterson, 2000). According to Baldoni (2007) leaders make progress by inspiring others through relationships and are generally viewed as more effective if they build good relationships. He explained that a leader's personal example can establish trust, which establishes relationships, which in turn are essential for productive teamwork and collaboration. When leaders inspire others through building relationships, an organization can achieve more. For that reason, relationships are important to leadership success and should be nurtured (Baldoni, 2007).

Addressing the Research Problem

The review of literature provides several categories to organize one's thinking when addressing the research question of what leadership practices are important to superintendent effectiveness. Those categories—vision, communication, visibility, etc.—were influential in the design of the questions for the interview protocol and guided the interview process with participating school superintendents. The conceptual underpinnings of this study dealt with leadership theory and superintendent effectiveness; the research focused on the best practices to ensure that effectiveness. The research process is more fully explained in Chapter 3. The next chapter also explains how qualitative research was implemented and how it addressed the research problem. Chapter 3 explains the role of the researcher and the steps taken to assure the trustworthiness of the study. In addition, it includes a description of the instrument (the research protocol) to be used in this study.

Summary

One might make a distinction between organizational leadership and school leadership, but as has been demonstrated, there is much that the two areas have in common. While schools have unique needs often requiring that their leaders must respond to special circumstances, there is much that school leaders can learn from what is written about organizational leadership in general. Because of that, the review of literature about school superintendent leadership contains information from authors on organizational leadership as well as school leadership.

Several sources have been cited that list leadership qualities desirable in the office of the school superintendent, and the criteria for evaluating school leaders suggests that particular areas are crucial for the school superintendent to be effective. Those sources list a great number of characteristics sought for in a superintendent, including an emphasis on student learning, effective communication, establishing a vision, having a strong sense of mission, professional growth, collaboration, working with stakeholders, acting with integrity and fairness, having an ability to motivate people, understanding the political context, handling budgeting issues, allocating resources, and guiding an organization through change.

The review of literature helps define the focus in to specific practices. The literature confirms that school superintendents, as school leaders, should place an emphasis on (a) vision, (b) communication, (c) visibility, (d) inspiring followers, (e) collaboration and shared leadership, (f) professional growth, (g) ethical behavior, (h) political awareness, and (i) building relationships.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Background

Qualitative research was selected for the design and methodology of this study, and is discussed throughout this chapter. The primary instrument for the study was an interview protocol used in interviews with rural superintendents to answer the research questions about leadership practices. Learning the superintendents' perceptions about what helps them be effective as school leaders was crucial. This chapter includes an explanation of how the interviews were conducted, a description of the position and role of the researcher, and the steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

Problem, Purpose, and Research Questions

The research problem of this study—what prevailing leadership practices are crucial for school superintendent leadership—was addressed when the review of literature was compared with the interviews of school superintendents. The research questions were:

1. What leadership practices are perceived by established school superintendents to be crucial to successful school leadership?
2. What do established superintendents perceive are the leadership practices that warrant the most attention from the school superintendent?

The leadership practices identified in the literature review guided the formation of the questions in the interview protocol. It is hoped the leadership practices identified in this study will be used as a vehicle for research and discussion to inform the profession of

education about improving school leadership. The purpose of this study is to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about school superintendent leadership, providing information for superintendents to consider and to reflect upon in their own leadership efforts.

Context and Methodology

This is a qualitative study involving interviews with rural Missouri school superintendents. From the outset, efforts were made to have a minimum of five interviews with superintendents from school districts having different characteristics, such as student demographics or geographical location. This study focused on interviews with six different rural superintendents, in different parts of the state. One of the school districts represented in the study is predominately made up of minority students; the other five have a student population that is predominately white. Qualitative research seeks to generate knowledge through analyzing and making meaning of the data. It involves coding the data in to specific categories to become the basis of a study's findings (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) contends that qualitative studies are well-suited to generating understanding of the perspectives of those studied, and as such, qualitative methods in this study were helpful in making sense of the perspectives of school district superintendents. Qualitative research is relatively new compared to quantitative research, but in recent years it has gained acceptance as a credible form of inquiry (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative research is highly subjective because the role of the researcher is prevalent throughout the process, and each researcher brings his or her own perspective to the study. In addition, in qualitative research the participants are not free of biases or preconceived ideas. As one way of addressing biases that undoubtedly exist,

this study includes a thorough description of the researcher's role in the section on assuring trustworthiness.

Advantages to qualitative research include the ability of participants to provide detailed information about their perspectives and allowing the researcher to have a degree of control over the line of questioning. Disadvantages include biases held by participants and the researcher as a result of their own experiences and how they view the world. Furthermore, not all participants are able to equally articulate their perceptions. Another disadvantage is that participants may be affected by the researcher's presence, by the idea of being interviewed, and by being a part of the study (Creswell, 2003). Seidman (1998) explained how this can be alleviated if the researcher will make an effort to build a healthy and comfortable relationship with each participant. He wrote developing rapport between the researcher and the person being interviewed is a good thing, and also explained how developing good interviewing skills is important in this process. Also, the researcher must deliberately practice good listening skills, and should know when the interview is slowing down and how to restore the energy level initially present.

Instrumentation and Participants

This qualitative study involved interviews with six school superintendents. Once the research was approved, the process of contacting potential participants began. Participants were to be established superintendents who, by definition in this study, have completed at least three years as a school superintendent. Interviews were conducted with six established superintendents in rural school districts. The leadership practices that emerged in the review of literature were helpful in designing the questions to be used in the interviews with school superintendents. There was a desire to have interviews with

superintendents representing school districts of different socio-economic demographics and school districts from different parts of the state. If a good representation was not found to represent different demographics and different geographical areas, it was to be discussed in the findings. Each potential participant was contacted by e-mail requesting his or her participation in this study. Follow-up contacts were made by telephone when necessary. The letter attached in the e-mail explained the study's purpose, the desired characteristics of the participants, and the time commitment that was involved in the interview and any correspondence that may follow (Appendix A). An informed consent form was provided to each participant (Appendix B) as well as an interview guide with the questions that were to be asked in the interview (Appendix C). The interview guide enabled the researcher to ensure the comprehensiveness of each interview, the consistent and orderly questioning of each participant, and that each interview remained on task and within the desired time parameters (Patton, 2002). The informed consent form included recommended information such as the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw from the study at any time, the right to obtain a copy of the results, an assurance of privacy, the benefits of the study, and signatures of the participant and the researcher (Creswell, 2003).

It was preferred that all interviews in this study be conducted in person, but a telephone interview was to be permitted if a face-to-face interview was not possible. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researcher followed the interview guide but unscripted questions or follow-up questions were sometimes necessary to gather more in-depth descriptions or information. Seidman (1998) recommends that the interview be conducted in such a way that the participant be

comfortable, describing the desired interview as friendly but not a friendship. Because the participants were sharing their time and knowledge with the researcher, it is appropriate that they were provided a copy of their transcribed interview, as well as a copy of the study's findings. This was also important for any participant who took part in member checking as a way of helping establish the trustworthiness of the study. (Member checking will be discussed in the next section). To assure confidentiality for participants, each was assigned a number preceded by an S for superintendent for identification purposes in the study. Participants were identified as S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, and S6. In addition, no comments from interviews were used that contained names of individuals or school districts that would enable the reader to easily identify the participant. If such a comment contained information that was crucial in writing the findings, the researcher planned beforehand to contact the participant about the comment to see if it could be re-stated in such a way as to preserve confidentiality.

Assuring Trustworthiness

Qualitative research involves taking steps to make sure the study is sound, and a variety of methods have been utilized in different studies (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). To ensure the trustworthiness and dependability of findings in this study, the following strategies were implemented: establishing researcher credibility, disclosure of researcher bias, triangulation, member checking, peer review, establishing an audit trail, and making generalizations.

Researcher Credibility

According to Creswell (2003) the qualitative researcher must reflect upon his or her role in the research as well as "his or her personal biography and how it shapes the

study” (p. 182). In this study on leadership practices employed by superintendents the researcher brought an enjoyment of writing and a high value placed upon teaching and learning. These characteristics on the part of the researcher brought about a natural interest in how the leadership practices are implemented in the office of the school superintendent. Qualitative research is appealing to the researcher because of his experiences in high school journalism, college journalism, earning a bachelor degree in journalism, and in writing for various newspapers over the years. Those experiences included countless interviews, writing, re-writing, checking facts, and going back to original sources. It also included a desire to be objective and accurate, realizing that any paraphrasing of accounts or events had to be done without compromising the original message or the original intent. This training and experience has made the researcher quite confident in his ability to carefully and fairly conduct qualitative research. This was done by taking a neutral position throughout the process, allowing the participants to voice their own views without exerting any influence, taking an objective look at the data, and being fair when writing about the findings.

In addition, the researcher has completed his ninth year of school administration, serving as a head principal or as assistant principal in three different school settings. He has a great interest in assuming a superintendent position, and has taken several steps to learn what is needed in the office of the superintendent. He has also completed a specialist degree and obtained a superintendent certification. His personal philosophy of learning is that the best teachers never stop being students themselves. This qualitative study is a part of his continuing education, and is one that is done with the hope of learning how superintendents may carry out their duties more effectively, and with the

completion of the dissertation, making that information available to superintendents. This background helped the researcher approach this study with a level of expertise and with great dedication. Patton (2002) suggests that to achieve credibility, qualitative studies must have a knowledgeable researcher and rigorous methods of data collection. The researcher in this study is committed to producing such a credible study.

Researcher Bias

The researcher suspected that the leadership practices that are detailed in the review of literature would also appear in the interviews with school superintendents. This study, however, was not about what the researcher thought at the outset, but about what the school superintendents said works in their own leadership experience in their own work settings. Creswell (2003) calls for the qualitative researcher to engage in sincere introspection to acknowledge personal biases, values, or interests, which will make for a more open and honest narration. The researcher is the person who will gather, analyze, and interpret data, but it is not realistic to assume that any researcher can completely divorce himself or herself from previously held views during the research process. What is realistic, however, is for the reader to expect that the researcher has a definite perspective and that the study has been filtered through the researcher's theoretical position or biases. As mentioned in the first chapter, the researcher is idealistic with an affinity for embracing the idea of objective truth. He approaches this study with a specific assumption that much can be learned from particular leadership practices about how school superintendents may be more effective. Those views have helped fuel and inspire this study.

In spite of such views, the researcher in this study, as in any qualitative study, was expected to make every effort to fairly and professionally examine the data and write the findings produced. As one writer stated, “There is simply no ethical alternative to being as nonbiased, accurate, [and] honest as is humanly possible in all phases of research....” (Crandall, 1978, as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 216).

Triangulation

Triangulation refers to the use of different sources as justification for the emerging findings in a qualitative research project. Using other sources in this way helps strengthen a study’s trustworthiness (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). In this study, triangulation was achieved by using multiple respondents and member checking. Making comparisons of the data in the interview transcripts of all participants and comparing the data to the existing research in the review of literature helped solidify trustworthiness through triangulation. In addition, an audit trail exists in this study including how the study is organized, how data were collected, and the documents used to obtain data. Such a data trail makes it possible to replicate the study with different respondents and in a different setting. These helped identify the common findings and to establish the trustworthiness of the findings. No finding in this study was to stand alone simply as an assertion of the researcher. Each was to be a finding supported by others through one or more of the three methods mentioned. In addition, findings of the study can be measured against existing research, much of which has been cited in the second chapter’s review of literature.

Member Checking

Member checking takes the findings of the qualitative study to the participants to see if they think they are accurate (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). In this study participants were provided findings and then invited to provide feedback on the results to see if they are plausible. Their input was to be considered as a part of the effort to check the trustworthiness of the results. A member checking letter was used in this process (Appendix D). Furthermore, five of the six participating superintendents were contacted after the initial interviews and data analysis was complete, to verify what was said and to obtain further explanation concerning specific leadership practices. This helped provide descriptive detail, as recommended by Merriam (1998).

Audit Trail

A well-documented audit trail was established for future scrutiny or replication of the study. The audit trail included the letter requesting individuals to participate, consent forms, interview guide, and member checking forms. Merriam (1998) wrote that an audit trail must also include details about how the data were collected and how categories emerged. Such a description will be included throughout the written part of this study.

Generalizations

A generalization is the idea that applications of findings can be made to other situations with similar conditions (Patton, 2002). The generalizations can be concrete applications from this study to another set of circumstances or they can be generalizations that apply to another situation as determined by the reader (Merriam, 1998). Either way, the researcher has an obligation to provide enough detailed information “to enable readers to compare the ‘fit’ with their situations” (Merriam, p. 211). When such

generalizations were made, they served to further establish the credibility of this study. Because of the amount of data analyzed in this project, the researcher worked with the assumption that generalizations would emerge that are useful for current and aspiring school superintendents.

Instrument

Interview questions about the importance of specific leadership practices were formulated to get the perspectives of the participating superintendents. The interviews were conducted in an effort to determine which leadership practices are the most relevant and most effective in school superintendent leadership. The instrument utilized was the interview guide (Appendix C) which included questions about the leadership practices that superintendents find essential in their own school leadership experience. The interview protocol was made up of questions based upon the leadership practices discussed in the review of literature. Participants were provided a copy of the interview protocol before the interview took place.

The superintendents were asked to elaborate on the leadership practices they employ and to what extent each are utilized in their own work setting. The superintendents were not expected to be experts on the leadership practices, but they are experts on their experiences in school leadership. In other words, they are the only ones who could provide first-hand information about their experiences and their perspectives—what has worked, what is important, what is of most value to them—as they carry out their duties as a school leader. The research questions were to be answered as a result of the themes that emerged in the interviews with the superintendents. This

was to be determined by what the superintendents said is important. This is required in qualitative research, and is one reason qualitative research was chosen for this study.

Rationale for Utilization of the Instrument

The interview questions were designed to determine what leadership practices are commonly used by school superintendents involved in the study. The desire was for each participating superintendent to explain in his or her own words what works and what does not. By using qualitative methods generalizations could be made from the data generated by the interviews, and if there was any misunderstanding during an interview, the respondent was asked to elaborate or clarify. Qualitative data analysis should provide data that is more revealing and much more descriptive than quantitative data. The findings in this study included descriptions by school superintendents about which practices are important in school leadership. The researcher in qualitative research has the opportunity to code the data generated by the interviews and provide what is often referred to as a thick, rich description for the study (Merriam, 1998). The intention was for readers to be able to make sense of the information in the findings as it applies to their own leadership experience. The results are to provide useful conclusions and recommended leadership practices for school superintendents.

Method of Analyzing and Presenting Data

Each participant answered interview questions about what leadership practices are important based upon his or her own school leadership experience. Their answers were subjective but when the data analysis was done and the information was coded, the researcher sought to take an objective approach. It was important to let the data speak for itself.

Creswell (2003) provides practical steps for organizing and analyzing qualitative data. Interviews are recorded and transcribed and the researcher reads through them to get a general sense of what is being said and reflect on the meaning. Next, Creswell recommends going through the data more carefully to begin the process of coding. This involves labeling specific parts of the interview transcripts and categorizing the data in to groups. Seidmann (1998) wrote data is coded in to categories for the purpose of identifying thematic connections to be discussed in the findings. Creswell described coding as organizing information in categories which he referred to as chunks. According to Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw (1995) the researcher can provide labels for each category or chunk of information. They wrote that there is no one right way to label coded information; the researcher should simply look for patterns and emerging themes, and to let those themes emerge from the data naturally. There should be no predicted themes before the research begins. Patton (2003) wrote qualitative research tends to evolve, resulting in having no clear distinction between data collection and data analysis. He also suggested that no definite formula exists for transforming data in to findings. In this study, the researcher followed the qualitative procedures recommended by Creswell (2003) and Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw (1995) and allowed the prominent themes to emerge from the data.

The aforementioned steps provided by Creswell (2003) are not necessarily distinct from each other because the process of data collection, data analysis, coding, identifying themes, and writing the results is one in which steps are interrelated, overlap, and go on simultaneously. The themes and findings that emerged from the data analysis in this

study are presented and discussed in narrative form in Chapter 4. Finally, the researcher made interpretations of the data and they are presented in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

Introduction

This dissertation is a study of leadership practices commonly used by school superintendents, and focuses on specific superintendents in six rural school districts in Missouri. The research was conducted to gain understanding of the superintendents' perspectives about which leadership practices are crucial for successfully carrying out their duties. Furthermore, it is hoped that greater understanding about school district leadership can be provided so school superintendents may reflect upon their own leadership experience. Research, in general, should be completed within the discourse of individuals seeking new knowledge and better understanding (Booth, et al., 2003) and it is within such a discourse that this study was envisioned and conducted. Chapter 2 contained a detailed review of literature on school leadership practices and Chapter 3 explained the methodology used in the collection and analysis of data. This chapter includes the presentation of the data that resulted from the qualitative analysis and how the two research questions are addressed.

The research questions considered in this study were: (a) What leadership practices are perceived by established school superintendents to be crucial to successful school leadership? and (b) What do established superintendents perceive are the leadership practices that warrant the most attention from the school superintendent? The first research question focused on the perceptions, impressions, and the experiences of the superintendents who participated. They were reminded, before and during their respective interviews, that there were no wrong answers. Any answer was appropriate if it came

from what the superintendent had learned in his or her own experience. The second question was an attempt to see which leadership practices required the most time from the superintendents. The amount of time utilized for each leadership practice may or may not have been an indicator about its importance, but the superintendents had the opportunity to elaborate on that in their interview, and most did. As a result, additional information was gained that may or may not directly relate to the leadership practices studied, but it was insightful information worthy of consideration in the data analysis and in the findings.

Participants

The six Missouri school superintendents participating in this study completed their interviews with the researcher during May 2010. They represented rural school districts with different locations and different sets of challenges. All had 3-6 years experience as the school superintendent, and had many years of experience in education, ranging from 21-33 years. All were working in rural Missouri school districts that included kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12). The size of the student population in those districts ranged from almost 700 students to more than 1600 students. In the following section, more specific numbers will be provided for the school districts of the participating superintendents. All numerical data provided for the school districts were obtained from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2010) and based upon figures available at the conclusion of the 2008-2009 school year. The demographics of the student populations were confirmed with the superintendents in each interview. Of the six participants, four were male and two were female. Three of the six were in their

40s in age; three were in their 50s. Two of the participants had three years of experience as school superintendent, three had five years, and one had six. According to Creswell (2003) in a qualitative study such as this, participants are not selected at random as in a quantitative study. A purposeful selection is recommended “that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (p. 185). For that reason, an effort was made to select superintendents from small Missouri school districts with some variation in geographic location and student demographics.

For the purposes of this study, and to preserve confidentiality, the six superintendents were identified as S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, and S6. Before participants were asked to take part, the researcher took precautions to protect their confidentiality and to ensure that there was little risk involved as a result of their participation. The committee chair provided ongoing guidance and assistance, and approval for the research was gained through appropriate channels at the university level. Research involving individuals has the potential to inadvertently cause them some harm, which could come in the form of physical or emotional pain, a violation of privacy, or a professional embarrassment (Booth, et al., 2003). In this research project, it was determined that the risk of such harm was extremely minimal. Nevertheless, steps were taken to ensure that no harm would come to any participant and that no confidence was violated.

Superintendent One

Superintendent One (S1) is a male in charge of a small town school district with a student population of 689. The student population has been about 98 percent white over the last five years. About 59 percent of the student population is eligible for free or

reduced meals. The school district has a certified staff of 66. Superintendent One has three years of experience in his current position as school superintendent.

Superintendent Two

Superintendent Two (S2) is a male working at a rural school district in a small town. The school district has a student population of 1623 with 131 certified staff members. The student population has been predominantly white, with a white student population of 98-99 percent over the previous five school years. More than 68 percent of the students in the school district are eligible for free or reduced meals. Superintendent Two has been in the current position as superintendent for five years.

Superintendent Three

Superintendent Three (S3) is a male working as the head of a small town school district with a student population of 755 and a certified staff of 88. The school district has few minority students, with white students accounting for 97-99 percent of the student population over the previous five years. More than 70 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced meals in the school district. Superintendent Three has completed five years as superintendent in this district.

Superintendent Four

Superintendent Four (S4) also works as head of a small town school district, but one with a much different demographic make-up than the first three. The school district has 835 students with a minority student population that exceeds 70 percent. The student minority population is virtually all black. White students make up less than 30 percent of the student population. The percentage of students eligible for free or reduced meals is about 83 percent. Superintendent Four oversees a certified staff of 75.

Superintendent Five

Superintendent Five (S5) is a female supervising a school district with a student population of 1411 and a certified staff of 139. More than 96 percent of the student body is white. Black students make up only 1.7 percent; Hispanic students make up 1.1 percent. Both Asian and American Indian students make up less than 1 percent of the student body. The percentage of students eligible for free or reduced meals at the conclusion of the 2008-2009 school year was 19.8 percent. Superintendent Five has three years of experience in her current position.

Superintendent Six

Superintendent Six (S6) is a female overseeing a school district of 899 students with 103 certified staff members. The school district is predominately white, with 98.6 percent of the student body consisting of white students. About 1.1 percent of the students are black. Less than 1 percent of the students are Hispanic. In the last five years, the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced meals has been about 37 percent. Superintendent Six has been in the current position for one year, but was superintendent in another district for the previous five years.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

Several strategies are cited by Creswell (2003) to preserve trustworthiness in qualitative research including triangulation, member checking, using thick, rich description, clarifying bias, presenting information that is contrary to identified themes, spending extensive time in the field to gain a familiarity of the area being studied, using peer debriefing, and using an external auditor. The following strategies have been implemented in this study: (a) extensive efforts have been made to clarify the

researcher's role (Chapter 3). (b) Triangulation of data has been completed through comparing data from different respondents, by engaging in member-checking of the data, and by comparing data to existing research as cited in the study's review of literature. (c) The description within this dissertation about how the study is organized, how data is collected, and how documents were utilized to secure data provides an audit trail to make it possible for the study to be replicated with a different group of respondents. (d) Finally, generalizations can be made from the data so readers can determine if there is a relation between the findings of this study and their own circumstances (Merriam, 1998). The strategy of making generalizations, however, must be qualified by stating that qualitative research focuses on a small number of nonrandom samples with the intention of understanding specific participants in depth (in this case, the experiences of superintendents); the primary goal of qualitative research is not to try to discover what might be true in most situations. In fact, a potential problem of qualitative research is how one grapples with the question of how to generalize from a small, nonrandom sample (Merriam, 1998).

Member checking in this study was completed in three ways. First, data were compared among the different participants. If three, four, or five of the six respondents were saying essentially the same thing about any particular leadership practice, it was noteworthy. Those responses were summarized in themes and the remarks from the superintendents became the basis of the data analysis and the study's findings. Secondly, each participant was given the opportunity to examine the transcript of his or her interview and suggest changes or deletions. Certainly, factual or typographical errors were to be corrected, but respondents were also told they might read something from the

transcript of the interview that did not convey the intended meaning and want to change the wording. Such changes were welcomed. Finally, many learning experiences of the superintendents about leadership, as described in their own words, were supported by the literature. In addition, the qualitative data allowed for the formulation of generalizations, which will be discussed in Chapter 5. Such generalizations were stated with the understanding that it can be problematic to take six respondents and make broad generalizations that are universally applicable.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative research is based upon face-to-face or telephone interviews, and once the transcripts of those interviews are complete, the researcher analyzes and interprets the data (Creswell, 2003). While explicit steps can be taken to organize, categorize, code, and analyze textual data, the process is one that is ongoing, “involving continual reflection about the data...” (Creswell, p. 190). In this particular study, transcripts were analyzed as they were completed, and the coding process began. As more and more data became available through the interviews, transcripts were revisited, comparisons were noted, and it became possible to see which terms were used most frequently. From that process, general themes began to emerge. This coincides with what is recommended by Merriam (1998) when she wrote, “...the right way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it simultaneously with data collection” (p. 162). In this study, comparisons were made among interview transcripts by asking questions such as, Are these two individuals saying the same thing with different words? Is one saying the same thing but with a different perspective? Are they even saying the same thing? Such questions required the researcher to carefully examine the context of what was said, and in some cases, to

ascertain the intention of what the participant meant based upon how it sounded rather than how the words looked on paper.

Analysis of Data

Information from the transcripts of the interviews was analyzed and coded so it could be placed in to different themes. (The terms categories and themes can be used interchangeably, but in this study we will refer to them as themes). Those themes provided answers to the two research questions of the study. Merriam (1998) wrote, “Categories should reflect the purpose of the research. In effect, categories are the answers to your research questions” (p. 183). As is usually the case in qualitative research, not all information fit nicely and easily in to a particular theme. For example, one respondent alone used different terminology to refer to shared leadership. She talked of meetings, establishing continuity, having a common vision, using power with others as opposed to power over others, getting buy-in from others, joining forces, working with others, leading collectively, and collaborating (S6). When those terms were used, a careful examination of the interview transcript showed that the common leadership practice under discussion was shared leadership. The transcripts were coded to indicate various terms, which could then be grouped under the umbrella of a common theme.

Presentation of Data

Because of the way in which interview questions were organized, each respondent provided his or her impressions of leadership practices outlined in the review of literature in Chapter 2. When the data analysis was completed, information was placed in themes that suggested some leadership practices were considered more important by the participants. From the qualitative data provided, however, evidence was sufficient to

enable one to make a case that each leadership practice has its own degree of importance in helping superintendents effectively carry out their duties.

For example, not every participant said that shared leadership was the most crucial leadership practice to be implemented, but all spoke about its significance, speaking in terms of shared discussions, consensus, collaboration, gathering input, getting involved in decisions, and working towards the same goals. Two of the six participants spoke of shared leadership as being one of the most important practices they use. The leadership practice of communication, on the other hand, was referred to more often and more prominently among all participants and became an important leadership practice to consider in helping answer both research questions in this study.

The leadership practice of having a vision was something that was mentioned favorably by five out of the six respondents, but only one of them listed having a vision as one of the most important. Communication was discussed by all the superintendents involved in the study and was listed by three of them as being one of the most important leadership practices. Furthermore, communication was present, in one form or another, in four of the seven themes generated from the qualitative data in this research project. Visibility was mentioned by each participant, and was coupled with communication in one of the seven themes.

Inspiring followers was discussed in interviews with each of the superintendents, but none listed it as one of the most important leadership practices. Furthermore, none of the participants talked about transformational leadership or discussed the idea of inspiring others to the extent that it resembled transformational leadership described by Yukl (2006), who wrote transformational leadership inspires others to do more because of the

admiration, trust, and loyalty they have towards the leader, and that transformational leaders motivate others by communicating an appealing vision. The participants in this study talked about the importance of communication and visibility, but did not speak of inspiring followers by using motivating oratory or leadership charisma. Their discussions of inspiring others dealt more with providing encouragement. One participating superintendent told of how she intentionally made an effort to encourage teachers when she heard they were having a difficult time, feeling stressed, or even questioning whether or not they should stay in education. “They needed encouragement,” she said. “I walked over when they had some planning time. I just walked in to give them some encouragement” (S6). Another superintendent said he tries to notice when a member of the teaching staff does something worthy of recognition. “I do support the staff,” he said. “When they do something good—which they do good stuff all the time—you make a point of letting them know.... They get a pat on the back. There’s somebody at least paying attention to what they’re doing” (S1).

Shared leadership was alluded to by each participant in the study, and two of them felt strongly enough about its importance that it was mentioned among the leadership practices considered the most crucial. Professional growth was regularly acknowledged as important, but none of the six superintendents cited it in their top three important leadership practices. Ethics, as a leadership practice, was mentioned directly by two participants as being one of the most crucial. When ethics was discussed in conjunction with the ideals of having a passion for what one does or doing what is best for students, however, all six participants spoke of its significance. Political awareness was mentioned as being one of the most crucial leadership practices by only one of the respondents, but

all spoke of what they must do to stay informed, to understand, and to be involved in local and state politics as they relate to education.

The themes that were generated did not precisely coincide with the nine leadership practices that were described in the review of literature. Of the nine leadership practices, only three of them (communication, visibility, and ethics) were translated directly in to one of the emerging themes. As stated earlier, however, when all the interviews were considered together, all leadership practices were deemed as having at least a degree of importance in helping a superintendent successfully carry out his or her duties. In addition, there was much discussion that indicated the superintendents felt the leadership practices were interrelated. For example, while only one of the participants listed the leadership practice of building relationships as being the most crucial, four of the six participants talked about building relationships in conjunction with one or more of the other leadership practices.

The following themes or categories emerged from the data: (a) Communication is important to successful school leadership. (b) Great care must be taken to avoid miscommunication. (c) Visibility helps communication. (d) Several leadership practices work together in helping the superintendent. (e) Ethics and having a passion for doing the right thing for students is important. (f) Management and organizational issues take a lot of time. (g) Communication requires much attention. The first five categories answered the first research question; the last two categories answered the second research question.

Table 1

Which Superintendents Provided Qualitative Evidence for each Theme

Qualitative themes identified	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
Communication is crucial		X		X	X	
It is important to avoid miscommunication	X	X		X		
Several leadership practices are connected	X		X			X
Ethics of believing in doing what is best for students	X		X		X	X
Visibility aids effective communication	X	X	X	X		X
Management, administrative, budgeting issues take a lot of time		X	X		X	X
Communication takes a lot of time		X		X	X	

Research Question One

The first research question asked, *What leadership practices are perceived by established school superintendents to be crucial to successful school leadership?* Seven themes were identified when the qualitative data analysis was completed in this study, and five of those themes address the first research question. Those five themes are (a) communication is key, (b) avoid miscommunication, (c) visibility aids communication (d) several leadership practices are connected, and (e) ethics and doing what is best for students (Table 1). Communication, visibility, and ethics were most widely discussed, but shared leadership, vision, and political awareness were also considered important by some participants.

Communication is key

According to the participants in this study, communication is important to successful school leadership. Three participants mentioned communication as being the most important, or one of the most important leadership practices. One explained how he always communicates by phone, e-mail, and in meetings with administration, the school board, or community members. Another told of how he provides ongoing communication with the school board and also does interviews on the local radio station. He said communication is “probably the most important piece of being a superintendent” (S4). Another said, “Communication is all-important.... I think you just really, you leave no stone unturned. There’s always a way that you can communicate better and more effectively” (S2). Another participant said, “I do think you can learn budget, you can learn board relations, as a superintendent, board relations are critical too, but if you really want to improve schools and student learning, you have to have that good communication” (S5).

One superintendent spoke of the importance of communication in a collaborative effort in her first year as a superintendent in which she led the school board in a constructed effort to begin thinking about how to educate students for the future. Communication was important in helping establish a new perspective and a new vision, and the process enabled each individual to build a connection with others around common goals for the school district. She said,

The board had opportunities to observe and experience some of the scientific-based activities. We engaged in activities of “thinking outside the box” and built a clear understanding of specific needs and how to implement objectives to obtain our goals. There was a strong relational bond of mutual respect developed through this process (S6).

One participating superintendent told of how extensive, ongoing communication was critical as his school district sought to build a vision of updated facilities and passing a bond issue. He explained that a bond issue had not been passed in the school district in 40 years, and even their most recent attempt failed. He still, however, spoke of the benefits of the effort, because it allowed more community members to be involved in communication with the school and helped more of them envision what they want their school district to be (S2). He said,

The whole process of getting people together, community people, business leaders, school people, board members, staff—I mean the whole process—and then bringing in the outside resources to start the process of trying to build this vision, and I’m talking in specifics of trying to build this vision of facilities for the school district and a master plan and all of that. But how important that whole process was, and the fact that when we did that we met weekly, sometimes we met every other week. We probably had 50 meetings over a year where we spent hours and hours and hours together talking about and communicating verbally and using multi-media presentations and researching and gathering information and just sitting down and talking through all of that, to try to get to this shared vision of what the future of this district should look like as far as safe facilities for our kids and up-to-date facilities with better technology and all of that. So that whole process, I think, was a prime example of how important it is to communicate and share that together, and we did that and even though we weren’t successful—you know, that’s terrible, that’s tragic that we weren’t. But that whole process shows how important communication is for building that, because when it was all said and done, there were a lot of people in this community—I wish there were more—that I think were all on board and had that same shared vision of what our campus could look like and what our master plan could look like and how that would benefit our kids for the future (S2)

Other participating superintendents did not directly say that communication was one of the most important leadership practices, but still spoke of its importance. One said,

Communication is very important. A lot of times that we are forced to make decisions, the people that those decisions affect will be more accepting to some of those decisions if they have all the information that they need. So if you are open to communication with them and share information with them, when it comes down to making a decision

everybody already knows what that decision is going to be because they've already all had a part in that process (S1).

One spoke of the importance of communicating expectations and the direction the district should go (S6) and another told of how the administration must know what the superintendent expects. He said communicating those expectations “trickles down” to the certified and non-certified staff (S3).

One participant told of how communication was important in an extensive effort to implement new teaching strategies. It involved training and clearly defined expectations (S4). He said,

A few years ago we worked with a McREL [Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning] program and it required a lot of time with the vocabulary piece. In that process we had several pieces of training that we had to get done and we had to come back to our buildings and get everybody else involved in that with a team of people. So we had several different processes where we had different groups of people involved where we tried to explain what our expectations were and to give them information we had received in the training. It was kind of a detailed process; we tried to get everybody on board. We implemented it in a 7-12 building and we added the lower buildings as we went on. And we used those people who were involved in the beginning to explain what the process was about and how we were going to do all of that. I was the leader of the group and I had teachers who were involved in that. It was kind of a team approach. As time went on the teacher-leaders did most of the communicating with the elementary buildings. It is still a part of what we do (S4).

Another participating superintendent told of how ineffective communication in his district created fears and ill will, and told how changes were made to improve communication and improve the situation. It involved bomb threats in his school district, and a lack of communication contributed to panic and a negative perception of the school district on the part of some. A more effective means of communication helped alleviate fears among patrons and to re-establish the public's confidence that the school was a safe

place for students (S2). He told of how the school district experienced a series of bomb threats a few years ago, and how the school district changed the procedure on how to deal with such a crisis situation. He said,

It got to be pretty specific at one point and we actually had a picture of cross hairs, like gun cross hairs, drawn in a bathroom. We had a date, we had a time. When it got to that point, of course we had the police and everybody involved. We actually shut down school for a few days. And when the decision was made to shut down school, and that information went out in the traditional ways we put it out, people went nuts (S2).

He explained that the problem was compounded by the fact that their public relations efforts and their media contacts were not very good. They investigated what was going on, and planned what to do next. They gave everyone an opportunity to speak at a community-wide, town hall meeting, and they also implemented a new plan for communicating better with parents and community members. He said,

We had a town hall meeting and actually sat down with all of those, we invited everyone to come and we went through the process and the protocol and everything we had done, and what our old plan was regarding the issues and the unveiling of our new plan in which we went to one of those instant parent notification programs. So bringing that on board, and utilizing that, we then had subsequent bomb threat situations in which we could pick up the phone, program that in, and get out the message that yes, there was a message written in a bathroom stall in the middle school today, it was dealt with, here's how we handled it, the kids are safe, they're in school (S2).

He said the new procedure for informing parents worked very well. Parents were thankful and said they appreciated the instant feedback. He explained how much different it was than the old procedure:

The first time we had that massive bomb threat and we dismissed school people went berserk. We had people lined up everywhere checking out their kids. I mean they just went wild. The next time when we used the school reach system and all that, we had maybe 15 or 20 people up here

trying to check out their kids or keep them out the next day, because everybody got the information. Now before that we were relying on either a letter we would write home and stick it in the kids' backpacks, putting it on [television] and expecting people to read it or whatever. We really just had limited access to parents to get them information. So that has been a tremendous benefit for our district and it has improved our overall communication. Now we use that system for parent-teacher conference nights, ball games that are cancelled and rescheduled, just anything and everything we use that system. We let staff know about upcoming events and back-to-school stuff. We just wear that system out. And people are very, very appreciative of it. It's one easy way to get a hold of the vast majority of your school people, so it's been a real positive (S2).

In the aforementioned example, miscommunication contributed to the school district's handling of problems surrounding the bomb threats, and the matter was addressed when the procedures were changed and communication was improved. The following section includes descriptions of other instances in which miscommunication can create difficulties.

Avoid miscommunication

As each participating superintendent discussed communication, the idea of misunderstandings and miscommunication continued to emerge in the interviews. This contributed to the development of the category that great care must be taken to avoid miscommunication and to build trust. One participant spoke of miscommunication this way:

That has gotten me in trouble more than anything else I've been in trouble for. Whether it's gotten me in trouble with the board members about something that I've said or something that wasn't understood, or whether it's teachers having a different perception of what we're trying to do from one building to the next (S4).

He also explained how his school district, with a high school as a low-performing school, had to make some changes in recent months and problems were created as a result of miscommunication (S4). He said,

Back just recently we had a situation—the high school principal had to be released because we were among the five percent of low-performing schools. He had been hired before 2007-08. So I had to get all of the teachers together and had to meet in the cafeteria so I had to explain to them what was going on. My staff is used to us having to pay them for every time we stay after hours, so even though it was a meeting we had called, some of them were concerned about being paid. I told them if they were concerned about being paid, we weren't paying for that. I had some teachers who were not there. They didn't hear the story. Then some of those that were there didn't fully understand the whole situation. So we had a communication issue that contributed to the problem. The ones who were not there did not get the input they would have gotten if they had been there in person. Rumors started and there were some things said that weren't in the works (S4).

He explained further that inaccurate information circulated at least three days after the meeting, and as soon as they would correct a rumor, something else would be said “that didn't have any validity to it” (S4).

According to the respondents, misunderstandings occur, even when the superintendent is trying to communicate effectively and to be completely forthcoming with information. One of the participants said he makes extensive efforts to get information out and to communicate openly, but individuals will still question what is being done, challenge the information, or “take bits and pieces of it” (S2). Another said,

I'm going to tell them exactly what I know. Sometimes that gets me in a little bit of trouble telling them what I know or telling them what I'm thinking because sometimes they misinterpret that to think that that's what the decision is. When I talk to them about things, it's, I'm thinking this, this, and this and what do you think about that. Sometimes...I have to clarify that, no, I never said that I was going to make that decision. I'm gathering information. Sometimes being real open kind of gives you little problems too in that respect (S1).

According to the respondents, extra efforts should be made to avoid miscommunication. This involves deliberate proactive action as well as times of reflection afterwards about how something might have been more clearly communicated.

One respondent said after each board meeting he thought of ways in which he wished he could have communicated better, and explained that the outcome of some board decisions might have been different if he remembered to say one thing or another. He said after a board meeting "...you wished you had said this or that" (S3).

One participating superintendent told of how he had to be aware of how the message received is not always the message that was communicated, and said that something as simple as body language can create miscommunication (S2). He said,

The more I think about this—not only just verbal communication and written communication and all of that, but I think a lot of times it is the non-verbal communication, when you're at a meeting setting such as a board meeting or when you're across the table from the CTA. Because what you say may not match your antics and your body motions and your facials and so on. I think it all goes together. You can say one thing and people can walk out of there with a totally different message based on how you present yourself with all the non-verbal stuff within a meeting setting. So it's just very critical. It's all-encompassing. It's very, very important (S2).

Another superintendent spoke of the efforts to make sure school board members understand information before a board meeting. He said he provides written information to each board member a week before a regularly scheduled board meeting. He said, "I advise them to contact me if they have any questions. Communication is a big issue for everybody. There's a lot of stuff that gets lost in communication" (S4). He elaborated further about miscommunication:

The biggest thing that catches up with people is the lack of communication. If I ever had anything happen that was a disaster or in a board meeting that was a disaster, it was the fact that communication fell apart. Even though you think you've got the people informed, the translation of that sometimes breaks down (S4).

He also explained in dealing with the school district staff he tries to get the same information to everyone at the same time to avoid miscommunication and the spreading

of rumors. Concerning a recent issue, he said they had a general staff meeting to make sure everyone understood the issue and got the same information. He said, “When they left yesterday at the end of the day, everybody had the same message. There shouldn’t be any deviation from that. They should have all gotten the same information and should have taken it the same way.” He later said, “Whatever you’re saying to people or you’re telling people, it can’t get lost in the translation. You have to be specific about what they don’t understand.” He told of how explanations and information should be provided to make sure their perceptions match the message that is communicated. “It can’t be the way they perceive it,” he said. “It’s got to be the way it is. That is part of the communication thing” (S4).

One respondent said he is always looking for ways to communicate better, to be completely open, to get information out, and in the process, to build more trust between the school and the community. He said,

There’s always a way that you can communicate better and more effectively. In some of the larger districts...they may broadcast their board meetings [on TV]. I used to laugh at that, I thought it was a dumb idea, but if people have a question and there’s a trust issue or anything like that, if your board meetings are broadcast and people can sit there and kick on the TV and watch what’s going on, then they may have no reason to feel that way. They have no reason to distrust or question. I think, in my own experience, in this district, I’m always looking for ways to make that communication better (S2).

He also explained how transparency is important. He said,

That’s the way it has to be. You have to be honest and up front with people when they ask. ...when they ask and people come calling and say what about this or that, you open the books and you say, here it is, here’s what we’ve done, here’s our history on this and here’s our plan for the future so they can’t say, I asked questions and nobody answered my questions (S2).

The qualitative data indicates that the participating superintendents have learned by experience that it is important to accurately communicate and to make sure individuals in the school district and in the community are provided adequate information. According to the participants, to fail to do so is to invite miscommunication, which can create additional problems for school leaders. The participants also spoke about the importance of visibility and how it relates to effective communication.

Visibility aids communication

All of the participants discussed visibility as a leadership practice, but five of six mentioned that visibility can help the superintendent in communication efforts. They spoke of the importance of the superintendent being visible to staff members and to community members so he or she can be available, build a rapport, appear down-to-earth, and be more approachable (S1, S2, S3, S4, S6). One said being visible “just opens up the line of communication. The more you’re out and about, the more they know you, the more willing they are to talk to you” (S1). Another respondent said it is important to see the superintendent in another setting. He said, “I’m not this hairy ogre that has a pocket protector, horn-rimmed glasses, and all that. I do care about kids” (S2).

One elaborated further,

I think just being visible makes you available. I think it’s more of being out in the buildings and knowing your staff and building relationships. Getting out there in the middle of them where they get to know who you are. Just getting to know your people (S1).

He also spoke of how being visible enabled him to personally connect with individuals and helped establish trust. He said this was important when he had to communicate to the staff about a budgeting decision concerning teacher salaries.

When it comes to budget cuts—all districts are facing that. If you aren't out there building trust they're not going to be supportive when you have to announce tough decisions. We were not able to provide a raise this year, but we did make sure the teachers got their step on the salary schedule. I had one coach who told me, "I'm not worried about it. They've always found the money before." He didn't understand the financial difficulty we faced. But the majority of the people understood, and because we had been open and interacting with them all along, when it came time to set the salary schedule they didn't even ask for a raise. They knew about the financial difficulties and they trusted what we were telling them. They were just glad to get their step (S1).

One superintendent said the school leader's visibility or invisibility communicates a lot. She said the superintendent sends a message by what is valued simply by being present or absent. She explained,

There's no message that speaks louder than to have a building level or a district level administrator walk in to a professional development activity long enough to introduce the speaker and then leave and go work in their office. You pretty much diminish the importance of that activity just by your absence.... You can't say you value something and then be totally void of having anything to do with it (S6).

To put it another way, the superintendent's visibility communicates the importance of an event. The participant said, "It's very important that you reflect what you truly value. If you don't, then it's just lip service" (S6). Martin (2002) wrote of espoused beliefs, which are what a person says is valued, as opposed to attitudinal or underlying beliefs, which reveal what a person or an organization really believes is important. If a superintendent says that an activity or an issue is important but does not believe it is important enough for him or her to participate in, it shows an inconsistency that was identified by Superintendent 6 and also referenced by Martin when he compared espoused values with underlying assumptions.

At some point in their interviews, five of the six participating superintendents made a reference to the importance of being visible in the school district or in the

community, often speaking of how visibility helps establish good lines of communication. Just as the leadership practice of visibility was often coupled with the leadership practice of communication, other leadership practices can often be used together.

Leadership is a combination of leadership practices

Three of six respondents could not pick just one leadership practice and say that it was more crucial than all the rest. They spoke of several leadership practices as being important, and how some of them are utilized together in the superintendent's leadership efforts. The respondents were validating a claim made by Maxwell (2007) when he wrote, "The one thing you need to know about leadership is that there is more than one thing you need to know about leadership!" (p. xx).

The review of literature and the interviews with superintendents both support the assertion that leadership is a combination of leadership practices, and that all nine leadership practices have a high degree of importance when it comes to helping superintendents carry out their duties as school leaders. Establishing a vision in leadership, for example, was mentioned by five participants as being important, but only one participant mentioned it as being one of the most crucial. Building relationships is a leadership practice which, when discussed by the participants, was given a level of importance, but only one participant said it was above all the other leadership practices in its degree of importance. Furthermore, the interview transcripts provide qualitative data that indicates there is much overlap in the leadership practices, and that no one leadership practice stands alone. The leadership practice of building relationships can be used as an example of overlap as well, because building relationships can be related to the

leadership practices of communication, visibility, inspiring followers, collaboration, and ethics.

In some instances, it was hard for the respondents to compartmentalize the discussion on different leadership practices. When asked about the most important leadership practice, one participant mentioned communication, shared leadership, having a vision, inspiring others, and having a good knowledge base (S5). (While she mentioned those five items, a careful examination of the interview transcript demonstrated a greater focus on the two leadership practices of communication and shared leadership). Another participant alluded to vision and shared leadership as the most important, but spoke of the necessity for good communication as well. She said communication is “an essential portion of the vision building because you don’t build a vision in isolation.” She also told of how it is important to get everyone in the district moving in a common direction using leadership practices such as communication, collaboration, and vision. She said, “It isn’t done in a vacuum” (S6).

Another participating superintendent told of how he would be leaving his position after the next school year, and that he did not want problems for the district in the coming school year as a result. As he described what he hoped for the school district in the coming year, it involved several leadership practices, including political awareness, ethical behavior, shared leadership, and communicating a clear direction for the school district. He said,

All the decisions that I make now...in my mind, there’s a question of, I’m kind of a lame-duck superintendent. They know I’m not coming back. I don’t want, for the sake of the district and the sake of the teachers and the kids...for there to be a lot of controversy (S2).

He explained he has seen instances in which a superintendent is leaving and a seven member school board votes down everything he recommends or passes it by a narrow margin. He explained that would not be best for the school district, and that he intended to involve all teachers and administrators in making decisions and in making recommendations to the school board. He said,

I'm trying to get ...people more involved in those decisions and the community, so that it's not [my] recommendation as superintendent, it is, the teachers have discussed this, the administrators have discussed this, this is our recommendation and it's a district recommendation...so that there are not 4-3 votes or 5-2 votes. Not that everything has to be totally 7-0 but, I do think that the decisions that a board makes send messages to the staff as to whether they're supported, whether the board understands, whether they've been communicated, whether they believe this is the right direction. That's something that I'm really working on this year.... I think by getting everybody else involved, you have the opportunity to continue to have those either unanimous or mostly unanimous board decisions so that the staff has clear direction as to what they need to be doing or where they need to go (S2).

Another respondent concurred with the idea that leadership practices are not carried out in isolation when he said the leadership practices can be placed under the idea of ethics. He said, "They just all seem to blend in to that one" (S3). He also elaborated on how he had to utilize different leadership practices to successfully pass a bond issue:

While attempting to pass the bond issue for a new elementary school, the community in which our satellite elementary school, which is 14 miles away, thought we were attempting to close that school up. I worked with the community leaders to get it across to them that we weren't trying to close that elementary school. To prove that point, I opened a pre-school up at that campus to show we were not planning to shut it down. We worked with the community and the politics involved, and of course there was a lot of collaboration there to show that we were in fact enhancing the school instead of trying to close it. So it took communication, politics, and collaboration to get them to back the bond issue. It turned out to be the highest rate of yes-votes in the state for the November election of 2008 (S3).

Another superintendent said he didn't believe it is always possible to separate leadership practices. He said, "They mingle together so much. To me, I don't think there's one trait here and one trait there. It kind of all comes together as one.... It just seems like it all works together" (S1). He explained how he believes all of the leadership practices are connected to the idea of forming relationships. He said,

We are in the people business and in order to achieve our goals in education we must start by addressing the need for belonging and caring.... We can try to cram knowledge and understanding in to people but they will be more willing to accept and understand it if they know it is coming from someone who truly cares for them (S1).

Another participating superintendent said she felt one of her strengths was relationships with people (S5). The idea of building relationships was voiced by Maxwell (2007) when he wrote, "Build enough of the right kinds of relationships with the right people, and you can become the real leader in an organization" (p. 17). Another participant also spoke of how building relationships is related to other leadership practices (S6). She said,

Communication, inspiring others, collaboration, and political awareness are all essential elements in building and maintaining relationships. One cannot build a shared vision without establishing a relationship of mutual trust with the various stakeholders within the organization. It is essential that a clear understanding of the challenges, as well as the goals, be effectively communicated. Effective communication helps build relationships and inspire others (S6).

Another participant spoke of building good relationships with administrators, board members, the Certified Teachers Association (CTA), the Professional Development Committee (PDC), and the classified staff employees. He said this can help with leadership practices such as communication, visibility, and political awareness. He explained that good relationships with board members, particularly the board president,

can help provide a “smooth and efficient and orderly monthly board meeting” (S2). He further said,

Working with the CTA, especially in light of collective bargaining and how important it is to be able to sit down across the table with them and talk so that those things go smoothly and you don't have this controversy and CTA versus the superintendent and against the board as far as salary and benefits. I also think about PDC and trying to build a relationship in which we're all on the same page as far as meeting our goals with training and developing the staff and how important that is for them to understand where the limits are. You know, next year they've kind of taken off some of the limits on the one percent funding [for professional development]. ...to be able to sit down with my PDC people, which I did, and say, “Look, you're entitled to up to \$58,000 but I only want to give you x amount because I need that additional money.” And everything was smooth, they agreed, they kind of changed some of the things we do. And that wouldn't have happened had we not had a good relationship (S2).

He also explained the importance of building relationships and gaining trust from the classified employees of the district, whom he described as “the go-to people in the district” (S2). He said,

If you don't have a relationship with them where they trust you and they know you have the best interest of the district at heart, that you care about them and stuff like that, then I think that can create a lot of problems for you. Those relationships that you've developed with those people allow them to see that in practice. I mean as you're working and dealing with them and you have those relationships, they're able to witness your political awareness, they're able to witness your commitment to a high ethical standard. So it's like practicing what you preach. You have the relationship, they see you on campus, they see you at the ball games, and see you working with the kids, and all of those things are evident to them. They know you; they know who you are, and they know where you stand on those things. So it allows you to practice what you've been preaching because you have that relationship with them (S2).

Interviews with participating superintendents revealed how more than one leadership practice may be utilized simultaneously. Communication is often aligned with leadership practices such as vision, visibility, or political awareness. Building relationships can be utilized with inspiring followers and shared leadership. Ethical

behavior is also a leadership practice that can be implemented in association with other leadership practices, and is discussed as a theme in the next section.

Ethics and doing the right thing

The participants agreed that ethics and having a passion for doing the right thing for students is important. As mentioned earlier, two participants directly mentioned ethical behavior as being one of the most important for the school leader, but all participants discussed ethical considerations such as doing what is best for students, having a passion for what one is doing, building positive relationships with others, and treating others fairly. One said, “My personal vision is to always be student-focused. Make sure that everyone realizes that we are here for the kids and everything we do has to be efficacious in enhancing what happens with our students” (S6). Doing what is best for the students was mentioned as the “bottom line” (S3) and the goal that everyone needs to have in mind (S4).

One superintendent spoke extensively about doing a good job and having a clear conscience. He said he would encourage any administrator to do the right thing and always be honest and fair. He elaborated further:

Work the schedule that you’re required to do, do the job, take care of business and be able at the end of the day, no matter what somebody says, I didn’t do anything wrong, I can sleep good tonight because I felt like what I did was right, I followed their policy, I did what I thought I needed to do to take care of business. I haven’t lied to anyone or misrepresented anything or done anything immoral or anything that could cause shame on myself, my family, or the district (S2).

Another participant talked about treating others fairly, saying, “Basically, I believe if you’re fair, when you treat others as you wish to be treated, then everything’s going to come out all right” (S3). He explained further,

I'm pretty much a simpleton. Just treat everybody the way you think you ought to be treated and everything will wash out. The superintendent I followed in this job played some favorites and it created a situation where people were afraid to come talk to the superintendent because of who his favorites were. So I had to work on that problem. I've had to overcome that by—you know, if you've got a problem with somebody, I don't care who it is, you need to come see me and we'll get it straightened out, and I think that's worked out for the best in the long run. It doesn't make any difference who they are having problems with, be it an administrator or teacher or whoever, they can come talk to me and we'll resolve it. It took a little time to get that across, that if there's a problem, I would talk to a principal about it or whatever I needed to do (S3).

He also told of how he once had to do what he felt was best for the students by removing a tenured teacher. He explained that he was doing the right thing because it was in the students' best interests, it was a reminder to other teachers of the importance of doing their jobs, it served as a way to communicate to parents that school officials were looking out for the students, and it enabled the school district to service special needs students according to the law. He said,

We had never fired a tenured teacher as long as I've been here, and I've been here 30-something years. So I had one that wasn't doing her job, and I talked to the board and said here is what we need to do—she's not doing her kids the right way and she's just wanting to stretch it another year and not do anything, and so it's not right. They backed me up and so we jumped through all the hoops and it took about three or four months, but we got rid of her and it was the best thing for the kids. The rest of the teachers kind of sat up and realized that you can fire tenured teachers if they don't do what they're supposed to do and so I think it was also a good lesson for those who were slacking on one end. On the other end, I was showing the parents that we were going to do the best we could to get someone in there to work with their kids. The parents were expecting results and that could have turned in to a bad deal with a lawsuit if we just let her slide and make excuses for her but we didn't do that. We got rid of her and the parents were supportive (S3).

Others talked about having a passion for the job, believing in your cause, and setting a good example. “You have to have a passion for it,” one said. “You have to have a passion for what you do” (S5). Another respondent said superintendents need to believe

in what they are doing. “They need to walk the walk,” he said. “You can tell. You really can tell which people really care about kids and care about their staff and which ones are there for the paycheck” (S1). One superintendent talked about the superintendent serving as a model of right behavior. She said, “You are a living example of what you want your staff and your students to reflect. If you’re not, you don’t need to be in that role” (S6).

Research Question Two

The second research question was, *What do established superintendents perceive are the leadership practices that warrant the most attention from the school superintendent?* This question was answered from two themes that emerged from the interviews. The two themes are (a) management and administrative issues and (b) communicating effectively. Communication was mentioned as a leadership practice that requires a great deal of attention from the school superintendent, but participants also spoke of the time needed for administrative tasks such as budgeting, finance, and keeping the organization running effectively on a daily basis.

Management and administrative issues

According to the interview data, management and organizational issues take a lot of a superintendent’s time. These include issues such as taking care of the physical property of the school district, addressing budgetary issues, consulting with attorneys, and hearing unexpected concerns or complaints from patrons. While administrative concerns such as these are not listed as a specific leadership category in the review of literature in this study, they are an important component of a school superintendent’s duties, and they were mentioned often by the participants. According to Yukl (2006) leaders must be able to assume an administrative role to coordinate many activities for

the most efficient use of people and resources. According to Drucker (2001) the executive leader's time "tends to belong to everyone else.... Everybody can move in on his time, and everybody does" (p. 197). One respondent in this study said that the administrative details can cause a superintendent to "get sequestered" in his or her own office (S6). Another participant said administrative concerns such as budgeting, leaky roofs, and bus problems could take up all of a superintendent's time, time that may have been devoted to the school vision, curriculum instruction, and student results. "You can get consumed with management," she said (S5). Another said there are always administrative tasks that need his attention. "It just seems like there's always something pressing in this office," he said, "it needs to be done, whether it's paperwork or coordinating things, or budgets, all the different things that we're trying to do in this office" (S2).

One participant elaborated further about administrative tasks. He said,

I think it's an everyday deal. Management issues eat all of your time up. It's just one thing after another. You don't have a whole lot of time at your desk. You have meetings, you fill out paperwork, and people come by who want to see you, and they may have already been by several times and you weren't available (S1).

He added jokingly, "And then you get these phone calls from these doctoral students" (S1).

When asked which leadership practices warrant the most attention from the superintendent, one respondent pointed out that while you want to utilize the leadership practices, taking care of the district finances is the most crucial and time-consuming administrative task of the school superintendent. It also is the task that can place a superintendent's job in jeopardy the quickest. He explained that the superintendent has

building principals to run the schools, but the budgeting for the district is the sole responsibility of the superintendent; in a small school district the superintendent cannot delegate budgeting matters to someone else. He said, “You can screw up about anything, and they will let you slide for a while, but if you screw up money, you can pretty much bet you’re gone” (S3). Another superintendent said, “You have to have time to study your budget. You have to have time to see if your budget is focused on the right things” (S5).

All of the matters that come to the attention of the school superintendent—meetings, hearing teacher concerns, coordinating bus transportation, supervising maintenance issues, reviewing bids for work, filling out paperwork for the state department of education—require a lot of time from the superintendent as an administrator and as a manager. These matters were mentioned by the participating superintendents in their interviews, but they also said communication with others warrants a great deal of their time.

Communication takes time

When asked what leadership practices warrant the most attention from the school superintendent, three of the six respondents mentioned communication (S2, S4, S5). Superintendents reported they spend lots of time on communication through meetings, contact with parents and staff, and solving problems. (S3, S5). One respondent explained how effective communication takes time. She said,

A good portion of communication is seeking first to just understand and then to clearly communicate the direction that you want to move together with the district. That’s done through written communication, that’s done through being out and interacting with people, listening to your staff, working closely with your building level administrators, clearly not only hearing what they have to say and working together, but being very clear about expectations and following through consistently with those

expectations. You can't just articulate something and then not follow through with it (S6).

One superintendent explained how he takes steps to make sure everyone understands what he is communicating. He gave an example of a potential political problem that the school board might face, and he said, "It's better sometimes to talk about it, get it all out in the open, get those players involved..." (S4). When he was asked what leadership practices warrant the most attention, he said taking time to make sure that what he has communicated does not get lost in the translation. Time is taken to make sure everyone gets the intended message and knows what takes priority (S4).

At the time of the qualitative interview, he spoke of a recent issue that required extensive efforts to communicate to everyone involved. He said,

One of the things we've been working on this week is a grant and it requires a needs assessment. That's a big part of this grant. It's a \$2 million grant for the five percent low-performing schools. We've got a group of people together—they've done a needs assessment, a needs study, and we've got a group of people, 15 teachers and staff and community members. They've been working on developing the goals and assessments. We've got to put that in place to work on the initiative to get our scores turned around. We've spent three days on that, trying to explain what we are doing and what is going on. Trying to get teachers to be there every day for three days, and community members that have other things going on... We had issues trying to stay in touch. We sent e-mails trying to let them know what was going on. We tried to keep everyone informed. We ...had a webinar done with video streaming, so that the girl that was in charge of the grant-writing process could tell everybody in the entire high school (7-12 building) what was going on so they could see what the strategies were, what the goals were... that whole process. And now, I'm in the process of setting something up for the community in the next week or two. The one who is writing the grant, she met with the board and she told them what the process was and answered their questions. We also had a focus group of community members and had a couple of board members in that group so if anyone asked what was going on they could explain what has been going on in the community in the last ten or 15 years (S4).

He also told of how he had to communicate with the community about changes in the school district, and about how the state department of education required that the principal be replaced because of low student achievement.

I've talked to the newspapers. I've tried to explain to them about the situation of our principal being removed. They knew it was going to be a big issue because the word initially was that he was going to be terminated and I told them that he wasn't going to be because we were in a turnaround schools project. Then I got word from the state department saying that, yes he had to go. Then I had to call and tell them that we had to remove him after the board had taken action on it (S4).

Another participating superintendent told of a five-year effort to implement an inquiry-based K-12 educational model in which ongoing communication was critical. "Communication was the essential element in this process," she said. "We had to communicate to identify the problem areas in our instruction based upon discrepancies in student performance" (S6). During the process, she said it was important to stop placing blame or making excuses, honestly examine weaknesses, and look at the data to determine effective practices and needed professional development. She said,

Ongoing training, opportunities to go observe similar practices in other settings, and frequent collaboration with colleagues provided the teaching staff with support and incentive. The district as a whole had to make a significant financial commitment to achieve the goal of the inquiry-based instructional model. There had to be complete buy-in to the need for, and the efficacy of, this instructional practice. Parents were provided many opportunities to observe this instructional practice and evening in-services were provided in conjunction with PTO. All stakeholders were included in the implementation of this instructional practice. The effectiveness was evidenced in the growth of student performance among all students but particularly students who in the title programs and special services. It all began and was completed via the framework of effective communication (S6).

Interviews with participants demonstrated the importance of the school superintendent taking time to communicate with various individuals, including teachers,

administrators, members of the board of education, the community, and the local media. Superintendents mentioned the need for communicating expectations, but also the importance of listening to others. They also said as school leaders they needed to effectively communicate while implementing an initiative or a training program, when expecting a controversial issue or a crisis, or to explain what the school district is required to do by the state and federal government. In addition, superintendents must spend time communicating to the public about improvement efforts and matters affecting personnel.

Summary

This chapter presented the data that was generated from the qualitative analysis and how it answered the two research questions. It included a description of the six participating superintendents and many citations from their interviews. The intention was to accurately report how the interview data answered the research questions of this dissertation study. Great care was taken to analyze the data and to identify themes that best represented the consensus of all respondents. In quoting from the interview transcripts, or when paraphrasing what was said in the interviews, every effort was made to remain committed to accuracy. The respondents had a lot to say about how the leadership practices of communication and ethics are crucial in school leadership, and they also spoke of how administrative issues can potentially take much of their time. In addition, the qualitative evidence in this study suggests that all leadership practices are important, and that many are used in conjunction with other leadership practices. Chapter 5 will include major findings, limitations, and recommendations.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This study originated with the intention of having superintendents explaining which leadership practices were most crucial according to their own perspective and their own leadership experience. In the review of literature in Chapter 2, nine leadership practices emerged and became the basis of the skeleton around which qualitative interviews were constructed. Chapter 3 explained the methodology that was used and how data were secured and analyzed. Chapter 4 presented the data and addressed the research questions. This chapter presents findings, conclusions, and recommendations based upon the literature and the interviews with superintendents.

Major Findings

Qualitative research requires the researcher to engage in the highly subjective activity of making meaning of the data by sorting it through his or her own personal lens, making interpretations of the data, and drawing conclusions (Creswell, 2003). This has been done in this study, but because of the subjective nature of qualitative research, it is once again acknowledged that although the researcher has been very careful in examining and interpreting the data, a different individual may well produce written findings with slightly different results. This is not to say that the findings contained here are merely the result of one person's interpretation or one person's opinion. The findings are based solidly on the data generated from the interviews and steps have been taken to measure the data's trustworthiness by using the strategies mentioned in Chapter 3. The result is a

discussion of findings with which others can concur, and not simply a report of what was stated in the interviews of this study.

In addition, the subjective nature of qualitative research means that findings may vary from one study to the next, and also that interpretations may vary. In this study, for example, it has already been stated that another researcher may interview a different group of superintendents and get slightly different results. Also, as previously mentioned, the nine different leadership practices that have been examined often overlap each other; both the review of literature and the interview transcripts from this study indicate that the nine leadership practices are rarely implemented in isolation. As a result, the nine leadership practices cannot be viewed as nine separate categories. Establishing a vision, as a leadership practice, is closely associated with the leadership practices of communication, inspiring followers, and building relationships. The subjective nature of qualitative research and the subjective nature of the data produced in this study means that different individuals may connect the leadership practices in different ways. The subjectivity on the part of the participants also resulted in some variation about what they said were the most important leadership practices. This does not, however, diminish the importance of any one leadership practice. The respondents indicated that all are important, but when asked specifically about which ones were most crucial they mentioned matters related to communication and ethics the most, and also how leadership practices are used in combination with others.

The two research questions of this study were: (a) What leadership practices are perceived by established school superintendents to be crucial to successful school leadership? and (b) What do established superintendents perceive are the leadership

practices that warrant the most attention from the school superintendent? The following themes were generated from the analysis of data in the interview transcripts, and provided information to answer each research question: (a) Communication is important to successful school leadership. (b) Great care must be taken to avoid miscommunication and to build trust. (c) Visibility helps communication. (d) Several leadership practices work together in helping the superintendent. (e) Ethics and having a passion for doing the right thing for students is important. (f) Management and organizational issues take a lot of time. (g) Effective communication requires much attention from the superintendent.

Explanation of generalizations

The following pages include a discussion of the findings of this study, based upon the themes that resulted from the data analysis. The findings can be categorized in to the following generalizations: (a) Communication is essential for superintendents to practice successful school leadership. (b) Superintendents should demonstrate good ethics, moral leadership, and believe in doing what is best for students. (c) Superintendents must be effective managers of administrative tasks. (d) Superintendents should reflect on the value of each leadership practice and how the leadership practices are related.

This study has provided information and insight for further reflection and study, but much of what the participants said merely confirmed what was contained in the review of literature about leadership practices. The idea that no one leadership practice is implemented in isolation, however, was one that emerged in the qualitative data analysis but has not been fully developed by research; it therefore represents an opportunity for further examination. This belief that leadership practices can be utilized simultaneously and implemented in conjunction is one voiced by participating superintendents when they

spoke of how the leadership practices “mingle together” (S1), “blend in to one” (S3), and are not implemented “in a vacuum” (S6). Using more than one leadership practice at the same time is a finding in this study that is noteworthy and warrants further study. Other findings in this study have confirmed much of what is in the review of literature concerning leadership practices for school superintendents. According to the interviews with the six school superintendents, their experiences suggest that using the school leadership practices help school superintendents in the following ways: (a) Gaining a good understanding and an overall picture of one’s own school district and community. (b) Addressing school district issues, reaching goals, completing tasks, and meeting responsibilities.

As stated in Chapter 4, qualitative research can be inadequate when one attempts to use the data to discover generalizations and deem them universally true, because it is not always possible to generalize using a small, nonrandom sample (Merriam, 1998). With that in mind, the following generalizations are offered with the belief—based upon the research—that they are applicable for superintendents in most school settings, but we must stop short of claiming that each generalization is universally true. While both the reader and the researcher may intuitively feel that each generalization applies in all school districts, it must be acknowledged that six interviews with superintendents does not provide a broad enough foundation of data on which to base a universal claim. The findings in this study, however, remain worthy of further consideration and reflection because they are grounded in the perceptions of established school superintendents and provide insight on the importance of leadership practices in schools.

Communication

One generalization is that clear communication is essential for a superintendent to practice successful school leadership. In this study, every participant spoke of the importance of communication. One participating superintendent said communication is important because administrators need to know clearly what is expected (S3), while another respondent said communication is important because individuals are affected by the results of the decisions that are made (S1). School employees need good communication from school leaders so they can be involved, informed, provide input, and serve as links to the community. When they are able to do that, they will support the end result (Lober, 1993).

Of the six participating superintendents interviewed, three of them said communication was one of the most important leadership practices. Of the seven themes that were generated in the qualitative data in this dissertation study, four of them were linked to communication: (a) the importance of communication, (b) avoiding miscommunication, (c) visibility helps communication, and (d) communication takes much of a leader's time.

Not only is communication considered important by the participating superintendents who were interviewed, but it is also important because it is needed to implement other leadership practices such as visibility, vision, inspiring others, ethical behavior, and building relationships. In other words, if the school superintendent can effectively communicate, then he or she can promote a vision of where the school district wants to go, inspire and encourage others, and make sure those in the school district are aware of the moral and ethical obligation to do what is best for the students. Interview transcripts demonstrated that superintendents often spoke in terms of communicating a

vision, communicating encouragement, and communicating a desire to do what is right. In that regard, one can conclude that communication is not simply to provide needed information, but it is also valuable as a vehicle to help school leaders employ other leadership practices in the best interests of the school district and the students.

The data analysis also revealed that effective communication is important because miscommunication is so undesirable. Participating superintendents had several comments about the efforts made in their school districts to avoid any misunderstanding, and they also spoke of how miscommunication can be detrimental. Lober (1993) wrote, “Up to 80 percent of a person’s time is spent communicating, yet as much as 50 percent of the information is not interpreted correctly” (p. 96). Miscommunication within school districts is a liability as much as effective communication is an asset, and the experiences communicated by the participants demonstrated this.

In addition, respondents spoke of how visibility by the superintendent can help enhance communication. This was communicated frequently enough that a theme emerged from the data about the importance of visibility in helping establish familiarity and trust, and in creating opportunities for two-way communication. Phillips (1992) wrote, “If subordinates, or people in general, know that they genuinely have easy access to their leader, they’ll tend to view the leader in a more positive, trustworthy light” (p. 18). Rebore (2003) wrote the school leader is only the school leader when he or she is recognized as such, and that school leadership is dynamic and relational. He wrote, “The mistake that some principals and superintendents make when they assume their position is isolating themselves from those they supervise. Engagement with others is the only way to exercise leadership” (p. 24). This is closely tied to several of the leadership

practices, including building relationships, communication, inspiring followers, collaboration, and political awareness.

Those who were interviewed also made it clear that establishing effective communication warrants a great deal of time and effort on the part of the superintendent. According to Patterson (2000) different superintendents have recommended that the school superintendent take time to build positive working relationships and good lines of communication with school board members by having work sessions to get to know them, by having informal conversations about issues that require decisions, and by helping board members postpone decisions when circumstances are highly emotional. When these efforts are combined with the usual expectations of communicating to administration, the teaching staff, and the community, it consumes a great deal of the superintendent's weekly schedule. Because communication is such a crucial leadership practice, however, the time spent orchestrating meetings, listening to concerns, and providing information is both necessary and beneficial. To summarize, when evidence provides so many reasons for school leaders to engage in effective communication, and when the experiences of numerous individuals validate the need for good communication on the part of the superintendent, it is recommended that continual, specific, deliberate efforts be made to effectively communicate with everyone concerned.

Ethics and moral leadership

This study emphasizes the importance of school superintendents demonstrating good ethics, moral leadership, and a belief in doing what is best for students. This goes far beyond simply doing the right thing. As the participants in this study said, it also involves believing in what you are doing and always trying to do what is best for the

children of the school district. When one takes the results of the qualitative data analysis in this study and couples it with the ideas of Sergiovanni (2007), we can conclude that doing the right thing ethically also means persuading others to be committed to organizational ideals. In this instance, the idea of doing what is best for students, no matter how it is articulated, is one that must be shared throughout the school district. As the moral leader, the superintendent must be instrumental in calling administrators, teachers, and community leaders to be committed to common goals, common values, a common purpose, and a common cause. As moral leaders who seek to bring individuals together based upon shared values and beliefs, superintendents should encourage subordinates to follow ideas and purposes rather than an individual, and must inspire them to reach organizational goals (Burns 1978, Sergiovanni 2007).

The organizational goals, if they are agreed-upon ideals, should be communicated as a calling, as doing something of great value, and as a work that is worthy of one's commitment and loyalty (Bolman & Deal, 2003). The efforts to inspire can be likened to bringing about "heightened motivations, purpose, and missionary spirit" (Burns, p. 437). To do this is to access "a deeper level of human energy" that will pay off in helping an organization reach its goals (Bolman & Deal, p. 398).

This is accomplished when the superintendent builds mutual trust and cooperation, helping subordinates increase their enthusiasm, optimism and confidence in commonly held objectives (Yukl, 2006). It requires being able to use the leadership practices of communication, having a vision, building relationships, and inspiring others. To state it another way, to gain the benefits of the leadership practice of ethical behavior, the superintendent must communicate a commonly held vision that embodies the school

district's purpose and inspire others to strive towards that purpose. Teachers who are dedicated to the school district's ideals—whether they involve student learning, innovative lessons, rigorous instruction, or any other agreed-upon priority—have a commitment that enables the school to become a community with shared values working together for the good of the student (Sergiovanni, 2007).

According to the literature cited here and according to what the participating superintendents said, it is crucial that the school superintendent spend much time discovering the important shared beliefs of teachers, administrators, and community members (which is the intention of articulating a school district's core values and beliefs in school mission statements or vision statements), and use those shared beliefs to continually remind them of why they are there. The superintendent can tell subordinates, "We have a lot of issues that divide us, but we should focus on those things that unite us and that we agree upon, namely that we all care about our students and we want to do what is best for their education, their well-being, and their future." If the school superintendent can continually communicate the school and community's shared beliefs about the right things to do, and can get others to focus on those beliefs each day, then he or she will be making great progress with the leadership practice of ethical behavior. Practicing ethical behavior and inspiring others to do what is best for the students also involves using the leadership practices of vision, communication, inspiring followers, and building relationships.

Managing the school district

Superintendents must be effective managers of administrative tasks. Four of six superintendents interviewed mentioned administrative tasks that must be addressed, such

as budgeting, meetings, facilities, and staying in compliance with what is required by the state department of education. The fact that day-to-day administrative and organizational duties were mentioned so frequently is significant because the participants were not asked specifically about administrative tasks, yet they emerged in the interviews nonetheless. According to Pardini & Lewis (2003) superintendents are under more pressure than in past decades, because they have a greater variety of issues which they must address. Administrative duties include personnel and student issues, as well as business matters such as bids, contracts, facility upkeep, and transportation. This is combined with the developments in recent years of additional accountability concerning student achievement. The superintendent must oversee analysis of the data, instructional improvement efforts, meeting state standards, and informing the public of the school district's progress, or in some cases, the school district's lack of progress. In addition, Rebore (2001) writes that the superintendent's duties of dealing with administrative and management issues are further complicated because he or she must navigate through issues that have grown more complex, with virtually every decision being questioned.

Interview respondents said numerous administrative issues prevent them from getting out of their offices, and that can be frustrating, especially when a superintendent desires more direct interaction with teachers and students. Rather than neglecting the leadership practices mentioned in this study because of administrative tasks, it is recommended to make time to be out of the office to work on communication, visibility, building collaborative efforts, building relationships, and inspiring others.

Reflecting on how to utilize leadership practices

The review of literature and the findings of this study suggest that superintendents should reflect on the value of each leadership practice and how the leadership practices are related. A school superintendent cannot help instill a vision without communicating that vision and inspiring others to work towards the fulfillment of that vision. Inspiring others must also be done in conjunction with leader visibility. Addressing political issues cannot be done without utilizing good school district communication. The leadership practice of shared leadership and collaboration will help inspire others because they feel a sense of involvement and ownership. The idea of practicing good ethics, as was explained earlier, cannot be divorced from effective communication and the school's vision. Building relationships is related to leadership practices such as inspiring followers, communication, political awareness, and collaboration. To explain the interrelatedness of the leadership practices in the words of one of the respondents, "...they mingle together so much.... It kind of all comes together as one..." (S1).

This co-mingling should be taken in to account when the superintendent desires to implement leadership practices. Some leadership practices may be viewed as more significant than others, but in many instances, it is difficult to utilize one without another. Furthermore, because evidence exists that each leadership practice has a level of importance, it is not always easy to clearly identify one leadership practice as more crucial. Some respondents in this study articulated that reality. For example, when asked which leadership practices were most important in helping the superintendent be effective, one mentioned communication, collaborating, building relationships, seeing the vision, and inspiring others (S5). Other participants also mentioned multiple leadership

practices when asked which ones they feel are most important in helping them be an effective superintendent (S2, S6).

Based upon the qualitative data analysis of this study, it is recommended that the superintendent as school leader reflect upon how to utilize good communication skills in conjunction with the other leadership practices discussed. Phillips (1992) wrote, “Every leader must realize that the power to motivate followers resides almost solely in the ability to communicate effectively” (p. 160). He also wrote that direct contact with individuals in one-on-one conversation may be more important than public speaking. Regardless of how the superintendent plans to utilize the leadership practices, it is recommended that he or she remain motivated in order to motivate others. A vision can also be used to energize people and motivate them to work towards organizational goals. Again, when implementing leadership practices, the superintendent must think about how they all have the potential to work together.

Conclusions

The leadership practices of having a vision, effectively communicating, being visible, inspiring followers, practicing shared leadership, implementing professional growth, practicing ethical behavior, political awareness, and building relationships are all important in helping a school superintendent carry out his or her duties. This study has indicated that the school superintendent must make great efforts to utilize effective communication and a strong sense of ethics in doing what is good for the students, and the study has also provided evidence that suggests that these areas of leadership practice are intertwined with many other factors. As a result, the school superintendent cannot simply focus on communication and ethical leadership, but must also reflect upon how

leadership practices are interrelated and cannot be implemented independently of one another. This has emerged as a finding in this study that adds to the existing knowledge base on school leadership, and is worthy of additional examination. In addition, the superintendent must address various administrative concerns, often while attempting to utilize specific leadership practices.

The effort to reflect upon and implement leadership practices is encouraged because it allows the superintendent an opportunity for personal and professional growth and to increase his or her effectiveness as a school leader. An organizational vision is important because it provides direction and indicates where the school district is going. The superintendent must utilize a sense of vision because as the school leader, it is the superintendent who should point the way. The superintendent must also recognize that many educators entered the profession to make a positive difference in the lives of students and in society, and as a part of ethical and moral leadership, it is important to help individuals unite around such ideals. In this way, the superintendent can help school district personnel work in harmony, help students, and have the fulfilling satisfaction of knowing they are making a meaningful contribution with their work. To state it another way, when the school superintendent successfully uses the leadership practices, he or she reminds educators of their purpose, provides encouragement, assures them of the importance of their work, and helps them take pride in what they do.

This qualitative research project was completed to produce findings that could help school superintendents improve in their leadership efforts. As mentioned, the information generated from this study provides evidence that there must often be a comingling of school leadership practices to help school superintendents effectively carry

out their duties, and this adds to what is known about school leadership. The other findings in this study are not new, but they are significant in that they confirm what the review of literature revealed about school leadership practices. In addition, for any school leader wishing to improve upon his or her leadership skills, the specific qualitative detail and the generalizations of this study provide an impetus for ongoing study, reflection, and insight.

With a great deal of negative publicity directed towards school districts, it is good to know there are school superintendents who are dedicated to what they do, who look for ways to improve their own performance and that of their school district, and who work hard to make sure the school is in the best position to get improved results. Good school leadership does exist and can make a difference. Pardini & Lewis (2003) quoted Stanford University education professor Michael Kirst saying that when school boards choose good superintendents and keep them employed, the result is improvement in the school district. “They’re getting good results,” he said, “and it’s because of the quality of the district leadership” (p. 4).

Acknowledging Limitations

It is understood that readers may raise questions or object to particular parts of this dissertation study, and it is also understood that it is best to acknowledge possible objections from readers or limitations of the study (Booth, et al., 2003). First, it is acknowledged that more than six rural superintendents could have been interviewed, and that it is always desirable to welcome more evidence in a study of this nature (Booth, et al.) Secondly, one might contend that if this study were replicated with a different group of superintendents, the researcher might get different results. This was acknowledged in

Chapter 1 and is done so again here. It should be noted, however, that while results may slightly vary from one group to the next, it does not diminish the perspective of the participants in this study. The six participating superintendents in this study represented six rural Missouri school districts. Their combined experiences provide insight about effective rural school leadership and provide data worth considering when any superintendent wants to reflect upon improving his or her own leadership ability. For example, it is noteworthy how much the six participants in this study spoke of the importance of communication.

Third, one might question whether the two research questions are asking essentially the same thing. The first research question asks about the importance of specific leadership practices and the second one asks which leadership practices seem to take most of a school superintendent's time. While the first research question was designed to target the essence of this study, the second research question was helpful because it provided data about additional information such as the sometimes challenging burden the superintendent has with day-to-day management issues. It also gave further insight in to the place communication has for the superintendent, both inside and outside the school district.

Fourth, it is acknowledged that other leadership practices could have been considered. Additional leadership practices might include having good school public relations, planning and preparing for the school district, continual learning and study, and carrying out administrative duties (which were discussed in this study). The nine leadership practices utilized in this study, however, were the results of the synthesis of the review of literature on leadership and school leadership.

Implications for Future Practice

To make a practical application of what is discussed in this dissertation, it is recommended that superintendents: (a) spend time in reading, study, and personal reflection about the leadership practices, (b) get feedback from subordinates, (c) have discussions about school leadership with peers in other school districts, (d) be available and accessible in their school districts to help keep the lines of communication open, (e) make deliberate efforts to communicate more effectively, even if those efforts do not feel natural.

It is recommended that superintendents spend time in reading, study, and personal reflection about the leadership practices, and this dissertation is intended to provide a starting point for such professional enrichment. Time spent in study could be a part of a personal improvement or growth plan that includes taking notes and summarizing what is learned, using a journal, and communicating with others what has been gained. It was recommended earlier that superintendents spend time reflecting on how the leadership practices work together, but it is also recommended that they reflect upon how the leadership practices can be better implemented in their individual school districts.

Superintendents could benefit from obtaining feedback from subordinates about leadership practices. This can be done in informal conversations in their school districts or in anonymous surveys. Some states already require school districts to obtain survey data from parents, students, and teachers, but the school superintendent may want to design surveys that specifically address the value of leadership practices or how they are implemented. Once data are obtained, it should be reflected upon and superintendents should decide the manner in which adjustments should be made in implementing leadership practices.

Superintendents may benefit from visiting with superintendents in other districts and have discussions about school leadership and leadership practices. It is recommended that information be shared, whether it is in a formal or an informal setting, so superintendents may gain from each other's experiences. It is already acknowledged that a number of superintendents do this when they arrive at meetings or conferences, but it would be helpful to go a step further and schedule times to get together for the specific purpose of having conversations about leadership practices.

Each superintendent is encouraged, within his or her own school district, to be available and accessible to ensure that lines of communication are established and remain open. Depending upon the circumstances in a particular district, this may require some changes in the superintendent's daily or weekly routine. A greater emphasis may have to be placed upon getting out of the office in an effort to improve communication, visibility, and in inspiring others.

Another recommendation for future practice is that superintendents make deliberate efforts to communicate more effectively, even if it doesn't seem to come naturally. The evidence from this study about the importance of effective communication is strong enough that a school superintendent would be unwise to not communicate in various ways with subordinates. To fail to do so would cause the superintendent to risk failing in a number of areas, and in the end, failing to be an effective school leader. When a superintendent in any school district does not make an effort to interact with others and have personal communication, the patrons sometimes make negative comments about the superintendent such as, "He doesn't seem very approachable," or "She doesn't seem very friendly," or "She's hard to get to know," or "He's not a people-person." When

comments such as these are made regularly, the superintendent is placed in a difficult position of having to overcome perceptions which may or may not be accurate. This lends added validity to the importance of the leadership practice of building relationships. Being out of the office, accessible, visible, friendly, and approachable will help in communication efforts. Aside from personal, one-on-one communication, the superintendent should engage in large-group communication, and provide various forms of written communication such as letters, memos, or newsletters to follow up on meetings or to supplement other forms of communication.

Recommendations for Further Study

When exploring the possibilities for further study, one must consider the possibility of doing a quantitative study on the leadership practices, doing a qualitative study on a specific leadership practice, such as visibility or shared leadership, and doing a qualitative study involving teachers' and principals' views on superintendent leadership practices.

A quantitative study could be undertaken to determine what superintendents believe are the most crucial leadership practices. A survey for participants could ask them to rate the leadership practices from 0 to 3, based upon how they apply to their own educational setting. A rating of a zero would mean the leadership tendency has nothing to do with educational leadership in the school setting. A rating of a 3 would mean the leadership practice has great relevance for educational leadership. Surveys would result in numerical values being attached to each leadership practice and a statistical analysis could be implemented to clarify the significance of the survey results.

A qualitative study can be completed on the relevance or importance of one specific leadership practice. An interview schedule could be designed that focuses on one leadership practice, such as political awareness or on professional growth. From those interview questions, superintendents could be interviewed about how crucial a particular leadership practice is, based upon their own experiences. The resulting qualitative data would be analyzed to determine the level of importance of the leadership practices and how it might relate to the overall school leadership efforts.

A qualitative study can be completed about the leadership practices in this study by interviewing teachers and principals about which leadership practices they feel are most important for the office of the superintendent. Again, an interview schedule would be formulated to address the specific needs of the research questions of the study. The interviews could include questions about which of the leadership practices they feel are most crucial in the superintendency.

Summary

This study on superintendent leadership practices related to effectiveness began with the idea that rural superintendents would be asked to explain, in their own words, what practices were most crucial and why. Much information was obtained and synthesized to form the review of literature in Chapter 2 and to identify nine leadership practices commonly used by school superintendents. The interviews for this study were designed with the leadership practices as a guide. The question about which leadership practices are most crucial was not one that was easily addressed, because while the interview transcripts from the six interviews with superintendents had many common characteristics in the data, there was not always unanimous agreement on particular

leadership practices. From the interview transcripts, however, it was evident that certain themes emerged about the importance of effective communication, ethical behavior, having a passion for helping students, the details of school superintendent management and administration, and the fact that many leadership practices are difficult to separate.

In Chapter 4, the qualitative data were presented and used to provide answers to the research questions of the study. In this final chapter, the researcher (after reflecting upon the literature and the data presented) was able to formulate findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Throughout the study, the intention was to provide information that could potentially help superintendents as they carry out their duties. It is acknowledged that while not all the information may be applicable in every school district circumstance, it is at the very least worthy of further consideration and reflection as school superintendents openly look for ways to utilize leadership practices and improve their own practice.

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APPENDIX A

Request for Participation

May 1, 2010

Participant Name
Participant Address

Dear Participant,

I am a doctoral student at the University of Missouri and I am working on my doctoral dissertation. It will be a qualitative study focusing on the leadership practices utilized by Missouri school superintendents, and I would like to ask you to participate.

The study will help determine which particular school leadership practices are the most helpful in the office of the school superintendent. Individual participants will be asked about their own school leadership experiences.

Your involvement will require setting aside time for an interview in which you are asked to elaborate on leadership practices you have found to be most helpful or most important in helping you be an effective school leader. You will be provided a transcript of our interview and will have the opportunity to change any statements that you feel are not clear or are inaccurate. There may also be follow up contacts by me in the event that I need to clarify any information that I have obtained as a result of our interview.

If you can participate, we will set up an interview at a time that is convenient for you, and I will provide interview questions in advance. Please contact me at one of the phone numbers or the e-mail below to let me know if you can participate.

Thank you for your consideration.

David Wilson
JCHS Assistant Principal
Doctoral Student, University of Missouri

573 xxx-xxxx (home)
870 xxx-xxxx (cell)

xxxxxxx@hotmail.com

APPENDIX B

University of Missouri Informed Consent Letter

Title: Practices that Constitute Successful School Superintendent Leadership:
Perceptions from Established Rural School Superintendents

Researcher: David Wilson, Doctoral Student

Purpose: This is a qualitative study which will examine the leadership practices recommended for school superintendents to be crucial to successful school leadership. This study is intended to join the conversation about which leadership practices are crucial for school superintendents to utilize.

Information: Participants will receive a letter requesting their participation in the study and a convenient time will be set up for an interview. Interview questions will be provided beforehand and the interview itself will be recorded and transcribed. The information from the interviews will be analyzed and coded in to categories to be used in determining the study's findings about particular leadership practices and how they are implemented by school superintendents. Pseudonyms will be used instead of names during the study.

Risks: There are no risks anticipated for any participant.

Benefits: Although participants will not be compensated for taking part, the researcher will offer to provide a copy of the study's results. It is expected that this study will expand the body of knowledge about the desirable leadership practices for the office of the school superintendent.

Confidentiality: You have a right to privacy with your responses, and this right to privacy will not be violated.

Voluntary participation: Your involvement in the research is completely voluntary. Participants also have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Informed consent: My signature below indicates that I have read the above information. I agree to participate in this study and have received a copy of this form.

Participant _____ **Date** _____

Researcher _____ **(David Wilson) Date** _____

Contact: If you have any questions regarding this study or the procedures you may contact:

David Wilson
XXXX XXXX Street, Jefferson City, Missouri 65109
573 xxx-xxxx (home)
870 xxx-xxxx (cell)
e-mail: xxxxxxxx@hotmail.com

Contacting the Univ. of Missouri: If you wish to speak to someone besides the researcher:

University of Missouri Campus Institutional Review Board (IRB)
483 McReynolds, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri 65211
573 882-9585 (phone)
573 884-0663 (fax)
<https://irb.missouri.edu>

APPENDIX C

Interview Guide

Practices that Constitute Successful School Superintendent Leadership: Perceptions from Established Rural School Superintendents

Participant _____ Date of interview _____

1. Please state your name, gender, age, and your position.
2. How many years have you been in this current position?
3. How many students are in your school district?
4. What are the demographics of your district (black, white, Asian, Hispanic, male, female)?
5. What percentage of your students are eligible for free or reduced meals?
6. In your experience as superintendent, to what extent has each of the following contributed to your effectiveness as a school leader?
 - a. Have you developed a vision for your organization? How has it evolved over time? How important is an organizational vision in your school leadership efforts?
 - b. In your experience, how has communication played a role as you carry out your duties as superintendent?
 - c. As a school superintendent, how do you maintain visibility in the school district?
 - d. In your experience, how important is inspiring followers to being an effective superintendent? How do you inspire those in the school district?
 - e. From your perspective, to what extent is collaboration and shared leadership important to being an effective superintendent?
 - f. Explain what you feel the superintendent's role is in facilitating professional growth among those in the school district.
 - g. From your perspective, what role do ethics play in being an effective superintendent?
 - h. In your experience, how has political awareness contributed to your effectiveness as a school leader?
7. Of the leadership practices we have discussed which ones do you feel are most important in helping you be an effective superintendent and why?
8. From your perspective, what leadership practices warrant the most attention from the school superintendent?
9. Is there anything else that should be mentioned concerning leadership practices for school superintendents?

APPENDIX D

Member Checking Letter

May 15, 2010

Participant Name
Participant Address

Dear Participant,

Thank you again for taking part in my doctoral research project about leadership practices. The insights you have provided are crucial as I approach the stage where findings will be discussed.

I am sending a copy of the transcription of our interview for you to examine. Your comments, corrections, and questions are welcome. Please let me know if there are any statements that need to be corrected for accuracy or need to be changed for the purposes of clarity. Please remember that the transcripts will not be published; nor will they be shared with anyone except my committee chair or members of my dissertation committee.

Please return the transcription with your corrections, additions, and comments by June 1, 2010. If you have questions, you may contact me with the information provided below.

At this stage of the research, your feedback is important. I value your input, and I thank you for allowing me to learn from our interview.

Sincerely,

David Wilson
JCHS Assistant Principal
Doctoral Student, University of Missouri

573 xxx-xxxx (home)
870 xxx-xxxx (cell)

xxxxxxx@hotmail.com

VITA
DAVID WILSON

David Wilson graduated from high school in 1980, earned bachelor degrees in both journalism and social studies, and then taught at the secondary level from 1989-2001. He has also worked in different capacities in journalism both before and after entering education. He has worked as a secondary administrator in Missouri schools from 2001 to the present time. He was born in St. Louis, Missouri but grew up in Arkansas, and has more than 21 years of experience as an educator in Missouri schools. He has college degrees from Ouachita Baptist University, Arkansas State University, Southeast Missouri State University, and the University of Missouri. He has always considered both Arkansas and Missouri to be home.

He enjoys teaching, reading, writing, exercising, watching football, and traveling. He plans to pursue personal and professional growth opportunities, to continue learning, and to contribute to educational improvement through speaking, teaching, presenting, and writing. He has close family members in Arkansas, including three children.