MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF ADMINISTRATOR INFLUENCE ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

A DISSERTATION IN
Education

Presented to the Faculty of the University of Missouri-Kansas City in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this symbolic interaction study was to develop a thick rich description of middle school teachers’ perspectives of the characteristics of administrators that have an impact on teaching and learning. Specifically this research examined the interactions between teachers and administrators and the constructed meanings created by teachers from these encounters. A symbolic interaction theoretical tradition was utilized in this study’s design. Symbolic interaction focuses on the nature of interaction and the notion that people act and react to things based on the interpreted meanings things have for them. People are constantly undergoing change based on social interactions, and society changes through interaction. Based on this premise teachers are constantly evolving because of the constructed meanings created through the interactions they experience. School cultures, whether defined as custom, tradition, norm, value, rules, or such like, are clearly derived from what people do and therefore are being defined and redefined through social
interactions. This symbolic interaction study was designed to assist middle school administrators in examining teachers’ constructed perceptions of administrator characteristics that impact teaching and learning and thus reculture their schools into learning organizations. Two middle schools located within a Midwestern suburban school district were chosen for this study. Data were collected from 86 middle school teachers. Teacher questionnaires, principal interviews, internal documents, focus groups, and observations were utilized for data collection and analysis.

Central questions for this symbolic interaction study centered on how middle school teachers define instructional leadership, what characteristics of instructional leadership have a positive impact on teaching and learning, and what characteristics of instructional leadership create a barrier or teaching and learning. The major themes that developed from the data collected were culture, high expectations, visibility, and resource awareness. Culture was defined as the administrators’ ability to establish a positive learning environment focused on what is best for every child. High expectations as a theme were interpreted as an administrators’ ability to communicate and establish reachable outcomes. Visibility related to ensuring administration was easily and readily available to teachers. Resource awareness emphasized the administrators’ ability to provide teachers the support needed to excel within the classroom. The commonality that emerged when defining instructional leadership was: an instructional leader is an individual that develops a culture conducive to providing good quality instruction, establishing expectations around a curriculum and instructional focus, while ensuring that all necessary resources are available to teachers.
The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Education have examined a dissertation titled “Middle School Teachers’ Perceptions of Administrator Influence on Teaching and Learning” presented by Eric J. Sipes, candidate for the Doctor of Education degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................... iii

ILLUSTRATIONS ................................................................................................................ xi

TABLES ............................................................................................................................... xii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................................... xiii

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................. 1
   Overview ......................................................................................................................... 1
   Purpose and Definitions ................................................................................................. 4
       Research Questions .................................................................................................... 6
   Theoretical Framework ................................................................................................ 7
       Background Experience ............................................................................................. 7
       Instructional Leadership ............................................................................................ 11
       Reculturing ............................................................................................................... 16
       Professional Growth ................................................................................................. 18
   Methodology .................................................................................................................. 21
       Research Design/Data Collection ........................................................................... 23
       Data Production ......................................................................................................... 25
       Data Analysis ............................................................................................................ 26
       Summary .................................................................................................................... 26

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................................................... 28
   Overview ......................................................................................................................... 28
   Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................. 29
Symbolic Interaction ........................................................................................................ 29
Constructivist Leadership and Democratic Schooling ............................................. 33
Instructional Leadership ............................................................................................... 37
Defining a Mission ........................................................................................................ 44
Change Leadership and Culture .................................................................................. 46
Dialogue ....................................................................................................................... 49
Learning Communities ................................................................................................. 51
Managing Curriculum and Instruction ....................................................................... 58
Supervising Teachers .................................................................................................... 59
Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 61

3. METHODOLOGY ....................................................................................................... 64
Overview .................................................................................................................... 64
Rationale for Qualitative Research ............................................................................... 65
Site Selection ............................................................................................................... 67
Data Collection ........................................................................................................... 73
Data Analysis ............................................................................................................. 74
Documents .................................................................................................................. 77
Open-Ended Surveys .................................................................................................. 78
Interviews .................................................................................................................... 79
Observations ............................................................................................................... 81
Focus Groups ............................................................................................................. 82
Limitations .................................................................................................................. 82
Validity and Reliability ............................................................................................... 83
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethical Considerations</th>
<th>84</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. FINDINGS</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Description</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis Procedures</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting Expectations</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-Ended Surveys</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Expectations</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource Awareness</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting Expectations</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Expectations</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource Awareness</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Groups</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Expectations</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Visibility ........................................................................................................ 119
Dialogue......................................................................................................... 120
Conclusions..................................................................................................... 121
Instructional Leadership Defined................................................................. 124
Conversation Structure................................................................................ 125
Positive Impacts............................................................................................ 127
  High Expectations....................................................................................... 128
  Visibility..................................................................................................... 129
  Dialogue...................................................................................................... 130
Negative Impact............................................................................................ 132
  Expectations............................................................................................... 132
  Negative Aspects of Culture ...................................................................... 133
  Time............................................................................................................. 134
  Lack of Knowledge..................................................................................... 135
Summary......................................................................................................... 135

5. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS................................................................. 139
Overview........................................................................................................ 139
Discussion...................................................................................................... 141
Recommendations for School Districts ......................................................... 146
Recommendations for Administrator Preparation Program ....................... 150
Future Research............................................................................................ 156
Conclusion..................................................................................................... 158
Appendix

A. CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH STUDY .......................... 160
B. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ........................................................................ 165
C. OBSERVATION FIELD NOTES TEMPLATE ........................................... 167
D. OPEN-ENDED SURVEY QUESTIONS ....................................................... 169
E. FOCUS GROUP SURVEY QUESTIONS ....................................................... 172
F. CODE BOOK .......................................................................................... 174
REFERENCES ............................................................................................ 177
VITA ........................................................................................................... 189
### ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Demographics of Selected Site</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Building Standardized Testing Results</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Path to Principal Certification</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Positive and Negative Behaviors Portrayed by Administrators and their Impact on Teachers</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Building Student Demographic Data</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Cross-Data Themes and Interpretive Codes</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my family. My supportive parents that have always been there for me no matter what. My beautiful children that were understanding when it came time for dad to be gone or when dad needed to write. In particular this is dedicated to my beautifully talented wife who would not let me quit when I was ready to stop. Without the “encouragement” of my wife I would have never finished. This is as much her accomplishment as it is mine. Thank you to all of you.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Overview

On a daily basis school leaders project certain characteristics through their interactions with teachers. My experiences as a teacher and administrator have led to my belief that some of these characteristics can have a positive impact on teaching and learning as well as the ability to create change within the school. “What principals understand, believe, say and do has a profound consequence on those around them” (Sparks, 2004b, p. 1). In other words a school administrator must make inherent changes in order to move an organization toward a true learning community. Principals are charged with improving the teaching and learning in schools, but they may operate without an awareness of teachers’ constructed perceptions of the administrators’ characteristics that may directly impact student learning outcomes.

Based on the working definition provided by Blase and Blase (1998), the term characteristics was used to describe strategies, goals, beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes relative to instructional leadership. Administrators who are aware of teachers’ constructed perceptions of administrative characteristics that impact students and learning have the ability to gain a better understanding of their own leadership from those that live and breathe it on a daily basis (Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley, & Beresford, 2000). Few studies have attempted to describe leadership from those that “arguably possess the most working knowledge of leadership,” the teachers (Day et al., 2000). Empirical data supports administrators becoming aware of the characteristics that have a direct positive impact on
student learning outcomes (Blase & Blase, 2004; Melton, 2003; Day, Hall, & Whitaker, 1998; Southworth, 2002).

Blase and Blase’s (2004) examination of over 800 K-12 teachers’ perceptions of administrative characteristics revealed that administrators that are aware of and utilize certain characteristics have a positive impact on a teachers’ motivation to improve their craft. A 2002 qualitative study which focused on 10 elementary school leaders demonstrated that administrators’ awareness and portrayal of certain characteristics created a teacher culture “characterised by professional collaboration and professional learning” (Southworth, 2002, p. 88). Another study of more than 200 stakeholders, including teachers, students, and parents, spotlighted the administrators’ abilities to impact teaching and learning by becoming aware of certain characteristics that focus on student achievement (Day et al., 2000).

Administrators that do not reflect upon their own leadership characteristics and become aware of teachers’ perceptions run the risk of causing “significant damage to teachers and, ultimately, the students with whom they work” (Blase & Blase, 2004, p. 49). “We cannot know what effective leadership means unless and until we include the stakeholders’ perspective and their constructions of leadership” (Southworth, 2002, p. 74). Studies have shown teachers that are led by administrators that ignore or are simply unaware of the characteristics that have a positive impact on teaching and learning lead teachers to feel abandoned, isolated, or possibly resentment toward the administrator (Blase & Blase, 2004; Melton, 2003). Administrators that are not cognizant of teachers’ perceptions run the risk of ignoring one of the most important factors in ensuring teachers are content, their emotional status (Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005). As recent studies have demonstrated,
if change is what society is looking for in our education environment the first look must be at our educational leaders (Sparks, 2004a; Blase & Blase, 2004; Melton, 2003; Day et al., 2000; Schlichte et al., 2005). Administrators must examine the characteristics they project and what impact these characteristics have on teaching and learning.

As a practitioner, I believe the administrators I work with understand the importance of focusing on the academic program to increase student achievement. However, understanding the importance of instructional leadership does not produce results. Action must be taken. One possible cause as I see it for the lack of focus on instructional leadership is the issue of finding time throughout the day to do so. In practice, based upon my experiences and other administrator’s statements, after lunch duty, managerial duties, and discipline issues are handled, an administrator in my district has approximately 40 minutes of time left to work with any particular teacher on improving their academic program. Therefore it is imperative that practitioners project characteristics that focus on academic improvement every second of every day. Results from a recent study suggest that leaders understand that “people make the critical difference between success and failure…positive psychological contact” are fundamental to improvement (Patterson as cited in Day, Harris, & Hadfield, 1999, p. 11). Other research suggests that a possible cause is the administrator’s lack of attention to the emotional connection of belonging teachers must feel in order to perform their job at the highest possible level (Schlichte et al., 2005). It is suggested that teachers that are known and recognized gain a greater amount of trust and confidence in their craft (Schlichte et al., 2005; Ganser, 1999).
Purpose and Definitions

The purpose of this symbolic interaction study was to utilize the voices of middle school teachers to describe their constructed perceptions of the characteristics of middle school administrators that directly improve teaching and learning in a Midwestern suburban school district. The theoretical underpinnings of constructivism were used as a lens to make meaning of teachers’ perceptions, the unit of analysis for this study. Patton (2002) defines the unit of analysis as the “primary focus of data collection” (p. 228) and that decisions regarding sample, sample size and sample strategies all depend on the unit of analysis. The unit of analysis for this study was the teachers’ constructed perceptions of administrator characteristics that have a positive impact on teaching and learning.

The qualitative methodology used in this study was symbolic interaction, which focuses on the “dynamic social activities taking place between persons” (Charon, 1939, p. 22). A symbolic interaction study examines the shared meanings people create “through their interactions, and [how] those meanings become their reality” (Patton, 2002, p. 112). Symbolic interaction “revolve[s] around the extent to and the manner in which the individual is connected to the social structure and the ensuing possible consequences of that connection” (Carrothers & Benson, 2003, p. 163). Researchers that study symbolic interactionism are concerned with the “participants’ points of view” (Jacob, 1987, p. 29). In particular researchers examine the “common set of symbols and understandings that emerge to give meaning to people’s interactions” (Patton, 2002, p. 112). This theoretical tradition was appropriate for studying the educational environment since schools are a collage of
constructed meanings from social interactions. A school’s climate and culture are constantly under construction based on these interactions.

The data collected for this symbolic interaction study were examined utilizing a constructivist lens. Constructivism is the process of reflecting on previously gained knowledge and utilizing that knowledge to interpret and make meaning of new interactions. According to Dewey (1972), learning is an internal process that only comes about when a person interacts with their environment by weighing previously gained knowledge and experiences against a new obstacle or experience (Lambert et. al, 2002). Similar to symbolic interaction, constructivism is the process of making new meanings based on earlier experience and knowledge. As educators it is imperative to understand how people gain knowledge and utilize this understanding to the best of our ability. Administrators must realize that every individual brings with them a plethora of experiences and encounters that have helped shape the way they do things. Administrators must understand that all teachers carry with them their own individualized culture and therefore everyone will create understanding in different ways. Teachers are “evolving” based on the contact administrators have with them. Administrators must take the responsibility to examine this contact and capitalize on every ounce of time they can to assist teachers in creating meanings that have a positive impact on teaching and learning. The evolution of the teacher based on the interactions between them and administrators is the basis for this research.

Throughout this study a middle school administrator was defined as the building level administrator in a school responsible for grade 6 through grade 8. Middle school administrators will include the principal and all assistant principals. Middle school teachers
were defined as those persons directly responsible for the daily teaching and learning in grade 6 through grade 8. Voice was defined as lived experiences and perceptions of middle school teachers. Voice will bring to life the true reality of teachers in order to break the silence of being suppressed by the hierarchical power of the bureaucratic system called education (Patton, 2002).

For the purpose of this symbolic interaction study instructional leadership was defined as any activity that supports the teaching and learning environment of schools. The researcher was specifically working to achieve the pragmatic goal of this study, empowering middle school teachers’ through listening to their voices as they share their perceptions of administrator characteristics that have a direct impact on classroom instruction.

**Research Questions**

The overarching question for this symbolic interaction study was as follows: What do middle school teachers perceive to be the administrators’ characteristics of instructional leadership that have the greatest direct improvement on teaching and learning? Sub-questions to address the overarching question were:

1. How do teachers define instructional leadership?
2. How are conversations about instructional leadership structured throughout a typical day?
3. What specific characteristics do administrators portray that improve the quality of teaching and learning?
4. What specific characteristics do administrators portray that create a barrier to teaching and learning?
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of a study helps to provide direction for the goals and purposes of the research. The theoretical framework consists of the assumptions one holds surrounding the phenomena to be studied (Maxwell, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994). “[P]ersonal experience and knowledge form an important part” of the theoretical framework (Maxwell, 2005, p. 123). My life experiences, readings, and research have helped to define my beliefs about instructional leadership. These beliefs coupled with leadership theory were utilized when making meaning of the data involved in this symbolic interactionism study.

Background Experience

As a first year teacher 12 years ago, the supervisory process was very intimidating to me. My supervisor would be directly monitoring me during instruction. The man who was going to decide if I would continue my career at this school was scripting every word and movement. I knew I was going to have to live these 45 minutes over again in slow motion. My anxiety level was at an all-time high because I had no idea how my students would act. Would they sit there and act unengaged? What would this guest in my classroom think of me as a person and specifically as a professional? The entire evaluation process was viewed as a threat to everything I had been working for. Could the last six years of my life spent preparing for this moment have been for naught?

Once I moved past my first year of teaching and realized that the evaluation process was somewhat of a joke, the anxiety went away and was replaced by plain negativity toward the entire process. My supervisor was seen in my classroom maybe twice a year. The
evaluation process went something like this: I was asked to turn in a pre-observation worksheet that would explain in detail what it was I was hoping to accomplish that day. I had to lay out the anticipatory set, the lesson, the instructional strategies used, and the evaluation process. My administrator made a 30-minute visit to my classroom. I was then to fill out a post-observation form in which I decided what went well and what did not. I sat down with my administrator to discuss the lesson at hand. I was informed of what the administrator liked and disliked. It was a very judgmental and directive process. I was then given directives on areas of weakness that I might want to work on in the future. That was it. At no time was there any offer of support or follow up to see how my progress was going. Ritualistically we performed this ballet a couple times a year. I never came away from these experiences with any feeling other than, “Well, I will see you next time.” Any and all interactions with my supervisor dealt with more managerial issues than instructional issues.

As I moved from the classroom to administration I carried with me the negative feelings toward my principal as an instructional leader. Through my coursework I had a clear understanding of what instructional leadership should look like. The challenge for me would now be to put the theory into practice. I knew moving into administration would require me to supervise classroom instruction and I knew I did not want to provide other teachers the same poor experiences I had.

As a first year administrator I was assigned six teachers to supervise. I was handed forms that looked similar to the forms that I used as a teacher five years before. To no surprise, the process of evaluating a teacher changed little in the course of five years. I felt guilty moving through the evaluation process from the administrator’s point of view. If I was
second guessing my authority to evaluate these teachers, the teachers had to be thinking in
the back of their minds, “Who is this newbie and what makes him think he has anything that
we need to improve our instruction?” Eventually, I dreaded my scheduled evaluations. I
finally befriended a couple of veteran teachers that I felt would give me some honest
feedback. I started listening to what it was they would like to see from me. Throughout the
conversations I gained a strong insight into what teachers felt meaningful instructional
leadership would look like. These conversations have led me to this research.

Administrators need to know which instructional leadership characteristics have a
direct impact on teaching and learning. In this day and age of No Child Left Behind all
educators need to be working as effectively as possible (Trahan, 2002). The teachers need to
utilize a variety of instructional strategies that work to ensure every student succeeds. Every
administrator needs to find instructional leadership strategies that can ensure every teacher
works to improve their craft. This symbolic interaction study was designed to examine and
compare what characteristics (e.g., strategies, behaviors, attitudes, and goals) of instructional
supervisors directly improve classroom instruction from the teachers’ points of view. This
study provided teachers the opportunity to place into words through open ended questions
what strategies administrators utilized that have a direct improvement on teaching and
learning.

The desire to constantly learn something new drove me to this research. I recently
completed a strengths-finder survey developed by the Gallup organization. “Learner”
appeared as one of my signature themes. A learner is described by Gallup as a person that is
“energized by the steady and deliberate journey from ignorance to competence” and “the
growing confidence of a skill mastered.” “The subject matter that interests you most will be determined by your other themes and experiences” (Rath, 2007, p. 5). Out of all the responsibilities that I had as a school administrator, being an instructional leader was the area that I felt the most inadequate. Therefore the themes and experiences pushing me drove me to learn as much as possible about becoming a great instructional leader, and who better to ask about being an instructional leader than teachers. Mahatma Gandhi as cited by Fullan (1997, p. viii) stated “[w]e must be the change we want to see in the world.” Change in any organization starts with an individual. Therefore by listening to the voices of teachers, I gained as well as hope to provide other potential or practicing administrators through personal contact or professional development a greater understanding of what strategies, behaviors, attitudes, and goals an administrator should exhibit in order to have the greatest impact on teaching and learning. The significance of this research lies in the impact for possible improvement of instructional leadership within the Midwestern middle schools being studied.

In order to fully understand this study on the influence administrators can have on the teaching and learning process, one must first understand in what ways administrators have the ability to influence classroom instruction. A brief introduction to the conceptual framework supporting this research is given below. This review of literature is the foundation for the study of administrators’ behaviors centered on teaching and learning. A more in-depth literature review is provided in Chapter 2. Through the use of instructional leadership, professional development, and reculturing the school, administrators influence the teaching and learning experienced within their schools.
Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership has taken on many forms over the last century. Goldhammer, Anderson, and Krajewski (1993) have classified the supervision techniques utilized in the last century:

1. Scientific management
2. Democratic interaction approach
3. Cooperative supervision
4. Supervision as curriculum development
5. Clinical supervision
6. Group dynamics and peer emphasis
7. Coaching and instructional supervision. (p. 63)

According to Goldhammer et al. (1993), “Supervision has progressed, at least at the theoretical level” (p. 23). The early stages of instructional leadership were defined by the administrator being an inspector. The role of the educational leader was to determine if teachers were in strict compliance with proper teaching techniques. Throughout the 19th Century, “Teachers were regarded as instruments that should be closely supervised to insure that they mechanically carried out the methods of procedure determined by administrative and special supervisors” (McNeil as cited in Goldhammer et al., 1993, p. 23). The early part of the 20th Century saw a shift in mental models when it came to supervising teachers. A collegial approach to school leadership was accepted. Supervisors became co-builders instead of enforcers (Goldhammer et al., 1993). The late part of the 20th Century saw another shift in educational leadership. Team teaching became a common practice. Dialogues between teachers were supervised by administrators that assisted with analyzing classroom instruction.
through the work of recent research on effective leadership, administrators have been able to move toward a more proactive style of instructional leadership (Goldhammer et al., 1993). According to Blase and Blase (2004) the goal of instructional leadership should be “helping teachers discover and construct professional knowledge and skills” (p. 8). How is this accomplished? Research shows good instructional leaders exhibit certain beliefs, behaviors, and characteristics (Blase & Blase, 2004; Melton, 2003). Effective instructional leaders understand the necessity to engage teachers in a reflective dialogue related to their instructional practices (York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, & Montie, 2006). Research findings by Blase and Blase (2004) and Melton (2003) on instructional leadership found that certain attitudes, behaviors, and strategies exhibited by school administrators have both positive and negative impacts on teaching and learning. Behaviors such as promoting a positive learning climate, observing and giving feedback to teachers, monitoring student progress, and defining a mission have been shown to produce positive impacts (Melton, 2003). Principals studied used observing and giving feedback in order to extend the teachers’ thinking. Feedback was provided to give teachers additional ideas. The teachers studied found it helpful when principals used their own experiences during feedback to provide meaningful examples on which the teacher could reflect. Feedback was also provided to encourage teachers to take risks in their classroom. In doing so the teachers stated their principals made them feel inspired, confident, supported, and safe (Blase & Blase, 2004). The most popular strategy utilized by principals to impact teaching and learning in a positive manner was building trust (Blase & Blase, 2004). Other strategies included effective communication, sharing leadership, and time management (Melton, 2003). Many of the characteristics
discovered must be used concurrently. The use of effective communication is woven throughout all of the positive impact behaviors and lacking in the negative impact behaviors. Effective communication builds trust, provides validation, and increases a teacher’s self-confidence (Blase & Blase, 2004). Other studies have demonstrated that administrators affect student achievement in an indirect manner through teachers’ instruction. Meek (199) conducted a study of educational leadership centered on such a notion. She studied a random sample of 300 public school principals. Utilizing the Hallinger’s Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale and comparing it with sate wide assessment data, she found a positive correlation between the instructional leadership of administrators and student achievement. The attributes of instructional leadership attributed to this correlation center around high expectations, data, high visibility, and monitoring instruction.

Both studies by Blase and Blase (2004) and Melton (2003) also examined the traits that have a negative impact on teaching and learning. Just as there were numerous characteristics found to have a positive impact there were a great deal that had a negative impact on teaching and learning. The action that had one of the most adverse effects on teaching and learning was the lack of a formal observation and evaluation process. It was found that a lack of a formal evaluation process did not provide teachers with necessary feedback needed for them to make improvements in their craft. Teachers stated the lack of a formal observation process did not require them to improve. The lack of feedback on the part of the principal leads to a teacher having no direction for improving instructional pedagogy. Teachers used words like insincere, lack of trust, and lack of respect to describe their feelings towards the administrators and their inability to perform a formal evaluation process (Blase
& Blase, 2004). “Class visits have become a ‘show and tell’ experience” (Blase & Blase, 2004, p. 48). Table 1 provides a more extensive list of positive and negative behaviors and their impact on teaching and learning.
Table 1

*Positive and Negative Behaviors Portrayed by Administrators and their Impact on Teachers*

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<th>Positive Behaviors</th>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Negative Behaviors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visibility</td>
<td>Increase motivation</td>
<td>Interrupting</td>
<td>Increase frustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praising</td>
<td>Increase morale</td>
<td>Criticizing</td>
<td>Increase aggravation</td>
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<td>Peer coaching</td>
<td>Increase self-esteem</td>
<td>Maintaining control</td>
<td>No value to organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing in classrooms</td>
<td>Sense of security</td>
<td>Personal insensitivity</td>
<td>Resentfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering teachers</td>
<td>Increase freedom</td>
<td>Lack of support</td>
<td>Lack of caring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supporting risk taking</td>
<td>Increase motivation</td>
<td>Spying</td>
<td>Distrust</td>
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<td>Effective staff development</td>
<td>Increase confidence</td>
<td>Nitpicking</td>
<td>Injury to self-confidence</td>
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<td>Fostering collaboration</td>
<td>Builds unity</td>
<td>Public criticism</td>
<td>Increase resistance/rebellion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving feedback</td>
<td>Increase community</td>
<td>Lying</td>
<td>Damage relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing reflection skills</td>
<td>Promotes enrichment</td>
<td>Favoring “select” teachers</td>
<td>Increase resentment teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extending autonomy</td>
<td>Increase professionalism</td>
<td>Taking credit</td>
<td>Loss of respect</td>
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As I read the results of Melton (2003) and Blase and Blase’s (2004) studies, the hair on the back of my neck raised. Each sentence brought with it flashbacks of my first few years of teaching. There was a lack of support and guidance. I felt as if the entire process was a waste of time. What disturbs me the most is thinking about the teachers I am now in charge of evaluating. Some say teaching stays the same because educators are repeating the same cycle of education they received. Therefore I am scared of falling into the trap of performing my formal observations and evaluations in the same manner that I saw as a teacher. Change starts with an individual. I hope this research will give me a greater understanding on how to be that individual.

**Reculturing**

After the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, educators in the 1980’s focused their efforts on reforming schools. The “rising tide of mediocrity” (Ravitch, 1990, p. 2) led to reforms in educational policymaking control, graduation requirements, and alternative certification for new teachers (Ravitch, 1990). Educators in the 1990’s felt schools should be restructured. Restructuring of our educational system entailed eliminating the exclusive structure that existed in schools, replacing it with one that is more inclusive (Rosado, 1994). However neither has seemed to have a lasting impact on student achievement. Educators today are working to reculture schools rather than reform or restructure. It is believed by many that the only way to create sustainable change is through the process of reculturing.

Kratzer’s 1997 study of school culture and its impact on student achievement found that a recultured school built on trusting caring relationships had not only a positive impact on the betterment of the school but also had a positive impact on student achievement.
Kratzer identifies a variety of characteristics of instructional leadership that attribute to the building of a positive culture. Kratzer found, administrators that build a culture around a feeling of trust, respect and support through informal interactions resulted in an increase in academic achievement.

Brock and Groth (2003) conducted a similar study of how cultural changes in 50 low-income, racially, and ethnically diverse minority schools can impact student achievement. They found that four factors provided the best chance of positive change. These factors include: a focus on staff development, a focus on student learning, continuous monitoring and evaluation, and a strong involved administrator. Brock and Groth (2003) concluded that school culture is directly related to student achievement.

A simple definition of culture is “How are things done around here?” Therefore reculturing would entail a school modifying inward practices of teaching and learning. One such method many schools are utilizing to reculture their schools is through the use of professional learning communities (Senge et al., 2000; Dufour, Eaker, & Dufour 2004). “Learning communities are characterized by a sense of collaboration throughout the school” (Speck, 1999, p. 104).

Some of the most important collaboration centers on creating a shared mission, vision, values, and goals. Collaboration is defined by” people working together, breaking down the walls of isolation built by solitary efforts of individuals” (Speck, 1999, p. 104). A school utilizing learning communities starts the reculturing process by creating a shared mission. This shared mission centers around what students should be learning, how one
would determine if students are learning, and what measures are put in place for those students who are not meeting expectations for learning.

Learning communities focus all of their efforts on achieving a high level of learning for “all” students. Power is shifted from the administrator to the teachers. However the administrator in a learning community plays a key role. Administrators in a traditional school setting are bureaucratically seen as a leader and teachers are viewed as followers. An administrator in a learning community is seen as a leader of leaders and every teacher is viewed as a leader of learning. Administrators in learning organizations empower teachers to make decisions about learning. To empower teachers the administrator must exhibit characteristics that focus on the teaching and learning process (Blase & Blase, 2004; Melton, 2003). Learning communities allow teachers to “solve problems collectively” (Speck, 1999, p. 115) which in turn provides teachers the responsibility for their own professional growth (Dufour et al., 2004).

**Professional Growth**

One manner in which administrators may work to set the stage for reculturing their schools is by promoting professional growth among the teachers within the school. “[T]he educational enterprise is ultimately about kids learning. But we must also give systematic attention to how teachers learn” (O’Neil, 1995, p. 20). Traditional professional development was strictly intended to give teachers the skills need to perform their jobs better (O’Neil, 1995). Meaningful professional growth requires an understanding of the principles of how adults learn. Teachers continually work to provide a stimulating and supportive environment for their students to learn. In the same manner, teachers provided with a stimulating and
supportive environment will reach higher stages of development (Phillips & Glickman, 1991). In order for teachers to reach these higher stages of development the professional development offered has to take into account teachers’ readiness to learn, their learning styles, and their interest in the topics to be studied.

In the same fashion that administrators encourage teachers to differentiate to meet the needs of every student, schools should also work to meet the needs of every teacher through differentiated professional development. Differentiated professional development ensures a teacher’s readiness, interest, and learning profile are addressed (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). Brain research shows that individuals learn in accordance with their “readiness” to do so. The National Research Council found that tasks must be at the proper level to ensure the greatest achievement (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). Lev Vygotsky, a Russian Psychologist, contends that each person has what is called a zone of proximal development (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). It is only within this zone of proximal development that learning occurs. Material presented below the zone is considered too easy and will not produce any results, and material presented above the zone will prove to be too difficult and will result in frustration. Differentiated professional development provides individualization for every teacher aimed at ensuring the zone of proximal development is met (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). “The goal is to move faculty beyond their individual comfort zones” (Blase & Blase, 2004, p. 32).

Differentiated professional development also takes into account a person’s interest in the material being studied. Through the research of Csikzentmihalyi and Csikzentmihalyi’s the “theory of flow” emerged (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). The theory of flow addresses a person’s interest in learning. According to Csikzentmihalyi and Csikzentmihalyi, if someone
identifies an area that they have a high interest in learning and have the needed skills to learn, the individual can reach a state of “flow” (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). People that reach a state of flow become so engrossed in the subject being learned that other activities get lost as well as losing track of time. The continual search for the state of flow allows people to apply their ever-growing skills while looking for the next challenge that may lie ahead. Tomlinson and Allan (2000) argue that only through providing differentiated learning opportunities for teachers can they reach their state of flow.

Each and every day administrators ask teachers to take into consideration the students’ learning profiles when designing lessons. However staff development is continually taught at all teachers rather than taught with each teacher; the exact opposite of what is ask of our teachers. A differentiated approach to professional development allows for different learning styles. According to Howard Garner (1983) each person can have up to eight intelligences. Teaching should take into account the way in which each person processes information (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000).

Differentiated professional development allows for teachers to have ownership in their own learning. Research shows that people that are engaged in activities resulting in a high success rate emerge feeling better about themselves and the subject they were studying, as well as learning more (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). Acevedo (2013) conducted a study of 17 high school teachers and the impact of a differentiated professional development program. Participants participated in a variety of differentiated professional development activities comparing their knowledge transfer as well as their experiences compared to traditional professional development activities. Teachers within the study that were offered
differentiated professional development reported becoming more cognizant of their own learning and therefore developed a greater understanding how students learn leading to the ability to scaffold student learning opportunities. Additional findings reported from the differentiated professional development program studied resulted in participants reporting an increase feeling of being treated like a respected and trusted professional. These feelings of professionalism resulted in an increased repertoire of instructional strategies to utilize in their classrooms. “Schools are like airport hubs; student passengers arrive from many different backgrounds for widely divergent destinations. Their particular takeoffs into adulthood will demand different flight plans” (Levin, 2002, p. 336). The same can be said about teacher passengers.

**Methodology**

The qualitative methodology used in this study was symbolic interaction, which focuses on the “subjective aspects of social life” (McClelland, 2000, p. 1). A symbolic interaction study examines the social interactions that people have daily. According to Tesch (2005), people are constantly in a process of interpretation and definition as they move from one interaction to another. Thus, researchers that study symbolic interactionism see people as “active, creative participants who construct their social world, not as passive, conforming objects” (McClelland, 2000, p. 1). Within the educational environment teachers and administrators are “both actors and reactors” (Carrothers & Benson, 2003, p. 163). Both individuals enter an interaction with preconceived knowledge gained from previous interactions. Each enters with a notion on the outcome of the interaction. An exchange of ideas or symbols, including spoken language, body language, facial expressions, tone of
voice, etc. are conducted. The individuals exit the interaction with newly gained knowledge about the other individual. Interactions such as these happen thousands of times a day. These interactions between an administrator and a teacher were examined for the purpose of this study. Specificity was given to meanings created by teachers and whether these meanings have a positive impact on their instruction.

The researcher examined perceived characteristics of administrators as they pertain to instructional leadership through the teachers’ eyes and whether these interactions directly improve the classroom instruction of the teacher. Because examination of the meanings created through social interactions was conducted, the theoretical tradition of symbolic interaction was utilized. Symbolic interaction theory focuses on the way in which people create meanings out of their social interactions (Jacob, 1987). “The human being is understood as acting in the present, influenced not by what happened in the past, but by what is happening now” (Charon, 1939, p. 22).

An interaction between individuals is not only an external exchange; there is also an internal change within each individual based on the external interaction. This internal change helps us define who we are (Charon, 1939). As individuals interact externally they are provided symbolic pieces of information; consciously and unconsciously they develop understandings for these symbols ultimately defining whom they are. In doing so they gain a greater understanding of the society in which they live and how to interact with this society. The interactions that teachers experience on a daily basis with other teachers and specifically their administrators help in the construction of their individual school identity. This study examined those interactions within this school society that directly influenced a teacher’s
A symbolic interaction study requires the reading and re-reading of documents, interview transcripts, observation field notes, and open ended survey data in order to discover themes that helped develop a thick rich description of the experiences of teachers (Blumer, 1986). Rich data provide a “full and revealing picture of what is going on” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 110).

**Research Design/Data Collection**

This symbolic interaction study focused on a Midwestern suburban school district. The population of the school district was 17,553 students. The ethnic breakdown of the district was: 73.3% White, 11.2% Black, 10.2 % Hispanic, 4.0% Asian, and 1.2% Indian (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2007). The district consisted of 29 schools, 21 elementary schools, five middle schools, and four high schools. The teaching staff within the district had an average of 12.5 years’ experience. Out of the entire teaching staff, 69.1% held a master’s degree or higher. The student teacher ratio within this district was 19 students to every one teacher. The district had been awarded the distinction of being a “Blue Ribbon District” by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education within their state (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2007).

This symbolic interaction study, based on the characteristics of school administrators, focused on the leadership portrayed in two of the five middle schools. Selection of the two schools was done through a criterion purposeful sampling. Criterion purposeful sampling involves the creation of certain criterion that the sample must meet in order to be considered a participant in the study (Patton, 2002). Criterion in selecting the two schools included: a) schools were similar in size, b) schools were similar in the level of socioeconomic status
which was based on the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch, and c) the schools selected were similar in racial and ethnic student demographics. Similar sizes in the population of the schools resulted in a similar participant size from each school.

Once the two schools were selected, data collection began. An open-ended survey was administered to all participants. The survey consisted of three pages: a cover letter, a demographics page, and a page for actual data collection. The cover letter explained the research intended to be examined. The demographics page allowed the researcher to gain a greater understanding of the background of each participant. The data collection page of the questionnaire was designed to examine teacher perceptions of instructional leadership and what characteristics the building administrator exhibits that directly impact the teaching and learning process. The data collection page was used for participants to focus on a detailed description of one characteristic that had produced a positive impact on the teacher’s instruction. More than one administrator may be identified within the questionnaire. The questions from page three are provided. Prompts from the questionnaire included:

1. How do you as the teacher define instructional leadership?

2. How are conversations about instructional leadership structured throughout a typical day?

3. Describe using real life examples specific characteristics portrayed by administrators that improve the quality of teaching and learning?

4. What specific characteristics do administrators portray that create a barrier to teaching and learning
Participation in the study was strictly voluntary and all information could be submitted anonymously.

**Data Production**

Data sources utilized throughout this symbolic interaction study were open-ended surveys, teacher focus groups, interviews, observations, and documents (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The responses from the open-ended survey were utilized to identify the most common characteristics of the building administrators that have a positive impact on instruction. In addition to the open-ended survey, focus groups, interviews, and were also utilized as a data collection technique. Observations were conducted to observe interactions between staff and administration. Observation times included faculty meetings, early release collaboration, staff development time, and during post observation conversations with teachers. Appendix C shows the observation field note template utilized to record observation data. Observation data were utilized to assist in exploring the meanings derived from the survey data, focus groups, and interviews. Documents and records were an additional source of data collection within this study. Documents and records were any piece of written correspondence between administrator and teacher. Documents included but were not limited to welcome back letters, newsletters, daily bulletins, emails, school improvement plans, professional development plans, and minutes from professional development or site council meetings.
Data Analysis

All data collected were subject to the same data analysis techniques. Survey data were typed into a written document. An electronic recording device was utilized to ensure accuracy of the open-ended interviews and focus groups. Once the interviews were conducted, each interview was transcribed to provide a written representation of the interview. Data collected through observations were recorded using handwritten notes and an electronic recording device. These notes were subsequently typed into a written document. The data analysis processed through three stages: data reduction, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Punch, 2005). During the data reduction stage, data were first coded utilizing descriptive codes. Descriptive codes were then clustered into groups known as interpretive codes. The interpretive codes were then clustered multiple times into groups. The interpretive codes continued to cluster data based on inferential themes until a succinct group of themes had been identified (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Memoing was also utilized in order to obtain the thoughts of the data analysts during the process of coding. Throughout the process specific cases were identified to help illustrate these themes. These identified cases provided a thick rich description of the perceived characteristics that directly improve teaching and learning.

Summary

The preceding information provided the background needed to understand this study of teacher’s perceptions of their administrators as instructional leaders. Chapter 2 will provide an in-depth review of the literature which informs this study of teachers’ perceptions of administrators’ characteristics that have an impact on teaching and learning. The
theoretical framework for this study will also be established in chapter 2. Chapter 3 further describes the methodology the researcher utilized throughout this symbolic interaction study. Along with describing the site selection chapter 3 will also describe the data collection and data analysis process. Chapter 4 will present the common themes derived from the data collected. In particular chapter 4 will present results from the research on how teachers within these Midwest middle schools define instructional leadership as well as what characteristics principals portray that have a positive impact on teaching and learning. Chapter 5 will lay out the implications of this research for administrators as instructional leaders. Chapter 5 will also provide some guidance for university level as well as district level preparatory programs. The empirical data derived from this in-depth look at two suburban Midwestern middle schools will provide information to assist other administrators interested in improving their abilities to directly improve teaching and learning through their roles as instructional leaders.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This symbolic interaction study was designed to provide a greater understanding of teachers’ perceptions of the characteristics of administrators that have an impact on teaching and learning. To accomplish this goal, the researcher worked to fully understand the meanings teachers create from daily interactions with their administrators. These interactions combined to develop the teachers’ understandings of instructional leadership. For the purpose of this study, instructional leadership was defined as any activity that supports the teaching and learning environment of schools. Chapter 2 will review the literature surrounding the work of instructional leadership in the 21st Century.

This study was guided by the following question: What do middle school teachers perceive to be the administrators’ characteristics of instructional leadership that have the greatest direct improvement on teaching and learning? Sub-questions utilized to address the overarching question will include:

1. How do teachers define instructional leadership?
2. How are conversations about instructional leadership structured throughout a typical day?
3. What specific characteristics do administrators portray that improve the quality of teaching and learning?
4. What specific characteristics do administrators portray that create a barrier to teaching and learning?
In order to fully understand the results of the data collected for this study one must first come to understand the literature behind instructional leadership. What constitutes instructional leadership? Throughout this study instructional leadership was characterized by several concepts: defining a mission, managing curriculum and instruction, and supervising teachers. Additional areas of literature were reviewed, including: (a) change leadership and school culture, (b) dialogue in the context of schooling, (c) democratic schools, and (d) organizations as learning communities.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Symbolic Interaction**

This research utilized the symbolic interaction theoretical tradition. Symbolic interaction involves the studying of “human group life and human conduct” (Blumer, 1986, p. 1). Humans act and react to the encounters they have with each other (Charon, 1939). This may be obvious when people converse with one another, however it is also true when they move their heads, frown, smile, wave, clench our fists, sit in a chair, or do anything else that may be observed by another individual. Everything people do carries with it some sort of meaning. The same act may carry with it different meanings for different individuals. Therefore it was important for administrators to understand the symbolic interpretations of their interactions. “Human interaction is symbolic through and through” (Charon, 1939, p. 134). Symbolic interaction has been utilized frequently as theoretical framework to study the educational environment (Peterson, 1993; Sickle & Spector, 1996; Ellis, 2012; Nix, 2001; Bentley, 2005; Maltas, 2004).
The central question to be answered by a researcher utilizing symbolic interaction as a theoretical tradition was, “What common set of symbols and understandings has emerged to give meaning to people’s interactions?” (Patton, 2002, p. 132). People interact with others hundreds if not thousands of times a day, and the “interaction is not simply what is happening between people, but also what is happening within the individual” (Charon, 1939, p. 23). People are in a continual process of creating and interpreting these interactions to create personal meaning (Tesch, 2005). Through every interaction both parties gain a greater understanding of their own reality. Symbolic interaction was based on three main premises: a) “human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them,” b) “the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with [others],” and c) “meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person dealing with things [he/she] encounters” (Blumer, 1986, p. 2).

An individual’s “perspective” is derived from the meanings they create through interaction. These dynamic perspectives can be altered or replaced as a result of any single interaction. People “are thought to be heavily influenced by their perspective” (Charon, 1939, p. 30). According to Charon (1939) every interaction was carried out in the following manner. As a people or “actors” (Charon, 1939; Blumer, 1986) enter a situation they bring with them ideas of the past that have shaped their perspectives on the situation and the futures they desire. They also are mindful of their own understandings as well as the understandings of significant others that may play a part in the upcoming interaction. Entering an interaction the actor predetermines the goals of the interaction, applies his/her
perspective to the situation, considers the future, views himself/herself in the situation, and takes on the role of the other person’s perspective. The actor then determines the actions that were taken in order to accomplish the desired goal. The actor acts overtly. The other person constructs meaning from the actor’s overt action based on his/her own perspective and definition of the situation. They then in turn determine the appropriate reaction to the situation and act overtly back. Both actors simultaneously interpret their own actions as well as interpreting the actions of the other person to determine what meaning they may create from the interaction. This process of interaction was carried out numerous times daily.

According to Blumer (1986), meanings/perspectives are generated for the most part in one of two ways. The first way was that an item “emanates, so to speak” (Blumer, 1986, p. 4) it’s meaning. That was to say that there was no thought process needed to understand the meaning of the object. For example: a dog is a dog, a door is a door, and a car is a car. The other method of generating meaning was through more of an interpretive process. The object gains its meaning based on the significance it creates to the individual. Objects that are defined through this method are such things as feelings, ideas, motives, and attitudes. A person defines an object based on the “psychological elements that produce meaning” (Blumer, 1986, p. 4). Symbolic interactionism however views the creation of meaning and perspective solely based on the “ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing” (Blumer, 1986, p. 4). Educators work both in the physical as well as the symbolic environment of schools (Jacob, 1987). This symbolic environment revolves around the multitude of daily interactions.
Meanings are created from every interaction and in turn people’s understandings of their interactions become their reality. Teachers interact with students, parents, classified staff, other teachers, and administrators on a daily basis. Teachers formulate, contemplate, and interpret meanings from these interactions. The social structure that exists in schools was created through this process. Teachers then act, challenge, or react toward students, parents, staff development, instruction, etc. based on the meanings created through this social structure. The social structure itself can impact the action of individuals within it (Carrothers & Benson, 2003). This reflective and reflexive process as well as the “extent to and the manner in which the individual was connected to the social structure and the ensuing possible consequences of that connection” (Carrothers & Benson, 2003, p. 163) was the basis for symbolic interaction (Mariampolski, 2001).

According to Blumer (1986), the best method for understanding the symbolic environment was through “close contact and direct interaction” with the individuals being studied (Patton, 2002, p. 112). The purpose of this symbolic interaction study was to describe the characteristics of middle school administrators that directly improve teaching and learning through the voices of middle school teachers in a Midwest suburban school district. Through symbolic interaction exploration into the “dynamic social activities taking place between persons” took place (Charon, 1939, p. 22). Specific consideration was given to the symbolic meanings constructed by the teachers due to these interactions and whether these meanings have a direct positive impact on their classroom instruction. Administrators must be cognitive of the information they are formally and informally portraying through their interactions with their staff members each and every day because “anything is capable of
being instantly re-defined” (Carrothers & Benson, 2003, p. 164). "Culture as a conception, whether defined as custom, tradition, norm, values, rules, or such like, is clearly derived from what people do” (Blumer, 1986, p. 6). Therefore cultures are subject to being “defined and redefined through interaction” (Charon, 1939, p. 24).

**Constructivist Leadership and Democratic Schooling**

When someone mentions the word ‘leadership’ people might picture the bigger than life military general barking orders and leading their troops to victory, suggesting that society views leadership as a verb (Lambert, 1998b). According to Lambert et al. (2002), leadership should be defined as the “reciprocal processes that enable participants in a community to construct meanings that lead toward a shared purpose of schooling” (p. 1). Leadership in this capacity ensures adult learning through the construction of meaning, which will ultimately lead toward a shared vision of the school environment. Leadership defined in this manner was considered what Lambert and colleagues refer to as constructivist leadership. The “primary role of the constructivist leader is as a leader of conversations” (Lambert et al., 2002, p. xix). A constructivist-led school environment is devoted to the belief that every adult within the organization has the capacity to lead just as every student has the capacity to learn (Lambert et al., 2002). Teachers are empowered through the constructivist approach to not only attend to the learning of their students but to also attend to the learning of their fellow teachers. “When teachers are enlisted and empowered as school leaders, everyone can win” (Barth, 1990, p. 128). This collegial learning will lead to professional development opportunities that are job-embedded (Thompson, 2002). Constructivist-led schools become a
shared endeavor which ultimately leads to “the foundation for the democratization of schools” (Lambert, 1998b, p. 18).

It was difficult to discuss democratic schooling without examining the vision that John Dewey had for schools. “Dewey’s general plan was to make his school (and ultimately schools in general) a miniature example of the kind of society he wished to promote—a society engaged in a continual process of democratic joint inquiry” (Schutz, 2001, p. 274). According to Dewey (1916), knowledge cannot be transferred directly “as an idea from one person to another” (p. 159). The only way that an individual will truly understand something was by “trying to do something and having the thing perceptibly do something to one in return” (Dewey, 1972, p. 153). An individual must experience things to understand them. Authentic learning then only happens when students interact with their learning environment. Dewey’s notion of learning was to center the educational environment on the child and present students with problems or “obstacles”. These problems allow the students to develop their own solutions (Schutz, 2001). Most obstacles presented to students would then be relatable to issues of the society at large.

Dewey’s hope in providing students clear ties to certain societal problems would allow students the ability to change their realities (Dewey, 1916). Students should work “towards goals relevant to the entire society, tracing consequences and connections from their local acts into distant operations of society” (Schutz, 2001, p. 273). Dewey’s school was “designed to foster individuals who actively engaged with obstacles, changing themselves and their environment in the process” (Dewey, 1988, p. 268). Dewey realized that “[a]n individual may lose his individuality, for individuals become imprisoned in routine and
fall to the level of mechanisms” (Dewey, 1988, p. 112). Teachers are providing “training rather than an education” (Dewey, 1988, p. 70). Therefore it was imperative that educators dialogue around current practices and redesign our practices around the interests of the students. Faculty members need to start teaching students to start thinking and acting for themselves. One of the most difficult challenges facing our students will be to unlearn the traditional way of schooling and learn how to think for themselves.

Administrators “who view themselves primarily as managers, as men or women of action, who ‘make things happen,’ who ‘shake things up’--these people are ill equipped to play the role of someone who builds a learning community” (Prawart as cited in Blase & Blase, 2004, p. 169). “The notion of the principal who acts as the all-knowing patriarch of the school and who wisely solves all problems was passé. Principals must be team builders” (Clark, 1995, p. 9). Administrators need to continually “support the goals of democracy” (Blase & Blase, 2004, p. 168).

“[A] democratic education means that we educate people in a way that ensures they can think independently…and draw their own conclusions…it is an empowering kind of education” (Darling as cited in Lathrop, 2005, p. 5). Democratic education was characterized by involving students, staff, and community members in the learning process so that all stakeholders are invested in the education of our youth, thus “empower[ing] students to have first-hand experience through activities that have been designed through student/teacher planning” (Thompson & Gregg, 1997, p. 30). Democratic education involves engaging students in active learning of material that was connected to real life problems. Dworkin
(as cited in Lathrop, 2005) notes some standard features and characteristics of Democratic schools:

The schools are characterized as having non-authoritarian and non-bureaucratic management by the principal; open communication of knowledge and information; share decision-making regarding school matter; a sense of responsibility by staff and students for school decision-making; student centered approach to teaching and learning process; parents that are regarded as partners in the educated process; and full representation of teachers and students on school council. (p. 7)

The process of tackling real life problems leads to students understanding how to manage their own freedom and responsibility. “[T]rust, equity, respect, and independence are democratic principles that fuel democratic schools” (Lathrop, 2005, p. 16). Wilbur (2009) studied the benefits of providing a democratic school environment for students. In her study she found by giving students a voice around the educational environment, dominant ideologies that adults should be the only empowered ones in the educational system was drawn into question. The people within the system, specifically the students, should be the ones with the power. In von Duyke’s 2013 study of democratic schools she concluded democratic schools assist in supporting students “not only as co-participants, but as co-creators of culture” (p. 453).

Our educational environment has been reduced to the production of adequate scores on standardized achievement tests. In a democratic school “learning is not evidenced by what students learn to do for test scores, but what students learn to do for themselves” (Lathrop, 2005, p. 16). Educators must work collaboratively “to build and defend an education that is worthy of its name rather than one that is reducible simply to the efficient
production of scores on problematic standardized achievement tests” (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. vii).

As participants construct meaning and knowledge together, a high-quality learning experience is established in order to ensure all students are able to succeed. A result of constructivist leadership and a democratic education, the professional culture of the organization becomes focused on the shared vision of what teaching and learning could be. The educational environment becomes a community of leaders and learners (Lambert et al., 2002). Taking the time to build the leadership capacity of a school will provide a strong foundation in collaboration and collective responsibility which will in turn sustain school and district improvements (Lambert, 1998b).

A school isn’t just a building. Or a bunch of books. Or whatever it says in the parent handbook. It is a complex web of relationships, rules, roles, and rewards that make up the real teaching and learning environment. Effective school leaders strive to shape this environment to benefit all stakeholders. (Ramsey, 2008, p. xv)

**Instructional Leadership**

The rapidly changing nation and the influx of globalization are forcing educators to reevaluate current practices. At the center of this reevaluation was the principal. Picturing a principal of the past, one might describe a larger than life male coach or physical education teacher. Coaches were ideal because they knew how to manage the game. They understood what it took to win and if someone stepped out of line they had the physical stature and intimidating stare to put people back in their place. This model of administration may have accomplished its intended goal for a number of years, however entering the 21st Century the manager was no longer a sufficient model of leadership. The principal must continually
maintain the managerial aspects of the organization while having a clear picture of where the school was going instructionally. “People who view themselves primarily as managers, as men or women of action, who ‘make things happen,’ who ‘shake things up’—these people are ill equipped to play the role of someone who builds a learning community” (Prawart as cited in Blase & Blase, 2004, p. 169). “The notion of the principal who acts as the all-knowing patriarch of the school and who wisely solves all problems is passé. Principals must be team builders” (Clark, 1995, p. 9) and work to develop a socially just educational environment.

Out of all the roles a school administrator has, being an instructional leader in the school was probably the toughest. Veteran administrators have been more of a manager than an instructional leader and young administrators must try to “lead while they are learning to lead” (Alvy & Robbins, 2005, p. 50). As a first year administrator myself I was faced with the task of leading while I was still trying to figure out how to lead. I had read the books and knew the theory, but actually putting them into practice was another thing. How was I supposed to stand up in front of this staff of 60 plus people, most with twice as many years of experience as me, and lead? It did not take long before I was thrown to the wolves. My first day with teachers I was co-facilitating a group of teachers when two veteran male teachers started berating me about how things were going to be different this year when it came to discipline. They were not satisfied with the way things had been handled in the past and they wanted to know how I was going to make things different. I must have looked like a deer in the headlights. I was taken back. I had prepared myself to be openly accepted and coddled by the staff and here I was getting ripped to shreds in front of a third of the faculty. I eventually recovered and tried to cover my lack of preparation by stating that past procedures would be
closely examine and that any feedback would be greatly appreciated. This type of experience makes it difficult on new administrators because most teachers want a leader, however new administrators are still working to take their first steps.

The success new principals achieve was greatly dependent on their competence as instructional leaders (Terry, 1996). There is no doubt on the importance of ensuring every classroom is led by a competent, caring teacher (Speck, 1999). It may be overlooked that this expectation is difficult to achieve if there is not a highly skilled administrator in every school (Sparks, 2004b). “Many principals say that a great deal of their time and emotional resources these days are devoted to upset parents, disaffected staff members, and unrelenting pressures from outside the school” (Sparks, 2004a, p. 1). As a school administrator, days may be spent more on managing the building than providing instructional leadership. Typical days constitute supervision of hallways, addressing the behavior of several students, lunchroom supervision, addressing the behavior of several more students, returning phone calls from upset parents, and working to ensure staff members are supported.

One positive aspect of a typical day is that in order to accomplish all of these things the school administrator must engage in the one aspect of the position that can have the biggest impact on teaching and learning, building relationships. My personal belief is that building relationships is the cornerstone of education. Whether dealing with misbehaving students, upset parents, or malcontent staff, everything comes down to the relationship you build with those individuals. However, these daily obstacles make it difficult for a building administrator to concentrate on being an instructional leader, even though this role carries with it the potential to have the greatest impact on student achievement (Terry, 1996).
Fullan (2006a) quotes the Hay Group as identifying seven major themes that administrators must concentrate on at any given time:

1. Leadership (vision of learning and development);
2. Teaching and Learning (establishing an environment for learning and development);
3. Resource Management;
4. Human Resource Management;
5. Policy Foundation/Implementation (educational and non-educational);
6. Administration (maintenance of records etc.); and
7. External Relationships. (p. 14)

Stephen Gordon writes in the forward of Handbook of Instructional Leadership: How Successful Principals Promote Teaching and Learning (Blase & Blase, 2004, p. ix) about an encounter he had at a conference for educational leaders. By chance Gordon was witness to a conversation between a colleague of his and a former student who was a practicing administrator. The principal told his former professor “I really enjoyed your course on instructional leadership; I don’t get much of a chance to use instructional leadership in the real world because I’m too busy with all the day-to-day responsibilities of being a principal” (Blase & Blase, 2004, p. ix). According to Stronge’s (1988) research, elementary principals spent only 11% of their time on instructional leadership issues and more than 62% on managerial issues. The 11% was consistent even after the administrators underwent in-service on instructional leadership. Hallinger (1989) attributed this lack of instructional leadership time to the inadequate support of new skills in the work place. Constrained by time, instructional leadership was one aspect of being a school administrator that gets pushed to the back burner, although it may be the one that was the most important, especially with the accountability brought about through the No Child Left Behind Act. R. Offield (personal
communication, December 13, 2007), a building administrator for 22 years, verbalizes the problem facing administrators today within the context of the daily job:

One of the things we are doing right now is meeting with every eighth grade student... in order to ensure all eighth graders are prepared to enter high school. I need to do that every day. I could not do it today. I don’t know if I will be able to do it tomorrow. It then spreads out so that I am intruding on class time. As I do this then I can’t answer my NCA questions and while I am not doing that I can’t talk with kids that are failing and I can’t follow up on some positive phone calls that I want to do this time and I can’t check my email or return my phone messages. Within all this I need to concentrate on being an instructional leader to each and every teacher. The problem is that I feel inadequate in my role as an instructional leader. The phrase is ‘work smarter not harder’. I think I am at my limit of working smart and I don’t know that I can work any harder.

In light of research that American youth are academically falling behind other countries, and corporate America hollering that schools are not preparing students for a technological age, increasing pressure has been placed on schools to produce results (Trahan, 2002). Ultimately school reform falls on the shoulders of the principal. Principals however are bombarded daily with a barrage of managerial issues. In this day and age of accountability and globalization the position of the building level administrator is considered by some to be the most critical position within the educational environment. Ask almost any active building principal to describe their job and you will hear adjectives such as challenging, strenuous, exhausting, and time-constrained (Jacobson & Conway, 1995). My personal experiences would include the list above, but would also include rewarding, exhilarating, and fun. The challenge lies in ensuring that all students succeed. How do you do this for those students who exhibit behaviors that have a negative impact on their academic success?
With regard to such behaviors, I recently worked with a student who would not attend class. He would hide out in the bathroom during passing period and then roam the halls. When I asked him what he wanted to do when he got older he stated he was going to be a professional motocross rider. My challenge was to find a way to connect with this student in order to encourage him to stay in class and work to succeed. I worked and worked with this young man on a daily basis. Everything from behavior contracts to rewards for good behavior was tried. I even spent many days shadowing this young man to and from class. He saw no connection with his future plans and school. Through the relationship I had built with this young man and the numerous conversations over his future plans I was able to get in contact with a professional motocross rider. This professional motocross rider wrote a letter to the student explaining to him the importance of an education. He explained in detail how education was important not only for the sport itself but especially for sponsorship. Sponsors provide money to athletes to get their product in front of the fans. It was imperative for sponsors to select well rounded individuals that can not only ride but can also carry on an intellectual conversation.

Things have worked out with this student. The interventions put in place transformed this young man’s negative behaviors. He is now attending class and doing quite well. I spent an enormous amount of time with this individual and it paid off. Too many times in talking with students I come across the phrase “school is boring.” As a leader in school I must work with teachers to improve the quality of instruction to ensure that all students are challenged at the appropriate level of difficulty. In order to ensure this it is imperative that
administrators continuously exhibit the characteristics that are shown to have a positive impact on teaching and learning.

According to Blase and Blase (2004), when it comes to instructional leadership today, “there is a compelling need for practicing and aspiring administrators and supervisors to search for ways to encourage collegiality and to significantly improve instructional supervision in today’s changing schools” (p. 4). “It is a tough balancing act, however, to keep improvement of classroom instruction as the center of the job while being barraged with administrative tasks. Successful principals must lead bifocally—taking care of both learning and business as they move through the day” (Alvy & Robbins, 2005, p. 51). In Heckert’s 2009 case study of five acting administrators, she examined their instructional leadership styles. She found administrators must utilize several different instructional leadership practices to assist teachers with their instructional practices. She noted these instructional leadership practices include but are not limited to promoting collaborative direction for instruction, develop a collaborative network with and among teachers, promoting professional development, and providing equitable support.

So, what characteristics make up effective instructional leadership? Research has consistently shown that instructional leadership was comprised of several attributes, such as defining a mission, managing curriculum and instruction, supervising teachers, monitoring student progress, promoting instructional climate are a few of the most common (Blase & Blase, 2004; Krug, 1992; Northern & Bailey, 1991). In addition, in order to create a socially
just and equitable school a leader must be transformative, develop relationships, and participate in moral dialogue with teachers. According to Shields (2004):

Educational leaders are expected to develop learning communities, build the professional capacity of teachers, take advice from parents, engage in collaborative and consultative decision making, resolve conflicts, engage in effective instructional leadership, and attend respectfully, immediately, and appropriately to the needs and requests with diverse cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. (p. 109)

All this within the context of the pressures of accountability, fiscal constraints, and social/political interference.

**Defining a Mission**

Samuel Krug (1992) stated, “[o]perating without a clear mission is like beginning a journey without a destination in mind. Chances are you won't know when you get there” (p. 432). My school recently participated in a peer review for a future NCA accreditation visit. Once feedback from the visit was received my building administrator was upset because our school did not receive outstanding reviews on all items. I do not believe he understood the reason for the peer review. The reason behind the peer review was to identify areas of possible improvement. One particular area of concern for the review committee was the lack of a mission. My school actually had a mission, it just had not been reviewed in 15 years. There were only a few teachers remaining from the initial review 15 years ago.

In a personal interview with my building administrator, I specifically asked about the importance of a mission for the school. His response was that he believed mission statements were “a too general kind of thing” and that he would rather look at what he can do every day to achieve a district goal. After reflecting on his response I believe he misunderstands the
purpose of a mission statement. My school recently tried to put up the perception that we knew what our mission statement was by taking one afternoon before our peer review to “study” it. Several comments were made that afternoon about memorizing our mission statement. I tried to explain as best I could what I believe about a mission statement. To me a mission statement should be in alignment with each individual’s personal mission statement. I worked with the teachers to explain that as a school a mission statement should not be “memorized” because it should be a part of each and every one of us and what is done each and every day. “Teachers work effectively together when they understand and appreciate the mission” (Tyler, 1989, p. 38).

Communicating this mission was essential to ensure all staff members clearly understand where the school was headed. “Only a clear vision of the future and a flexible blueprint for arriving at that vision will equip instructional leaders adequately” (Northern & Bailey, 1991, p. 25). This was evident in a welcome back to school letter I received from a high school principal to his staff. The principal was setting the stage for how the school year would be laid out. “As we consider the new school year, I also want us to keep our mission in the forefront to guide our efforts with students and with each other” (R. Bowman, personal communication, June 13, 2007). Mr. Bowman (2007) went on to say that, “it is imperative that we keep in mind what our mission is as we move throughout the school year, without a mission we won’t know where we are headed.” Later he added, “Our mission will give us a clear understanding on how decisions are made here. All decisions made this year will be based on our shared mission statement” (R. Bowman, personal communication, June 13, 2007).
Change Leadership and Culture

It becomes difficult to discuss change and the change process without also including a discussion of school culture and reculturing schools. The terms go hand and hand when one refers to the process of moving an organization forward. Changing an organization became a tough task because as educators we “have to run the system we have while leading the creation of the system we need” (Wagner et al., 2006, p. xiii). Programs and initiatives do not bring about change within an organization, people do (Dufour & Berkey, 1995). Every parent hopes and dreams for a high quality education for their child. A high quality education not only benefits the child but it also benefits the public as a whole (Fullan, 2003a). I understand that my role as the principal was a “pivotal figure when it comes to [the] success” of this organization (Fullan, 2006b, p.1). However my role on student achievement may be powerful but indirect. According to Fullan (2006b) as the principal I should focus on “developing the culture of the school” (p. 3).

It’s more important to student success than the curriculum. The reading program. The basic texts. Technology. The physical plant. Or even the testing program. And it’s more important to teacher morale and effectiveness than wages, benefits, or working conditions. What is it? It’s the culture of the organization. (Ramsey, 2008, p. 1)

The culture of a school plays a significant role in the quality permeated within the school (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Schein (1985) defines culture as “the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs of an organization, that operate unconsciously and that define in a basic ‘taken-for-granted’ fashion an organization’s view of itself and its environment” (p. 6). A simple definition of culture according to Bower (1996) was the way we do things around here. Culture encompasses all the unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations.
that drive every aspect of the organization. Culture affects every nook and cranny of the organization. Everything from the way people act, the clothing they chose to wear to work, what they converse about in the lounge, and how they feel about their jobs in general (Deal & Peterson, 1999). These unwritten rules and norms mold the way individuals make meaning of their daily interactions. “School cultures are complex webs of traditions and rituals that have been built up over time as teachers, students, parents, and administrators work together and deal with crisis and accomplishments” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 4). Effective schools research of the 1970’s and 1980’s has shown that an effective school was one in which the staff has a clear focus on student learning and achievement embedded within their cultural norms (Fullan, 2006a). In study after study, organizational culture has been found to be “critical to the successful improvement of teaching and learning” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 5). "[B]y learning more about the school culture, researchers can begin to understand the human dynamics that nurture and sustain meaningful changes in learning and teaching" (Strahan, 2003, p. 129). Restructuring by itself was not sufficient to sustain lasting change (Fullan, 2006a). In order to ensure success, organizational changes along with cultural changes are needed (Deal and Peterson, 1999).

In my experience as a school administrator I have worked in a building with a largely veteran staff. This particular staff was stuck in the mud when it comes to the way we do things around here. We recently restructured the teams in this building to bring about change. Restructuring had some impact on instruction but was not sufficient to accomplish what was needed. Since the restructuring two years ago we have now turned our efforts toward reculturing. We are trying to change the way we do things around here in order to
improve the educational opportunities of the students. “[R]eculturing is the name of the game. Much change is structural, and superficial. The change required is in the culture or what people value and how they work together to accomplish it” (Fullan, 2002, p. 2). “Educators must be willing to examine their beliefs about what school should be and challenge their thinking about what constitutes meaningful learning” (Thompson & Gregg, 1997, p. 30). Therefore reculturing would entail a school modifying inward practices of teaching and learning.

Reculturing would then be considered the changes that occur because of middle grades educators expanding their mental models surrounding the education of young adolescents (Senge, 1990). “Reculturing is a contact sport that involves hard, labor-intensive work. It takes time and indeed never ends” (Fullan, 2001, p. 44). Expanding our mental models and working toward changing our beliefs and behaviors toward the young adolescents in our school was the first step in creating a culture of success for all students (Wagner et al., 2006). In order to change someone’s beliefs, a community of trust must be built around individuals so that new beliefs can be expressed and nurtured (Fullan, 2003b).

There are a number of things that may assist in building better schools such as: (a) better-trained teachers, (b) improved facilities, (c) up-to-date curriculum and materials, and (d) effective assessments of student learning. However one thing that has tremendous positive impact was building relationships and working to improve the overall culture of the school (Ramsey, 2008). A positive school culture was an essential component of an effective school. Gettemeier (2012) conducted a study on the effects of implementing change to the culture of a middle school. His findings found that even a brand new administrator can have
a profound impact on the culture of school in his first year. He also found that a deliberate plan of action must be established in order to change to take ahold. Although a school culture may not be able to change in a single year the effects of school culture can be felt immediately. School cultures do not happen by accident. School leaders must continually articulate and model a vision of common goals that lead to the success of every student. Gettemeir (2007) also found that by involving teams of parents, teachers, and students in carefully planned research-based strategies and community building activities, school leaders are in the best position to shape a school culture that is positive, enriching, and filled with teacher and student success. Stone (2009) found similar results in her study of school culture. The results of this study showed that administrators who focused on building a school culture around collaborative practice, community involvement, and teacher empowerment resulted in the best setting for academic achievement.

Dialogue

According to Thompson and Gregg (1997) in order to change the culture people must first change the way in which they communicate with one another. Dialogue is the most effective practice for team learning (Senge et al., 2000). Educators need to dialogue rather than having discussions around developing “collective mental models” (Thompson & Gregg, 1997, p. 30) centered on learning. “It is the inquiry conversations that distinguishes a self-renewing school from a stagnant or declining one” (Lambert et al., 2002, p.70). Dialogue “is a discipline for collective learning and inquiry that can provide a means for developing shared understanding” (Thompson & Gregg, 1997, p. 31). During dialogue mental models are suspended. This does not mean a person throws away their mental models. Mental
models are temporarily laid aside in order to examine a topic from new angles (Senge et al., 2000). According to Senge et al. (2000), suspending your mental models involves three distinct steps. First is the process of bringing a person’s own assumptions to the surface. Secondly is the process of displaying these assumptions so that others can view them. Lastly is the process of inviting others to examine these assumptions in order to provide additional feedback on why these assumptions may exist. Through the process of accepting other points of view a common ground is built. Mutual trust is developed from this type of meaningful dialogue.

Too many times dialogue is misconstrued within a discussion. Discussion “shares its root meaning with ‘percussion’ and ’concussion,’ both of which involve breaking things up” (Bohm, Factor, & Garratt, 1991, p. 4). Dialogue centers on opening up and discovering multiple perspectives, whereas discussion is the process of narrowing down or eliminating perspectives (York-Barr et al., 2006). Discussions according to Thompson and Gregg (1997) revolve around one person convincing the other that their solution is the better way of doing things. More time is spent trying to convince others their way is right than is spent listening to other’s point of view. Decisions that are made only based on discussion generally lead to decisions that seldom stay made. Conversely, decisions based on adequate dialogue “leads to shared thinking, which leads to aligned action” (York-Barr et al. 2006, p. 53).

One of the most important dialogues that faculty will need to focus on is the moral dialogue centered on the diversity of students entering our halls. Students come to school from a variety of different backgrounds. The differences students bring into our schools provide “a rich tapestry of human existence that must be the starting point for a deeply
democratic, academically excellent, and socially just education” (Shields, 2004, p. 127).

Educators must realize that no matter the situation they become our students the minute they enter the doors. In doing so teachers must take responsibility for the education of all students. They cannot allow a student’s background to be an excuse for why they are performing poorly. Educators must avoid the temptation to blame the system for a student’s lack of academic achievement. According to Shields (2004), “when educators examine our attitudes and assumptions, avoid pointing fingers of blame, and take responsibility for socially just education in our own contexts, academic achievement improves” (p. 127). There is no need for educators to work harder, they just need to work differently and smarter.

Dialogue is the key to everything. Educators cannot move forward as a school without authentic dialogue. They must move away from trivial social discussions and move toward true dialogue centered on the teaching and learning process. They must promote a culture of open-mindedness and flexibility. Teachers must utilize dialogue to constantly challenge old assumptions in order to frame new actions (Lambert, 1998a). Through dialogue new visions will emerge of what this middle school could become (Lambert et al., 2002).

**Learning Communities**

One method many schools are utilizing to increase dialogue and address the issue of reculturing their schools is the creation of a learning organization (Mohr & Dichter, 2001). “The most promising strategy for sustained substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities” (Dufour & Eaker, 1998, p. xi). “Professional learning communities are in fact about establishing lasting
new collaborative cultures” (Fullan, 2006a, p. 10). A collaborative culture works to build the capacity for continuous improvement through the use of inquiry. According to Lambert et al. (2002), inquiry is what puts the “learning” into learning community (p. 70). The basic purpose of professional learning communities according to Fullan (2006a) “is to change the culture of school systems” (p. 11). According to Blankstein (2004) the research speaks for itself, “building such a community is our best hope for sustained school success” (p. 6).

Schools that are working toward becoming professional learning communities hope that if the adults in the organization commit to collaboratively talking about the teaching and learning process then action will lead to increased student achievement (Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004).

The notion of professional learning communities did not originate in the education world but rather in the business sector. Mary Follett’s work in 1924 on human relations led to a more democratic way for working together in the business world. Follet’s work on human relations eventually influenced W. E. Deming’s notion of Total Quality Management. All of this work eventually led to Peter Senge’s (1990) book titled The Fifth Discipline, in which he explores the world of learning organizations (Walker, 2002, p. 23). According to Fullan (2006a), professional learning communities date back to Judith Little’s research in 1981 on collegiality, in addition to Susan Rosenholtz’s research 1985 research on collaboration. Findings in their research showed that schools working collaboratively with a focus on better teacher instruction were found to be better schools. Peter Senge first coined the term “learning organization” in his book The Fifth Discipline (Blankenstein, 2004). Although the book was originally written for the corporate world, many educators found the
concept of a learning organization fitting for schools since schools were organizations of learning. “As schools become engaged in building collaborative work cultures, the term learning organizations came to be referred to as professional learning communities in schools” (Thompson et al., 2004, p. 2)

Senge’s notion of a learning organization involved what he called five disciplines. They include: (1) systems thinking, (2) personal mastery, (3) mental models, (4) building shared vision, and (5) team learning. Based on Senge’s five disciplines Sharon Kruse and Karen Seashore Louis developed the concept of a “school-based learning community.” Kruse and her colleagues believed reflective dialogue, de-privatization of practice, collective focus on student learning, collaboration, and shared norms and values are dimensions of an effective professional learning community. Kruse concludes her article (as cited in Fullan, 2006a, p. 13), “professional community within schools has been a minor theme in many educational reform efforts since the 1960’s. Perhaps it is time that it became a major rallying cry among reformers, rather than a secondary whisper.”

In 1995, Fred Newmann and Gary Wehlage researched educational reform and restructuring. Their research concluded that “[t]he most successful schools were those that used restructuring tools to help them function as professional communities” (as cited in Blankstein, 2004, p. 53). Decades later professional learning communities are making a mainstream stand for their ability to establish long term change. This mainstream revival is due in part to Richard Dufour and his colleagues. Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker base
their image of the “professional learning community” on the earlier works that devised the concept. Dufour and Eaker (1998) state:

Each word of the phrase “professional learning community” has been chosen purposefully. A “professional” is someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has not only pursued advanced training to enter the field, but who is also expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base…“Learning” suggests ongoing action and perpetual curiosity … The school that operates as a professional learning community recognizes that its members must engage in ongoing study and constant practice that characterize an organization committed to continuous improvement … In a professional learning community, educators create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone. (pp. xi-xii)

The concept of professional learning communities for this study will be grounded in the five disciplines of a learning organization. According to Senge et al. (2000), systematic thinking is the “cornerstone of a learning organization because it integrates the other disciplines” (Thompson & McKelvy, 2007, p. 12). Systematic thinking consists of taking a holistic approach to examine the school environment. Educators that engage in systems thinking understand that it is difficult to address one area of concern within an organization without it having an impact on all other aspects of the organization. Educators in the past have developed what Senge et al. (2000), refers to as an “attention-deficit culture” (p. 77). In this Senge refers to the fact that educators are all about the quick fix. Senge proposes that in order to have sustainable results educators must look at the underlying patterns, what forces have attributed to these patterns, and how our thinking plays a part in perpetuating these patterns. In order to accomplish this goal everyone involved must suspend mental models. Mental models as defined by Senge et al. (2000) are “our theories about the way the world
works” (p. 83). These mental models influence our thoughts and our actions within the system of education.

Personal mastery is an individual’s desire to better himself/herself by being responsible for his/her own learning. Educators deal in personal mastery every day when it comes to working with children. They are constantly pushing students to do their best and to continually push themselves farther and harder (Senge et al., 2000). By taking a systems thinking approach to education, one must understand that in order for the educational environment to improve, one must start with one’s own learning. Other disciplines may be considered a group process, while personal mastery is only accomplished through a lifelong process of solo reflection (Senge et al., 2000). “Adults in the school must be willing to try new ways of doing things to increase learning opportunities for all students” (Thompson et al., 2004, p. 3). Adults in the afore-mentioned sentence do not just refer to teachers. In order for a school to become a true learning organization every person from the students, the bus drivers, staff members, teachers, and administrators must be willing to participate in the learning process.

Every person has a picture of what they hope to gain from education (Senge et al., 2000). The discipline of shared vision revolves around the process of open dialogue with the sole purpose of taking everyone’s different images and developing a shared picture of the future. Every decision made within a learning organization is based on the shared vision of the school. A vision is not something that can be handed down from the administration, it must be developed by everyone involved in the organization. “Without a sustained process
for building a shared vision, there is no way for a school to articulate its sense of purpose
(Senge, 2000, p. 72).

An additional discipline of learning organizations is mental models. “Mental models
are subconscious, taken for granted beliefs that limit our thinking about how the world
works” (Isaacson & Bamburg, 1992, p. 43). These mental models are so engrained within
someone that it makes it difficult for people to change (Senge et al., 2000). Our mental
models of education have been passed down to us for the last 100 years. Ellwood
Cubberley’s notion of the educational environment as a factory in which students were the
raw material to be molded into a finished product has resisted the change process due to
society’s mental models on the way education should be (Cubberley, 1929). Through the
notion of scientific management Cubberley helped establish the hierarchal chain of command
teachers continue to see in education today (Taylor, 1923). In order for an organization to
move toward the concept of a learning organization, educators must expand their mental
models surrounding the education of young adolescents (Senge, 1990). Once these mental
models are expanded so that educators understand doing the right thing for the young people
they teach is the most important thing, improvement will happen. Expanding our mental
models and working toward changing our beliefs and behaviors toward the young
adolescents in our middle grades schools is the first step in creating a culture of success for
all students (Wagner et al., 2006). In order to change someone’s beliefs a community must be
built around them where the new beliefs can be expressed and nurtured (Fullan, 2003b).

Team learning is an additional discipline of a learning organization. Team learning
refers to the process of a group of people working and thinking together for a common
purpose. An essential requirement for team learning is dialogue and collaboration. Through the use of dialogue and collaboration, staff members within learning communities come to believe that by creating a collaborative culture through the use of high performing teams the fundamental goal of success for all may be reached. These high performing teams embed collaboration within their daily routine. Collaboration is defined by “a systematic process in which we work together, interdependently, to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve our individual and collective results” (National Educational Service, 2004, p. 35). Through the use of collaboration the “traditional view of teachers as autonomous, independent sub-contractors” (National Educational Service, 2004, p. 61) is eliminated. Teachers within a learning community collaborate about all aspects of the learning process. Specific and measurable goals are set, action research is conducted, results are analyzed and teaching and learning decisions are made by the teams. Power is then shifted from the administrator to the teacher.

Schools today may advertise themselves as being innovative, but I believe very few ever really accomplish such improvement and originality. New leaders may be brought in from the outside in order to gain a new perspective or new leadership style, however new leaders may be undercut in their efforts to be innovative by the experienced administrator that has been socialized into the system. It is difficult for a new administrator to break through and be innovative in an environment that has never been open to innovation. By the time most school leaders become the principal of a secondary school, they have put in several years as an assistant principal. The time working as an assistant principal allows the system to socialize them into the standard operating procedures of the system.
I personally have been hired to work alongside a leader with 20 plus years as a school administrator. Coming into this system did not provide me the opportunities to develop a democratic learning organization because “things have always been done this way.” As a newly hired administrator the best accolade I have heard given to my building principal is that “he runs a tight ship.” Comments did not include that he is a great instructional leader or that he even makes decisions based upon what is “best for kids.” I would hate to know the exact number of times I was congratulated on receiving an administrative position in a great school run by an administrator who runs a tight ship. If the number of years that this building principal has in his position is not enough of a deterrent to be innovative, the average number of years of experience for the 60 teachers in the building is 19 years. A veteran staff have also been socialized into the bureaucratic system of education and resist any change that may be presented, not because change is a bad idea, but they resist on the shear notion that it is not the way they have been doing things for the last 15 years. Lambert and her colleagues attribute this continued dominance to what they refer as “teacher and community lore” which is defined as “believing educational tenets to be true because they have been repeated so often” (p. 10). According to Counts (1932) in order to be effective educators must be able to break the “slave psychology that has dominated the mind of the pedagogue” (p.27).

Managing Curriculum and Instruction

“The primary service that schools offer is instruction” (Krug, 1992, p. 432). An educational leader must give all students access to the curriculum regardless of their lived experiences. Educational leaders must encourage teachers to dialogue around the background
stories of their students (Shields, 2004). The teachers I am surrounded with seldom dialogue around the background of their students except to provide an excuse for why they feel the students cannot perform at a high level. “When the atmosphere of the school is one that values learning and supports achievements, it is difficult not to learn” (Krug, 1993, p. 241). “An effective, excellent administrator will always have a good feel for the organizational pulse and temperature of (individuals and groups)” (Northern & Bailey, 1991, p. 25). An educational leader must continually promote a positive instructional climate in which reflection and risk-taking are the norms (Terry, 1996). Morale has a positive impact on the teaching and learning practices within a school. High morale leads to more effective teaching which in turn leads to higher student achievement. The responsibility for maintaining a high morale within the confines of the school building lies on the shoulders of the principal (Tyler, 1989).

**Supervising Teachers**

According to Terry (1996), “[p]erformance evaluation is retrospective; instructional leadership is prospective and is focused on what can be, not what was” (p. 5). An effective instructional leader focuses on the continual professional development of all teachers. They study how teachers learn and must be proactive in their efforts to eliminate any barriers that may inhibit teachers from participating in professional development opportunities. The goal of professional development is the improvement of all teachers’ current teaching practices. Relationships and dialogue must be established so that all teachers understand how the professional development opportunities connect to the mission of the school. Dialogue
should encourage teachers to develop or lead what they may consider to be a meaningful professional development opportunity for other teachers.

In no other area is the principal's influence felt more than in his insistence that every teacher be well prepared every day with interesting, challenging lessons and activities. The principal should be in classrooms observing teachers, offering support and suggestions. He/she should have an ongoing in-service program for improvement of the instruction in the school. This advocacy of good teaching may be the most important single influence the principal can have in providing students with a school that is a comfortable, exciting, stimulating learning place. (Duke as cited in McCurdy, 1983, p. 24)

Specialized, personalized, and differentiated staff development training must be provided to ensure that every teacher improves their current practices around teaching and learning. An effective instructional leader incorporates a variety of methods to engage teachers in this process. Methods such as peer collaboration, critical friends groups, access to resources, empowerment, and constructivist learning and leadership. All professional learning must be embedded within the school’s improvement plan. The continuous professional development described above is crucial to improving the instructional practices within a school (Guskey, 2000). Some of the benefits seen by providing teachers with a differentiated style of professional development are: (a) teachers’ stress levels around a particular content or activity presented are lessened, (b) teachers are involved in important dialogue centered on current practices which in turn reduces isolation, and (c) teachers are engaged in more reflection and growth. Additional benefits center around teachers’ willingness to step outside of their comfort zones and engage in more risks, and in general just “more positive attitudes toward the school environment and the educational system” (Vartuli & Fyfe, 1993, p. 41).
Along with differentiation, professional development needs to be ongoing and outcomes-based. The goal of any professional development program should be to foster continuous improvement (Guskey, 2000). Teachers can engage in professional development through a variety of sources. Schools can offer professional development opportunities to their staff members. Opportunities at this level can be geared specifically toward areas of concern the staff may have in regards to the instruction being offered. Districts themselves can provide both informal and formal opportunities for staff development. Specialized trainings are also available through district, state, and/or national organizations (Stallings & Krasavage, 1986). School leaders must be innovative in how they can incorporate any and/or all of these methods consistently throughout their schools.

Conclusion

To empower teachers one must exhibit characteristics that focus on the teaching and learning process. Administrators must become skillful instructional leaders. In order to build an education that will meet the learning needs of all kids administrators need to work to shift the focus of “school improvement efforts from the supervision and evaluation of individual teachers to an emphasis on building the capacity of teams of teachers to take responsibility for their own learning” (National Educational Service, 2004, p. 62). According to Senge, the “new” leader of a learning organization will be designer of a culture in which all five disciplines may be practiced, a steward of the shared mission, and a teacher that promotes the learning of all (Isaacson & Bamburg, 1992). To promote the learning for all, the “new” leader will be required to promote a new form of professional development (Thompson et al., 2004). The traditional approach to staff development will no longer be sufficient. Job-
embedded professional development allows teachers the opportunity to actively engage in meaningful analysis of teaching and learning which is consistent with a teacher’s goals.

There is simply no way to achieve educational excellence in a school where purposes are blurred, where teachers and students fail to communicate thoughtfully with each other, and where parents are uninvolved in the education of their children. Community is without question, the glue that holds an effective school together. (Boyer as cited in Speck, 1999, p. 9)

It is up to each and every educator to change his or her mental models around education. The purpose of this research was to guide future and practicing administrators into building the instructional leader within. I believe in the words of Ghandi, “[we] must be the change [we] want to see in the world” (Parry, 2006, p. 54). “Nothing will change, until we change—until we throw off our dependence and act for ourselves” (Horton, 2003, p. 118). The bureaucratic system of education has us all between a rock and hard place. On one side educators should be able to see the change that needs to happen, on the other the system places roadblocks at every turn. Therefore the system perpetuates itself. The power for change lies within district and building level administrators and their ability to recognize characteristics that will propel them into becoming expert instructional leaders. “Most of the real obstacles to change are not ‘out there’ but inside us. We each have our own collection of educational bogeymen who we’re afraid to confront” (Gregory, 2001, p. 580).

The key to successful change is the improvement in relationships between all involved and not simply the imposition of top-down reform. The new emphasis is educational change based on creating the conditions to develop the “capacity” of both organizations and individuals to learn. The focus moves away from an emphasis on structural change and towards changing the culture of classrooms and schools, an emphasis on
relationships and values (Fullan, 2001, p. 421). The focus should be on building our capacity as instructional leaders.

Chapter 3 will describe in depth the methodology utilized throughout this symbolic interaction study. It will also give an overview of the rationale for qualitative research along with an insight into the site selection and data collection process.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Overview

In order to fully understand and improve educational leadership administrators must first work to understand the meanings teachers create of the daily interactions with them. Through this symbolic interaction study a greater understanding was created of teachers’ perceptions of the characteristics an administrator should exhibit in order to have the greatest impact on teaching and learning to improve school leaders’ capacity for effective instructional leadership. For the purpose of this study instructional leadership was defined as any activity that supports the teaching and learning environment of schools. From my experience as a practitioner there is limited time to engage teachers in meaningful dialogue surrounding instruction. Therefore it is important to utilize every moment of precious time available. This study was designed to assist in understanding the meanings created by teachers from any and all encounters with school administrators and how these encounters may have a positive impact on instruction.

Educators work both within the physical environment as well as the symbolic environment of schools (Jacob, 1987). The symbolic environment is assembled through the compilation of daily interactions. Meanings are created from every interaction and in turn people’s understandings of their interactions become their reality. The social structure that exists in schools is continually re-created through the meanings of individual interactions. Carrothers and Benson (2003) believe that once this social structure is in place the structure itself can impact the actions of the individuals within it. Therefore, the purpose of this
symbolic interactive study was to describe the characteristics of middle school principals that have a positive impact on teaching and learning through the voices of middle school teachers in a Midwestern suburban school district. Through symbolic interaction a deep understanding of the meanings teachers acquire through their interactions with their administrators was created. The potential significance of this research lies in the impact for possible improvement of instructional leadership within the Midwestern school district being studied.

The qualitative researcher, Janesick (1994), emphasized the importance of identifying what it was the researcher wants to know:

All dances make a statement and begin with the question, what do I want to say in this dance? In much the same way, the qualitative researcher begins with a similar question: What does the researcher want to know in this study? This is a critical beginning point. Regardless of point of view, and quite often because of our point of view, we construct and frame a question for inquiry. (p. 210)

Based on Janesick’s description of qualitative research, this study was guided by the following overarching question: What do middle school teachers perceive to be the administrators’ characteristics of instructional leadership that have the greatest direct improvement on teaching and learning? This researcher hoped to answer this question by examining the meanings teachers created from their daily interactions with administrators.

**Rationale for Qualitative Research**

A qualitative research strategy was adopted for this symbolic interaction study. Some would say that all data are qualitative (Berg, 1989). All data starts out qualitatively by describing a “raw” phenomenon then is converted into words or into numbers (Miles & Huberman, 1994). According to Creswell (1998, p. 15), qualitative research is an “inquiry
process” designed to make sense out of a “social or human problem”. Qualitative research is
done within a natural setting and the researcher is the instrument of data collection (Patton,
2002). Qualitative data are more likely to lead researchers past “initial conceptions and to
generate or revise conceptual frameworks” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 1). A qualitative
research study was appropriate in this instance because according to Creswell, “qualitative
researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret
phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 15).

This symbolic interaction study focused on the phenomena of instructional leadership
and the personal meanings teachers derived from the interactions they have with their
building administrators. Through qualitative research the researcher worked to construct
meaning from the participants’ point of view. “The researcher builds a complex, holistic
picture, analyzes words, reports, and detailed views of informants” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15).
According to Miles and Huberman (1994) qualitative research brings “undeniability” to the
quality of the findings generated (p. 1). Utilizing the words and stories of those directly
involved provided a much more vivid picture of the phenomenon being studied than does the
regurgitation of numbers (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The best way to gain a greater
understanding of the characteristics exhibited by school principals that had a positive impact
on teaching and learning is to emerge myself in this environment with as little disruption as
possible to the daily environment. I examined the interactions between school administrators
and their teachers. Specific examination was given to the perceived characteristics of the
administrator through the teachers’ eyes and whether these interactions have a positive
impact on the classroom instruction of the teacher.
This study will utilize a symbolic interaction theoretical tradition. A symbolic interaction study examines the shared meanings people create “through their interactions, and [how] those meanings become their reality” (Patton, 2002, p. 112). Symbolic interaction “revolve[s] around the extent to and the manner in which the individual is connected to the social structure and the ensuing possible consequences of that connection” (Carrothers & Benson, 2003, p. 163). Researchers that study symbolic interactionism are concerned with the “participants’ points of view” (Jacob, 1987, p. 29). In particular researchers examine the “common set of symbols and understandings that emerge to give meaning to people’s interactions” (Patton, 2002, p. 112). Symbolic interactive studies involve reading and re-reading the documents, interview transcripts, observation field notes, and open-ended survey data in order to discover the categories, concepts, and themes that may help to develop a thick rich description of the lived experiences of teachers. Through the use of descriptive coding, interpretive coding, and thematic coding the researcher hopes to gain a greater understanding of the interactions that occur on a daily basis between teachers and administrators and how these interactions may have a positive impact on teaching and learning.

**Site Selection**

The school district of the selected site (see Figures 1) was in a suburban area of 81.68 square miles. The total enrollment of the school district was 17,003, with an average daily attendance rate of 93.5%. The Department of Education of Missouri has provided the district full accreditation and has given it the award of “Blue Ribbon District.” The district had 21 elementary schools, five middle schools, and four high schools.
Figure 1. Demographics of Selected Site

DEMOGRAPHICS

District Data
- Blue Ribbon District named by Expansion Management magazine.
- ACT composite scores meet or exceed national and state averages
- MAP scores exceed state averages in nearly every tested content area
- High percentage of students enrolled in advanced courses
- High numbers of students pursuing post-secondary education
- 2,000 families enrolled in Parents as Teachers
- More than 66% of certified staff holds advanced degrees
- Fully accredited by the State of Missouri

Special Programs and Services
Percentage of students participating in K-8 gifted programs ...................... 4%
Number of early childhood special education students ............................... 185
Number of families served through Parents as Teachers ............................. 1,972
Percentage of high school students enrolled in district vocational programs 12.2%
Percentage of special education students .............................................. 13.6%
Percentage of students enrolled in advanced placement courses ............ 21.3%

School Calendar Data
Grade/Section Level Actual Days
Grades K-5 174
Grades 6-8 174
Grades 9-12 174
Parent/teacher conferences 2
Staff development for certificated staff 4

District Data
Total enrollment ................................................................. 17,003
Average daily attendance .................................................... 93.5%
High school dropout rate .................................................... 1.8%
Area of school district ...................................................... 81.68 square mi.
## DEMOGRAPHICS

**Missouri School Improvement Program**

Accreditation Rating: ................................. Fully Accredited (February 2003)

Number of students eligible for free/reduced lunch ................................. 4,987

Percentage of parents participating in parent/teacher conferences ................. 95.8%

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</table>

Percentage of graduates taking the ACT – 48.3%

### Enrollment

- **6th Grade**: ................................................................. 1343
- **7th Grade**: ................................................................. 1398
- **8th Grade**: ................................................................. 1461

### Student Population

- **Asian**: ................................................................. 4.39%
- **Black**: ................................................................. 13.27%
- **Hispanic**: ............................................................... 10.51%
- **Indian**: ................................................................. 1.21%
- **White**: ................................................................. 70.62%
- **Free/Reduced**: .......................................................... 28.02%
- **ELL**: ................................................................. 5.2%

### Graduate Follow-up

- Percentage of 2005 Graduates enrolled in a college or university ............ 76.8%
- Percentage of 2005 Graduates entering a post-secondary (Non-college) institution .................................................. 4.4%
- Percentage of 2005 Graduates entering the work force ......................... 13.2%
- Percentage of 2005 Graduates entering the military ............................ 2.5%

Figure 1. Demographics of Selected Site (continued)
This symbolic interaction study on the characteristics of school administrators focused on the leadership portrayed in two of the five middle schools. Selection of the two schools was done through a criterion purposeful sampling. Criterion purposeful sampling involves the creation of certain criterion that the sample must meet in order to be considered a participant in the study (Patton, 2002). Criterion in selecting the two schools included: a) schools should be similar in size, b) schools should be similar in the level of socioeconomic status which was based on the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch, and c) the schools selected should have a similar student racial demographics. Similar sizes in the population of the schools resulted in a similar participant size from each school. Also from an instructional standpoint the schools selected were very similar in makeup as well. The principal of one building was the mentor of the principal in the 2nd building. The principal in
the 2\textsuperscript{nd} building had previously worked as an assistant principal in the 1\textsuperscript{st} school for 8 years before becoming a leader in her own building. Also the school district had undergone some recent instructional changes that assisted in aligning the priorities of both buildings. Therefore instructionally the buildings were operated within similar guiding principles. The one principal had been in building leadership for over 22 years.

The criterion purposeful sampling allowed for the selection of two buildings with similar demographics. There was a combination of 102 teachers in both buildings. There were 15 males and 87 females within the two buildings. Eighty five percent of the teachers were of Caucasian decent along with eleven percent Black and two percent Asian. Each building had three administrators that were in charge of instructional leadership. Approximately 81\% of teachers in each building held a master’s degree or higher, with this approximately 99\% of all classes taught in each building were considered to be taught by highly qualified teachers (Missouri Department of Education, 2009). Table 2 shows the student demographic data of the two buildings being researched. Enrollment of both buildings was within fifty students of each other. Being that both buildings were within the same geographical location the breakdown of racial percentages were relatively close. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of standardized testing schools for each building and the percent of students scoring in each level of below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced in both communication arts and mathematics.
Table 2

**Building Student Demographic Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Enrollment</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Indian</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>ELL</th>
<th>Free Reduced Lunch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bldg A</td>
<td>856</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>85.6%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bldg B</td>
<td>913</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>87.3%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Building A</th>
<th>Building B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gr</td>
<td>Below Basic %</td>
<td>Basic %</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.32</td>
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<td>5.32</td>
<td>34.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.84</td>
<td>32.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.60</td>
<td>38.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Building Standardized Testing Results
All middle school teachers received the open-ended questionnaire along with all middle school administrators. Participation in this study was strictly voluntary. Within this Midwestern suburban school district, administrators were the individuals solely responsible for supervision and evaluation of teachers. It was their instructional leadership that was examined throughout this study.

**Data Collection**

The data collection techniques used in this symbolic interaction study included four basic modes of collecting qualitative data, which were open-ended survey data, interviews, observations, and document and record analyses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each data collection technique provide a unique set of data, which in part served to assist in triangulating the results. Initial data came from the open-ended survey. After the data analysis of the survey, focus groups were conducted in each of the participating schools to develop a thick rich description of the perceived characteristics identified by the open-ended survey. A stratified random sample (Patton, 2002) was utilized to determine which teachers were asked to participate in the focus groups. The middle schools in this study consisted of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students. Each school had four focus groups of teachers based on their teaching assignments. There was a sixth grade, seventh grade, eighth grade, and an encore focus group. Encore was defined as those teachers who do not teach math, science, social studies, or communication arts. Each focus group consisted of three to four members. Hubert Blumer believed that focus groups allowed a researcher to gather data from a real “panel of experts” (Patton, 2002, p. 112). Interviews were conducted using general open-ended questions developed to assess their perceptions of their principal as an
instructional leader regarding the quality of leadership they received, formally and informally.

One-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted with the six administrators of each building to gain an understanding of why they believe certain of their characteristics have a positive impact on teaching and learning. Interview questions focused on the perception of the principal in regard to the characteristics identified by the open-ended teacher survey. In addition to interviewing the principals, observations were conducted by the researcher to observe the principals during routine interactions with the teachers. After observations are conducted, reflective interviews were held with the administrators to determine the intended purpose of the interaction. The participating teacher were also questioned about their perception of the interaction and if the interaction were seen as having a positive impact on their teaching and learning.

**Data Analysis**

“Qualitative data analysis is a continuous, iterative enterprise” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 12). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative data analysis consists of three main components, data reduction, data display, and drawing/verifying conclusions. Data reduction was continual throughout the duration of the analysis process. “Data reduction refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data that appear in written-up field notes or transcriptions” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10). Early on in the data analysis process data reduction “happens through editing, segmenting and summarizing the data” (Punch, 2005, p. 198). As the analysis process continues, data reduction occurs “through coding, and memoing… finding
themes, clusters, and patterns” (Punch, 2005, p. 198). Finally data reduction was accomplished through “conceptualizing and explaining” (Punch, 2005, p. 198) the findings of the research. Through data analysis the researcher sharpens, sorts, focuses, discards, and organizes data in such a way that “final” conclusions can be drawn and verified (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 11).

Qualitative data can be “voluminous, bulky, and dispersed” (Punch, 2005, p. 198). Data displays assist in the organization of this data. Data displays “are designed to assemble organized information into immediately accessible, compact form so that the analyst can see what is happening and either draw justified conclusions or move on to the next step” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 95). Data displays may include matrices, graphs, charts, networks, and diagrams (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Punch, 2005).

“From the start of data collection, the qualitative analyst is beginning to decide what things mean” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 11). Data reduction and data display assist in identifying the “truth” or “reality” behind the data. Drawing conclusions is not a final step in the data analysis process but a continual step interwoven throughout the data reduction and data display stages.

The coding of data, for example (data reduction), leads to new ideas on what should go into a matrix (data display). Entering the data requires further data reduction. As the matrix fills up, preliminary conclusions are drawn, but they lead to the decision, for example, to add another column to the matrix to test the conclusion. (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 12)

Another way of expressing this process is that, “Coding is analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56; Punch, 2005, p. 199). Throughout the process of data analysis the researcher utilized coding in order to organize and make sense of the data collected. Coding
allowed the researcher to: (a) identify interesting patterns that emerged from the data, (b) mark this pattern with a code (see Appendix F), and (c) allowed for easy retrieval for analysis later (Carruthers, n.d.). Coding allowed the researcher to fracture the data into various abstract categories or themes and “code” the text in the data as necessary. “Codes are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56). Codes were utilized by the researcher to allow for easy retrieval of chunks or clusters of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As each sentence of the data was read the researcher asked, “What is being referenced here?” in order to code the data. Descriptive coding was utilized as a first pass through all data collected whether through documents, observation field notes, interview transcripts, or open-ended survey data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Punch, 2005).

Descriptive codes require little, if any, interpretation of the data. Descriptive codes allow the researcher to gain a “feel” for the data being collected (Punch, 2005, p. 200). After all data were coded using descriptive codes the data were reexamined with a more interpretive eye looking for inferences or patterns that emerged from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Punch, 2005). Clustering the various descriptive codes into larger patterns based on the inferences that may emerge “sets the stage for drawing conclusions” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 57). These clustered groups of descriptive codes were given a secondary code called an interpretive code.

Interpretive coding helped to “identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69). Interpretive coding was utilized therefore to categorize and develop the codes into themes. Through the clustering of interpretive coding
the once enormous amounts of data collected was compacted into a manageable number of analytic data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interpretive coding “helps the researcher elaborate a cognitive map, and evolving, more integrated schema for understanding local incidents and interactions” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69).

Memoing was utilized throughout the data analysis process. “A memo is the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding … it can be a sentence, a paragraph or a few pages” (Glaser as cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 74; Punch, 2005, p. 201). Memos are the thoughts of the researcher as they code the data and look for patterns and themes throughout the data. Memos were utilized to assist in tying together pieces of data. “Memoing helps the analyst move easily from empirical data to a conceptual level, refining and expanding codes further, developing key categories and showing their relationships, building toward a more integrated understanding of events, processes, and interactions in the case” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 75).

Throughout the process of coding, clustering, and memoing the researcher was able to identify specific cases that will help illustrate the themes discovered. These identified cases assisted in providing a thick rich description of the teachers’ perceived characteristics of school administrators that directly improve teaching and learning.

Documents

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) a document is defined as “any written or recorded material other than a record that was not prepared specifically in response to a request from the inquirer” (p. 277). Documents for this study were collected voluntarily from
each building administrator. Documents “constitute a particularly rich source of information about many organizations” (Patton, 2002, p. 293). These documents were any correspondence from the building administrator to the staff as a whole. Documents included: beginning of the year welcome back letters, newsletters to the staff, daily bulletins, and other emails to the entire staff. A criterion sampling was used to determine the documents usefulness within this study. Criterion for selection of use included: 1) The documents must be addressed to the entire staff; and, 2) The documents must address one of the following: instructional leadership, professional development, school culture, or teacher leadership.

Four predetermined categories were established through the literature review to begin the categorization of documents. These four categories are listed above: instructional leadership, professional development, school culture, and teacher leadership. Each document was quickly examined by the researcher to determine in which category the document was placed. Each document was then placed in its appropriate file folder. Each document was then coded according to the methodology previously described.

**Open-Ended Surveys**

An open-ended survey was delivered to teachers and was utilized for data collection throughout this study. All faculty members within the two schools being studied were were provided a copy of the open-ended survey. The survey consisted of a three-page document. Page one consisted of a cover letter outlining the reasoning behind the study as well as the understanding that participation was strictly voluntary. The cover letter also explained in detail the research study and potential benefits. Page two was a demographics page to assist the researcher in gaining a greater understanding of the background of each participant.
Demographics included but were not limited to years teaching, degrees earned, as well as subjects taught. The final page was for actual data collection. The data collection page was utilized so that the teachers could provide a detailed description of what characteristics might produce a positive impact on their instruction. All data could be submitted anonymously and participation in the study was strictly voluntary. All data collected were transcribed. The transcripts were subsequently typed and analyzed through the use of descriptive coding, interpretive coding, and thematic coding described previously. The survey protocol was developed to increase the quality of the data obtained and can be viewed in Appendix D.

**Interviews**

Standard open-ended interviews were conducted with each of six administrators within the two buildings being examined. The standardized open-ended interview facilitated data analysis by making respondents’ answers easy to find and compare (Patton, 2002). “[S]tandardized interviews ensure consistency across interviews” (Patton, 2002, p. 346). Standardized questions helped compensate for an inexperienced researcher’s variability in skills (Patton, 2002). An interview protocol was developed to increase the quality of the data obtained. The researcher was sensitive to issues and “distance” to enable participants to “answer real questions and to explore, not to share assumptions” (Seidman, 1991, p. 77). “The quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent on the interviewer” (p. 341). The interview consisted of fourteen open-ended questions designed to examine the perspective of the building administrator toward the instructional leadership characteristics they portrayed within their perspective buildings. Appendix B has a list of the fourteen questions. Interviews were utilized to “find out … those things we cannot directly
observe” (Patton, 2002, p. 340). The researcher is unable to observe everything. According to Patton (2002), we cannot observe “feelings, thoughts, and intentions” or the “meanings they attach to what goes on in the world” (p. 341). Therefore to fully understand the symbolic interactions between administrators and the teachers they work with daily it was necessary to enter into the perspective of those involved. “Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit” (p. 341). Through the interview process I hoped to gain a greater understanding of how the process of instructional leadership looked and felt to the people involved.

The interviews within this research were guided by the following protocol. Interviews were conducted one–on-one with the prospective administrator. Confidentiality of the interviewee’s answers were strictly assured before the process began. Interviews were conducted in a place comfortable for the interviewee, in a quiet location free from distractions. Therefore the interviews were conducted within the environment of the administrator’s office. The interviews were requested to be conducted after hours in order to help eliminate interruptions. After arriving at the interview site the interviewee was asked to complete a consent form. The purpose of the study was discussed with the interviewee to ensure complete understanding by all parties. The researcher explained the amount of time needed for the study along with the plans for the use of the results of the interview. A copy of the report was offered to the interviewee if they were interested. An electronic recording device was utilized to ensure accuracy of the interview. Once the interviews were conducted, each interview was transcribed to provide a written representation of the interview. Once a
written transcript was created the data was analyzed with the same process as written documents. Through the process of descriptive coding, interpretive coding, and thematic coding the overlying themes were identified. These themes helped provide a thicker description of the instructional leadership characteristics that are provided by the administrators.

**Observations**

For this study the researcher asked permission to observe each of the six administrators within their natural context. The researcher requested to observe each administrator during such activities as facilitating faculty meetings, early release collaboration days, staff development time, post observation conversations, as well as any other setting that may be discovered after the initial interview session. Purposeful sampling was utilized to select the observation settings. The goal of utilizing purposeful sampling in determining the appropriate sites for observations was to help maximize the scope of any information presented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through observational data the researcher hoped to gain a better understanding of the context in which teachers and administrators work. Observational data also allowed the researcher to see things that may have been overlooked by someone that works within the environment daily. Participants involved in the daily routines of the social systems in which they exist may “cease to be aware of important nuances” (Patton, 2002, p. 263). Data collected through observations were recorded using handwritten notes. The notes were subsequently typed and analyzed through the use of descriptive coding, interpretive coding, and thematic coding described previously.
Focus Groups

For this study the researcher attempted to create a number of focus groups. A purposeful sampling was made from teachers that volunteered to fill out their demographic information. The purpose of creating focus groups was to bring “together people of similar backgrounds and experiences to participate in a group interview about major issues that affect them” (Patton, 2002, p. 236). Focus groups were utilized throughout this study to assist in validating the findings from the surveys and interviews. Focus groups were also utilized to elucidate and further explore identified themes. An attempt was made to create a cross-curricular focus group from each building being studied. A cross curricular focus group was defined as a group containing a teacher from each core area along with a teacher from a non-core area. Core area teachers included those teachers teaching math, communication arts, science, or social studies. Non-core classes included teacher teaching subjects other than those listed above, physical education, technology literacy, art, speech, etc. Data collected through focus groups were recorded using an electronic recording device. The transcripts were subsequently typed and analyzed through the use of descriptive coding, interpretive coding, and thematic coding described previously.

Limitations

Qualitative research requires the researcher to become the instrument of data collection. In doing so there may exist some subjectivity to the results (Patton, 2002). An important component of any research study is to identify areas for potential weaknesses (Creswell, 2003). Since the researcher was collecting the data as well as analyzing the data it is imperative that they keep subjectivity in the forefront and worked to remain as objective as
possible. As I was a middle school principal, I was embedded within this research and had to maintain a level of objectivity during this study. Given that the primary intention of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of instructional leadership, my personal experiences as an educator added to my credibility as the data collection instrument. I personally know many of the participants and hold a position of authority within the structure under study. Therefore my role may influence the behaviors of participants during observations. I was very cognizant of this limitation while analyzing the data collected. Through self-reflection a counterbalance was established.

A second limitation existed involved the open-ended questionnaire. Patton (2002) cautions that self-reporting methods may be subject to limitations due to the fact that a person’s perceptions may not be consistent with reality. In order to address this limitation I triangulated the data. An open-ended questionnaire was conducted with teachers to examine their perceptions of the administrator characteristics that influence teaching and learning. Interviews were conducted through focus groups containing a cross-section of the teaching staff. Observations of the principals being studied were also conducted. During these formal observations interactions between principals and teachers were examined. The teacher(s) and principal involved in the interaction were then interviewed to determine if both could identify the characteristic being portrayed and if the characteristic had a positive influence on teaching and learning.

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are approached with different lenses in a qualitative study as opposed to a quantitative study. Quantitative research focuses on conclusions drawn from
statistically analyzed research data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Qualitative research however uses the views of the people involved in the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In order to establish validity within a study a researcher must work to establish a thick-rich description through data triangulation (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Reliability is a prerequisite for validity. Miles and Huberman (1994) defined reliability as the process which would create a consistent, stable results across researchers and methods. Reliability was established throughout this research study by developing clear research questions and maintaining alignment between the elements of the study and the research questions.

Data triangulation was utilized to develop validity of the study. “Triangulation is a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126). A variety of data sources were utilized throughout this study. Documents were collected, interviews conducted, surveys administered, observations, as well as focus group data. Conclusions were generated from each data collection method. These conclusions were then converged across all data sets. I worked to generate thick, rich descriptions throughout the data analysis and conclusions of the study. The hope is that those who may choose to read my study will gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of those participating.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the course of this symbolic interaction study I complied with all aspects of research expectations as outlined by the University of Missouri – Kansas City (UMKC) Social Science International Review Board (SSIRB). All SSIRB requirements were followed
in order to comply with the United States Department of Health and Human Services regulations for human experiment surveillance.

University faculty supervised my research and I followed all university processes around submitting my proposal for studying human subjects. As required I submitted all protocols to the SSIRB for approval before beginning any data collection. As the principal investigator it was my duty to protect the rights and wellbeing of human subjects that agreed to participate in the study. Throughout the data collection process I carried out sound, ethical research in accordance with the research plan submitted and approved by the SSIRB.

As required by the UMKC SSIRB department, I collected signed informed consent of study forms prior to any subject participating in the study (see Appendix A). The informed consent to participate in research study was offered to all perspective participants to educate them on the extent how confidentiality of records were to be handled. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any point throughout the process. All protocols for the SSIRB department were followed throughout the data collection process.

**Conclusion**

This symbolic interaction study examined the interpreted meanings created by middle school teachers when interacting with administrators. Specificity was given to whether these meanings have a positive impact on the teaching and learning process within the teachers’ classrooms. Through the documentation of these interpreted meanings and the data analysis process of coding, clustering, and memoing certain administrator characteristics began to emerge. By identifying characteristics administrators portray that teachers perceive to have a positive impact on instruction, guidance has emerged to future administrators as well as
veteran administrators on the importance of every interaction no matter how small.

Chapter 4 will provide an in depth examination of the results generated from this study. A definition of instructional leadership will be gleamed from the results as well as identification of those characteristics that have a positive and negative impact on teaching and learning.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Overview

Symbolic interaction, which focuses on the social interactions between administrators and teachers, was the methodology that was utilized to glean the results of this study. Previous research on symbolic interactions suggests, people are constantly redefining their notions of the world as they move from interaction to interaction (Tesch, 2005). The interactions that develop between a teacher and the administrator directly responsible for the teacher’s instructional improvement were examined for the purpose of this study. Specifically the results were examined to determine what meanings teachers identified as having a positive impact on their instructional practices. As interactions between administrators and teachers happen on a daily or weekly basis an internal change occurs in both participants based on the external exchange of ideas. This internal change is what helps define who people are (Charon, 1939).

Eighty-six teachers from two middle schools in a Midwestern suburban school district participated in this study. A criterion purposeful sampling was utilize to select the two schools being studied. Criterion included: a) schools similar in size, b) schools similar in the level of socioeconomic status which was based on the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch, and c) the schools with similar racial and ethnic student demographics.
Prompts from an open ended questionnaire included:

1. How do you as the teacher define instructional leadership?

2. How are conversations about instructional leadership structured throughout a typical day?

3. Describe using real life examples specific characteristics portrayed by administrators that improve the quality of teaching and learning?

4. What specific characteristics do administrators portray that create a barrier to teaching and learning?

Data sources utilized throughout this study were open-ended surveys, teacher focus groups, interviews, observations, documents, and record analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All data collected was subject to the same three stage data analysis: data reduction, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Punch, 2005). Categories and themes were derived from conclusions, which provided a thick rich description around the research questions.

This symbolic interaction study examined the interactions and internal changes teachers experienced from these encounters. These internal changes assisted in developing the school identities that teachers portray. Specificity was given to those interactions that teachers perceived to have a positive and negative impact on their instruction. A symbolic interaction study requires the reading and re-reading of documents, interview transcripts, observation field notes, and open ended survey data in order to identify themes that developed a thick rich description of the experiences of teachers (Blumer, 1986). Rich data provides a “full and revealing picture of what is going on” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 110).
The findings from this symbolic interaction study showed teachers all define instructional leadership in his or her individual way. By analyzing these definitions through the process of data reduction the following common definition emerged. An instructional leader is any individual that develops a culture conducive to providing good quality instruction, having a curriculum and instructional focus, while ensuring that all necessary resources are available to teachers. Instructional leaders develop this culture by developing a daily conversation structure. Culture also emerged from the data collection as one of main themes responsible for having the ability to have both a positive and negative impact on teaching and learning. The remaining themes identified within the research having a positive impact on teaching and learning were high expectations, visibility, and dialogue. The additional perceived characteristics emerged from the data collected creating a barrier on teaching and learning were setting expectations, time, and lack of knowledge. This chapter assisted in developing a thick rich description of each identified category. The following sections shared results gleamed from this research study, beginning with an examination of the definition of instructional leadership. Next, results were shared on how conversations are structured within this Midwest middle school and the impact these conversations have on the teaching and learning environment. After an examination of the conversation structure, results were shared on what perceived characteristics administrators portray that have a positive impact on the teaching and learning environment. Lastly, this chapter explored those perceived characteristics that have a negative impact on the teaching and learning environment.
Participant Description

Eighty-six teachers assisted in completing the survey questionnaire. Of the 86 teachers in the study, 12 were male and 74 were female. Ninety percent of the teachers participating were of Caucasian decent. The remaining ten percent of teachers were two of Asian decent and seven were Black. Teachers completing the survey taught would be considered veterans of their trade. Forty of the eighty-six middle school teachers, or 46%, in this study had more than 15 years of teaching experience. Another 28 teachers, or 33%, taught school between 6 and 15 years. The highest degree attained for 56 of the 86 middle school teachers, or 65%, was a masters degree. Another 28 teachers, or 33%, earned a bachelor’s degree as the highest degree. Three individuals had doctoral degrees.

Teachers participating taught a variety of coursework. Most teachers, 60 of the 86, or 70% taught what is considered core coursework. These teachers are responsible for teaching mathematics, communication arts, social studies, and science. The other 30% taught encore classes which consist of classes such as physical education, foreign language, and art.

Two focus groups were also created for this research study; one focus group was created for each of the two middle schools being studied. Focus groups consisted of five member teams. Each focus groups contained four women and one male. All participants were of Caucasian decent. Of the ten members of the focus group there were two teachers from each core area of math, communication arts, science, and social studies. Of the two encore teachers one taught physical education the other taught computers. All members of the focus groups had taught for 8-10 years.
The administrators being studied throughout this research consisted of three males and three females. One male was of Hispanic decent the remaining members were of Caucasian decent. Two male assistant principal participants had four years of leadership experience, while the remaining two assistant principal members had between 6-10 years of leadership experience. One male principal had 22 years of leadership experience and was the mentor of the other female principal who had 12 years of leadership experience.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

The primary method of data analysis that was used during this study consisted of 3 basic phases: data reduction, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Punch, 2005). This three-step process assisted in the management of the volume of data collected. It also determined if the research was aligned with the theoretical framework of the study. Data themes emerged throughout the course of this process. The first step in the process was to code the data utilizing descriptive codes. Descriptive codes were then clustered into groups known as interpretive codes. The interpretive codes were then clustered again into groups. The interpretive codes continued to be clustered data based on inferential themes until a succinct group of themes had been identified (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Specific cases were identified throughout the data analysis process. These identified cases provided a thick rich description of the perceived characteristics that directly improve teaching and learning. Validity was established through these thick rich descriptions and data triangulation (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Developing clear research questions and maintaining alignment between the elements of the study and the research questions established reliability.
The central question for this symbolic interaction study was: What beliefs, behaviors, or characteristics do administrators portray that have a positive impact on instruction? Sub questions that were explored throughout this study included: (a) How do you as the teacher define instructional leadership?; (b) How are conversations about instructional leadership structured throughout a typical day?; (c) Describe using real life examples specific characteristics portrayed by administrators that improve the quality of teaching and learning?; and, (d) What specific characteristics do administrators portray that create a barrier to teaching and learning?

Documents

My initial document sampling consisted of several letter correspondences between the building administrators and their staff for their beginning of the year letter. At this time a convenience sampling was utilized. All building administrators of the two identified Midwest school district were sent an email requesting a copy of any correspondence between them and their entire staff, including their beginning of the year welcome back letter. The middle school administrators consisted of three male and three female. All correspondence were sent to teachers of their perspective buildings in the months of June through August in preparation for all teachers and staff to return to school in August. I received thirteen responses from administrators. I received seven responses from male administrators and six responses from females.

All documents collected were read and re-read. Each sentence was analyzed to answer the question “What was being referenced here?” By asking this question descriptive coding was utilized as a first pass, according to the codebook in Appendix F. The descriptive
codes were counted and examined closely and clustered into interpretive codes. The interpretive codes were clustered again into themes. The overlying themes produced from the welcome back letters data centered on promoting a positive learning culture and setting high expectations.

**Culture**

Documents collected illustrated the theme of building a positive culture through the interpretive code of shared leadership. Shared leadership was defined as an administrator’s ability to delegate portions of the leadership responsibility to the teachers in the building. Sharing the leadership responsibilities allowed for teachers to take ownership and responsibility for the building as a whole rather than just their individual room. This ownership in turn assists in building a positive learning culture. One such administrator showed how he was willing to share the leadership role as follows: “there is a sizable group of teachers and staff that have already begun brainstorming, planning, and implementing a character education initiative focusing on the key traits of trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship.” This activity “should prove to be enjoyable as we participate in team building exercises.” Another administrator utilized the welcome back letter to promote shared leadership by focusing on the duties of the building leadership team. “Exciting things are happening as we envision how truly promising our future can be. The building leadership team has been hard a work preparing for the year ahead.” These statements in a welcome back letter during the months of July encourage a culture by promoting the building of leadership capacity among teachers.
Setting Expectations

Setting Expectations developed as a theme from the documents collected. Setting expectations developed from the interpretive codes focus and goals. Focus was defined as the administrator’s ability to create a vision for where the school was headed over the next school year. The document data collected though small in numbers contained a wealth of information in a few short words. These documents allowed the administrators to set the direction of the upcoming school year. One such administrator demonstrated focus in their document through the following words “[w]e must continue to be proud of the things that we have accomplished. We must be willing to be caught up in the rebirth that is possible with each new year.” Communicating this focus was essential to ensure all staff members clearly understand where the school was headed. Another administrator provided focus through their welcome back letter in this manner. “As we get ready to gear back up for the school year it is important that we reflect on our mission. The mission of our school will guide us throughout the year.”

Goals developed as an interpretive code throughout the document data collected. Administrators utilized the welcome back document to remind teachers of goals for the upcoming school year. Goals were defined as the administrators’ ability to identify parameters of achievement throughout the school year. Administrators utilized the welcome back letter to remind teachers of a variety of goals. Some goals were academically focused while others were more culturally focused. An example of an academically focused goal was delivered in this manner, “Please keep in mind that our goal for the upcoming school year is to increase student achievement in both math and communication arts by 3% over last year.”
Other goals were focused on establishing the culture of school. One administrator put it this way, “we will dedicate ourselves to educational excellence for every student and acknowledge the best interest of the students is the only interest to be considered.”

**Open Ended Survey**

An open-ended survey was utilized for data collection throughout this study. All teachers within the two middle schools being studied were provided a copy of the open-ended survey. The survey was a three-page document: a cover letter, a demographics page, and a page for actual data collection. The cover letter explained in detail the research study and potential benefits. The demographics page allowed the researcher to gain a greater understanding of the background of each participant. The data collection page was used to gain a detailed description of the characteristics that had produced a positive impact on the teacher’s instruction. All data could be submitted anonymously and participation in the study was strictly voluntary. All data collected were transcribed. The transcripts were subsequently typed and analyzed through the use of descriptive coding, interpretive coding, and thematic coding described previously. The themes that emerged from the open-ended survey were culture, high expectations and resource awareness.

**Culture**

Maintaining a culture focused on quality instruction was a major theme that emerged from the data collected from the open-ended surveys. The interpretive codes that lead to the theme of culture were curriculum, best practices, setting high expectations, collaboration, and environment. Focusing on curriculum was defined as the administrator’s ability to assist
teachers in identifying the essential goals and objectives that need to be taught. Teachers believed an administrator with a curricular focus allowed them to relax and focus on the lessons themselves. One such teacher described it this way: an instructional leader “is a leader who can step in and guide and direct curriculum that will impact students learning.” Another teacher expressed the same sentiment in this manner, “the focus must be on making sure the teacher is teaching what he/she should be teaching.”

Focusing on best practices was another interpretive code that arose from the data collection. Focusing on best practices was defined as the administrator’s ability to foster the teaching pedagogy within the classroom. Teachers believed that the instructional leader was the person that makes instructional quality the top priority of the school and attempts to bring that vision and mission to realization. Teachers rely heavily on administrators to provide information related to effective instructional strategies and current trends in education. Instructional leaders then need to be tuned in to all of the pertinent issues and current events related to curriculum, effective assessment and pedagogical strategies. Teachers identified an instructional leader as someone able to embrace current educational practices and have the ability to teach them to others and/or facilitate instruction. One such teacher expressed it as:

assisting teachers with focusing on best practices in the classroom. A good instructional leader first has to understand what are the best practices within the learning environment that will produce the best results and then ensure that staff are focused on implementing these best practices.

Another participant similarly stated:

Instructional leadership is a quality an educational administrator possesses which allows his/her staff to look for guidance and modeling of classroom instruction, classroom management, student motivation, student assessment, academic research, etc.
Another interpretive code that emerged from the data collection to support the notion of building a culture conducive to quality instruction was the focus on setting high expectations. Teachers routinely identified the notion of setting high expectations for both staff and students assisted in establishing a culture within the school focused on the success of all. Teachers believed a good instructional leader who sets “clear cut expectations that are consistent for both teachers and students” could have a profound impact on the teaching and learning within their buildings. One such teacher put it in these words:

A good instructional leader is one that leads my school in a way that places student and adult learning as the central focus, high expectations and standards for the academic and social development of all students. By clearly communicating these expectations to staff and students he/she sets the tone for the entire building.

An additional interpretive code that arose to support the notion of providing a culture focused on instruction was collaboration. Teachers expressed a collaborative environment was defined as one in which teachers felt safe and secure to share ideas and take risks within their classrooms. Teachers identified instructional leaders as those that work to establish a culture in which they believed they could share expertise among the staff as well as provide and receive open and honest communication and feedback. Two teachers explained: “instructional leadership to me is a collaborative effort where goals are set for areas of needed improvement in an academic area. Teams of teachers then work together to ensure success.” “Instructional leaders provide staff with an environment for collaboration and experimentation in order to improve instruction.” Throughout the research it was clearly
identified that instructional leaders must be able to provide honest feedback in an environment to educators that did not feel threatening or demeaning.

Instructional leaders must be able to provide specific feedback on my instructional strategies. They also improve teaching and learning by providing feedback regarding lessons that align with school improvement goals and/or district initiatives on an ongoing basis.

Creating a trusting, nurturing, and inspirational environment emerged as a interpretive code that supported the theme of building a culture focused on instruction. The participants within the research stated numerous times that the learning environment, as a whole was a major factor in their ability to perform within the classroom. Instructional leaders must work to build a trusting, nurturing, and inspirational environment. Visibility in and around the building was one method suggested to accomplish this. Teachers identified the environmental setting of the building as a major factor in a strong instructional leader. Administrators should feel comfortable in trusting teachers to instruct according to their learning style while giving nurturing advice to assist teachers to advance their level of teaching. The instructional leader, according to one teacher, was “the position in the building that nurtures in each instructor the desire to reach each and every student.”

Educational leaders have to possess the ability to inspire their colleagues by empowering them to do what they were trained to do, but also leads by example. They should be someone who is true to the word, persistent, and dedicated to both the students and teachers within the organization.

**High Expectations**

Teachers within the study identified that in order for an administrator to be labeled an instructional leader they must maintain high expectations around educational integrity. They
must also establish expectations around the importance of a guaranteed and viable curriculum and instructional strategies that work with an emphasis on data that supports the classroom. Therefore high expectations became a theme that emerged from the data collected. An interpretive code that emerged from the data collection was academia. According to the research collected, principals need to have a keen concept of the current academic world. They must maintain an up to date view of academic research currently being conducted, nationally and internationally.

One more way an administrator portrays instructional leadership is through the administrators’ knowledge of issues, pursuing knowledge for furthering their own personal degrees, and keeping abreast of current issues, changes, and research in the field of education.

Not only do they need to be able to understand this new research, administrators need to have the capability to relay information to staff. Administrators need to continue to “seek out the well-researched instructional techniques; learning, practicing, and mastering these techniques; and then, helping teachers learn and master the techniques.” Expectations surrounding the administrators’ level of knowledge of research based instructional strategies became prevalent throughout most teachers’ responses to assist in the defining of an instructional leader. The knowledge of current academic strategies was not enough for teachers within the study. Administrators need both knowledge and an arsenal of practical examples.

It is very important for administrators to know what an effective lesson looks like, how to encourage a teacher to be more effective, or model effective teaching practices. This includes knowledge of in-service strategies, connections and consultants that can get the job done at their own school with their school climate in mind. If they can identify what quality instruction really is then they can go about assisting those in their school who have difficulty with effective instruction.
Another teacher stated it this way:

Instructional leadership can also be seen in their willingness to learn, change, stay current, continue their educational background, monitor student progress, and increase their own personal knowledge of effective instructional strategies. It is the administrators’ job to observe teaching methods that are working and keep all instructors informed about effective strategies. Knowledge of these strategies is not enough; they also need relevant examples of how these strategies can be used in particular subject matter.

Another interpretive code that became prevalent throughout the data collection was a focus on data. While maintaining an understanding of current instructional strategies teachers identified a focus on data to assist in supporting expectations surrounding curriculum and instruction within the educational environment as essential for an instructional leader. Administrators must have knowledge of tools that show student growth and mastery. Administrators need the ability to present data to teachers in order to support change and support specific instructional strategies as related to the curricular content. Common formative assessment data was mentioned several times throughout the research as a data point to assist principals in this endeavor.

With the advent of outcome data as a curriculum-planning tool, I believe my administrator can now see that learning is the only real measure of teaching; instead of the old system of education where the task of teaching ended with the lesson.

Administrator must create a system of tracking student mastery and growth.

An instructional leader is someone that is strong in data analysis so that he/she can guide teachers in effective classroom instruction that will increase student achievement. Administrators in my building do this by keeping track of individual student behaviors and academic reports. They then keep teachers abreast of this data and offer interpretation as needed.
Resource Awareness

Resource awareness emerged as another theme teachers identified in their definition of an instructional leader. Resource awareness encompassed many different aspects of the learning environment. The overarching premise that emerged from the experiences of the teachers was ensuring teachers have what they need in order to do their job effectively. One interpretive code that emerged from that data collection was physical supplies. Physical supplies were defined as any resource needed to adequately instruct within a classroom. Physical supplies would consist of classrooms with enough desks, books, technology, as well as other supplies to ensuring teachers had access to mentor teachers as well as access to academic research as needed. According to one teacher a good instructional leader was one that understands “providing us with the resources we need to teach and for students to learn is essential in the learning environment.” Another teacher put it this way, “before I can begin to start teaching I have to know that I have the textbooks, desks etc. to begin. It makes it difficult to plan a lesson without this basic knowledge to start with.”

Instructional resources were another interpretive code that emerged from the data collection. Instructional resources encompass every aspect of the teaching and learning environment. Many aspects of resource awareness impact the managerial side of the educational environment however other instructional resources directly impact the instructional aspects. Specifically teachers mentioned having access to disaggregated test score data. Administrators need to ensure teachers have timely access to test score data in order to be able to make decisions quickly on re-teaching and enrichment. One such teacher put it this way “my administrator becomes a better instructional leader by ensuring I have
access to the things I need when they are needed. For example, I have to be able to make
decisions on who needs a particular topic retaught or who already knows the material and can
move on. Without timely access to this data things get missed.”

Other instructional resources that become important on the instructional side of the
school day were access to instructional focused activities as well as an instructional calendar.
Ensuring that teachers have access to these items and understand the importance of these
items helps keep a focus on the goals of the school, which ultimately was student
achievement. One such teacher explained things this way “my principal ensures that all
teachers keep an eye on the instructional calendar. This calendar helps create timelines that
are easy for follow and ensure that all learning objectives are addressed.”

One of the biggest instructional resources that teacher’s responses focused on was
professional development. Therefore professional development became an interpretive code
assisting in developing the theme of resource awareness. Administrators must ensure that all
teachers have access to meaningful professional development. One teacher expressed her
desire for more meaningful professional development in this manner, “I believe the single
most important thing my administrator can do to improve instruction within this building is
to focus on the professional development of all.” In order to ensure meaningful professional
development for all teachers, administrators must first build a safe and trusting culture in
which they can understand the individual needs of all teachers. A shotgun approach to
professional development was no longer sufficient. One size does not fit all. Therefore a
deep understanding of the individual needs of teachers was required. One teacher in
particular expressed it this way “professional development is the one resource that my
administrator can provide me that will have the biggest impact on my teaching and learning. However what I need for professional development is different from what my colleagues may need.”

**Interviews**

Interviews were conducted with each of the six administrators within the two buildings being studied. Interviews were of a standard open-ended format. A standard open-ended format was selected because according to Patton (2002) this format facilitates data analysis by making respondent’s answers easy to find and compare. This format also helps “ensure consistency across interviews” (Patton, 2002, p. 346). In order to help increase the quality of the data obtained an interview protocol was developed. Each interview was electronically recorded and transcribed. Once transcribed the interview was treated as a document. Analysis of the data followed the same protocol as with the document analysis through the use of descriptive coding, interpretive coding, and thematic coding. The themes that emerged from the interview data were: dialogue, curriculum and instruction, and time.

**Culture**

Culture developed as a theme from the interview data gathered. Cultures develop through dialogue. Dialogue is essential for team learning (Senge et al., 2000). In order to build “collective mental models”, educators must dialogue rather than just having discussions centered on learning (Thompson & Gregg, 1997, p. 30). The interpretive codes of collaboration and dialogue assisted in developing the theme of culture. Collaboration, and dialogue as defined for this research both included having some type of conversation.
between teachers and administrators. Each however carries with it a varying degree of depth and formality. These two interpretive codes come together to create a the theme of culture centered not only on the teaching and learning aspects of students but the social and moral aspects of education. Students come to our schools from all different backgrounds. The differences students bring into our schools provide “a rich tapestry of human existence that must be the starting point for a deeply democratic, academically excellent, and socially just education” (Shields, 2004, p. 127). Educators must realize that no matter the situation they become our students the minute they enter the doors. In doing so educators must take responsibility for the education of all. Teachers cannot allow a student’s background to be an excuse for why they were performing poorly. Educators must avoid the temptation to blame the system for a student’s lack of academic achievement. According to Shields (2004, p. 127), “when educators examine our attitudes and assumptions, avoid pointing fingers of blame, and take responsibility for socially just education in our own contexts, academic achievement improves.” There is no need for educators to work harder, they just need to work differently and smarter. Educators must examine the way they have always done things and allow for open conversation around teaching and learning.

Collaboration was defined as dialogue focused on curriculum and instruction. Respondents of the interview demonstrated the importance of collaboration through the following comments: “[t]he other thing I have tried to do and I am not consistent enough is to share research, share ideas, share best practices where we can have maybe staff conversations about that…Administrators need to be a part of those conversations because these assist in
molding the way we do things” Another administrator’s focus on collaboration was stated the following way,

One of the reasons I felt we needed to have early release for collaboration was to hone in on and focus in on data review, curriculum, grades, mastery learning, grade level conversations, vertical team conversations with a focus that related to instruction, that related to curriculum. This collaboration time is some of the most important time we can spend as an administrator. During this time we have the ability to focus on what we want students to learn, how we know they learn it, and what will we do if they don’t.

Conversation was an interpretive code that resonated throughout the data gathered which led to the theme of culture. Throughout the interview data the administrators constantly referred back to conversations with teachers and the importance of those conversations. Conversations build culture. Conversations as defined by the data collected were informal meetings between the administrator and teacher. Culture cannot exist without these daily informal conversations. According to the administrators interviewed many conversations happen in the hallways or other informal type settings. The administrators interviewed utilized conversations on a daily basis in order to engage teachers in cultural changes around education in a more informal non-threatening way. One such administrator stated,

I prefer to have an informal hallway conversation with the teachers in order to ensure they do not feel threatened. By having daily conversations in the hallways I feel I can touch every teacher on a daily basis, otherwise I may only speak to them in a group setting.

Another administrator stressed the importance of the conversation in this manner,

The hallway conversation is some of the most important conversations that happen during the school day. There are so many things that take up my time sometimes it is difficult to make it to every professional learning team time. Therefore I have to
make the most of every interaction I have with teachers. I make a point to make it to
every classroom every day. These short little bursts of conversation become vital to
giving teachers needed feedback on a variety of issues.

Setting Expectations

Setting expectations developed as a theme throughout the interview data collection.
Setting expectations from the interview data was defined as establishing the manner in which
the curriculum and instruction of a building would be delivered. Curriculum and instruction
included such things as: academic vocabulary, objectives, mastery learning, modeling
research based instructional strategies, as well as promoting active participation and risk
taking. “The primary service that schools offer is instruction” (Krug, 1992, p. 432). It is
essential for the building administrator to have a working knowledge of each subject as well
as knowledge of proven instructional strategies. An awareness of all subjects allows the
administrator to enter a classroom and know immediately if the lessons being taught were
grade level appropriate. One administrator stressed the importance of a working knowledge
of curriculum and instruction “without a working knowledge of the curriculum and
instructional strategies it would be difficult for me to set expectations and recognize when
support should be provided for teachers that may need it.”

A rigorous and relevant curriculum is a necessity to assist in improving student
engagement (Dow, 1991). Mastery of this curriculum will lead to student achievement.
Mastery emerged as an interpretive code that developed the theme of setting expectations.
Mastery for the purpose of this study was defined as identifying the essential objectives that
all students should know and master before they leave a certain grade level. Respondents to
the interview focused on mastery through the following comments. “[T]eachers have an
opportunity to look at and determine this is what 6th graders should know, this is what 7th
graders should know, this is what 8th graders should know.” According to one administrator
interviewed,

Mastery is the end expectation for all teachers. Determining what is essential for all
students to learn is the first step. The next step is how are we going to get every
student to master these concepts. This is where the art of teaching comes into play.

Encouraging risk taking was a second interpretive code that assisted in developing the
theme of setting expectations. Risk taking was defined as the ability to step outside the box
in order to try a new approach. Throughout the interview data collected it became prevalent
that administrators were willing to encourage teacher to take risks within their classrooms.
The administrators interviewed were willing to allow teacher to try teaching strategies that
they may not be familiar with for the betterment of students. One such administrator
explained risk taking in this manner, “Don’t be afraid to try new things. If you want to try
something new or different that it great, if it works fantastic if not let’s reevaluate.” Another
administrator put it this way,

I talk to my teachers all the time around taking risks within their classrooms. I let
them know that it is okay to take risks however if you are going to take risks “fail
fast.” Fail fast means you are welcome to try anything within your classroom you
want if you believe it may promote better student learning, however if you do not see
improvement then feel comfortable to fail fast and move to a different strategy.

Time

Time became a prevalent theme throughout the interview data collected.
Administrators interviewed spent a large amount of time discussing how they spend their
time throughout the typical day. The theme of time was derived from interpretive codes
including overload and inadequacies. Overload was defined as the number of tasks, fires,
and questions that must be addressed throughout a typical day. Besides the instructional side of job which all participants agreed was the most important aspect of the job, managerial duties and putting out fires leads to the overload administrators feel. Managerial duties include all items attended to by the building administrator that have little to do with the actual teaching and learning going on within the four walls of the classroom. One administrator described his feelings in this manner,

I spend so much time taking care of the business side of the building that it makes it difficult to focus on the educational side of the job. Maintaining a safe and respectful school is one item necessary to ensure that all students enter school each and every morning with a feeling of safety and order. The majority of these items include the daily disciplinary actions.

Another administrator described his overload in this manner,

One of the things we are doing right now is meeting with every eighth grade student to discuss first quarter grades, attendance, and behavior to look for an area that may need to be focused on in order to ensure all Antioch 8th graders are prepared to enter high school…I need to that every day. I could not do it today. I don’t know if I will be able to do it tomorrow. It then spreads out so that I am intruding on class time…As I do this then I can’t answer my NCA questions and I am not doing that I can’t talk with kids that are failing and I can’t follow up on some positive phone calls that I want to do this time. The phrase work smarter not harder. I think I am at my limit of working smart and I don’t know that I can work any harder.

Inadequacies emerged as another interpretive code related to the theme of time.

Inadequacies were defined as knowledge that must be mastered in order to function effectively as an instructional leader. Administrators must not only have a working knowledge of the curriculum, current pacing guides, essential objectives, but also a working knowledge of the most effective instructional strategies. All of these lead to a sense of inadequacies felt by school administrators. Efforts spent trying to eliminate these
inadequacies lead to a restriction on the amount of time available for other things. One administrator describes his sense of inadequacies as follows,

I don’t have the time to know everything I need to know. I am supposed to lead teachers in all aspects of the educational environment, from curriculum to instruction and beyond. I am supposed to have the answer to all questions, however I have little time to improve my own skills.

Another administrator maintains, “I play many roles throughout the day, friend, confidant, leader, follower, teacher, and student. Some days I do not feel I have the time to play any of these roles adequately”.

**Observations**

Observations were conducted with the building administrators of the sample buildings. Faculty meetings, early release collaboration days, staff development time, post observation conversations were targeted for observations. Observation data allowed the researcher to look at things from a different perspective. This perspective allowed the research to gain a better understanding of the context in which teachers work. Looking at the context as an outsider allowed the researcher to identify things that may have overlooked by someone that it immersed in the environment daily. Patton (2002) believes that those involved in daily routines may “cease to be aware of important nuances” (p. 263). Data collected through observations were recorded using hand written notes. The notes were subsequently typed and analyzed through the use of descriptive coding, interpretive coding, and thematic coding describe previously. There were two themes that emerged from the observation data. These themes consisted of setting high expectations, and resource awareness.
High Expectations

Setting high expectations amounts to “[w]hat steps are we going to take and when are we going to take them” (Eaker, Dufour, & Burnette, 2002, p. 17)? Setting expectations allowed everyone to understand how they will work toward achieving the vision of the school. Therefore expectations should not be whimsical but should be tied directly to the vision of the school (Eaker et al., 2002). High expectations as defined by the research data was setting measurable standards that were continuously monitored. The interpretive codes that developed the theme of high expectations were student expectations and school expectations. Student expectations were defined as standards set in order accomplish the academic and behavior expectations of all students. During the observations conducted it was evident that student expectations played a key role in the better of the school. The administrators observed spent a large portion of their time dialoguing around the expectations of students. One school in particular was developing a school wide behavior program. This program was called BEST for students behaving their best in particular parts of the building. The conversations observed centered on the teachers and administrators establishing expectations around what the best behavior looks like and rewarding students for this behavior. One administrator was heard saying, “This process is establishing the behaviors we expect from our students.” They went on to say, “It is not enough for us to just establish expectations and assume the students know how to behave this way. We must take the time to teach them how each of these expectations looks and feels, then reward them once they master it.”
School expectations were defined as those standards established by the school site council and school building leadership team in order to accomplish the vision and mission of the school. Another large portion of time during the observations was spent overseeing school expectations. School expectations ranged from discussion around progress toward school improvement goals to a variety of other tasks such as ensuring alignment of curricular and instructional strategies or establishing expectations around instructional changes that needed to occur after a benchmark assessment was delivered. During one such observation and administrator was heard saying, “our school expectations are very consistent from year to year and we are very clear of the importance of achieving our goals.” During an observation discussing early release time an administrator was heard establishing the expectations of the usage of this time.

The board of education has established that every Thursday we will have early dismissal. This time is designed for teacher to collaborate. Please keep in mind as a district we are saying that this forty-five minutes is more valuable to our students by meeting rather than actually teaching. This time needs to be focused on grade level expectations, lesson planning, common formative assessments, and the analysis of data derived from these assessments.

**Resources Awareness**

Data developed as an interpretive code in defining the theme resource awareness. Data was defined as the administrators’ ability to provide information to teachers about students’ achievement. Data has become a cornerstone of the educational environment. During the observation of the administrators throughout this study data was large focus of conversations. Data has come to assist in driving the goals of these particular schools. According to observations, data came from a variety of sources: the Missouri Assessment
Program (MAP) provided data on the achievement level of students, other data collected were benchmark data, intervention matrix data, and common assessment data. One principal described the importance of data in this manner, “We now use data for every decision we make. It is no longer acceptable to make decisions based on intuition. We must have the numbers to back up that decision.”

Another administrator described the variety of data sources as follows:

MAP data is disaggregated on a subject and grade level basis and student strengths and weakness are identified. We then use this data to set communication arts and math goals for improvement through the school improvement plan. Ongoing assessment data, including curriculum-based measurements, district benchmark assessments, and common unit assessments are used to monitor the effectiveness of the school improvement plan.

Professional development emerged as an interpretive code to support the notion of resource awareness through the collection of data through observations. Many of the observations were conducted during staff meetings or during professional development days therefore professional development was a focus of the observation. During many of the observations the administrator led professional development opportunities other times they set the tone for the day before teachers were allowed to attend a multitude of professional development opportunities. As discovered in other data sources the professional development opportunities offered could impact instruction in the largest manner when differentiated. As one administrator noted during his anticipatory set for the day, “as you prepare for your days work we have identified a multitude of professional development opportunities that you make pick and choose from. Each session will be repeated throughout the day so feel free to set your schedule.” Another administrator provided the following,

The professional development you have available to you today was arranged through a focus on the school improvement plan. We are beginning a focus on literacy this
year and a need was identified to ensure all teachers understand that literacy is not just a communication arts issue it is a school issue. Literacy needs to be taught throughout all curriculums. Therefore we have brought in a respected outside consultant to provide the professional development today around literacy.

Focus Groups

For this study a number of focus groups were created. A purposeful sampling was made from teachers that volunteered to fill out their demographic information. The purpose of creating focus groups were to bring “together people of similar backgrounds and experiences to participate in a group interview about major issues that affect them” (Patton, 2002, p. 236). The researcher focused on creating a cross-curricular focus group. A cross curricular focus group was defined as a group containing a teacher from each core area along with a teacher from a non-core area. Core area teachers included those teachers teaching math, communication arts, science, or social studies. Non-core classes included teachers teaching subjects other than those listed above, physical education, technology literacy, art, speech, etc. Two focus groups were created, one for each of the two middle schools being studied. Each focus group consisted of five members. Both focus groups contained four women and one male. Of the ten members of the focus group there were two teachers from each core area of math, communication arts, science, and social studies. Of the two encore teachers one taught physical education the other taught computers. All members of the focus groups had taught for 8-10 years. Data collected were recorded using an electronic recording device. The transcripts were subsequently typed and analyzed through the use of descriptive coding, interpretive coding, and thematic coding described previously. The themes that emerged from the focus groups data were culture, high expectations, visibility, and dialogue.
Culture

Teachers participating in the focus groups within this research project identified culture as a major theme for having a positive impact on instruction. As was seen in the literature review culture can have a large impact on an organization. The data collected from these teachers proved to be no different. Teachers expressed when they could work within a positive learning climate they were more apt to perform their job better. Two interpretive codes that lead to the culture theme were overall professionalism, and trust.

Professionalism in this instance was defined by the manner in which not only the administrators handle themselves but also the manner in which they treat staff. Positive attention received by teachers around the work that they did instilled a sense of pride that in turn was projected into their delivery of instruction.

Teachers are no more than glorified students. Just as students enjoy positive feedback from teachers, teachers cherish positive feedback from their administrators. If an administrator takes the time to point out something they see in a classroom, it just makes the teacher want to work harder for that individual.

Professionalism also refers to the methods an administrator utilized to motivate individuals to accomplish what needed to be done. One teacher described professionalism as follows, “when teachers are treated as professionals in the field of education then they can put their focus on the task at hand. Administrators can accomplish this by creating a safe and orderly environment, recognizing individual achievement, and empowering others.” The culture of a building can be molded on the interpersonal aspect of a leader. One teacher stated, “When an administrator is available and receptive to my needs for both academic and discipline concerns throughout the school day, and quickly responds to my requests and
questions immediately it makes me feel as if I have been heard.” From the data it was evident that by treating teachers as professionals and utilizing interpersonal skills administrators can build a sense of trust among the staff. Therefore trust became an interpretive code leading to the theme of culture. Trust was defined as a teacher’s ability to be able to count on an administrator to do as they say they will do. Teachers identified trust as one of the aspects of building a culture that had a positive impact on teaching and learning. One teacher identified trust as being built by “administrators’ attitudes and actions that assure teachers that they work with administrators not for them.” Others added, “knowing that I have support in the office gives me more confidence as I teach and the students respect that.” Another teacher explains the notion of trust like this, “knowing that I can go to my admin if needed is a help to me, knowing that asking for help is not seen as a weakness.” One particular teacher summed it up like this,

Our administrators have created a culture of support and appreciation. This makes me want to work harder for not only my students but my administrators as well and builds a positive learning climate for all to enjoy.

High Expectations

High expectations became a theme mentioned by most if not all the participants in the focus groups. High expectations can be expressed in a variety of ways throughout the school day. Three interpretive codes were identified throughout the data evolved into the theme of high expectations: high expectations in the setting the structure, high expectations on utilizing best practices within the classroom, and high expectations by setting the mission, vision, and goals of the school itself.
Structure was defined as the administrators’ establishing guidance for how the daily operations of the building exist. Setting high expectations around the structure in which the school functions seemed to resonate throughout the teachers’ experience. One such teacher provided a good example of how setting high expectations around the structure of the environment can have a positive impact on their instruction:

My administrators are involved in guiding the frameworks and foundations of instruction in my building on a daily basis. Their expectations around how things should look and feel allow me to clearly understand what is expected. This removes the uncertainty and allows me to focus on what I do best which is educate students.

Setting expectations around the structure of the school day also assists teachers in understanding what they should be doing with time allocated for planning. Several teachers identified collaboration time as one the biggest assets at their fingertips to assist them in improving instruction. The teachers identified that protecting this time was vital to the overall improvement of the instructional integrity of the building. They recognized that the administrators’ protection of team collaboration times and set expectations on how this time should be utilized had a positive impact on their instruction. Several voiced their admiration to the fact that the administrators also followed up to ensure those expectations were adhered to.

One thing my administrator does to improve the quality of my teaching is to make sure I have time to collaborate with my team and to make sure I have time to collaborate with the other teachers at my grade level who teach my subject area. It is crucial that I have a set time each day to meet with either my team or my content professional learning communities to talk about student achievement to brainstorm ways to make sure students are learning.
The teachers participating in the focus groups also identified that setting high expectations around and among utilizing best instructional practices was paramount in having a positive impact on their teaching. The teachers identified that in order to have the biggest positive impact on instruction an administrator much make instructional quality the top priority of the school and bring that vision to realization. Administrators need continuous focus on the research and instructional practices that yield the best results for the students in the classroom. They must establish expectations that will work with teachers to become masters of these practices in order to parlay that into student achievement. One such teacher put it in this manner: “my administrator works with me on the analysis of what is supposed to be taught and when, implementing classroom instruction using effective, creative, and motivating methodology, and reflecting upon the results.” Another stated that “setting guidelines to get teachers actively working on improvement for strategies in the classroom” has a positive impact on their instructional practice in the classroom. “Focused collegial discussions around best teaching practices and what activities we are doing that show the greatest amount of student success” is how one teacher described the way in which her administrator set expectations around best practices and how it had a positive impact on her instruction.

Setting high expectations around the vision, mission, and goals of the school was identified as another way administrators have a positive impact on their instruction. Teachers voiced that expectations around structure and best practice alone cannot produce the results desired by a school. Administrators have a positive impact on instruction by setting expectations around the vision the building is headed. Without guidance as to where the
educators are headed, a school was equivalent to a boat without a rudder, aimlessly moving around.

One of the biggest ways my administrator has a positive impact on my instruction is by setting the course. He worked with the building a few years ago to establish a new mission and vision for the school. It was wonderful to see all the teachers coming together to establish what we were about as a school. This provided clarity and focus for all.

Goal setting meetings also emerged as a method in which administrators can have a positive impact on instruction. Establishing building based goals through a school improvement plan is one process teachers identified as strategy administrators utilized to “set the course” for the upcoming school year. This was seen throughout the document analysis as well. Principals utilized a variety of methods to communicate the building goals for the upcoming year. Several administrators continuously communicated the building goals through daily, weekly, and monthly communications. Methods of communication vary from emails, newsletters, as well as verbal announcements over intercoms. By continually reinforcing the building level goals teachers recognized that “it is hard to lose focus of the end goal when you continue to hear it over and over.” Teachers even expressed that setting expectations at the building level did not always equate to classroom teaching. Their administrators took that notion one step farther. In order to ensure that all teachers understood their classroom was responsible for the building level goals administrators work with teachers to set classroom level goals.

Unless you are a core content classroom teacher sometimes it is difficult to understand how my classroom content will have an impact on the building level goals. My administrator does a good job of working with each individual teacher to establish classroom goals. By doing this he/she fosters the needed connection to the building level goals.
Visibility

Teachers identified the best method leaders utilize to ensure structures are followed and the culture of the school is focused on high expectations is by being visible throughout the school building. Visibility throughout the building “reinforces their support of what staff is doing. Presence was the interpretive code that lead to the theme of visibility. Presence was defined as the administrators’ physical proximity to the teaching environment. An administrators presence reinforced that they expected everyone to follow the expectations for behavior and learning.” Administrators that were visibly present and actively involved with both students and staff provided a strong support system to the building. Leaders that were visible and available to staff and students foster a sense of friendliness and cooperation as well as maintain a familiarity with the learning environment.

Improving the quality means visibility, like parenting…good teaching takes time and lots of trial and error to get it right. Our administrators are out in the buildings seeing and watching what happens, talking with kids, visiting with teachers thus supporting the teacher and the students’ education.

Another teacher put it this way:

I love the way my administrator drops by. They raise the awareness of their position, not just as a disciplinarian, but also as an adult who cares about education, especially when they insert some wisdom into my lesson. I love showcasing my classroom in a casual, non-threatening manner, the kids feel special (as do I) with the extra attention.

Visibility allowed administrators to be involved in the day-to-day aspect of classroom teaching. Frequent visits to the classrooms foster the trust, which is necessary to build a positive learning environment.
Dialogue

According to the literature review, goals and structure provide the content to direct the educational environment, culture provides the setting and motivation to carry out these goals, but dialogue is the mechanism to ensure all parties continue to move in the same direction. The research collected for this study emphasized the positive impact dialogue can have on instruction. Dialogue was broken down into two interpretive codes, open communication and providing feedback. According to one teacher “open communication is the biggest way administrators can keep the quality of teaching and learning high.”

According to this same teacher:

My administrator has an open door, literally and is very approachable. I feel very comfortable talking through any issue whether it is academic or interpersonal. I never feel as if I am being judged or look down upon. This helps in the classroom because I can talk through what I want to try, and get immediate feedback on how that will be received.

Teachers commend leaders that can provide “clear and concise communication when issues arise that may need clarification or emphasis.” Open communication assists in building a trusting professional bond between teachers and administrators. In turn a culture centered on a positive learning environment can be nurtured.

Feedback was the second interpretive code of dialogue that was identified through the focus group data. Feedback centered more around providing teachers feedback on utilizing best practices within the classroom. Administrators that provide feedback to teachers let them know they are aware and value the quality of learning going on in the classroom.

He/she looks at my lesson plan book and asks questions about the approaches I am utilizing to deliver my content. He provides feedback as needed around best instructional practices to help improve my craft. He notices items in the room such as
student work and comments on how this work matches (or does not match) areas of tested strength or weakness of students.

**Conclusions**

The central question for this symbolic interaction study was: What do middle school teachers perceive to be the administrators’ characteristics of instructional leadership that have the greatest direct improvement on teaching and learning? Sub-questions addressed during the study were: (a) How do teachers define instructional leadership?; (b) How are conversations about instructional leadership structured throughout a typical day?; (c) What specific characteristics do administrators portray that improve the quality of teaching and learning?; and, (d) What specific characteristics do administrators portray that create a barrier to teaching and learning? Table 3 represents a cross data analysis of the themes represented from the data collected. Table 3 identifies both the main theme that was identified throughout the data collection and the interpretive codes that were identified to assist in supporting the themes. The findings of this study revealed two themes that were consistent across almost all five sets of data collection. These themes were culture and high expectations. Other themes that were prevalent throughout the data collection were visibility, dialogue, time, and resource awareness. Although visibility and dialogue were not identified as main themes throughout all data collection methods, the data identified visibility and dialogue as interpretive themes that help support the notion of culture and high expectations. As the data was examined throughout the different data collection processes it was determined that visibility and dialogue although prevalent throughout fit better as an interpretive code to support the theme of culture and high expectations. As shown below,
dialogue was an interpretive code to assist in developing the theme of culture among the interview data. Dialogue also shows up in the survey data as a portion of the interpretive collaboration. Visibility was also utilized to assist in developing the theme of culture by assisting in the development of the environment interpretive code. The themes listed below were utilized to illuminate the research question findings.
Table 3

Cross-Data Themes and Interpretive Codes

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<tr>
<th>Culture</th>
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<th>Visibility</th>
<th>Dialogue</th>
<th>Time</th>
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Instructional Leadership Defined

The first question examined within this study was how teachers go about defining instructional leadership. For the purpose of designing this study, instructional leadership was defined as any activity that supports the teaching and learning environment of schools. Instructional leadership is defined in a variety of ways as attested to by the literature review. This trend continued to be the case within this research. According to the data collected each individual defined instructional leadership based on their own personal background knowledge and experiences. One such teacher defined instructional leadership as “the act of building a school community that has the belief that every student can learn.” Another teacher defined instructional leadership in this manner: “instructional leadership to me is when a leader builds a culture of excellence for all. All meaning every teacher, student, as well as support staff. When a building leader can instill excellence within every aspect of the business we are in that is when they will have the greatest impact on instruction.” There were commonalities that began to emerge as the data were analyzed. The commonality that began to emerge when defining instructional leadership was: an instructional leader is an individual that develops a culture conducive to providing good quality instruction, establishing expectations around a curriculum and instructional focus, while ensuring that all necessary resources are available to teachers. This definition was supported throughout all facets of the data collected. Maintaining a culture focused on quality instruction was a theme that emerged in most all data collection methods. A commonality across this theme and all participants was the expression that an administrator must work to build a culture that focuses on three areas: curriculum, best practices, and setting high expectations. All teachers
mentioned the importance of an instructional leader that focuses on the instructional quality of the building and makes it the top priority of the school. Teachers emphasized how they rely heavily on administrators for resources centered on instructional strategies and best practices. Teachers mentioned the importance of an instructional leader as someone able to mentor and facilitate instruction by relying on current educational practices.

**Conversation Structure**

The second question posed to teachers was centered on how were conversations about instructional leadership structured throughout a typical school day. This particular question provided a variety of responses. After reading and rereading the responses numerous times certain patterns began to emerge. Many teachers responded that no instructional conversations were conducted within their daily life but after probing a little further into their experiences it was discovered that many administrators rely on an a deeply rooted informal method of conducting instructional conversations. In many instances, it did not seem to be the administrator delivering the instructional conversations but more times than not, it was another teacher or administrative designee, i.e. department chair, that was responsible for delivering the instructional message. Most teachers identified a daily conversation structure as the structure of choice for their particular administrator. Systems were setup so that in some capacity a teacher had a conversation around improving instruction on a daily basis. Most of these structures centered on common plan time for teachers during the day. In some instances the administrator was present. An administration designee led other conversations. One teacher explained it this way “faculty meets daily during planning periods and during early release to discuss instructional issues. We as the teachers generally facilitate
conversations on our own about instructional leadership.” Another teacher explained, in many instances the administrator facilitates conversations if they are available during this time:

In my building, teachers have plan time that is used for meeting with team teachers and/or content specific teachers to collaborate on students and to collaborate on effective teaching strategies. Our administrator visits these meetings so that he/she knows what is being discussed.

Other teachers identified a very informal method of structured conversations around instructional needs. “Conversations around instructional leadership takes place anywhere and everywhere throughout a typical school day. They can be both formal and informal between and among teachers and administrators.” Several teachers stated that conversations can be informal in nature and may result in emails regarding what is being taught or suggestions around how a teacher might approach a particular item being taught. “Conversations on a day to day basis which revolve around instructional leadership may be diverse. Whether it transpires at the copy machine, in the lunchroom or in the parking lot, it involves both trying to improve instruction.”

Many teachers identified that their administrator does not stick to one particular structure to discuss instructional issues. Whereas some principals conduct daily instructional conversations, others are not so inclined. According to the experiences of the teacher’s weekly, monthly, and even bi-annually are more likely methods of conversation. All teachers have structured weekly early release time that is directed to elicit conversation around instruction.

At the middle school where I teach, conversations surrounding instructional leadership are on-going and take place in several settings. Some of these settings
include team meetings, vertical teaming with like content areas, staff development days, professional learning committee meetings, and technology meetings.

**Positive Impacts**

After examining how teachers define instructional leadership and how instructional conversations are structured, the researcher worked to identify those perceived characteristics that administrators portray that have a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning through the experiences of a teacher. The next question in the research was to ascertain teachers’ perceptions of those characteristics portrayed by their administrators that have the greatest positive impact on teaching and learning. The responses gathered for this particular question were found to be congruent with those that were found in the literature review. There were three that emerged from the data collected that represent the perceived characteristics of instructional leaders that had a positive impact on instruction. Within each category, I developed descriptions of the actions teachers identified as traits of leadership of instruction and learning. The data collected from this research identified the following three themes as having the greatest positive impact on instruction.

1) **High Expectations**

2) **Visibility**

3) **Dialogue**

High expectations were expressed as the most prominent characteristic that had a positive impact on their instruction.
**High Expectations**

High expectations were prominent throughout all data collection methods. Teachers mentioned that high expectations could be communicated through a variety of methods. Teachers expressed that administrators were foundational in articulating the framework of instruction. Expectations removed uncertainty. They recognized that setting expectations around team collaboration time allowed for a more efficient use of this time. Teachers also expressed the desire for once expectations were set there needed to be processes established to ensure these expectations were adhered to.

The teachers within this study also identified the importance of setting expectations around utilizing instructional strategies that are proven to be effective. They expressed the need for administrators to focus on current research in the field of education and work to establish expectations around allowing teachers to take risks and explore new instructional strategies within their classroom. Teachers mentioned setting guidelines to allow for risk taking and encouraging improvement had a positive impact on the level of instruction within the classroom.

Other data collected demonstrated that administrators that establish clear expectations around the vision of the school could have a positive impact on teaching and learning. The administrator that sets expectations provides clarity and focus for all. Teachers also identified that administrators that assist with setting expectations through goal setting have a positive impact on instruction. This was seen throughout the documents, focus groups, interviews, observations, and survey data. By setting goals and then reinforcing these goals
throughout all aspects of the day an administrator makes it almost impossible for teachers to lose focus on the end goal.

Teachers repeatedly mentioned that a school couldn’t move forward if they do not know where they are headed. One group of teachers stated, “just let me know how you want me to do it and I will do it that way.” They continued to express how the expectations of the building leadership allowed them to set expectations within their classrooms. In this manner the expectations resonated throughout the building from the students to the teachers, and beyond. Teachers also expressed that uncertainty with expectations in the learning environment caused distrust and resentment. The teachers expressed how they don’t mind expectations being set but they want to ensure expectations apply to all involved and there will be follow through.

Visibility

Although visibility was identified as a theme in one data set it was apparent throughout all data sets that the major themes identified throughout were based on the administrator having a presence throughout the school. Teachers maintained that the culture of the building and school expectations rely on an administrator that is visible throughout the school day. Visibility was mentioned as a method for administrators to monitor the expectations established. Teachers also expressed administrators that were visible throughout the school also monitored teachers’ needs for resources. Leaders that are visible provide a strong support system for both students and staff according to the teachers examined. Teachers contended that visible administrators demonstrated a caring attitude and projected the presence of an adult that cares about education.
Visibility was expressed as one of the most important factors in having an impact not only on the teaching and learning within the classroom but also as the building as a whole. Teachers expressed a strong desire to have an administrator that was visible throughout the school day. Teachers stated they themselves stayed “on their toes” if they knew the administrator of their building was going to be showing up at any time. Teachers expressed a desire to do well but that desire was heightened when they knew their administrator would be by as opposed to an administrator that spent their time in their office. They also noticed how the behavior of the students improved when the administrator presence was felt. Students became more focused and docile when administrators were visible. Teachers also mentioned that it was wonderful when the administrator actually participated within the lesson as a whole. It showed students they care about the entire educational environment. The teachers expressed that the entire feeling of the educational environment changes for the positive when an administrator is visible.

Dialogue

As the literature review established, expectations around structure provided direction for the educational environment, culture provided the incentive to achieve, dialogue was the means by which to guarantee all stakeholders are moving in the same direction. The teachers within this study repeatedly emphasized the positive impact dialogue had on their instruction. Dialogue is how all other themes identified throughout the research are communicated to all. Teachers identified that without dialogue culture would fail to flourish and without dialogue expectations would not be shared and adhered to. The data collected emphasized the positive impact of dialogue on instruction. Dialogue for this research study was broken down into
open communication and providing feedback. According to the teachers, aside from setting expectations, and being visible one of the most important thing administrators do that have a positive impact on instruction is to have open and honest communication. They expressed that open communication between teachers and administrators is key to keeping the quality of teaching and learning high. Teachers expressed the importance for administrators to have an open door policy. Teachers emphasized how they want to feel as if they can approach an administrator at any time. They also identified how important it is to feel as if they are not being judged when asking questions whether academia focused or interpersonal. The importance of this type of open communication was identified as having a positive impact on instruction. The teachers within this study repeatedly commended those building leaders that can provide clear and concise communication. This level of communication in turn has a positive impact on the learning environment.

Feedback was also identified as a subset of dialogue. Whereas open communication centered on more of the daily interactions of the school, feedback was identified as dialogue centered on improving the instructional level of the teachers. Teachers identified the importance of receiving feedback on the level of instruction within their classrooms. Teachers emphasized those administrators that perform classroom walkthroughs on a routine basis and provide teachers small snippets of feedback could have the largest impact on their instruction. By providing feedback in smaller increments, the teachers mentioned it provided the ability to make immediate smaller tweaks to their teaching as opposed to the summative evaluation conference that does not provide the ability to make the needed changes in a
timely manner. The teachers also identified administrator feedback let the teachers know they are cognizant of the value and quality of learning taking place.

**Negative Impact**

The next question in the research was to ascertain teachers’ perceptions of those characteristics portrayed by their administrators that create a barrier on teaching and learning. The fourth part of the questionnaire requested teachers to identify a particular negative characteristic and its impact on their teaching. There were four themes that emerged from the data collected for this particular research. Some of these themes were also identified throughout the data collected as having a positive impact on instruction. The data collected from this research identified the characteristic of expectations as the most prominent characteristic that created a barrier on their instruction. The other three themes that were identified were culture, time, and lack of knowledge.

**Expectations**

According to the literature review and the evidence found in this research it is evident the positive impact setting expectations can have on teaching and learning. As stated previously, setting expectations assist teachers in clearly understanding where the entire organization is headed. However, when there is a lack of expectations or expectations that change the impact can prove to have a negative effect on instruction. Lack of expectations and changing expectations ran prevalent throughout the research as two categories of expectation that are detrimental to the educational environment. Some teachers expressed that a lack of clear expectations leads to “some groups of teachers are treated differently than
others. Some have planning time at the end of the day and are allowed to leave work early and are never questioned.” Without a clear set of expectations resentment may begin to build among staff members and a positive learning environment can turn sour quickly.

Expectations allow all parties to understand how all should perform under certain situations. “When an administrator does not follow through with rules/procedures, that creates low morale and rules/procedures are not taken seriously.” Lack of expectations may cause as much of a negative impact as changing expectations. Teachers expressed that “the practice of introducing or changing goals in the middle of a school year really impacts effectiveness.”

Negative Aspects of Culture

The academic literature is filled with research on how the culture of a building can have a positive impact on instruction if nurtured and developed by a leader. However if that culture is built on a foundation of distrust and inconsistency the opposite affect can happen. Distrust was one characteristic that teachers identified that can create a barrier to improving teaching and learning. In many situations the teachers described instances of administrators repeating confidential conversations, participating in gossip or judgmental behavior, as well as refusal to accept responsibility to improve the learning environment. All of these actions led teachers down a road of resentment and ultimately a lack of caring. “I witnessed an administrator screaming at a fellow teacher in the hallway in front of students about something they did or did not do. This encounter left a lasting impression on me to keep my
head down and stay out of the spotlight.” An inconsistent culture has a similar impact on teaching and learning as a distrustful one.

My administrator does not follow-up. Teachers in the building know that nothing will happen, there are not consequences. Therefore district initiatives and building team projects are not followed through with. Teachers do whatever they want.

**Time**

Time is another theme identified as creating a barrier to improving the teaching and learning environment. The two categories that emerged to build this theme was managerial time and interrupting. The teachers surveyed believed that:

There are often so many things going on at school that the focus on teaching and learning is pushed to the side. Everyday issues such as budgets, XLT questions, PTA meetings, committees often take on more importance than teaching because answers are needed immediately.

Time was found as one of the greatest barriers to teaching and learning. “The administrators are so busy and overworked that I don’t want to bother them and/or take their time unless it is absolutely necessary.” Administrators also create a barrier to the learning environment by interrupting classrooms for various reasons. “Administrators sometime create a barrier to teaching and learning with interruptions to the class time via intercom” others “will create a barrier to teaching and learning by interrupting classroom instruction and pulling the teacher into the hallway to discuss in detail a student issue.” These interruptions disrupt the flow of the current lesson for the entire class.
Lack of Knowledge

An administrator’s utter lack of knowledge was also identified as a barrier to teaching and learning. This lack of knowledge extends to both a lack of knowledge of best practices as well as a lack of knowledge of certain content areas. “My principal is unable to provide me with guidance about teaching due to his/her true lack of knowledge around certain initiatives.” Another teacher cited “the barrier that exists seems to stem from ignorance of my profession. The general feeling that what we do is not important.”

Summary

The sample of middle school teachers who contributed to this symbolic interaction study emerged with voices showcasing their perceptions of instructional leadership. Although each individual teacher defined instructional leadership uniquely, based on his or her own constructed perceptions, there was a commonality to that definition, which was consistent with the working definition provided in this study. Instructional leadership is any activity that supports the teaching and learning environment of schools. Specifically derived from this study came the following definition. An instructional leader is an individual that develops a culture conducive to providing good quality instruction, having a curriculum and instructional focus, while ensuring that all necessary resources are available to teachers. Each of these identified themes were derived from multiple categories. Developing a culture conducive to providing good quality instruction was broken down into a culture that focuses on three areas: curriculum, best practices, and setting high expectations. The curriculum and instruction theme was further broken down into academic research and having a focus on data.
Regarding the question around how instructional related conversations were structured, teachers provided a plethora of answers. It appears that from the teachers' perceptions many administrators do not conduct specifically structured conversations around instruction but prefer to rely on a deeply rooted informal method of conducting instructional conversations. Several teachers identified that the person delivering the instructional conversation was generally not the administrator but rather an administrative designee, i.e. department chair became responsible for delivering the instructional message. However, three main themes emerged from the research around the manner in which instructional conversations were structured. The three themes that emerged from teachers’ perceptions to describe the structure of instructional conversations were daily, informal, and variety. The theme that emerged as the most prevalent by teachers was a daily conversation structure. Systems were created in the majority of classrooms so that in some capacity a teacher had a conversation around improving instruction on a daily basis. The most common system was centered on common plan time for teachers during the day.

In general, the sample of middle school teachers’ perceptions of the characteristics of instructional leadership that have the greatest positive impact on teaching and learning are consistent with the literature. The four themes are high expectations, culture, visibility, and dialogue. According to the research collected it is difficult for a good instructional leader to have a positive impact on instruction by only focusing on one characteristic. All four
characteristics were identified by teachers as essential to having a positive impact on instruction.

It is difficult to set high expectations and expect teachers to follow through with those expectations without a culture of mutual respect and trust. Furthermore it is difficult to build that culture of mutual respect and trust without being visible and having conversations around those expectations. It becomes the circle of life we live in at school.

In general, middle school teachers’ perceptions of the characteristics of instructional leadership that create a barrier on teaching and learning there were four themes that emerged from the data collected. The characteristic of expectations according to the teachers’ perceptions created the largest barrier to teaching and learning. The other three themes that emerged from the data were identified as culture, time, and lack of knowledge. As identified in earlier, setting expectations can have a positive impact on teaching and learning however when those expectations change or are inconsistent the opposite can happen. The same holds true for culture. As identified the culture of a building can have wide spread positive implications on teaching and learning, however a culture that is left unattended or built on distrust can have the opposite effect.

The results of this symbolic interaction study demonstrate that middle school teachers perceptions of the characteristics portrayed by their instructional leader that have the greatest positive and negative impact on teaching and learning are consistent with the literature surrounding this area. However, it has become clear that developing a culture that promotes a positive learning environment through high expectations, respect and trust are the characteristics that have the greatest impact on teaching and learning in these Midwestern schools. The teachers sampled perceived that the biggest influence an instructional leader
can have is by developing a positive school culture promoted by setting expectations and by influencing teaching and learning through collaboration and visibility. These characteristics create conditions to motivate teachers to do what need to be done by creating a safe and trustful environment.

Chapter 5 will provide a discussion of the results of this research. Chapter 5 will also provide recommendations for instructional leaders as well as how administrator preparation programs may examine their practices. Future research topics around the area of instructional leadership will also be examined in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

Overview
In August of 1949, fifteen men parachuted into a mountainous area of Montana to put out a growing fire. Within minutes, the fire exploded out of control, spreading at 660 feet per minute and threatening to consume the firefighters. Fourteen of the men turned away from the fire and ran for the ridge. One did not. He turned toward the approaching inferno and set the grass in front of him on fire. As the grass finished burning he yelled for his comrades to drop onto the resulting ashes to save their lives. In the end, he was the only survivor (Maxfield, 2009, p. 26).

As a building leader, principals are always fighting fires whether around instructional issues, student issues, or staff issues. It is imperative that educational leadership today not run from the fire. “We think the most critical interaction in schools is between the teacher and the student, but second to that is leadership in the building” (Douglas as cited in Mendels, 2012, p. 48). It is of the utmost importance in today’s world of heightened expectations that great leadership is in every school building (Mendels, 2012, Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr & Cohen, 2007). For these reasons it is why this work is so crucial.

The perceptions of middle school teachers in a Midwestern suburban school district were focused on for this symbolic interaction study. Data were collected in a variety of ways however an open-ended survey was utilized initially to collect data from all participants. Focus groups were then created in order to delve deeper in to the experiences of the teachers.
A total of 86 teachers participated in the study. The overarching questions in this study were:

1. How do you as the teacher define instructional leadership?
2. How are conversations about instructional leadership structured throughout a typical day?
3. Describe using real life examples specific characteristics portrayed by administrators that improve the quality of teaching and learning?
4. What specific characteristics do administrators portray that create a barrier to teaching and learning?

This research was designed to assist administrators in understanding the perceptions that teachers create through their interactions. Specifically examining those beliefs, behaviors, and characteristics portrayed by their administrators that had a positive impact on instruction. Data from an open-ended questionnaire were analyzed and interpreted using a qualitative methodology of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism closely examines the meanings created as participants interact within a social setting.

This chapter will begin with a discussion around the significant findings of this study. Then recommendations for instructional leaders based on this research will be provided. Recommendations from this research will center on administrators building a school culture around high expectations and trust. Additional recommendations will be provided for school districts to develop programs under their own control to grow their own instructional leaders. Finally, implications of this study for educational preparatory programs will be examined. It is recommended educational preparatory programs should consider restructuring their preparatory programs in order to provide perspective graduates a greater practical, problem
based learning experience. Finally avenues for future research will be explored. Specially centering on the effectiveness of both grow your own programs as well as university preparatory programs.

**Discussion**

The findings of this symbolic interaction study support the research surrounding effective instructional leadership. There are certain beliefs, behaviors, traits, and characteristics that can have a positive impact on instruction (Blasè & Blasè, 1998; Melton, 2003; Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2007; Mendels, 2012). One individual characteristic cannot stand on its own but all must be expressed together in order to have the most profound impact on teaching and learning. The findings within this study illuminated the critical impact administrator relationships have on the teaching and learning environment of their buildings.

The sample of 86 teachers participating in this study emerged as knowledgeable educators and insightful around their concept of instructional leadership. Although all teachers defined instructional leadership in their own personal way based on their own background knowledge and experiences, a common definition emerged from the data. This common definition that emerged was: an instructional leader is an individual that develops a culture conducive to providing good quality instruction, having a curriculum and instructional focus, while ensuring that all necessary resources are available to teachers. The findings of this study also support the literature in clarifying the notion that effective administrators must dedicate a large portion of time to their roles as instructional leaders (Hallinger & Heck, 1996). “Instructional leadership is more than a set of techniques or
competencies” (Melton, 2003, p. 151). This study suggests that middle school teachers require administrators to infuse their practice with certain beliefs, behaviors, and characteristics within their daily work (Blase & Blase, 1998). This research identified four themes that emerged as characteristics of instructional leaders that have a positive impact on instruction. These characteristics were:

1) High Expectations

2) Culture

3) Visibility

4) Dialogue

These characteristics cannot stand-alone but must be intermingled to provide the desired result.

According to Southworth (2002), “Leadership is socially constructed” (p.74). An administrator must work to shed the managerial aspects of the job in order to build the instructional capacity of the school. Visibility was a large theme that emerged throughout the data collection process for this study. Teachers are seeking administrators to be visible in their classrooms, hallways, libraries, and learning labs. Visibility raises the teacher’s level of awareness of their instruction and provides a feeling of value to the teacher that the administrator is observing. One such teacher expressed her desire to have her administrator more visible in the classroom and hallway:

For me to be effective at my job I need my administrator to be effective at his job. This starts with them getting out of their office and into the classrooms. Administrators that are visible in the classrooms show that they are interested in not only what I am doing but show interest in what the kids are doing. This provides not only me but also specifically the students a sense of pride that the building administrator is proud of what we are accomplishing.
In my experiences, administrators spend entirely too much time taking care of duties and answering questions that do not pertain to the instructional improvement of the building. I believe, some administrators may use these managerial duties as a crutch to hide the fact that instructional leadership is not their strong point. As this research demonstrates there is a desire by teachers for administrators to make a conscious effort to focus on the instructional integrity of their buildings.

Being visible is an integral part of building trust and establishing rapport with all stakeholders. However, visibility is not the only skill an administrator must embrace in order to have a meaningful impact on instruction (Keesor, 2005; Williams, 2012; Marshall, 2012). According to Keesor (2005), the visibility of the administrator is of the utmost importance. Administrators that are visible in the classrooms can have a significant impact on the teaching and learning environment (Keesor, 2005). The larger question becomes how are barriers removed so improving instruction within the building becomes the main focus? I recently worked at a school that created a unique solution to this problem. There were a large number of teachers aspiring to become administrators in the future. These future administrators would most anything to gain some type of administrative experience. It becomes much easier to acclimate someone into an administrative role that has some type of experience than it does to employ someone that has nothing but book knowledge. Therefore, one particular building I worked at, utilized this eagerness to their advantage by assisting in eliminating some of the managerial issues that plague administrators which may keep them from focusing on the instruction within the building. They surveyed all teachers that might be interested in being a prospective administrator or pursuing a degree in administration.
Those teachers that were willing to give up a piece of their time were then given some of the managerial duties that administrators deal with. These tasks included but were not limited to dealing with discipline issues, supervising lunch duty, etc. This technique freed up the administrators in the building to focus on being visible within the classrooms and working with teachers on instructional related issues. Instructional leadership became the primary focus of these administrators at the same time aspiring administrators gained some practical experience dealing with teachers, parents, and students. This method of removing the managerial aspects of the position allowed the administrators to become more visible in and among the classrooms and set the expectation that instruction was the most important aspect of the job.

Building a nurturing, caring culture was another major theme that emerged from this research. A positive school culture can impact all aspects of the learning environment including fostering effort and productivity, promoting collaborative activities, supporting change, building commitment, as well as focusing attention on what is valued (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Fisher, Frey, & Pumpian, 2012). Administrators must continuously focus on molding the culture of their building. As attested to by this study, an administrator must make a conscious effort to focus on the symbolic interactions that exist each time they converse with any teacher, parent, or student. According to Tschannen-Moran (2004), the job of the administrator begins with the relationship. These interactions produce an internal reaction in the individual or individuals that may be in on or even observing the correspondence. Many of these internal reactions are impossible to observe but may continue to build and produce a negative impact on a buildings culture. As stated in the
research teachers believe that an administrator that builds a positive learning environment can have the greatest impact on their instruction. Administrators that build a strong positive culture focused on instructional leadership can ultimately lead to an increase in a teacher’s self-efficacy (Calik, Sezgin, Kavagaci, & Kilinc, 2012). One such teacher put it this way, “we know we will succeed because our leader is one that builds a culture of excellence centered on every individual learning, adult and student.” This sentiment should hold true for all teachers that deliver instruction no matter how many years a person has been in the profession. Too many times administrators walk through the evaluation process differently with a veteran teacher than they do with a new teacher. Teachers expressed that an administrator must “inspire them to improve, while working side by side rather than from above.” Teachers within this research expressed the desire to have administrators that appreciate and praise them for the work they do while continually sharing expertise.

Professional dialogue became another large theme throughout the discovery of this research. Instructional leaders must be willing to engage teachers in meaningful reflective conversation around improving instruction. As stated earlier, from this researcher’s experience, too much time is spent talking about the managerial issues of school and not around dialoguing about the instructional issues. Professional dialogue is the skill of “constructing and posing questions with the intention of engaging and transforming thought” (Costa & Garmston, 2002, p. 6). Administrators must be willing to have those critical conversations around instruction. According to John Hattie, we must “encourage teachers to look for evidence when their teaching is NOT working with which students and on what
aspects of what they are teaching it is not working. This heightened seeking of feedback about their impact as a teacher is a key to successful teaching” (Shaughnessy, 2008, p. 239).

Professional dialogue as discovered from this study can be developed in many different formats. Staff meetings, daily or weekly planning times can be two such structures. However the structure the conversations must be centered on reviewing practice, looking at student data, or general teamwork. Professional dialogue allows administrators to identify teacher’s assumptions and to promote ideas around best practice. Administrators must be willing to sustain teacher collaboration and use it as a vehicle for staff development (Southworth, 2002). Professional dialogue must center on setting expectations. Data collected for this study shows that teachers feel a sense of relief when clear and concise expectations are established, communicated, and non-changing.

**Recommendations for School Districts**

“Principal training academies and other alternate routes in to school leadership have grown rapidly in recent years, as traditional university based programs have been criticized for their lack of selectivity, rigor, and practice based curriculum” (Corcoran, Schwartz, & Weinstein, 2012, p. 233). Based on the research of this study as well as the research of others a recommendation to school districts is to build a “grow your own” program for perspective school leaders (Corcoran, Schwartz, & Weinstein, 2012; Davis et al., 2005; Kochan, Bredson, & Riehl, 2002; Tucker & Codding, 2002). One such program focuses on teachers that have a desire to become administrators. One such school district employs a program labeled as a leadership institute. This leadership institute is designed to give teachers who show interest in becoming a school administrator a deeper look at
administration from this district's perspective. Potential candidates must apply to become a member of the leadership institute. The candidates must provide a written recommendation from current administrators within the district. Once selected the candidates are enrolled in a six-month program in which they begin to understand the ins and outs of school administration for this particular district. The program culminates in each candidate establishing a problem based learning project that works for the betterment of the district. Candidates are required to observe, shadow, and dialogue with current administrators to gain additional insight into the vision of instructional leadership for this particular district. The final requirement is that each candidate is assigned a building in which they are the acting administrator for a summer school program. This gives each candidate a four-week window of practical experience. This length of experience may not be enough for a candidate to fully understand all the ins and outs of the position it does give them a chance to lead a group of staff and students.

The second such recommendation for a district based program on this particular research is the investment in the assistant principals within a district. As stated earlier, administrators spend too much time doing managerial duties, maintaining discipline, supervising lunch duty, etc. Most of these responsibilities fall onto the shoulders of the assistant principals. Too many times when staff development is provided for administrators it is provided to the lead principal only. The assistant principal is usually left behind during these times to manage the building. It then becomes the responsibility of the lead principal to pass along any professional development to the assistant principals. Over time, this information gets lost in the daily grind of school. Therefore, this researcher recommends that
each school district implement a program specifically designed to improve the instructional leadership capabilities of all assistant principals. The basis of such a program could be based on the identified characteristics that have a positive impact on instruction. One such school district has implemented such a program called the Assistant Principals Institute (API). The Assistant Principals Institute is focused specifically on improving the instructional leadership skills of assistant principals with the purpose of preparing assistant principals to become great instructional leaders as future principals. This program provides assistant principals a safe nurturing environment to reflect with colleagues all having the same types of experiences. Similar to the reflective dialogue those teachers identified within this research as having a positive impact on their instruction this particular program is built around administrators engaging in reflective dialogue to improve their instructional leadership, as well as providing problem based learning experiences for perspective leadership candidates.

Current research supports a “grow your own” environment by placing an emphasis on problem based learning as an integral part of any administrator preparatory program (Holter & Frabutt, 2012; Bridges, 2012). There is a disconnect “between the skills and dispositions required of contemporary leaders and the type of training offered in many traditional leadership preparation programs” (Holter & Frabutt, 2012, p. 255). Problem based learning lends itself to assisting school districts in a multitude of ways. Perspective administrators grow by gaining real world knowledge of the principalship while the district receives assistance in solving a potential problem. “Problem based learning strategies my include action research, case study analysis, and other applied projects and assignments that link classroom learning and educational theory with the practice of leadership in the local school
setting” (Holter & Frabutt, 2012, p. 255). Problem based learning can have a “real, positive impact on leadership skills” (Holter & Frabutt, 2012, p. 256). According to Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, & Orr (2010), perspective administrators that were trained utilizing problem based learning strategies were able to demonstrate more effective leadership when compared to a national sample.

A “grow your own” leadership program with a foundation in problem based learning would allow districts the ability to assist perspective administrators in dealing with the emotional side of the job.

Students, like the administrators they aspire to be, encounter the emotional problems of working with people. These occasions create opportunities for students to test their competence in interpreting and responding to the feelings of others. When projects go awry, students also acquire insights into how they deal with frustration, anger, and disappointment (Bridges, as cited in Bridges, 2012, p. 404).

According to Bridges (2012), preparatory programs whether grow your own or through a university should acknowledge and address the “importance of emotions in school administration, especially the principalship, even though the management of emotions seldom, if ever, appears in the job description” (p. 415).

The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) embarked on just such an adventure in 2003. NYCDOE formed two leadership programs designed to transform its principal workforce (Corcoran, Schwartz, & Weinstein, 2012). The district created the New York City Leadership Academy (NYCLA) and one of the programs for the NYCLA is the Aspiring Principals Program (APP). The Aspiring Principals Program is a training program to assist in New York City School District in training their own principals for service. The program consists of a 6-week summer intensive followed by a 10-month residency
requirement (Corcoran, Schwartz, & Weinstein, 2012). The final summer consists of a transitional planning summer designed for allow candidates to spend time reflecting and preparing for their transition into a leadership role. The summer intensive program is a problem-based learning environment with role-playing and simulations that mirror the experiences one might see as an active building leader. All activities are closely aligned to district goals. During the 10-month residency requirement candidates shadow an active mentor principal. This residency allows the candidates to actively engage in all building leadership activities while still under the guidance of a veteran administrator.

Throughout its training the NYCLA seeks to develop a set of personal qualities and behaviors that the school leadership literature has associated with effectiveness. These behaviors—which include reacting constructively to disappointment, collaborating with families, and recruiting high quality staff—are organized into nine competency areas: personal behavior, resilience, communication and the context of learning, focus on student performance, situational problem solving, learning, supervision, management, and technology (Corcoran, Schwartz, & Weinstein, 2012, p. 235).

**Recommendations for Administrator Preparation Programs**

As stated earlier, it is difficult for any one characteristic to exist without the others. As found within the research of this study, an administrator cannot build a positive learning environment without being visible within the building or without establishing meaningful dialogue with teachers. One particular teacher says it best, “my administrator cannot be an instructional leader from behind their desk. They have to get out into the trenches with the rest of us and fight right alongside of us.” So the question becomes how can administrators develop the skills to become a strong instructional leader.
“Some schools are lucky enough to have excellent principals. What's missing is a reliable leadership development system that takes luck out of the equation—a system that identifies, recruits and develops people who have proven records of raising student performance and closing achievement gaps (Bottoms, O’Neill, Fry, & Hill, 2003). This researcher believes this system can be setup within three particular programs. One program could be established at the university level while prospective administrators are working to complete administrative degrees. The experience of this particular researcher while going through courses to become an administrator left a void in practical experience. While all course work and research on building a positive culture and best instructional practice developed a baseline to become an administrator, I believe there is not a focus on the practical experience to become an instructional leader. Based on the research within in this study there are specific characteristics that teachers identify as having a positive impact on instruction. The question becomes how can universities and school districts assist prospective administrators in practicing and honing these skills before entering the world of instructional leadership. “Changing the principal-as-manager paradigm begins with a vision of the knowledge and skills instructional leaders should have” (Gray, Lewis, 2011, p. 2). Another consideration is for pre-service teacher programs to provide more of an understanding of the school as a learning organization.

Lynch (2012) believes, principal preparation programs must be restructured to focus on their role as instructional leaders. “Certification, as it exists today, is not proof of quality” (Bottoms, O’Neill, Fry, & Hill, 2003). Based on the results of this study, this researcher suggests that universities and state licensure agencies should implement a more stringent
“residency program,” as prospective teachers must adhere to before entering the classroom. Prospective teachers must complete a ten-week program in which they conduct what is referred to as student teaching. This student teaching program allows for the creation of practical experience supervised by veteran teacher before entering the classroom for the first time. Universities should rethink their preparatory programs to create a similar type program for prospective administrators to allow for the creation of practical instructional leadership skills (Schechter, 2011). According to Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen (2007), students attending a leadership training program that “did not receive strong internships wrapped around their coursework, or who did not receive ongoing professional development once in the field, were less likely to report high levels of effective practices.” This particular program could serve two purposes. This would give a prospective administrator a safe nurturing environment supervised by a veteran administrator, previously identified as a good instructional leader, to hone the skills identified within this research that have a positive impact on instruction. This program would also give a school district a good solid look at any prospective candidates before offering a position. This could possibly weed out candidates prior to course completion instead of a teacher being in classes just to move on the pay scale. However as Orr & Barber (2005) found, the quality of internships and field-experiences vary greatly from one administrative program to another producing results that are uneven.

“While it is clear that the internship is integral to effective administrator preparation, many internships still do not offer the needed experiences that successfully prepare future leaders” (Anast-May, Buckner, & Geer, 2011, p. 2). The current structure of the principal
internship just does not provide candidates the ability to “grapple with the real demands of school leadership under the supervision of a well-qualified mentor” (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr & Cohen, 2007, p.7). As this research demonstrates and emphasis must be places on preparing administrators for the roll of instructional leader. Therefore, “[f]ield-based experiences must be a high priority and a central focus of principal preparation programs” (Anast-May, Buckner, & Geer, 2011, p. 3).

Anast-May, Buckner, and Geer (2007), recently conducted a study around what types of activities should be included in the internship. This study examined active principals perspective on what types of experiences should perspective administrator have. From this study several themes arose on practical experiences perspective administrators should have: “planning change in areas of curriculum and teaching, supporting cultures of learning and using data to support continuous school improvement” (Anast-May, Buckner, & Geer, 2011, p. 4). Based on the research of this study along with the research of others it is imperative that administrator preparatory programs along with state licensure agencies mold their practices and procedures to provide perspective candidates an authentic dose of what excellent instructional leadership looks like.

Based on recent research Missouri is in the process of changing its requirements for MO state licensure for the principalship. Missouri is implementing a two year process to become a certified school leader. The process will consist of two parts: part one consists of professional leadership courses along with two required internships and part two consists of a series of assessments to measure the candidate’s level of preparedness. Figure 3 shows the path a perspective administrator must follow under the new guidelines.
## School Leaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Assignments &amp; Assessments by Programs</th>
<th>Missouri Educator Gateway Assessments (MEGA)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Professional Leadership Courses</td>
<td>Professional Competency Profile (Teacher)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Early Level Internship</td>
<td>Educator Profile (MEP)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Professional Leadership Courses</td>
<td>School Leaders Content Assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internship – Composite Score &amp;</td>
<td>School Leaders Performance Assessment (SLPA) – Composite Score &amp; Individual Score Per Standard</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Individual Score Per Standard from On-Site Supervisors, Program Supervisors, Other Assignments &amp; Assessments</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Completion of the Leadership Preparation Program</td>
<td>Professional Competency Profile (Principal)</td>
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(G. Hairston, personal communication, March 4, 2014)

Figure 3. Path to Principal Certification
Along with specific coursework in part one around foundations of education administration and a knowledge of curriculum and school law, Missouri educators seeking a certificate in school administration will have to demonstrate a knowledge of the following:

1. Developing and implementing a vision
2. Promoting a positive culture focused on teaching and learning
3. Managing resources and personnel
4. Collaborating with community
5. Ethical integrity
6. Best practices professional development

Missouri is also focusing on the internship as an integral part of the licensure process. Missouri will require two separate internships for a total of 300 clock hours (G. Hairston, personal communication, March 4, 2014). The initial internship can be completed early on in the licensure process and at the least be comprised of observations of acting administrators demonstrating the above selected criterion. In addition to the early internship another internship should be conducted to culminate the licensure process. This internship is designed to immerse the perspective graduate into real world experience. In order to complete this internship candidates must be directly leading the specific activities above as well as working directly with students, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders while under the supervision of qualified on-site and preparation program supervisor. For an on-site supervision to be considered qualified they must have a minimum of five years’ experience and a minimum of a specialist degree. The preparatory program supervisor will also be
required to have minimum of five years’ experience in a PK-12 setting. They will also be
required to have weekly contact with the intern as well as the on-site supervisor.

This focus on the practical side of instructional leadership is designed to allow
perspective candidates to connect what they learn in a safe, nurturing environment. These
changes also allow candidates to learn by doing which will hopefully allow a newly hired
administrator to hit the ground running rather than just trying to survive the first few months
on the job.

**Future Research**

There are several avenues of research that could contribute to the body of knowledge
on instructional research. In particular would be to research the effectiveness of
administrator preparation programs in developing instructional leaders. Specificity could be
given to teachers perceptions versus new graduate perceptions on how well administrator
preparation programs prepare administrators for real world application of the identified
characteristics that have a positive impact on instruction. Further research could be
conducted around graduate follow-up studies. K-12 education institutions are now required
to do follow-up surveys with recent graduates. University settings could gain some insight
into how well they prepared recent graduates for the workforce. Additional research could
be conducted around how educator preparation programs impact student achievement in the
K-12 setting where their graduates have been in the workforce for three years or more.
Recently, Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) researched the commonalities between university
administrative programs that are considered highly effective in producing strong instructional
leaders. All university programs should examine this research more closely in order to identify areas of improvement.

Research could also be conducted around the effectiveness of the district level administrative preparation programs recommended above. Do internal preparation programs result in a positive impact on instruction? Both the teachers’ perspective as well as the candidates’ perspective could be examined and compared. Student achievement data could also be researched and examined in conjunction with the internal preparation programs in order for adjustments to be made to such programs.

Alternative certification programs are growing in popularity as people decide to make a career change later in life (DeVeny, 2011). Alternative certification programs allow people that have chosen another career path enter the world of education without requiring them to take all the educational requirements that a student starting out at a younger age would. Alternative certification programs give perspective students credit for the experience and knowledge gained in the workforce. Research around the effectiveness of alternative certification programs graduates and student achievement/instructional leadership could also be conducted.

Further research could also be done around what additional steps administrators could employ to remove barriers to building a positive learning environment. Particular focus could be placed on those administrators identified as strong instructional leaders and the methods they employ to eliminate barriers. Research is abundant surrounding the importance of professional development for teachers to improve their craft. Additional research could be conducted around the importance of professional development for school leaders in order to
develop the knowledge skills, and dispositions that are needed to become effective instructional leaders. Continued professional development is the key to improving one’s role as an instructional leader. Any of the above mentioned studies could contribute to the body of research surrounding the improvement of instructional leadership.

**Conclusion**

As educators move through their career the natural progression for some is college graduate to classroom teacher to administrator preparation programs to school administrator. Therefore, the question becomes at what stage in this progression do administrators learn to become good instructional leaders? Naturally, some may have the inherent talent like a gifted athlete, however, some have to be taught and practice the skills needed to become an instructional leader. This is why this study and studies like this are so important to the field of education. One cannot presume that educators inherently know how to move from the classroom to the office. The skills needed to become an effective instructional leader must be researched and identified in order to assist those that are interested have clear playbook in which to work. This symbolic interaction study assisted in developing a thick rich description of middle school teachers’ perceptions of the characteristics of administrators that have an impact on teaching and learning.

Administrative preparation programs, whether at the university level or at the district level are vital for these candidates to hone their skills before stepping into an unknown world. Continued professional development is also a must. The needs of the teachers today may be different from the needs of the teachers in the future. Administrators must be provided the opportunity to learn new skills in order to promote the best support for the
educators in the classrooms. It is extremely important for schools to have the most effective instructional leader possible in order to build the most conducive environment for student learning. The research abounds around the impact of an effective teacher within the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Feng, 2010; Rockoff, 2004; Scott, Jolivette, Parks Ennis, & Gilkey Hirn, 2012). However the effectiveness of that teacher is diminished when there is not a strong instructional leader there to assist. Or as one teacher put it best: “I cannot do my absolute best for the kids in my classroom if I do not have a strong instructional leader standing behind me.”
APPENDIX A

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH STUDY
Consent for Participation in a Research Study

Middle School Teachers’ Perceptions of Administrator Influence on Teaching and Learning

Principal Investigator:
Eric Sipes

Invitation to Participate

You are invited to participate in a research study to examine the middle school teachers’ perspectives of the characteristics of administrators that have an impact on teaching and learning. Specifically this research will be examining the interactions between teachers and administrators and the constructed meanings created by teachers from these encounters. Two middle schools in a Midwest suburban school district were selected for the focus of this research. The research project, Middle School Teachers Perceptions of Administrator Influence on Teaching and Learning, is a qualitative study designed to utilize the voices of middle school teachers to describe their constructed perceptions of the characteristics of middle school administrators that directly improve teaching and learning.

Who will participate?

Teachers and principals who are currently employed by the two middle schools participating in this study will be invited to participate in focus group interviews this study is seeking the participation of upwards of 40 teachers from the possible 120 eligible.

Purpose

The purpose of this symbolic interaction study is to develop a thick rich description of middle school teachers’ perspectives of the characteristics of administrators that have an impact on teaching and learning. Specifically this research will be examining the interactions between teachers and administrators and the constructed meanings created by teachers from these encounters. This study is designed to assist middle school administrators in examining teachers constructed perceptions of administrator characteristics that impact teaching and learning and thus read reculture their schools into learning organizations. The overarching research question for this study is as follows: What do middle school teachers perceive to be the administrators characteristics of instructional leadership that have the greatest direct improvement on teaching and learning? Sub-questions to address the overarching question will be:
1. How do teachers defined instructional leadership?
2. How are conversations about instructional leadership structured throughout a typical day?
3. What specific characteristics do administrators portray that improve the quality of teaching and learning?
4. What specific characteristics administrators portray that create a barrier to teaching and learning?
The findings will be shared through research articles submitted to professional journals and presentations at school leadership conferences

**Description of Procedures**

You will participate in a five question open-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. A voluntary focus group interview will be conducted based on the results of the questionnaire. Focus group interview questions in this study will be unique to the school site and primarily based upon the results of the open-ended survey. The responses from the open-ended survey will be used to identify the characteristics of the building principal that were perceived to have a positive impact on teaching and learning. This data will be used to develop preliminary interview questions to be used with the focus groups. Focus group interviews will take approximately 50 minutes and will involve all voluntary teachers that are available on that day. You will be involved in one interview session. Interviews will be conducted at the school sites. If you are willing to participate in a focus group please check the appropriate box at the bottom of the consent form.

**Voluntary Participation**

Participation in the study is voluntary at all times. You may choose not to participate or to withdraw your participation at any time. Deciding not to participate or choosing to leave this study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. If you decide to leave the study, the information you have already provided in the form of focus group and/or questionnaire responses will be retained by the principal investigator for data analysis.

**Fees and Expenses**

There are no monetary costs to you.

**Compensation**

You will not be compensated for participation in the study.

**Risks and Inconveniences**

No physical or psychological/emotional risks are associated with this study.

**Benefits**

Benefits from this study for the participants may include the personal reflection or connections made from the sharing of their perspectives on school leadership. This study will benefit school administrators through conclusions about the leadership characteristics that positively influence educational achievement and the development of learning communities.
**Alternatives to Study Participation**

The alternative is not to participate in this study.

**Confidentiality**

Questionnaire data will be anonymous - there is no identifying information on the surveys to designate the identity of participants. While every effort will be made to keep confidential all of the information completed, it cannot be absolutely guaranteed. Individuals from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies), Research Protections Program, and Federal regulatory agencies may look at records related to this study for quality improvement and regulatory functions.

Original surveys will be archived by the principal investigator.

**In Case of Injury**

The University of Missouri-Kansas City appreciates the participation of people who help carry out its function of developing knowledge through research. If you have any questions about the study that you are participating in you are encouraged to call Eric Sipes, the investigator at 816-413-6223.

Although it is not the University's policy to compensate or provide medical treatment for persons who participate in studies, if you think you have been injured as a result of participating in this study, please call the IRB Administrator of UMKC’s Social Sciences Institutional Review Board at 816-235-1764.

**Questions**

If you have any questions regarding the study, please contact the principal investigator or the faculty advisor to the study:

Principal investigator: Eric Sipes, Assistant Principal, Antioch Middle School / 2100 NE 65th St., Gladstone, MO 64118 / phone: 816-413-6223 esipes@nkcsd.k12.mo.us / fax: 816-413-6205

Faculty Advisor: Jennifer Friend Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of Missouri Kansas City / 330 Education Building, 5100 Rockhill Rd, Kansas City, MO 64110 / phone: (816) 235-2550 / friendji@umkc.edu
Authorization

__Check here if you are willing to participate in a focus group

____________________________ Participant’s Signature________________________

Eric Sipes

Printed Name: _____________________________

Date: ______________________________ Date: ______________________________
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
**Interview Questions**

1. How do middle school principals view and implement their role as an instructional leader?

2. How do you feel early release has played a part in assisting the teachers with improving instruction?

3. How do you feel the notion of mastery learning has affected the teaching and learning of your school?

4. What challenges must principals overcome to implement the role of instructional leader?

5. How do you perceive your role as principal/instructional leader?

6. Looking at the global role as principal do you feel there are areas that may get short changed?

7. What stands out for you about instructional leadership?

8. What comes to mind for you when someone refers to you as the instructional leader of your school?

9. In what ways do you encourage your staff to break the status quo to be risk takers and change the way in which teaching and learning looks within your school?

10. Can you give me some examples of how you provide instructional leadership for your school?

11. What would you say are the four or five most important things that instructional leaders should do?

12. What would you say are the four or five things an instructional leader should not do?

13. How important do you feel it is for an instructional leader to focus on a clear mission and vision of a school?

14. In what ways do you utilize teachers within the bounds of instructional leadership?
APPENDIX C

OBSERVATION FIELD NOTES TEMPLATE
Observation Field Notes Template

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<th>Administrators Name</th>
<th>Observer’s Name</th>
<th>Eric Sipes</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School:</td>
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<td>Date of Observation</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time of Observation</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Background on teachers:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Makeup of teachers present:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role of the observer:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Content being discussed during observation:</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Observer’s Comments:</th>
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<td>Time observation concluded:</td>
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<td>Reflections following the observation:</td>
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APPENDIX D

OPEN-ENDED SURVEY QUESTIONS
Open-Ended Survey Questions

1. How many years have you been teaching in this school? __________

2. How many TOTAL years have you taught in elementary or secondary education?
   __________

3. What grade level do you currently teach?
   - 6th
   - 7th
   - 8th
   - Mixed Grade Level

4. What subject(s) do you currently teach? Check all that apply
   - Special education
   - Math
   - Science
   - Communication Arts
   - Social Studies
   - Encore, such as Foreign language, health, physical education, fine and performing arts
   - Other (specify) ______________

5. What kind of teaching credential do you hold in your main assignment area?
   - Standard, professional credential awarded by your state when all requirements for a credential have been met
   - Probationary or provisional credential awarded AFTER completion of teacher education and while a probationary period is underway
   - Temporary or provisional credential, permit or waiver awarded BEFORE teacher education or testing requirements have been completed
   - No credential

6. What is the highest degree you have earned?
   - Bachelor’s degree
   - Master’s degree in education (MA, MS, EdM)
   - Master’s degree in something other than education (specify)
     ______________
   - Education specialist or professional diploma (at least one year beyond master’s level)
   - Doctorate (EdD or PhD)
   - Other (specify) ________________________________
7. What do you as a middle school teacher perceive to be the administrators’ characteristics of instructional leadership that have the greatest direct improvement on teaching and learning? (Please use specific examples of how your administrators impact your teaching.)

8. How do you define instructional leadership?

9. How are conversations surrounding instructional leadership structured throughout a typical school day?

10. What actions does your administrator(s) do on a typical day that improves the quality of teaching and learning within your classroom? (Describe in detail)

11. What actions does your administrator(s) do on a typical day that creates a barrier to teaching and learning? (Describe in detail)
Focus Group Survey Questions

1. How would you define culture?

2. What aspects of a school culture have the greatest impact on your daily instruction?

3. Explain what is meant by high expectations?

4. How do high building expectations spill over into the expectations of your classroom?

5. How do you define instructional leadership?

6. What actions does your administrator(s) do on a typical day that improves the quality of teaching and learning within your classroom? (Describe in detail)

7. What actions does your administrator(s) do on a typical day that creates a barrier to teaching and learning? (Describe in detail)

8. What do you as a middle school teacher perceive to be the administrators’ characteristics of instructional leadership that have the greatest direct improvement on teaching and learning? (Please use specific examples of how your administrators impact your teaching.)
APPENDIX F

CODE BOOK
**Code Book**

Data collected from the questionnaire were coded utilizing the codebook listed below.

After coding each individual response, codes were grouped into interpretive codes, which eventually lead to a creation of instructional leadership themes.

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<th>Behaviors</th>
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<td>Defining School Mission</td>
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<td>Promoting a Positive School Culture</td>
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<td>Observing and Giving Feedback</td>
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<td>Managing Curriculum &amp; Instruction</td>
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<td>ABSA</td>
<td>Monitoring Student Achievement</td>
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<td>ABRP</td>
<td>Reflective Practice</td>
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<td>ABRP-TR</td>
<td>Develop Teacher reflection skills</td>
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<td>ABRP-I</td>
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<td>ABRP-D</td>
<td>Data to question, evaluate, and critique</td>
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<td>AB+</td>
<td>Positive</td>
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<td>AB+V</td>
<td>Visibility</td>
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<td>Praise</td>
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<td>ASSI</td>
<td>Sharing Leadership</td>
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<td>ASTm</td>
<td>Time Management</td>
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<td>ASFc</td>
<td>Fostering Collaboration</td>
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175
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>ASPc</td>
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<td>ASCWT</td>
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<td>TAL-DL</td>
<td>Democratic Leadership</td>
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184


187


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VITA

Eric J. Sipes was born on July 11, 1971. He was raised in a small Midwest town called Oregon, Missouri. He was educated at South Holt R-I School District in Oregon. He attended Northwest Missouri State University in Maryville, Missouri and graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics with a Computer Science Minor in 1994. Mr. Sipes received his Masters of Science in Education with an emphasis in Mathematics from Northwest Missouri State University in 1997. His Education Specialist in Urban Leadership and Policy Studies was completed at the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 2003. Eric earned his Educational Doctorate with an emphasis in educational administration in May of 2014.

Mr. Sipes is a life-long learner with a vast array of educational experience. Eric has taught everything from middle school math to 6th graders—all the way to calculus and college algebra to seniors. He then became a technology integration specialist and spent five years assisting teachers with understanding how to integrate technology into their everyday classroom.

At that time, he was recognized for his instructional and leadership skills and was chosen to participate in the North Kansas City School District Leadership Institute. Upon completion of the Leadership Institute, he was chosen to serve as the Assistant Principal of Antioch Middle School in 2006, a school serving 900 students in 6th-8th grade. In 2010, Mr. Sipes was given the honor of combining two of the things he loves, education and technology. He was selected to be the Executive Director of Information Technology Services for the North Kansas City School District. Eric currently manages a team of 50 individuals that support a network of over 16,000 computing devices.