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## Urban principal creative leadership and policy compliance in the era of accountability

Gretchen Wilson Liggins  
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URBAN PRINCIPAL CREATIVE LEADERSHIP AND POLICY COMPLIANCE IN  
THE ERA OF ACCOUNTABILITY

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN URBAN EDUCATION: POLICY STUDIES

at the

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

AUGUST 2020

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**For**

**Gretchen Eileen Wilson Liggins**

**Candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy in**

**Urban Education: Policy Studies**

**This dissertation has been approved for the**

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**July 27, 2020**  
Student's Date of Defense

## DEDICATION

*Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding. Exalt her, and she shall promote thee: she shall bring thee to honor, when thou dost embrace her. She shall give to thine head an ornament of grace: a crown of glory shall she deliver to thee. Proverbs 4:7-9 (KJV)*

To my parents Mary E. and Vernon A. Wilson, who have transitioned to their heavenly home, for instilling in me the love of reading, learning and the value of education. This work is dedicated to my children Tiana, Torria, and Michael for their unwavering belief, support, and assurance that I would persist through obstacles to completion. I am constantly amazed and inspired by each one of you. I also dedicate this to my grandchildren Kwan, Zadiah, Eric, Jr., Erica, Erin, Yonique, and Prince James. Embrace the purpose of each new day. Passionately pursue the joy of learning.

Special dedication to my husband Derrick for your love, prayers, and kindness as we travel this interesting road of life together.

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To my B.F.F. Sara V. Jackson, godson Kristofer Jackson, and Henry Jackson, “my village” who support me through thick and thin.

To the dedicated educators of CMSD, your creative leadership matters. Your voice matters. Our children matter. Continue to courageously lead the change you wish to see in the world.

URBAN PRINCIPAL CREATIVE LEADERSHIP AND POLICY COMPLIANCE IN  
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**ABSTRACT**

For decades, urban school reform has been a persistent issue. Research suggests that urban school reforms that connect equitably to broader community improvement efforts are more sustainable and that principals play a pivotal role in leading such efforts. Although the role of the school principal is a front-line leader charged with the execution of policy and legislation, the experience of principal leadership is an area of limited research particularly how the creative leadership of the school principal connects with school transformational improvement efforts.

The purpose of this research was to explore and describe the experiences of urban principals, particularly their roles, responsibilities and leadership styles within an era of accountability of student performance outcomes as measured in state test scores. Central to the study was the principal narrations of their experiences as they navigated between policy compliance and creative leadership through the specific context of the Cleveland Plan implementation. In this study, creative leadership is defined as a multi-dimensional and transformational in its integration of distributed, authentic, and adaptive in its response to complex urban environments. It involves a view towards change that steps outside of the existing practices through collaborative, distributed, and authentic leadership to strategically move through a problem-solving framework (Puccio, Mance, & Murdock, 2011).



Using a case study design, the research focused on the principal leadership skill set as narrated by principals within a context of a specific period of school reform beginning when the Cleveland Plan was legislated as H.B. 525 in 2012 through 2019 and the issuance of the last full year state report card. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with principals of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. The research sought to both expand the study of school administration and leadership in new directions and to contribute to the base of research using the actual experiences of urban principals.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Many people, including legislators and policymakers, tend to believe they have a deep understanding of education and educational issues merely because they have had some experience with school or schooling. They remember their teachers and principals, but may not understand the leadership role that the administrator occupied then, now, or in the future. Those who serve in the role of school principal acknowledge that it has become increasingly complex, challenging, and evolving. School leadership also has become more daunting as federal legislative mandates have increased with No Child Left Behind and continuing with Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). These recent mandates call for public scrutiny and accountability for all students to reach high academic levels based on standardized assessments (Aagaard & Barnett, 2007; Alejano, Knapp & Marzolf, Portin, 2006).

In the past thirty years, the research on the importance of the role of the principal has continued to evolve with the increased demands that have stemmed from the expanded federal presence in policy formation, as well as the state anchoring local school initiatives into school district-specific legislation such as in Cleveland, Ohio. Every

effort to understand how these policy initiatives translate through to execution by the urban principal is critical.

Principal leadership historically has viewed as one factor that provides an indirect effect on student achievement (Gareis & Tschannen-Moran, 2015; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010;). More recently, the role of the principal in shaping the conditions in which students learn and the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process has been quantified, revealing that this role is second only to the direct impact of teacher effectiveness upon student academic achievement. On average, the influence of a principal can be substantial. Principal influence accounts for as much as twenty-five percent of a school's total impact upon student achievement and as much as twenty percent for direct student impact upon achievement (Branch, Hanushek & Rivkin, 2012; Marzano, McNulty & Walters, 2005).

Additionally, more recent research has explored how administrative qualities or strategic actions on the part of building leaders provide the most significant impact on student achievement and particularly student achievement in the urban setting for student and school improvement. There is research that suggests that dramatic transformations require leaders who are masters of their imaginations rather than prisoners of culture and tradition that have ceased to be relevant in this century (Rifkin, 2011). Puccio, Mance, and Murdock (2011) assert that those leaders who are effective in an increasingly complex world are committed to new ways of leadership built around the creative problem-solving process.

### **The Context and Overview in the State of Ohio and City of Cleveland**



Improving student achievement has become the focus of not only policymakers and legislators, but philanthropic and business leaders as well. In 2009, the philanthropic community—Philanthropy Ohio (formerly the Grantmaker’s Forum)— released its report that included an action strategy to support the accelerated improvement of education in Ohio. The report provided details of eleven strategic areas that Philanthropy Ohio would focus their efforts over time (Grantmakers Forum, 2009).

School leadership scholars have also been making contributions to the discussion around the effectiveness of transformational leadership approaches (Bosker, Kruger & Witziers, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 2010). From leadership scholars and theorists, there are stakeholders in between the planning and actual implementation of transformational initiatives of a school district. However, among the various layers of educators to lead the implementation in individual schools, principals may not be present during discussions or planning stages. It is the principal and the capacity of the principal primarily charged with the day-to-day execution of a package of initiatives that make up the school improvement.

Over the past few decades, the state of Ohio has increasingly become more involved with local school policy. The federal government has also increased its role, but its impact is indirect in comparison to the recent state legislative action taken with H.B. 525, better known as The Cleveland Plan – the evolution of a previous Academic Transformation Plan and the Mayor’s Plan for Transforming Schools (2012). The Mayor’s Plan was designed to address the pervasive and chronic academic and structural challenges of the local school district. During the 2011-2012 school year, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District met only 1 out of 26 academic indicators and the 2012-2013

school year ushered in a changed state report card system. For the report card issued in the summer of 2013, CMSD met 0 out of 24 indicators, and just over half of grade 3 students were proficient in reading. While pursuing a quality educational opportunity as a civil right, the Mayor's Plan addressed failing schools as a social justice issue.

The Cleveland Plan, authored by Mayor Frank G. Jackson and sent to then Governor John Kasich, called for quality schools in every Cleveland neighborhood. The Cleveland Plan was given birth by a variety of documents, meetings, and studies that preceded the mayor's plan.

The purpose of the Cleveland Plan was to ensure that every child in Cleveland would be able to attend a high-quality school and that every neighborhood would have a number of high-quality schools from which parents could choose to send their child. The Plan includes the strategies for implementation to make it all happen.

From Mayor Jackson's Cleveland Plan for Transforming Schools came bi-partisan sponsorship that guided legislation through H.B. 525, cementing changes specifically to Cleveland into state law. H.B. 525 had its impact in three broad areas: 1) providing autonomy and flexibility to the district via the CEO of schools and exemptions from certain statutory requirements; 2) changing employment practices that eliminated seniority as the sole factor in teacher placement, instituted school site hiring via personnel selection committees, and developed a performance-based evaluation and compensation system; and 3) establishing a Transformation Alliance to ensure fidelity of implementation of the Cleveland Plan with all district-sponsored charters and other schools of Cleveland who would share in school district levy proceeds.

### **Accountability of Schools through the Role of Principals**

Accountability pressures and the reinvigoration of instructional leadership due to this accountability, as well as the Common Core State Standards establishing a level of academic achievement, have caused principals – especially the urban principal – to take on the role of organizational capacity builders. Accountability has so increased the demands placed upon the principal, as have compliance issues, making the principal role extremely difficult and complicated.

Accountability for public schools – mainly urban public schools – is a topic that has come under profound scrutiny since the No Child Left Behind legislation with its punitive and prescriptive measures for not meeting minimum proficiencies of student outcomes. Accountability continues to be a focus with the reauthorization known as Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Although the state has flexibility regarding its educator evaluation and accountability systems with ESSA, at this writing, the Ohio Educator Standards Board has maintained the Ohio Principal Evaluation System (OPES) with its current weighting of half of a principal evaluation based upon student academic performance. Accountability for traditional public schools has been affected for a long time due to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and its subsequent waivers that included accountability through evaluation systems. The Race to the Top competitive funding initiatives and waivers required that states that were receiving funding linked teacher and principal evaluation systems to student academic growth. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) had states reviewing and revising educator evaluation systems that were to be determined by the state. Testing to determine student outcomes remains in the

ESSA legislation; however, state flexibility as to the remedy for meeting student outcomes. Adjustments to the reliance on testing data for educator evaluation is in process for implementation in the 2020-21 school year in Ohio (ODE, 2018).

Historically, the goal of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) was to ensure that all children were to reach proficient levels of achievement in reading and mathematics by the 2013–2014 school year. NCLB was a bi-partisan piece of federal legislation that focused on closing the achievement gap between white students and students of color, economically disadvantaged, for whom English is not the first language, and students with disabilities. As Apple (2001) notes, a policy may be useful in theory, but implementation at the classroom level may not be as intended. A primary strategy of NCLB was to hold states, districts, and schools accountable for children’s mastery of state content standards, as measured by state tests and to share this information about districts’ and schools’ performance with parents and educators.

After the initial passage of NCLB in 2001, the achievement of all students was reported publicly. Initially, the primary indicator of the achievement of students was based on individual state proficiency testing outcomes. Each state was responsible for its content standards and the incremental progressive passing scores to determine proficiency each year until the 2013-2014 school year. In Ohio, state proficiency tests from its inception to 2014 were a minimum competency exam (ODE, 2003).

Accountability in the area of student achievement ostensibly was equivalent to achieving proficiency on this test, which became increasingly high-stakes. This NCLB measure of accountability through test scores caused the narrowing of the curriculum, emphasizing tested subjects at the exclusion or reduction of others.

Before the reauthorization of NCLB as ESSA, a number of federal policies were implemented. Blueprint for America in 2008 was the preliminary outline to adjust for policy flaws of NCLB. Later in 2013, Race to the Top (RttT) competitive federal funding called for Common Core standards adoptions to mitigate the wide variations among educational standards from state to state. The shift also moved expectations for student achievement from grade level proficiency to being on track for career and college readiness. The accountability focus shifted to what graduating high school students should know and be able to do. Accountability for student progress also experienced a shift to the individual school level calling for increased teacher effectiveness through changes to the teacher evaluation system adding multiple measures of student growth in addition to common core state assessments, and technology enhancements to provide real-time data to educators as well as to parents and the community at large. Unlike any other time in our nation's history, our education system is facing a proliferation of significant education reform policies at all levels of government. Accountability indicators were collected and publicly reported on an individual school basis that included the name of the principal, not the teachers.

More recently, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law in December 2015, required each state to submit an implementation plan that included input from a variety of stakeholders. In preparation for the ESSA plan development for the state of Ohio, a variety of community groups, parent groups as well as a variety of educator groups convened in meetings across the state, reflecting research showing the benefits of involving all stakeholders to produce high-quality learning environments

(Cohen, Pickeral, & McCloskey, 2009). The Ohio Department of Education submission of its state plan to the U.S. Department of Education was completed September 2017.

Historically, public education systems have not been viewed as complex systems, but rather institutions or more appropriately bureaucracies. However, this viewpoint has been evolving toward the recognition of system complexity. This statement has been true of the Cleveland school system. To meet the needs of an ever-increasing complex world, students and educators must prepare in new ways of utilizing new tools and within a variety of contexts. New networks and strategic alliances – spanning boundaries – are required for these complex systems. Maintaining traditions that have ceased to produce desired outcomes have to be released to history. Researchers Wohlstetter, Malloy, Chau & Polhemus (2003) found that decentralized school reforms have a more significant positive effect on student achievement outcomes in those schools which exhibit the capacity for reforms. Teachers and building-level leaders require skill sets that include capacity building and development of collaborative networks to solve problems without a central office having to drive each problem-solving session. Greater autonomy for decision-making at the building level to improve efficiency and outcomes is desired with the proper organizational supports. To achieve student success that is transformational at the local level, the leadership of the principal is crucial to navigating the complexity and ambiguity of the urban school system.

### **Problem Statement**

Transformational leadership is complex, iterative, and adaptive. There is a continual exchange of power between leaders and members of an organization. Organizations such as schools must respond more quickly than strategic plans will allow.

It is also essential to understand the context of urban school environments, including its historical and cultural environment. This investigation is best achieved through a study of this context through the experience of building principals who have served and continue to lead within the Cleveland Plan implementation.

The role of school leaders is quite varied and cannot be singularly focused on instructional leadership. The significant challenges that face school leadership as we now know it and the rapid change in the urban environment require multiple solutions. This creates the need for new knowledge in this area of principal leadership. Acknowledging that principal leadership matters, research by Grissom and Loeb (2011) note that the identification of essential leadership skills can be daunting due to the complexity of the leadership work of the principal.

To develop a body of useful research on any aspect of principal leadership, it is imperative to include principals' narrated experience through rich, thick descriptions of the everyday experience of individuals in this position. Qualitative research can provide an exploration of the nature of the complex roles and responsibilities for administrators in leadership positions. Having these narrated experiences could provide a more in-depth understanding to those in position to craft policy in which school leaders are expected to execute. By narrating their experiences participants may reflect upon their ability to lend voice as policy actors.

While some of the recent research has centered on principal effectiveness through measures of principals' dispositions and feelings of overall effectiveness, others have sought to investigate principal leadership characteristics of success. One such example is a study of 96 principals by Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) that found that the school

leadership's sense of collective self-efficacy positively predicts the school's achievement level. Other principal leadership studies emphasize leadership centered on instructional leadership and transformational leadership (Marks & Printy, 2003).

In January 2017, the Rand Corporation issued an updated report on school leadership interventions since ESSA (Herman et al., 2017). Echoing the research, Rand found that school leadership can be a powerful driver of improvement of student outcomes and ESSA's requirements for evidence-based initiatives designed to improve school leadership, thus positively impacting student, teacher, and principal outcomes. While NCLB had prescriptive interventions for school improvement, ESSA allowed for flexibilities for states and districts to select evidenced-based interventions (2017).

In Cleveland, the Cleveland Plan calls for deep visioning and moving away from the excessive accountability, unfunded mandates and prescriptive interventions of NCLB. From my recognition, excessive accountability represents situational and transactional leadership theory and may limit creativity and innovation, cause a percentage of instruction to go towards testing formats, and increase formalized assessment time, thereby effectively reduces the instructional time and experiential learning opportunities for children. An example of excessive accountability would be assessing students for state require student growth measures and also assessing students in the same subject areas as a district requirement as well. The Cleveland Plan follows an accelerated portfolio strategy allowing for school autonomy, the ability of schools to market themselves at the local level and to continue to work on the central office as a support entity to the schools. With this school autonomy comes accountability to improve the



academic achievement outcomes for all students. Creative leadership at the principal level could be a driver for implementation of The Cleveland Plan.

This research seeks to explore the role and perceptions of the urban principal during the change process known as The Cleveland Plan implementation in the waning days of NCLB – an environment of accountability. The historical context of this contemporary research is the transition from the unfunded mandates and punitive testing model of No Child Left Behind to the beginning of the state implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act. Also considered in this context is the increased state and local government involvement in the local school system through Ohio H.B. 525 (The Cleveland Plan) as well as a renewable local school levy based upon performance and public perception.

### **Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this research is to explore and describe the experiences of urban principals as they navigate between policy compliance and creative leadership in an environment of accountability of student performance outcomes. In this study, creative leadership is defined as involving a view toward change that steps outside the existing practices through collaborative and distributed leadership to strategically move through a problem-solving framework (Puccio, Mance, and Murdock, 2011).

This research focuses on the principal leadership skill set as narrated by principals as well as the tensions between compliance and creativity evident in archival documents during a specific period of school reform beginning in 2012, when the Cleveland Plan was legislated as H.B. 525 through 2019, the issuance of the last full year state report card. Gathering information through archival documents and participant descriptions of

lived experiences collected through semi-structured interviews with participants from or recently employed by the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, the research seeks to both expand the study of school administration and leadership in new directions and to contribute to the base of research using stakeholder input.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The need and purpose of this research centers around the leadership capacity of urban principals in an era of accountability through a particular context within the educational reform of the Cleveland Plan. Therefore, the theoretical framework used for this study is contemporary leadership theory -- the post-industrial transformational leadership paradigm -- with a focus on creative leadership theory and practice that is relevant in the educational setting (Rost, 1991). Creatively thinking and leading is not just visioning and leading novel ideas, but the ideas must have a purpose. Creativity can include doing something unique or original, but it must serve a purpose, meet a need or solve a problem. Sternberg (2006) asserts successful leaders need creative intelligence, which allows them to form a vision in the first place as well as being able to gain support for ideas that may be unpopular or novel. While the ability to solve complex problems creatively has a direct impact upon performance (Mumford et al., 2000), principals of urban schools encounter a high degree of expected compliance in terms of meeting prescribed school improvement demands from their district and ensuring their students perform on high-stakes standardized tests at scores determined by the state as showing evidence of proficiency.

Kirtman and Fullan (2016) put forth that leaders have to distribute or delegate compliance tasks so that the principal is freed up to develop innovative and motivating cultures for continuous student improvement and educator capacity building.

Figure 1 provides a graphic display of how creative leadership is theorized in this study. It conceptualizes creative leadership within local, state, and federal funding and accountability mandates as well as the Cleveland Plan. Within this context, it draws on Puccio, Mance, and Murdock (2011) define creative leadership as the ability to deliberately engage the imagination to define and guide a group toward a novel goal—a direction that is new for the group. This novel direction is a result of placing creativity, ideation and problem-solving at its core. By bringing about this change, creative leaders have a positive influence on their context such as the school, community and the workplace as well as the individuals that are part of the context. Creative leadership can embody several leadership approaches that allow problems to be solved or improvements to be made using novel or creative ways (Puccio, Mance & Murdock, 2011). In this study, creative leadership is defined as a multi-dimensional and transformational in its integration of distributed, authentic, and adaptive in its response to complex urban environments. It involves a view towards change that steps outside of the existing practices through collaborative, distributed, and authentic leadership to strategically move through a problem-solving framework (Puccio, Mance, & Murdock, 2011).

### **Research Questions**

The study will address three main research questions, as indicated below:

1. What are the roles, responsibilities and leadership styles narrated by principals within a context of high-stakes accountability and efforts toward district transformation?

2. In what way do the narratives of principals on their leadership styles reflect compliance with directives outside their building and in what way do the narratives reflect creativity?
3. What are the barriers principals narrate and what are the supports as it relates to roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles?

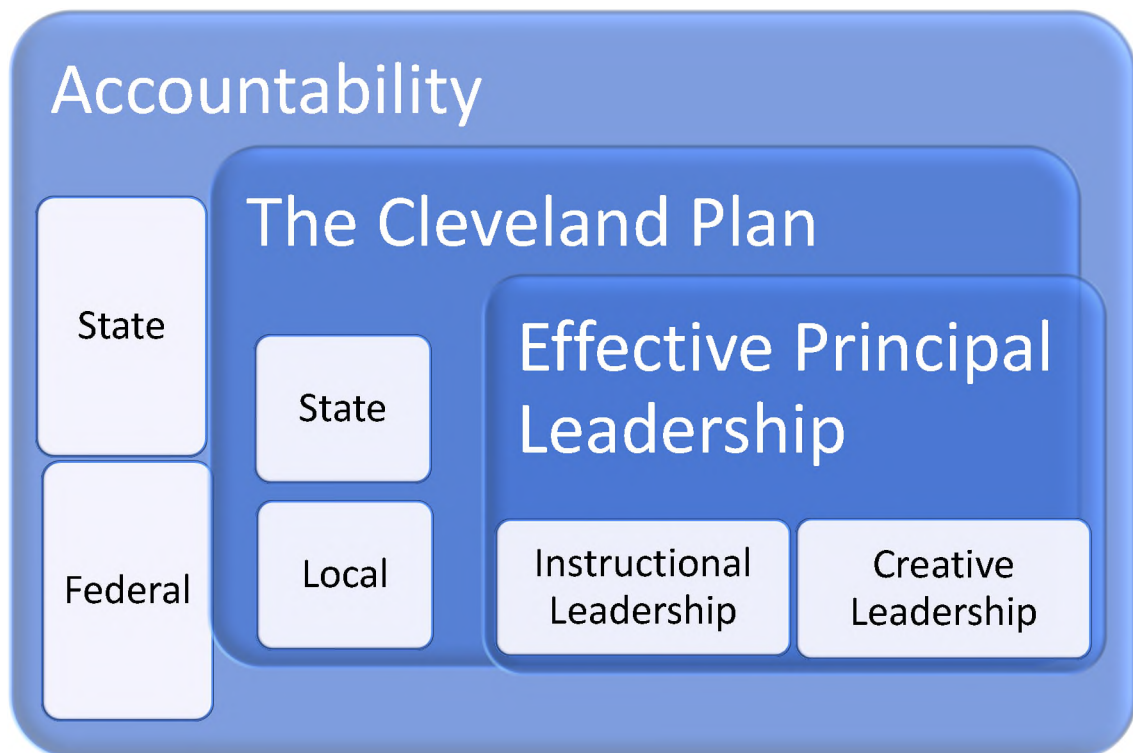


Figure 1 Concept Map

### **Significance of the Study**

The study is significant in its potential benefit to principal preparation programs. Given the focus in this research to understand current principals' experiences, the findings might inform school leader preparation programs so that coursework is meaningful, job-embedded, relevant, and helpful to future leaders' connections with new

networks to span traditional boundaries. Improving school leadership preparation programs might accrue benefits for educators at a variety of levels and their students.

Additional potential benefits of this study would be in the educational policy area. Often educator policy has lacked input at the principal level. Findings from this study might better inform policymakers as to the issues and context as education policy and decisions are made.

### **Limitations**

This research proposes to study urban principals to understand how creative leadership as defined by this research is utilized to navigate policy compliance of H.B. 525 (The Cleveland Plan) within a particular context. The resultant descriptions of this contemporary context may not be generalizable to all urban principals in their leadership capacities or all urban districts. While not generalizable, the research will use rich description of themes from in-depth principal narratives that may be useful in similar contexts and in advancing the scholarship in this area. From principal narratives, there may be a better understanding of how to align principal support and structure organizations; however, definitive mechanisms for doing so may not result from this research.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following definition of terms will apply:  
*accountability*: professional and personal responsibility for achieving a level of academic achievement. Accountability is most closely associated with school performance on standardized tests with performance targets set by the district and the state.

*Cleveland Plan:* The Mayor's Plan for Transforming Schools issued in 2012 is referenced throughout this study as the Cleveland Plan. This plan evolved from The Academic Transformation Plan. The Cleveland Plan is an aspirational plan to reinvent public education in the city and serve as a model of innovation by having high performing schools in every Cleveland neighborhood. This will be driven by school autonomy linked to accountability, exemplary principals leading schools with exemplary teachers, and parents having school choice.

*compliance:* conforming to expectations, agreements, rules, policies, regulations or laws. Funding may or may not be linked to compliance.

*creative leadership:* a multi-dimensional and transformational in its integration of distributed, authentic, and adaptive leadership in its response to complex urban environments. It involves a view towards change that steps outside of the existing practices through collaborative, distributed, and authentic leadership to strategically move through a problem-solving framework (Puccio, Mance, & Murdock, 2011).

## **Summary**

In this chapter, the focus of the study, the problem statement, theoretical framework, and research questions were introduced. The specific research interest is leadership theory associated with principal leadership. There is an emphasis upon creative leadership theory. As creative leadership theory is viewed as collaborative and integrative containing elements of complexity/adaptive, distributed, and authentic leadership approaches which are strongly intertwined with the creative leadership paradigm.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Background**

Attempting to explore and describe the experiences of urban principals as they navigate between policy compliance and creative leadership in an environment of accountability, this research focuses on contemporary leadership theory as it relates to schools. Therefore, leadership in general needed to be understood. The review of the literature will move from the broad topic of leadership theory to the more specific theoretical framework for the study – creative leadership theory.

Relevance to the urban school setting was a factor of when considering which contemporary leadership theories would be pertinent. Another guiding factor of the literature review was the context of the study – a local school reform plan generated from business, philanthropic, mayoral, and district administration through state legislation – The Cleveland Plan to Transform Schools implementation. Leadership theory as researched in the context of school improvement yielded the most researched theories in contemporary theory. Leadership theory relevant to principal leadership within the context of the study is included in the review.

The review of the literature moves beyond the notion of leadership as a one-dimensional characteristic. For example, Galton's *Hereditary Genius* (1869) provided the basis of leadership study 150 years ago – that leadership was a characteristic of extraordinary individuals whose opinions could bring about radical change, and that leadership characteristics were essentially hereditary. Galton's belief in a hereditary disposition for leadership may have been flawed through the emergence of his study of eugenics; however, the notion of leadership characteristics has prevailed over time. In trying to define leadership, there is no one correct definition. It was argued by Bass (2000; 2008) that a single definition of leadership was pointless. Multiple definitions and multi-dimensional leadership concepts are needed for a valid definition of leadership (Bass, 2008).

According to Northouse (2018), leadership is a process, occurs in groups, influences a group of individuals, and includes moving toward or accomplishing common goals. Burns (1978) asserted that leadership is exercised over other persons to realize goals that are mutually held by leaders and followers. Burns also acknowledged that leaders encourage self-actualization because they have the ability to lead followers by helping them become aware of their true selves and true needs within an organization. Leadership has also been defined as the “quality of the behavior of individuals whereby they guide people or their activities in an organized effort” (Novicevic, Davis, Dorn, Buckley, & Brown, 2005, p. 1400). In the following literature review, leadership theory in the contemporary period of leadership study will be discussed, followed by leadership theory in the context of educational reform.

### **Contemporary Leadership Period**



Rost (1991) posits that the contemporary period of leadership theory is recognized as a post-industrial paradigm with the research of transformational leadership by Burns serving as the catalyst. It was Bernard Bass and other researchers who expounded upon the transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Bass and Avolio (1994) included elements of trait theory of leadership by noting the charismatic characteristics of leadership. Contemporary leadership theory is grounded in the improvement of the common goal with the addition of social responsibility. Contemporary leadership theory hinges upon the interactions of leaders and followers moving away from the leader-focused transactional theory.

However, James MacGregor Burns is typically noted for revolutionizing the scholarly view of leadership in the post-industrial era with the publication of the book *Leadership* in 1978. In this work, Burns was the first scholar to conceptualize leadership as a social process that involved the *interaction* of leaders and followers in achieving common interests and mutually defined ends. It was during the 1980's as noted by Rost (1991) that research and models were developed for transformational leadership theory, shifting the emphasis on the development of the follower and conceptualizing leadership as a social process with interactions between leaders and followers. The literature review of leadership viewed as contemporary leadership theory moves forward from this work.

### **Effective Principal Leadership and Accountability**

Effective school leadership and accountability are inextricably intertwined. In a 2010 survey of school and district administrators, policymakers and education advisors, principal leadership ranked second only to teacher quality among twenty-one educational

issues that included special education, school violence, English language learning, school drop-outs (Simpkin, Charner & Suss, 2010, pp 9-10).

Notable research projects that have been supported by the Wallace Foundation since 2000 have provided empirical information regarding the correlations between effective principal leadership and student achievement particularly in schools needing turnaround. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom (2004) reported that few if any troubled schools exhibited “turnaround” without an effective principal leadership. After six additional years, the team of Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson (2010) reaffirmed their earlier findings adding confidence to the conclusions that effective principal leadership was second only to teacher effectiveness in impacting student achievement.

The Wallace Foundation (2012) upon review of their produced reports found that there were five leadership practices of effective principals: 1) Shaping a vision of academic success for all students based upon high standards; 2) creating a climate hospitable to education—safe and orderly climate with fruitful interactions; 3) cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and others carry out the school vision; 4) improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and learners to learn at their utmost; and 5) managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement.

Effective principal leadership literature lacks a certain amount of consistency other than noting that the principal has been the central figure or decision maker in a school. Beck and Murphy (1993) noted that the increased demands on principals made broad, metaphorical descriptions inaccurate. Role definitions in the literature and by

principals themselves have been problematic due to continually evolving and changing descriptions (Daresh, Gantner, Dunlap & Hvizdak, 2000).

According to Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom, (2004), leadership can foster a highly significant role in enhancing student learning (p. 1). Successful leaders are those who can redesign the organization to meet the needs of the students and staff. As the focus on student achievement has become paramount, successful leaders develop school cultures where its members are accountable for academic excellence and strive for high learning expectations. The leadership encourages the building of collaborative processes and the appreciation of student capacity to learn. Effective leadership understands that to meet the needs of the students and staff, the design and culture of the school must support and sustain their efforts. The principal establishes the environment as well as the culture for learning (Allensworth & Hart, 2018). Beyond the principles of successful leadership, Leithwood & Riehl (2003) confirmed that successful leaders had mastered not only “best practices” but also productive responses to the unique demands of the contexts in which they find themselves (p.14).

### **Contemporary Leadership in Schools**

Understanding contemporary approaches to leadership are of increasing importance due to the rapidly changing, diverse, and complex nature of organizations. Winston & Patterson (2006) provided a definition representing an integrated model – “A leader is one or more people who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) who have diverse gifts, abilities, and skills and focuses the follower(s) to ... expend spiritual, emotional, and physical energy in a concerted coordinated effort to achieve the organizational mission and objectives” (p. 7).

Definitions of contemporary leadership are as vast and varied as all others. What is typically noted regarding the more recent theories, approaches, and models of leadership are that there is a connection made between people – a style of working horizontally -- more so than merely as leaders and followers. In contemporary leadership literature, the importance of relationship and collaboration are noted. Instead of leaders and followers or members, there is evident an emphasis on co-collaboration and co-constructors of influence within a social process to achieve a goal.

The focus of this leadership inquiry is in schools, specifically principal leadership in the urban schools in a contemporary context. The word contemporary leadership for this study include the most prevalent leadership approaches in the last thirty years with the context of the organization of schools. The focus ultimately is within the integrative creative leadership theory framework.

### **Accountability and Compliance**

Frattura and Capper (2007) assert school-based educational leaders have to move beyond the limitations of compliance and move toward the development of high quality integrated comprehensive services for all learners. Noting the number of students who qualify for federally mandated services is growing in urban as well as suburban and rural districts, principals have to create ways to meet the needs of a variety of learners yet comply with state and federal guidelines. These guidelines or mandates can be connected to funding such as Title I. Research by Lyle Kirtman (2013) conducted on over 1000 educational leaders demonstrated that the highest results come from the leaders who are low on compliance and rule following and high on innovation. With the current

complexities and diversity of student needs, trying to be perfect with all policy, state and local demands may create a less effective principal.

The deleterious effects of increased micro accountability – the insider accountability within schools and districts--in the evolution of the principalship have occurred ironically in the name of instructional leadership (Fullan, 2014). As increased compliance takes its course, it becomes ever more intrusive, and detailed and evermore ineffective. Very often there are not enough hours in the day to complete compliance tasks, not to mention that it may include work that undermines the professional relationship between principals and teachers, and principals and district personnel. Dufour and Marzano (2009) sounded the alarm about the conflicting trend between the accountability and compliance when they wrote “time devoted to the capacity of teachers to work in teams is far better spent than time devoted to observing individual teachers” (p. 67).

Accountability and compliance can result in building leaders feeling restricted and constrained which may make daily work ineffective but also can circumvent creativity and innovation. The tension associated between creativity and compounding compliance toward accountability policies can put a focus on fear of failure. That fear can cause a leader to hold back from the freedom to create and the willingness to try a new approach that may actually result in superior performance (Fullan, 2014).

### **Instructional Leadership**

Instructional leadership theory and conceptualization is uniquely a school-based leadership theory. The notion that principals were more than managers of resources and facilities began to evolve to one of instructional leadership with Ron Edmonds' Effective

Schools research (1979) that found that effective schools were led by principals who were instructional leaders who focused teachers, resources, and parents on academic achievement goals particularly in schools which served the urban poor. Leithwood and Montgomery (1982) found that the principals' behaviors, actions or strategies connected school-related factors and classroom related factors such as school climate that greatly provide the conditions for learning. Instructional leaders define the school mission, take the lead in managing the instructional program and promote a positive school environment (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). While much of this research was from the 1980's and 1990's, it continued to form the basis of principal preparation programs until very recently.

Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) in a meta-analysis used the results of 22 studies to compare the effects of instructional and transformational leadership on student outcomes. Instructional leadership includes an intense focus and moral purpose promoting deep student learning, professional inquiry based upon student data, development of trusting relationships of education staff to ascertain evidence of student achievement outcomes toward learning targets (Timperley, 2011). They estimated that the average effect of instructional leadership on student outcomes is three to four times greater than the effect of transformational leadership. In a second analysis, the authors analyzed survey items from 12 of the studies and inductively identified five leadership dimensions: (1) establishing goals and expectations; (2) resourcing strategically; (3) planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum; (4) promoting and participating in teacher learning and development; and (5) ensuring an orderly and supportive environment. They find the most substantial effects on student outcomes from

dimension (4), followed by dimensions (1) and (3). Combining the findings from the two analyses, the study concludes that —the more leaders focus their relationships, their work, and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their influence on student outcomes (p. 636).

This emphasis on the teaching and learning aspects of school leadership is the hallmark characteristic of the instructional leadership literature. This research generally concludes that a strong, directive principal, focused on curriculum and instruction, is essential for effective schools (e.g., Blase & Blase, 1992; Heck, 1992; Leithwood, 1994; Southworth, 2002). Strong instructional leadership behaviors are described as hands-on with curriculum and instruction issues, unafraid to work directly with teachers, and often present in classrooms. While the focus on instructional leadership waned somewhat in the 1990s as transformational leadership received greater research attention, interest in instructional leadership in the literature has seen a resurgence with the accountability and school improvement movements, which have re-emphasized the role of the principal in facilitating instructional quality (Hallinger, 2005). Hallinger (2003) developed a specific conceptualization of instructional leadership that consisted of three goals: 1) defining the school's mission; 2) managing the instructional program, and; 3) promoting a positive school learning climate. Additionally, more recent research has broadened the conceptualization to include shared instructional leadership. Consideration for two additional leadership theories follow next – that of transformational leadership, followed by creative leadership.

### **Transformational Leadership Theory**

MacGregor Burns (1978) is noted as the first to view leadership as an interaction between an individual in a leadership capacity and followers. Burns further argued that leadership involved two dimensions – transactional and transformative. The transactional dimension according to Burns does not individualize the needs of the follower, but rather seeks to motivate the follower to do what the leader wants. Transformative leadership is an exchange and an appeal to the values and emotions of participants of an organization to continue to improve. Transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1998; Burns, 1978) emphasizes collaboration with other stakeholders, particularly the role of the principal in inspiring and motivating the staff, developing a commitment to a common vision, building the staff's capacity to work collaboratively, and shaping the organizational culture.

Bass's Theory of Transformational Leadership (1998) motivates followers to do more than expected by raising followers' level of consciousness about the importance and value of goals. Transformational leadership taps into utilitarianism by influencing followers to transcend their own self-interests for the greater good -- the team or organization. In the case of schools, transformational leadership involves moving followers to address higher level needs of children over the needs of the adults.

Bennis and Nanus (1985) through their interviews with a large number of corporate CEO's ascertained four common strategies used by leaders in transforming organizations, which include the following: 1) having a clear vision of the future of the organization and could clearly and simply articulate that vision to others; 2) acting as social architects who could re-culture an organization through individuals creating new norms and reshaping organizational philosophy; 3) being able to garner trust by making



their positions known, even through a high degree of uncertainty through the transformational process; and 4) having the ability to idealize influence (act as strong role models for followers); inspire motivation – (communicate high expectations, inspiring them to become committed to organizational goals); intellectually stimulate – (stimulate followers to be creative and innovative and by challenging the intellect); Provide individualized consideration (provide a supportive climate in which they listen to the needs of followers.)

Transformational leadership theory application may be ideal for principals of schools needing or going through drastic or substantial reform as change management is a strength of a transformational leader (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2006). Transformational leadership has been associated with positive school outcomes regarding improvements of school environment and relations with teachers and staff (Bogler, 2005; Griffith, 2004). However, there were weaker relationships between transformational leadership practices and student achievement, but stronger impacts on teacher motivation (Leithwood and Janzi, 2006). Similar results were found with data collected by Ross and Gray (2006) from Canadian elementary schools. They found stronger direct effect on teacher commitment and weaker indirect effects of principal transformational leadership on student achievement.

From the broad organizational leadership model of transformational practices, principal leadership studies have reported more behavioral findings—the things that principals actually do—more so than the charismatic traits of the leader. Hallinger (2003) found that transformative principal leadership has a focus upon developing the capacity of the organization to innovate. As opposed to specifically focusing upon

facilitation, coordination, and control, the transformational leader seeks to first build the capacity and then selects the purposes and supports to the changes necessary to the teaching and learning process.

The more recent educational research notes that the role of the principal is constantly evolving looking at school level leadership through a transformational paradigm. Transformational leaders must be effective leveragers and managers of human capital. Odden (2011) and Kimball (2011) note that human capital management focuses upon the continual transformation or continual evolution and professional growth of staff. Effective leaders cultivate leadership in faculty members formally and informally (Odden, 2011). Distributing and cultivating leadership talent in teachers is part of a balanced leadership framework (Marzano, Walters & McNulty, 2005) that provides for the professional development and continual intellectual stimulation of staff. Human capital management is a major component of transformational leadership skills.

The principal's role as a transformational leader and human capital manager means that principals need to be able to attract, manage, and develop talent strategically. Building leaders have to use a network approach to recruit and retain talent, convey a shared vision, provide for relevant professional development, increase team efficacy, teacher evaluations with meaningful and timely feedback, use data-driven decision-making, and recognize successes of staff members (Kimball, 2011; Hoy & Tarter, 2011).

As noted earlier, a broadened conceptualization of instructional leadership theory into practice includes collaboration among teachers, creating opportunities for professional growth, and the development of professional learning communities (Marks & Printy, 2003). Marks and Printy (2003) have argued for integrated leadership

approaches, which combine instructional and transformational leadership. Their research concludes that the most effective schools are the ones in which the multiple models of leadership characteristics and behaviors coexist. The notion of leadership as multi-dimensional is discussed within the final section on creative leadership theories.

### **Creative Leadership**

To more fully understand creative leadership, an understanding of creativity needed to be explored. Kozbelt et al. (2010) identified ten categories of theories of creativity. Highlighting the most pertinent to this research, essentially theories of creativity can be classified into one of four elements of creativity – process, product, person, and place or press. Sir Ken Robinson (2001) expressed a simpler way to define creativity as “the process of having original ideas that have value” (p. 67). It can be argued that the value of an original idea could be subjective or dependent upon other contexts.

For the purposes of this study, creative leadership is viewed as an integrative leadership theory that is focused upon positive organizational behaviors. The theories that have been conceptualized as components of creative leadership are in part as a result of a review of the literature of both current and future-focused leadership development literature (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). Puccio, Mance, and Murdock (2011) define creative leadership as the ability to deliberately engage the imagination to define and guide a group toward a novel goal—a direction that is new for the group. Creative leadership can embody several leadership approaches that all problems to be solved or improvements to be made using novel or creative ways. The following leadership

approaches are prevalent in the educational setting of schools and are integrated into the problem-solving process of creative leadership.

**Adaptive leadership in response to complex urban environments.**

Increasingly complex demands have reached into the urban principalship as building leaders are finding themselves navigating between schools as educational institutions, social service agencies, as well as leading organizational incubators for innovation. In light of the dizzying array of roles that principals play – particularly those in the urban environment – an integrative leadership approach to creative leadership is complexity leadership theory.

Cistone and Stevenson (2000) in their report of the urban principalship found that due to the variety of conditions in the urban environment – social, economic, and political – the role of the principal was more complex than their suburban peers. With the daily realities of the position and the speed of change, previous linear models of strategic organizational planning may not work. More rapid responses are needed in urban environments and relating to data on urban schools.

Complexity leadership theory seeks to take advantage of the dynamic capabilities of complex and adaptive systems. Complexity Leadership Theory focuses on identifying and exploring the strategies and behaviors that foster organizational and team creativity, learning, and adaptability when appropriate. Complex adaptive system dynamics are enabled within contexts of hierarchical coordination. In Complex Leadership Theory, three broad types of leadership are recognized: (1) leadership grounded in traditional, bureaucratic hierarchy of alignment and control (i.e., administrative leadership); (2) leadership that structures and enables conditions so that complex and adaptive systems

are able to optimize creative problem solving, adaptability, and learning or enabled leadership; and (3) leadership that operates as a generative dynamic that underlies emergent change activities and creates new leadership knowledge as obsolete processes are allowed to phase out.

The complexity leadership perspective is premised on several critical notions. First, the informal dynamic is embedded in context (Hunt, 1999; Osborn et al., 2002). Complex adaptive systems and leadership are socially constructed in a situated context—a context in which patterns over time must be considered and where history matters (Cilliers, 1998; Dooley, 1996; Hosking, 1988; Osborn et al., 2002).

Second, a complexity leadership perspective requires that there is distinction between leadership and leaders. Complexity Leadership Theory has a view of leadership as an emergent, interactive dynamic that is capable of adaptive outcomes and is therefore also called adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994). Complexity Leadership Theory considers leaders as individuals who act in ways that influence this interactive dynamic and the outcomes. Leaders may change according to the needs of the group moving toward a goal.

Finally, complexity leadership occurs in the face of adaptive challenges (typical of the Knowledge Era). As defined by (Heifetz, 1994) and (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001), adaptive challenges are problems that require new learning, innovation, and new patterns of behavior. They are different from technical problems, which can be solved with knowledge and procedures already in place (Parks, 2005). Adaptive challenges are not amenable to authoritative leadership or standard operating procedures, but rather require exploration, new discoveries, and adjustments. Day (2000) refers to this as the difference

between management and leadership development. Management development involves the application of proven solutions to known problems, whereas leadership development refers to situations in which groups socially construct a solution and figure their way out of problems that could not have been predicted.

In the school setting, this socially constructed leadership theory could be evidenced through teacher-based teams or professional learning communities that are formed according to the contexts and needs of individual schools. Within schools, structures, frameworks for practice, professional development and capacity building for collaborative teams would require implementation. The needs of the school and leaders of the teams would be members of the team based upon their creativity, expertise and ability to influence the collaborative group in positive ways to solve problems and achieve goals. Inclusive and flexible leadership approaches are integrated in part with other leadership approaches with connections to creativity and the creative problem-solving process. Distributed leadership approaches involves other members which can encourage divergent and creative thinking while working toward a common goal.

**Distributed leadership.** Distributed Leadership Theory as a concept recognizes the importance of interdependence within an organization and the importance of collaborative teams, relationships, shared experiences and social interaction. Leadership is shared and socially distributed promoting interdependence and shared responsibility among the members of the organization as opposed to dependence upon a singular leader (Harris, 2005). This leadership theory acknowledges the impossibility of the overwhelming demands upon a single leader (the principal) to effectively carry out the mission of the school organization. Timperley (2005) suggests that shared or distributed

leadership may have been in response to the growing complexity of the role of the school principal.

As greater calls for accountability for school improvement have been demanded, the expanded definition of leadership is captured in this definition of distributed leadership. Spillane (2006) state, “Leadership refers to those activities that are either understood by, or designed by, organizational members to influence the motivation, knowledge, affect, and practice of organizational members in the service of the organization’s core work” (pp. 11-12). As noted, this definition of leadership takes into account the shared leadership responsibility of the organization’s members.

Alma Harris asserts that leadership is not the domain of a singular person, but rather a fluid or emergent phenomenon. She also notes that organizational leadership fluidity does not do away with formal leadership structures (2008). Gronn (2008) believes that distributed leadership provides the foundation for a more democratic and inclusive organization thereby increasing the sources and voices of influence of the organization.

There are also caveats to distributed leadership in actual practice that may be evidenced in the school setting. Gronn (2008) warns against championing distributed leadership against singularly leadership focus or style indicating there must be balance to honor and promote divergent thinking within a school setting. Balance is achievable through the collaborative process that takes place with distributed leadership and as an integrative strand of creative leadership from ideation, shared production, and execution.

**Authentic leadership.** Authentic leadership is also included here as a component of creative leadership. However, the theoretical basis for authentic leadership was as a

result of transformational leadership writings of Bass & Steidlmeier (1999) that suggested that within transformational leadership there were pseudo versus authentic transformational leaders. The concept of authentic leadership in practice has been written about in general leadership practice by George (2003) and Luthans & Avolio (2003) defined it using the academic community as its context. Authentic leaders help to create the environment where students and teachers learn and grow. Place and press are components of the creative leadership process.

Authentic leadership for the purposes of this study will draw upon the definition provided by Luthans & Avolio that authentic leadership is “a process that draws upon both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors...” (p. 243). Subsequent research by Cooper et al. (2005) and Sparrowe (2005) agree with four factors of authentic leadership: 1) balanced processing; 2) internalized moral perspective; 3) relational transparency; and 4) self-awareness. Authentic leadership further implies that one acts in accord with one’s true self and self-expression and leadership behaviors are consistent with inner thoughts (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

### **Research Gaps in Creative Leadership**

Leadership theory, more specifically contemporary leadership theory, has been selected as the theoretical framework for this research, with a focus on creative leadership theory and practice that is relevant in the educational setting (Rost, 1991). Leadership theory is a pertinent framework for the study of the urban school principal, and as Harris (2009) noted, “Leadership is primarily about influence and change” (p.10). Leadership is



therefore primarily about influencing others to act and change --one of the many roles of the school principal is leading and influencing change.

Leadership research itself is replete with diverse as well as integrative and complex theories, approaches, and models. Moving from general leadership theory to more specific theories of leadership as it relates to school principals informs the framework for the research. Increasingly complex and demanding metaphors describe the urban principalship as building leaders are responding to multiple views of schools as educational institutions, social service agencies, as well as organizational incubators for innovation. In light of the dizzying array of roles that principals play – particularly those in the urban environment – the theoretical framework deemed appropriate is leadership theory with a focus upon theory grounded in more contemporary leadership contexts.

The research seeks to explore and understand the experiences of urban principals' navigation of policy compliance to meet the demands for rapid academic achievement gains situated in complex urban environs. This review of the literature focused on research on contemporary leadership theory within a context of accountability and school reform policy. Considerations for creative problem solving and leadership capacity in an era of accountability drove the focus of this literature review. Conceptualizing creative leadership as an emerging integrative leadership theory may have the most promise going forward for the urban principal who deals with diversity, rapid change, innovation, adaptability, and relational trust in “flattening” organizational structures.

There has been recent research on improving student educational outcomes; however, there has been limited research that revolves around how the roles, responsibilities, and leadership are approached creatively. Real leaders are creative

problem solvers. Byrne et al. (2009) allude to the fact that due to the complex behaviors and considerations within organizations, developing the skills to lead innovation needs to occur systemically. Systematic models need collaboration creativity, intelligence, organizational wisdom and idea generation for the common good (Sternberg, 2008). With urban school leadership becoming more diverse and complex, accelerated by technology and globalization within a context of high accountability, it is difficult for the research base to keep pace. This study is intended to help fill this gap.

### **Summary**

The past thirty years has provided an environment for a multitude of school leadership approaches. Some borrowed from business and complexity leadership stemming from the tech sector provides an understanding that leadership in schools is truly organic and is indeed a social process. The field of school leadership research throughout the 1990's, the need for school turnarounds as well as the complexity of the principal leadership role shifted the research interest to transformational leadership. While instructional leadership was highly researched, creative leadership as multi-dimensional and transformational in its integration of distributed, authentic, and adaptive in its response to complex urban environments has not been widely researched. As organizations become “flatter” in structure and as there is an increased need to produce and cultivate building level school leadership capacity, creative leadership as an educational practice has been explored. There are great tensions inherent in creative leadership and its integrative leadership approaches within federal accountability compliance with mandates toward student performance targets measured by state tests.

The experience of building principals creatively navigating these tensions is a much needed area of study.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this research is to explore and describe the experiences of urban school principals as they navigate between policy compliance and creative leadership within federal accountability mandates toward student performance targets measured by state tests. In this study, creative leadership is defined as multi-dimensional and transformational in its integration of distributed, authentic, and adaptive in its response to complex urban environments. It involves a view towards change that steps outside of the existing practices through collaborative, distributed, and authentic leadership to strategically move through a problem-solving framework (Puccio, Mance, & Murdock, 2011).

This research will examine the principal leadership skill set as narrated by principals. It will also attend to the tensions between compliance and creativity during a specific period of school reform beginning with NCLB in 2001 through ESSA in 2015. At the state and local level, the context of study also involves the 2012 legislation of the Cleveland Plan in H.B. 525 through 2018, the most recent full school year for which there is a state report card. The research will gather information through archival

documents and a study of lived experiences collected through semi-structured interviews with building principals currently or formerly employed by the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. The research will seek to both expand the study of school administration and leadership in new directions and to contribute to the base of research using stakeholder input.

### **Research Questions**

Research questions this study seeks to answer are the following:

- Q1. What are the roles, responsibilities and leadership styles narrated by principals within a context of accountability and efforts toward district transformation?
- Q2. In what way do the narratives of principals on their leadership styles reflect compliance with directives outside their building and in what way do the narratives reflect creativity?
- Q3. What are the barriers principals narrate and what are the supports as it relates to roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles?

### **Research Context**

The urban principal encounters a unique set of circumstances whereby leadership, accountability, policy/legislation compliance, and the demands for increasing student achievement intersect. The Cleveland Plan, authored by the office of Mayor Frank G. Jackson and sent to the state assembly and Governor John Kasich for his signature into law, called for quality schools in every Cleveland neighborhood. Bi-partisan sponsorship guided the state legislation known as H.B. 525. In 2010, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District had an abysmal high school graduation rate of 54%. In the spring of 2010, the Board of Education approved the closure of sixteen schools. There was a

projected \$74 million budget deficit, creating the need for lay-off over six hundred teachers. In order to be eligible for federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) funds, the lowest performing schools that were still open had to remove the principal and 50% of the teaching staff as part of a turnaround strategy. Since those daunting days in 2010, the District has posted a four-year high school graduation rate of 78.2% and a five-year graduation rate of 81.5% as of the 2018-19 school year with a state goal of 85% (ODE, 2019). Additionally, improvements in reading and an improving attendance rate were evident in the report to the Ohio Department of Education submitted in the spring of 2016 (CEO Progress Report to ODE, March 2016).

The Performance Index is a measure of state test results of every student, not just those who achieve a proficient score or higher. There are seven levels on the index and districts receive points for every student who takes a test. The higher the achievement level, the more points awarded in the district's index. This rewards schools and districts for improving the performance of all students. The CMSD Performance Index for the past 3 years was reviewed as the state tests changed from the Ohio Achievement Assessments (OAA) to Ohio State Tests (OST). Reviewing the Performance Index of CMSD from the OST years only, the Performance Index for the district moved from 55.1 in the 2015-16 school year to an Annual Measurable Objective of 70.9 as of the last report card 2018-19 which indicates how well a district is closing achievement gaps toward state goals for disaggregated groups of students. (ODE 2019).

According to Crain's Cleveland Business of January 3, 2016, the Transformation Plan implementation has begun with multiple changes in rapid succession. Key players in the process have been principals. Many have been leading the change at the building level.

In an Education Week report, a 25% turnover rate of in urban schools was indicated (2014, November, 5). Recently CMSD noted that about 40% of current school principals have two to five years of experience as principals for the district (CMSD, 2019). Greater school autonomy has been added over time via greater control of school budgets at the school building level as well as specific hiring decisions for teachers through a collaborative personnel selection process.

A qualitative research approach was selected since the purpose for the research is to explore the experiences and to understand how principals make meaning of these experiences. The research is designed to study leadership from the perspective of those who are charged with executing initiatives and policies in the schools – the principal participants. I am seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ view of their role. For the rich descriptions of these experiences, a quantitative approach would not be adequate. It also would not provide for the co-construction of principal’s realities between myself as the researcher and my participants. This research is intended to give voice to a group of urban professionals who have not had their experiences documented through this recent history.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The need and purpose of this research centers around the leadership capacity of urban principals in an era of accountability through a particular context within the educational reform of the Cleveland Plan. Therefore, the theoretical framework used for this study is contemporary leadership theory -- the post-industrial transformational leadership paradigm – with a focus on creative leadership theory and practice that is relevant in the educational setting (Rost, 1991). Creatively thinking and leading is not

just visioning and leading novel ideas, but the ideas must have a purpose. Creativity can include doing something unique or original, but it must serve a purpose, meet a need or solve a problem. Sternberg (2002) asserts successful leaders need creative intelligence, which allows them to form a vision in the first place as well as being able to gain support for ideas that may be unpopular or novel. While the ability to solve complex problems creatively has a direct impact upon performance (Mumford et al., 2000), principals of urban schools encounter a high degree of expected compliance in terms of meeting prescribed school improvement demands from their district and ensuring their students perform on high-stakes standardized tests at scores determined by the state as showing evidence of proficiency. An emphasis on accountability involves the plan, goal and targets established as the external federal, state, and district systems use to measure student achievement outcomes. Compliance involves the tasks that may or may not directly affect student achievement outcomes and may be required to receive funding such as Title I. It may involve SIG grant reporting, or it may pertain to state requirements or district policies. Kirtman and Fullan (2016) put forth that leaders have to distribute or delegate compliance tasks so that the principal is freed up to develop innovative and motivating cultures for continuous student improvement and educator capacity building. Figure 1 provides a graphic display of how creative leadership is theorized in this study. It conceptualizes creative leadership within local, state, and federal funding and accountability mandates as well as the Cleveland Plan. Within this context, it draws on Puccio, Mance, and Murdock (2011), who define creative leadership as the ability to deliberately engage the imagination to define and guide a group toward a novel goal—a direction that is new for the group. This novel direction is a result of



placing creativity, ideation and problem-solving at its core. By bringing about this change, creative leaders have a positive influence on their context such as the school, community and the workplace as well as the individuals that are part of the context. Creative leadership can embody several leadership approaches that allow problems to be solved or improvements to be made using novel or creative ways (Puccio, Mance & Murdock, 2011). In this study, creative leadership is defined as a multi-dimensional and transformational in its integration of distributed, authentic, and adaptive in its response to complex urban environments. It involves a view towards change that steps outside of the existing practices through collaborative, distributed, and authentic leadership to strategically move through a problem-solving framework (Puccio, Mance, & Murdock, 2011).

### **Design of the Study**

A qualitative approach was selected for this study due to the nature of the study – seeking to understand the lived experiences of a particular group of people within a particular context. In general, qualitative research methods are useful in discovering and exploring the meaning that people provide to events that they experience (Biklen & Bogdan, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative research questions typically begin with words such as *why*, *how*, or *what*. Phrasing research questions in such a manner allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the research topic according to the experiences of the research participants (Patton, 2002). A qualitative research approach was deemed the most appropriate as the questions require the researcher to explore the participants experiences within a particular context (Stake, 2005).

As noted elsewhere, the role of the principal has become more rapidly complex. The interaction between the various layers of leadership within units, organization, and socio-political structures is organic, multi-faceted and complicated. A qualitative case study approach was most appropriate to understand the natural setting of schools and the experience of those in school leadership positions. Group, organization and time bounded this case study.

The description for this bounded case study was contextualized in the contemporary event of the implementation of the Cleveland Plan to Transform Schools for the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. The group that was the focus of the case study was principals at varying junctures in their career within a seven-year period between 2012 and 2019. As noted, this bounded time period begins with the implementation of the Cleveland Plan and runs through its current implementation.

A qualitative case study is a rich, concentrated investigation of a single organization, person, or group (Merriam, 2009). A case study involves an intensive description and analysis of a bounded social phenomenon whether it is social unit (urban principals), an institution (school district), or a process (transformation) (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002; Yin, 2009). A case study can be both a methodology and an object of qualitative study (Creswell, 2007). The case study approach involves a detailed description of the setting, context, and participants in coherence with an analysis of the data for themes, patterns, and issues (Merriam, 2009). The case study allows for the deeper inquiry of contemporary phenomenon within a real-world context especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not always clearly evident. The case study can be both a methodology and a design (Yin, 2014). A case study is a

preferred method of contemporary events that can be contextualized with the overlapping of historical events (Yin, 2009).

Data collection in a case study relies upon multiple methods of data gathering including participant interviews (Creswell, 2007). Other methods can include document reviews, focus groups, and surveys, and archival research. Analysis can be holistic or embedded in the case (Yin, 2009). As analysis is a process that is done throughout the data collection, this allows the framework to help structure the collection and analysis process, but does not lock it in to rigid form that cannot change once data gathering commences.

### **Interpretive Community**

The study was informed by the social constructivist interpretive paradigm. Interpretivist research “is guided by the researcher’s set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 22). In the interpretive paradigm, “knowledge is relative to particular circumstances—historical, temporal, cultural, subjective—and exists in multiple forms as representations of reality (interpretations by individuals)” (Benoliel, 1996, p. 407). Interpretivists or interpreters acknowledge multiple meanings and ways of knowing, and understand “objective reality can never be captured. I only know it through representations” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 5). The interpretive paradigm focuses primarily on recognizing and narrating the meaning of human experiences and actions (Fossey et al., 2002).

Finally, the constructivist paradigm is conceptualized as having aspects of both the constructivist/interpretive paradigm. Meaning is co-constructed through an interaction of the researcher and the participant. The interpreter, though not entirely

objective, is able to separate from the phenomenon being studied or documented and the interaction between the researcher and the participant (Creswell, 2013). Sense making and meaning is constructed through the interaction and can be influenced by the phenomenon and the context. It is not simply the researcher's interpretation, but rather the extent to which the phenomenon affects the interpretation with equivalent force. Social constructivism is considered a post-modern era in qualitative research (Andrews, 2012). In this research, the conceptual understanding of the knowledge of this research topic is co-constructed rather than discovered.

### **Participant Selection**

Participant selection for this study was purposeful to get the greatest degree of insight, information, description, and voice. The design called for the selection of 6-8 participants who have served as principals within the seven-year period in the Cleveland District. To provide for multiple realities within the context of the urban principalship and the process known as the Cleveland Plan implementation (transformation), three categories of school level leaders were selected based upon the following criteria:

- 1) two current principals who have served in the same capacity for a period of one to three years;
- 2) two principals who served prior to beginning of the Cleveland Plan implementation
- 3) two principals who have changed assignments or roles within the district during the past seven years.

The participants selected should be able to provide important facets and perspectives related to the phenomenon being studied. As a member of the current principal group,

participant selections will be made through email to persons who are members of the aforementioned groups with the assistance of appropriate department such as human resources and organizational accountability. Efforts will be made to have a geographical cross-section of school-based participants.

### **Data Collection Plan**

Each participant participated in two hour-long, semi-structured interviews at a location of convenience to the participant. Interview questions were deliberately arranged to first establish rapport and to collect some basic demographic information. The subsequent questions were designed to gather descriptions and responses to assist in the answering of the research questions. Probes were designed to encourage the participants to expand on their responses. Specific questions were designed to address specific research questions. The arrangements of interview questions followed the suggested three segments of the semi-structured interview process by Galletta (2013) with the opening segment to allow for the greatest space for participant narrative; the middle segment to allow for more specific questions related to the research questions; and the concluding segment to allow the interviewer to circle back on any unaddressed or unclear material and conclude the interview.

Interview questions were prepared in advance and provided to the IRB, but questions were not provided to participants prior to the interview in an effort to receive the most candid response. However, invitations to participate provided the nature of the investigation. The interview protocol is located in Appendix A.

## **Data Analysis Plan**

Review of the literature helped to identify creative leadership theory within the context of contemporary leadership as the theoretical framework for analysis. However, with social constructivism being the underlying interpretive lens, the lived experience narrated in participant interviews will be in conversation with this framework, perhaps complicated by participant responses.

Essential accepted practices of analyzing qualitative research are organizing the information and reducing the data in such a way that it relates to answering the research questions. Guided by Maxwell's Interactive Model of Research Design (2013), the process of analysis is non-linear and centered upon the answering the research questions through the data collection, triangulation of collected information and the framework of the analysis.

Key elements of analyzing qualitative data included organizing the information and reducing and later synthesizing the data to be gathered. I used coding to organize data. I used technology enhanced transcription to assist as I transcribed each interview so that I heard the participants' voice, tone, and emphasis multiple times. The transcripts were then uploaded to Nvivo 12 to assist in the identification of themes (nodes) through frequency tables. The transcripts were read multiple times. Frequency tables were generated, but were not the primary strategy for identification of themes or of interpreting the data. Multiple hard copies of transcriptions were made in addition to those located in Nvivo 12 which allowed me to manually annotate on hard copies while maintaining organized digital copies. Open coding or initial coding of transcripts was performed to ascertain key themes. Interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times.

Through coding, the reduction of the data into codes followed by the synthesis of thematic categories can occur leaving clear descriptions and hopefully providing interpretations of the phenomenon being studied (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005).

Emergent themes were then linked to the major components of contemporary leadership theory. In this way, the data was analyzed through open coding of the lived experience of principals as well as the more theoretical coding related to leadership theory. In my synthesis of the research findings, I provided findings in relation to key ideas on leadership theory (Richards & Morse, 2007). Through this iterative process, some themes fell away for this study as they did not assist me in answering my research questions.

### **Institutional Review Board (IRB) Process Requirements**

An application was made to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to meet the requirements for this research study after the prospectus had been successfully defended. Attached to the IRB application was a list of the interview questions and a copy of the proposed participant consent form. The participant consent form contained language consistent with IRB requirements. Once written approval was received from the IRB, the invitation to participate in this study commenced. There were no known or minimal risks beyond daily living to study participants. All information collected was maintained in strict confidence to assure there was no risk to interview participants. No real participant names were used during the digital recordings of interviews or on the transcripts. Participants received a copy of their signed consent forms in advance of the start of interview by having two copies prepared. Participants were provided the opportunity to clarify interview remarks via review of interview transcripts.

## **Researcher Perspectives**

Adler and Adler (1987) would have categorized me as a complete member researcher. As an urban principal in Ohio, I am already a fully affiliated member of the group being researched. Although group membership identity of the researcher and the bias that may exist on the part of the researcher has been debated back and forth, Asselin (2003) suggests that it is probably better if the researcher has some familiarity with the group being studied. Subtle nuances of the subculture may be missed without member affiliation. While subjectivity is a strength, it is also a challenge. I as the researcher had to employ different strategies to assure to record only what was heard, to ask probes to move the interview questions along as part of the co-constructive paradigm, and to adhere to the scripted questions and probes with an amount of fidelity and consistency.

It was anticipated that some interview principals may be known to the researcher professionally, but are not considered close, personal friends. By using the scripted questions, allowing for circling back and to allow for additional comments or clarifications, the insider-outsider relationship of group membership can assist with the researcher as the instrument in focusing on the lived experience of the participant. Reflexive writing completed immediately upon the close of each participant interview, as well as memoing, reflexive journaling and field notes assisted with managing my subjectivity as a member of a group to which I fully belong. To prepare this research design, a pilot study focusing upon development and alignment of the interview questions to the research questions was conducted as a class project. Due to the approval of this work as a class project, the pilot project mentioned is not be part of this final dissertation. The project did allow for the refinement of the interview questions, probes and



experience with transcription. Having good questions and probes refined through pilot testing also helped to increase the trustworthiness of my interpretation.

### **Trustworthiness of the Interpretation of Data**

#### **Participant Transcript Review**

Each participant was sent a copy of their interview transcript to review for accuracy as well as to provide the opportunity to clarify any responses from the interviews.

#### **Reflexive Writing**

Reflexivity or self-reflection is a process that challenges the researcher to explicitly examine her own research agenda and assumptions, personal beliefs, and emotions to manage the subjectivity in the research. Reflexivity also allows for transparency in the research, documenting the research process and understanding the researcher's subjectivity. It is a process wherein the researcher makes a conscious and deliberate effort to interrogate his/her subjective self in relation to the research subject. Berger (2015) notes that reflexivity is a continual internal dialogue of the researcher to critically self-evaluate positionality to overcome. Hellowell (2006) maintains that the ability to replace shallow, over-generalized writing styles with thicker, more nuanced notes hinges on the capacity of the researcher to practice reflexivity.

Reflexivity is considered an imperative practice for qualitative inquiry because it conceptualizes the researcher as an active participant in knowledge production rather than as a neutral bystander (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Smith, 1987). Reflexivity requires the researcher to become self-aware through examination of any assumptions or

existing perceptions held (Mann, 2016). This would be accomplished through the immediate completion of reflexive questions after each participant interview.

As an interactive, relational research process reflexive writing recognizes the presence of the participant and challenges a directive, researcher-centered epistemological proposition. The main objective of doing reflexivity in qualitative research is to provide trustworthiness through acknowledgement and interrogation of the situated role of the researcher in research design, data collection, analysis, and knowledge production. Reflexivity can demonstrate the interactive, co-constructed nature of the qualitative interview in which the researcher and participant's perceptions of each other and their respective subject locations may have a bearing on the nature and outcome of the interview (Jorgenson, 1991).

### **Peer Auditing and Debriefing**

Another means for trustworthiness of this research was the use of peer auditing. My methodologist, who is not a member of the group, served as a peer auditor. To establish an audit trail, the researcher maintained a research journal as documentation of all research decisions and activities. The peer auditor took notes that could provide evidence of the audit trail throughout. The goal of the peer auditing is to examine both the process and product of the inquiry, as well as to substantiate the trustworthiness of the findings.

There is a rigor to the auditing and debriefing process. It is a systematic procedure whereby the reviewer writes and or discusses an analysis after carefully studying and reviewing the documentation provided by the researcher. It is analogous to a fiscal audit

as noted by Guba and Lincoln (1985) in that the researcher provides an audit trail that can provide the basis for inquiry by the peer auditor.

By maintaining a research journal documenting the inquiry process, logging research activities and developing a data collection clearly recording analysis procedures and thoughts will provide the critical review and exchange with a thought partner. The auditor examines or debriefs the documentation with the researcher with the following questions in mind: Are the findings grounded in the data? Are the inferences noted logical? Is the category structure appropriate? What is the degree of researcher bias? What strategies were used for increasing credibility? (Schwandt & Halpern, 1988). These reflexive practices aim to make visible to the reader the constructed nature of research outcomes, a construction that “originates in the various choices and decisions researchers undertake during the process of researching” (Mruck & Breuer, 2003, p. 3; Ortlipp, 2008).

Computer assisted interfaces were utilized with manual supporting documentation maintained in a researcher journal. Reflections were on-going, constantly referring back to the research questions. Analytic memos were developed and organized using Nvivo 12 software.

### **Validity and Reliability of Qualitative Research**

In qualitative research, data triangulation strengthens the construct validity of the case study (Yin, 2014, p. 121). In the proposed research methodology triangulation for convergence of evidence will be gathered through semi-structured interviews of three different groups with principal experience within the focused timeframe of the same

school district—providing for multiple realities of the same phenomenon. Document reviews as well as pertinent archival records will provide for additional evidence.

### **Summary**

In summary, the purpose of this research is to explore and describe the experiences of urban principals as they navigate between policy compliance and creative leadership in an environment of accountability. A qualitative approach was selected since the overriding purpose for the research is to understand the experiences and to make meaning of these experiences from the perspective of those who are charged with executing initiatives and policies in the schools – the principal participants. I am seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experience. For the rich descriptions of these experiences, a quantitative approach would not fully provide for the participant voice to be heard through the process of finding answers to the questions. This research reflects my desire to give voice to a group of urban professionals who have not had their experiences substantially documented through this recent history.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS**

This research sought to explore and describe the experiences of urban principals as they navigate between policy compliance and creative leadership in an environment of accountability of student performance outcomes. A qualitative research approach using case study was selected for this bounded study. This case study was bounded by organization and role of the participants within the contemporary context of the Cleveland Plan implementation. This provided a context for participants to relate when discussing their leadership experiences. Semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted to gather information.

The interviews were conducted with six participants who gave of their time and thoughtfully conversed with me in the setting of their convenience. The participants represented different groups of principals of various levels of administrative experience. Pseudonyms were used for each participant. The pseudonyms used in reporting the findings are Sarah, Elena, Jan, Ross, Michelle and Stephen. The participant sample included principals who began their careers before the Cleveland Plan was implemented, some who changed their roles during its implementation as well as participants who became principals after the implementation began. Attempts were made to have principal

representation from a variety of demographics. During the interviews, notes were taken directly on my copy of the interview protocol as key words or thoughts were spoken. As most of these interviews took place in the participant workspace, I had the opportunity to make note of additional environmental observations. As part of the transcription process, I made additional notes on the transcripts. Additional reflections were taken by listening to interviews and reviewing hard copy transcripts multiple times.

Nvivo 12 software was utilized to collect and organize the data. Interviews were uploaded to Nvivo. Any handwritten notes were also included using the software as analytic memos were developed. These memos were linked to each of the interview transcripts uploaded into the software. As subsequent reviews of each interview data took place, ideas, concepts, key words and additional thoughts were recorded on an increasing number of analytic memos. As subsequent ideas and thoughts arose, these were noted and added to the analytic memos. Additionally, peer auditing sessions with my methodologist caused me to further explore the interview data. I then added key words as it related to the research questions and theoretical framework and updated the interview memos in Nvivo 12.

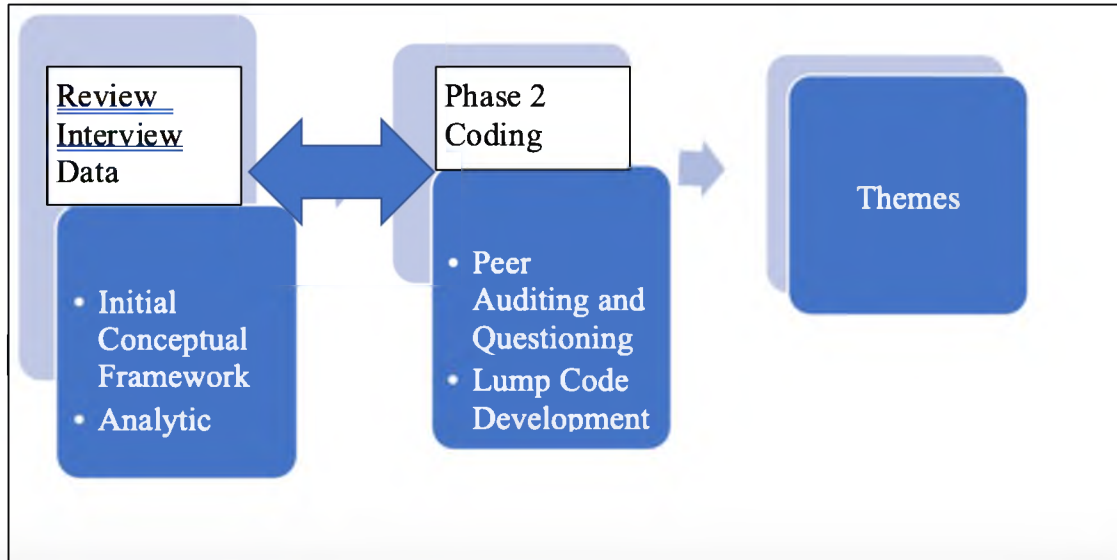


Figure 2 Coding Process

The research questions this study sought to answer were as follows:

Q1. What are the roles, responsibilities and leadership styles narrated by principals within a context of accountability and efforts toward district transformation?

Q2. In what way do the narratives of principals on their leadership styles reflect compliance with directives outside their building and in what way do the narratives reflect creativity?

Q3. What are the barriers principal narrate and what are the supports as it relates to roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles?

A process of lump coding was used to distill down my original conceptual understanding. Lump coding is a method of taking a chunk of the data after review as part of the winnowing down process from a volume of interview data. Lumping is a way to expose the theme that emerged through a volume of text and to get to the essence of the theme (Saldana, 2013. p.24). I used the actual participant words that best expressed

the essence of the theme. Each theme aligned with the research questions that this research sought to answer.

Theme 1	<i>I've Had to Take On More Roles</i>
Theme 2	<i>Creating A Community of Collaboration</i>
Theme 3	<i>Accountability and Autonomy Are Not the Same</i>
Theme 4	<i>Having the Freedom to Actually Find Unique Solutions</i>
Theme 5	<i>I Think That We Have Autonomy, But It Doesn't Feel Like It Sometimes</i>
Theme 6	<i>You have to Have Formal and Informal Support Structures</i>

Figure 3 Themes Aligned to Research Questions

The first theme, *I've Had to Take on More Roles*, provided the essence of the variety of roles that school principals narrated that they play within their schools. Principal participants found they fulfilled a variety of roles in order to operate a successful school or move their schools toward the aim of improving student outcomes.

The theme, *Creating A Community of Collaboration*, reflects how the variety of leadership styles narrated by principal participants note a number of ways that their leadership includes others in the process of leading and school operations.

*Accountability and Autonomy Are Not the Same* explores the tensions that may be created by district, state and federal accountability requirements and compliance demands. Principals also shared whether they felt they had any influence in these areas narrating some degree of autonomy and provided examples.

The next theme, *Having the Freedom to Actually Find Unique Solutions* provides examples and narrations of principal creative leadership. A variety of examples provide



how principals use creative leadership to both meet compliance demands and uniquely create a more successful school.

*I Think We Have More Autonomy, But It Doesn't Feel Like It Sometimes* reflects the principal narration as it relates to barriers and perceived barriers that cause limits or restrictions to successful building leadership. This theme includes stories of obstacles or hinderances within the context of the Cleveland Plan implementation that participants shared.

Finally, the theme, *You Have to Have Formal and Informal Support Structures* identifies the supports that help principals lead their schools effectively. This includes principal shared experiences of both organizational structures as well as building level supports that been created or that exist. In the sections that follow, each of these analytic themes are described and they are often opened with a quote from a participant.

### **“I’ve Had to Take on More Roles”**

All of the participants reported on having a variety of roles that extended their responsibilities. Although instructional leadership was an expected focus of their work, a number of different roles were narrated during the interview process. One of the areas that came through was having a responsibility to develop relationships with the community and realizing the importance of these relationships to the success of their schools.

Michelle offered “...we are very connected [to] our community...I feel like it has been the biggest win in general for the school because we...really are a part of our community.” She went on to describe how her school connects with the community:

We do a lot. We focus on the general neighborhood also. We are very inviting to come in and use our fitness center. We have a washer and dryer and some come [and] use the computer lab – community members who just come into the building to use the facilities which is nice. I feel like that has been the biggest win, in general for the school because ... we really are a part of our community which is nice.

Elena discussed how principals have to do things differently from when she first became an administrator. She said that in the past most emphasis was on managing the learning environment and staying off of the evening news. Elena noted that more recently, “Your leadership has to go into the community.” Elena added that there have been “days that I’ve had to stay until midnight and it wasn’t a dance... there’s kids in need.” Because the lives of students are so complex, including instability with home situations, Elena maintains communications with a variety of community organizations so that she knows of and connects with community resources that are available to assist students. She also maintains relationships with community leaders. It seems as though through her experiences, she realized that not only is the school part of the community it serves, but the resources of the community are needed to support the variety of needs of the students—a partnership.

Elena furthered how her planned day of getting into classrooms as part of her expected instructional leadership could change depending on the circumstances. Attending to the complex lives of students and their families meant responding to the needs as they came up, often unexpectedly during the day. For example, principals may

act as juvenile court liaisons. Elena said that a day could take on different phases from unannounced visitors that may include, "...a probation officer or anyone of that sort [including other community agencies, such as] someone from social services. All of this is part of our urban education and could be part of a typical day."

Ross linked community- school relationships with the aims of the Cleveland Plan. Ross mentioned making connections with community-based organizations to improve the outcomes of students. Ross said that as he continued to better understand the district's effort at transformation written in the Cleveland Plan, he found it was about a mindset, a "do whatever it takes" mindset. Ross mentioned working with local hospitals and university groups to help his students get what they need. Ross noted that "building relationships with both kids and community... getting the results we need for our kids to be the best" is an aim of the Cleveland Plan.

Social and emotional learning leadership was specifically identified as a role and responsibility that has become increasingly important. Stephen stated, "So that social emotional piece, I think it's a big component that I've learned a lot about". Stephen was able to share a recent experience of a verbal altercation between a teacher and a student. Stephen shared it was the lack of the teacher's knowledge that the student's family was involved in gang related activity and the student's uncle was killed. Stephen then conveyed, "so he's bringing that baggage into the school. So how do we instill in the teachers this concept of compassion for the students?" It was apparent that Stephen was also bothered by faculty who did not even know student names heading into the third quarter of the school year. Stephen noted attention to this area of his students'

development was an emphasis in the district and the state, a “push” to attend to students more holistically:

Like there’s really been that push to kind of get to that space within our students... Try to understand them in the realm as it pertains to what they bring in the classroom.

Sarah also discussed the importance of leading staff to new understandings about social emotional learning. She shared that she has had to lead a number of faculty members to understand that a specifically designed area within the school called the Planning Center – is there to support social and emotional learning and can be used for de-escalation of tensions experienced by students. Sarah says that she is using more restorative practices and her school and finds that she has been leading staff away from an outdated model of an in-school suspension area. Sarah herself noted, “I think that I’m more [and] more sensitive to kids’ needs.” She continued,

We’re working on this SEL and all that kind of stuff. Trying to really get that into play. Not so much as with the kids, but with the teachers. It’s like, are you really forming relationships with the students? And do you know why this child is acting this way? Did you know he was homeless? Did you know he was living on the streets? Did you know before you yelled about a pencil? So because we’ve had these type of kids, now we have to address it more, you know.

Social emotional learning and leadership is a part of the principal role that has evolved. Elena put it this way,

So you've got to know instruction. So you've got to know what to do if in fact a kid comes in here and the kid is having a mental breakdown. How do you address those kinds of things, too? I find that a lot of what you may be asked to do as a principal may not be something that you actually acquired in your educational experience in going through to get your licensure...you learn on the job.

All participants expressed that they try to meet a variety of needs of students. Before a student can learn, basic needs have to be met. Principals expressed needing to take on characteristics of a social worker. To do this, principals narrated paying attention to their relationships with students. Ross dedicates the first part of his day to direct student connections, so he develops knowledge of his students and building relationships. He sets aside the first two hours of the school day specifically for this purpose. Ross feels he is better positioned to meet student needs and support them by doing this. He shared "in the mornings I dedicate just to students. So whether that's in my office or me having breakfast with them, whether that's me just walking around classes and having conversations."

Elena says that you have to be willing "to go above and beyond. She further explained why principals can include social worker as one of their roles.

[An] urban principal nowadays has to be a unique person. Has to be somebody that is just willing and able to go that extra mile to be a social worker...[Y]ou need to be a social worker, whether you have a license or not. Know that, okay, there [may be] the case where I may have to call 696-KIDS [child abuse and

neglect reporting number] because it's [pause] your hands are tied and you just know that this kid is crying out for help.

Principals have had to take on roles in which they feel they have no experience and are not prepared to respond accordingly. For example, the Cleveland Plan implementation allows parents to choose which schools to send their children rather than automatically being assigned by address. This implies a certain degree of skill on the part of principals toward marketing their school to parents near and far within the district. Stephen shared his feelings with having to attract students to his school as part of school choice. "I've never done marketing, right. So I don't know. I don't know the first thing about it." It appears that principals have to market their schools and their programs. Without marketing being an area of expertise for Stephen, he questions whether or not families are fully informed about his school and really able to make the best educated choice for their child.

Jan's experiences with marketing have somewhat been the opposite in that she expressed that she has new children showing up each day to her school. She receives no advance knowledge that new students are coming. She said that she would like to be prepared by having books and a desk ready for them. While she is not actively marketing, she believes that due to certain programming features her school has, parents simply select then send their children. She expresses that she cannot stop this as long as there is capacity space. Alternatively, Jan finds that some of the students that arrive to her school after the school year has begun have no interest in the special programs of the school that the parent selects.

Stephen summarized the variety of roles he sees himself occupying when he said, “you have to be...a good communicator, a coach, a motivator.” Michelle expressed her role this way,

You have to be a facilitator. My job was to facilitate your job, to make sure that you know, you’ve [teachers] got what you need. And it’s also my job to facilitate for the students to make sure they’re getting what they need. So, you really kind of have to be a Jack of all trades...”

### **“Creating A Community of Collaboration”**

All of the principal participants expressed moving toward or practicing a shared or collaborative leadership style. Principals described their jobs using adjectives such as challenging, overwhelming, and stressful. The ways in which participants, it seems, were able to mitigate these feelings was by tapping into the strengths and talents of their staffs. Although there were a variety of leadership lengths of experience, this area was consistent across all experience groups.

Stephen shared how he was able to get things done with less administrative staff than he was used to by identifying the strengths with the administrative team he now has which included his school secretary and a paraprofessional. He said in his previous experiences “everyone had their own role.” He says his team now has grown together in understanding what needs to be done. Stephen said, “we just kind of, we flow pretty good together...I lean pretty heavily on like my planning center coordinator, my secretary.” Stephen created an organizational structure that allows others to step in and support his leadership using identified talents of others.

Michelle who has been an educator in different roles for a number of years spoke of an “old school” mindset that pits the principal at odds with the teachers instead of working collaboratively together. Michelle said,

There are still too many people in leadership who are very old school and that opinion of its us versus them no matter what, when that doesn't make any sense.

You know you need to be able to work together.

Michelle is working towards changing these mindsets as she inherited a building where there was a lot of animosity between faculty and the previous administration. Having had previous work experience in a school with a collaborative culture, Michelle wanted those same experiences for her current school. Of her previous experience she said, “the entire building was like a really cohesive family, which was nice because everyone really worked together.”

Principals described particular strategies that they used to share leadership roles with other building level administrators utilizing the strengths and ideas of their colleagues to make a difference in their leadership. For example, Sarah was able to work closely with her Assistant Principal and were able to challenge one another through daily debriefings as well as focus upon their areas of strength to improve the school and student outcomes. Sarah sets her schedule, so she is able to go into classrooms every day and provide feedback to teachers. She also includes her administrative team for them to respond to the feedback that she provides to teachers. Sarah tries to meet daily with the other administrators on her team as part of the collaboration process as they plan for professional development based upon their observations and feedback.



Principals acknowledged the job was too big to be a singular leader. Ross discussed how his leadership style changed with experience. He explained, "When I first got here, I was very micro-managing. I would even go so far as saying, you know, the mindset of a dictator. But I've grown to identify the strengths of my teachers. Building their capacity has taken a lot off my plate. It created a community of collaboration."

In my interviews with Ross, he shared how he had to realize that several of his faculty members had more years of teaching experience than he did. He learned not to be threatened by this as an administrator. He learned from these faculty members. Ross went on to share that becoming a collaborative team "is a learning process." He continued, "I've learned a lot about my staff. I've learned a lot about their needs. I've learned a lot about myself." Through this collaboration, Ross could integrate learning from his own experiences and that of others. In doing so he narrated that he has worked toward building the capacity of his staff.

### *Competing Demands of the Role of Manager with the Role of Instructional Leader*

Principals conveyed how their leadership styles have changed during their time in school administration. Principals in all interview categories were able to describe ways in which their styles adjusted to meet the needs of the situation. Although principals expressed that parts of their leadership were focused upon managing the environment, it was noted that there were other leadership practices that they believed were more important than that.

Michelle shared, “You know, I think the job has really changed from being a manager in the past where you just manage the people to really more recently... becoming more of that instructional leader.” Michelle discussed how time has been spent developing a school culture that expects students to be successful. A challenge has been around changing adult mindsets. She also realized that she had to adjust to the needs of her faculty. Michelle shared that being a data-driven manager, she tended to “pull the emotions out of things” in dealing with her staff. She admits that it took “probably two years [as a principal]” to realize the needs of her staff before and adjust to those needs as a manager and as an instructional leader. However, there are many other things that principals have to do in their managerial functions. With the Cleveland Plan implementation and increasing school autonomy, more managerial functions take place at the school level. Michelle explained, “I feel like the shift on us principals has [been] we’re so overloaded with other things, [such as budgeting, staffing, overseeing building purchasing, and public relations] that how can we be the instructional leaders they want us to be?” Michelle would like to spend to spend more time relating classroom observed practices and relate it to data to help teachers grow with their instructional practices.

Jan has had to balance her time between managing the environment or student discipline and providing instructional leadership. Due to the arrival of new students daily, she works with school culture, discipline and providing instructional leadership. Sometimes management of building needs and supporting instruction at the classroom level compete with each other in terms of her time and focus. Jan emphasized... “It’s overwhelming sometimes... I have to be in the classrooms more.” Of great concern is the

academic level of her students, some of which come in below grade level...“So, I have to be in the classrooms a whole lot more than I’m doing.”

To deal with the competing demands, Sarah has found that she had to prioritize her instructional leadership. She discussed how she schedules her classroom visitations according to greatest need because she also spends part of her day controlling the environment in the cafeteria assisting with supervising student lunch times. Although she starts visiting classrooms in the morning, she is not able to get to every classroom. Sarah said, [I try to] provide feedback every day. Not every classroom, but to where feedback is [most] needed....and I email...then I’m supervising kids in and out of lunch.”

### **“Accountability and Autonomy Are Not the Same”**

Principal participants expressed their understanding of accountability largely as measured primarily by standardized test scores, the schools’ outcomes as reported on assessment data. All participants referenced test scores and equated accountability with being responsible for achieving scores or quantifiable metrics and data related to the standardized test scores. While some alluded to accountability being a collective of the school team—internal school accountability, other participants shared yet another perception of accountability having to do with principal personal responsibility. Jan, in part includes in her description of accountability as, “we do have to be accountable for what the teachers are teaching to the students. We have to be accountable for the things that we say, how we act [as well as] how we interact [with] all stakeholders.” Ross also includes personal responsibility as part of his understanding of accountability. In addition to test scores, Ross emphasized “being a principal... the buck stops with you. So

I'm...held accountable for everything that happens in this building during school hours and outside of school hours. We have to operate in excellence.”

There are aspects of accountability that relate to compliance. The perspective of accountability as compliance was mentioned by some principal participants as it related to the state report card. The state report card is accessible and viewable by the general public. Within this perspective, principals discussed concerns as it related to special education student performance, adherence to labor union contracts, and making sure that managerial items were performed correctly. One of the goals of the Cleveland Plan is to have a high performing school in every neighborhood. Principals reported developing internal accountability systems within their schools to track student assessment data, using benchmark assessment data, and building teacher capacity for school improvement through collaborative planning.

Elena shared that when she first became a principal the general perspective was that success meant you controlled the learning environment well. She went on to speak of accountability in this manner,

Now you're being measured and everyone is looking at how you're graded [on state report card] or they decide on whether they want to actually invest in you or not...you have to establish some systems to make sure that you kind of cross all T's and dot all I's.

The meaning that Elena gives to “accountability” appears to be at a level of compliance of making sure that you “cross all T's and dot all I's”. There appears to be an understanding of the potential for a much more expansive leadership than “controlling the learning environment” yet at the same time, there is the push toward this type of

compliance which seems to dilute the ability to lead in a way that is intrinsically motivating, tapping into expertise and based upon one's high level of professional judgement.

The tension between creating or activating one's own leadership style and complying with district or state directives is understood even more as Elena further explained the pressure to comply with accountability measures as connected to the desire to keep one's school open:

Accountability is one thing. The autonomy is another thing that the Cleveland Plan gave to us. The fact that my leadership had to be diverse with knowing that the school is, is being graded and that [a] certain number of low performing schools were going to be closed at the end of each of the years. And you're trying to fight to make sure that you're not in that number.

Additionally, Stephen questioned how to promote strong student relationships and balance student achievement and make "the whole system work." He continued

...when the state makes different data changes and the district wants to focus on something else then you have to almost kind of be flexible in what you, what you know is right versus how you measure it versus how you interpret the data and what to focus on and really kind of figuring out what is being measured and how can you incorporate that into how you're pushing your teachers or the direction that you're pushing your teachers.

Stephen offers a description of the balance he is trying to achieve – the balance between the quantifiable achievement goals and those contextualized as needed for each student as

a unique person. It appears that some principals may go in the direction that Stephen may go, which is the direction that feels important – the development of student relationships—yet the pull toward student achievement outcomes as measured in state tests may interfere with the relationship building. While Stephen would not likely argue against student achievement, his narrative seems to suggest an underlying critique of the current accountability system and “what is being measured” and the challenge of trying to make “the whole system work” when it may seem contradictory to him.

The way in which participants spoke about accountability revealed a level of stress associated with the word and its meaning. It appears that how participants responded to that stress suggested ways in which they interpreted “accountability”. For example, both Jan and Michelle spoke of accountability being stressful. However, Jan’s description of accountability was quite different from Michelle. Jan said, “It’s just stressful to me sometimes when I know that our scores have to be so good or a certain level in order for us to get something or in order for me to keep whole staff or, in order for me to keep my job.” In some ways, Jan’s view of accountability seems tied to compliance and the worry that not meeting particular measures of accountability will create a problem between herself and the district or will reduce her opportunity to receive certain resources. This appeared to create another level of worry among some, though not all of the principals.

Alternatively, Michelle noted that while accountability is stressful, she expressed it as an opportunity to create a sense of urgency amongst her faculty. Michelle’s perspective “...to me the Cleveland Plan means holding everyone accountable, holding everyone to raise the bar. You know, it’s [about] challenging previous expectations and

beliefs about what our students can do.” Michelle’s view of accountability seems to be interpreted as a collective effort to meet an expectation, one that she appears to share.

In analyzing the data related to this theme, it is evident that a constant perspective is that principals are ultimately responsible and held accountable for everything that happens or does not happen in their schools. Elena narrated it this way,

From [teacher and principal] evaluations...to increasing attendance...the amount of accountability that goes with the principalship is, to me, unbelievable how many hats you have to wear and you’re expected to wear because ultimately the buck stops with you.

#### **“Having the Freedom to Actually Find Unique Solutions”**

Without being provided a set definition, each participant was asked to provide what the term creative leadership meant to them. All participants were able to share their thoughts and unfettered perceptions regarding leading creatively. Most participants narrated thoughts of being outside of the confines of the school building and engaging in world outside of a physical school building. The words “out of the box” and “beyond the walls” were expressed by principals.

Throughout the interview process, Jan tended to think, pause and respond. Her response was insightful both into creative leadership and Jan as a school leader. “I think with creative leadership comes a lot of transparency [as a leader].” She further explained her thinking this way,

... because when you're creative, you're doing something totally different than somebody else and you have to feel comfortable and confident enough to do it when nobody else cares. So I'm opening up myself, I'm opening up this weird part

of me to everybody because I feel it's going to work. [Creative leadership is] leading outside of the typical walls of doing things; a lot differently than, the average principal. Having different ideas. The person that comes to mind right now is Ron Clark in Atlanta ...and all the different things he did and the support that he had to do those things. Just not typical.

In Michelle's response, the notion of freedom seems to indicate there is presently a sense of possible constraints to her thinking. Michelle conveyed that creative leadership involved problem solving.

To me a creative leadership means having the freedom to actually find unique solutions. Being able to get out of the box completely and find, just find those unique solutions. Being able to find alternative solutions...that's really what we need and that's not what [is currently happening]. We were so constrained by our own status quo...you know, you just start doing something and then it becomes, this is what we always do. And I think that happens not, not maliciously or not intentionally, it is just human nature.

Michelle also narrated a reflection that principals may have learned to limit their creativity due to existing structures. She went on to share this reflection noting, "We may want to do different things. I don't know that everybody knows how to do things differently. So being allowed to be that creative leaders' leader".

Michelle shared the concern that accountability may hinder creativity. "I think it's really hard in our current setting...if you try to be creative or you try to encourage creativity and others, then what is the result that you see? I think that accountability is



important [but may interfere]...[and] systems tend to get [people]into a rut.” Ultimately Michelle narrated her belief that creative leaders are more flexible because “they want to solve problems differently.”

Participants also spoke about how they felt that creative leaders solve problems, and how these leaders may have unique lanes in which they operate and do not mind doing things that others may not have done. It also seemed that they are driven by student need. Ross believes that working within the Cleveland Plan made him believe that he had the flexibility to do something great at his school. He believes that the wording within the Cleveland Plan document helped him to have a creative mindset. He said that he refers back to the document. Ross emphasized, “[a creative leader] may be someone who has their own lane, someone who makes decisions or they go, they get to a decision making mindset. That [decision-making] process is unorthodox, out of the box. [Creative leaders] are, they are leading based off of what's needed [for students].”

Stephen personalized his interpretation of creative leadership and narrated that his creative strengths were in establishing new structures of support for students and scheduling. He was student centered in his responses sharing ways in which creative leadership would directly impact students, their opportunity and engagement. Stephen discussed, “I think thinking outside of the box, find[ing] ways to engage students in the lessons and expand upon their experiences not inside the classroom...to think outside of the building and expand upon that...looking a non-traditional pathways and real-world experiences.”

**“I Think We Have More Autonomy, But It Doesn’t Feel Like It Sometimes”**

The Cleveland Plan implementation included shifting many responsibilities that were previously carried out in a centralized system to the individual schools. The central office would then become a support organization to help facilitate each school's autonomy. Decision-making at the school level around budgeting, selection of personnel, and scheduling of the school day are the parts of autonomy that the principal participants are the most familiar as expressed through our conversations. Jan described that when she first began as a principal that she could not hire staff, and there was no discussion of a budget beyond being given a specific dollar amount to work with for the year. However, Jan expressed autonomy this way, "I think we have more autonomy, but it doesn't feel like it sometimes. It's like an oxymoron in a way". She emphasized that when trying to apply her autonomy, she is still told what she cannot do or purchase. "You [are supposed to] have this autonomy, but you can't do this and you got to go here and you gotta do this." The frustration with a compromised autonomy as it currently stands is still challenging to Jan because there seems to be school based decisions she would like to make, but she has to conform to some other structures that are in place. This suggests that complete autonomy for principals is aspirational on the part of the district. So, while there have been certain inputs that she has been able to make, there is frustration that remains.

Another area of principal responsibility is hiring staff. While there is school input in the hiring process, Jan shared a situation where she wanted to hire for a position, but it appears the process, caused considerable frustration. Jan shared, "You get all these names in a 'bucket' and [they may or may not include the person you wish to hire]. I don't know if there is a better way. The hiring issue is just crazy to me."

Elena shared an experience which she described as disappointing regarding staffing as well, but her issue was a barrier caused by the collective bargaining agreement. She explained, “I was fighting to justify and retain staff members for the betterment of the school, but there was a seniority issue.” Elena described the anguish of not being able to retain a quality person, “a person that genuinely has a passion for what they do and they do well because they have the kids best interest at heart.” Elena reported this was due to collective bargaining seniority being a factor in building staffing decisions. It appears that this situation was in conflict with Elena’s ability to exercise her professional judgment.

All principal participants alluded to the collective bargaining agreement as a restriction or barrier to their autonomy. Ross expressed that he “had to learn how to operate within the collective bargaining agreement.” He feels that it poses challenges and restrictions as he carries out his job. Jan expressed it this way, “because the union is so strong, it is everything in that book [collective bargaining agreement document]... to protect teachers, but it really limits a lot of things that I could do [for students].” Michelle asserted her belief that “we let the union run too much of what we need to be doing.” Elena and Stephen both cited the collective bargaining agreement as a barrier to their leadership. Stephen emphasized that it is “still a huge restriction.”

### **“You Have to Have Formal and Informal Support Structures”**

School principals are the second leading factor for successful student outcomes. As described in the Cleveland Plan implementation, autonomy has been shifted to the schools and more precisely, the school principal. Principals support their faculty and

staff, but who and how are principals best supported to help improve the academic achievement of their students and schools?

Principals narrated areas where they felt supported. Among these were formal supports as well as informal supports. As part of the central office's efforts to refocus and to provide support to schools, the Assistant Superintendent position was renamed Network Support Leader emphasizing the role to support principals in their school leadership. This was noted as a source of formal support among some of the principals. For example, Elena shared that she has benefitted from the support of network leaders:

I felt supported with network leaders... I've truly feel that I have been blessed to have those individuals ...I could reach out and communicate with, via phone, email, what have you, and they were there to support me [at] the times when I felt I may have to do something that wasn't quite right [to meet expectations or solve a problem]. I explained to them the rationale behind it, I've gotten that support...I appreciate the closeness we've been able to establish with the, the network leader structure that has been in place for the past years. And those individuals, my network, leaders have been very supportive, very supportive. I can't say anything negative about any of them. There wasn't a time when I needed them and they didn't come to my rescue.

Michelle narrated how a formal support component can also provide needed informal support, "I've never felt like I've been alone. So that first year I had a coach, which was nice because...you know [in your first year as principal], you just need someone to talk to.

As a part of school autonomy as written within the Cleveland Plan implementation, principals play a role in shaping their school budgets. While some principals narrated constraints in this process, Stephen spoke of his appreciation for aspects of the Student Based Budgeting protocol. SBB is an allocation of funding provided to each school based upon the number of students each school has as well as differentiating additional dollars for each additional disaggregated need the student may have such as services for a low-incident special education student or an English Learner. Stephen expressed that, “One of the supports I do think [is helpful is] SBB. It is a good thing. It does create, some flexibility. So knowing, what our numbers are [budget amounts] and what our budget's going to be allows us to make [school specific decisions].” Stephen continued that as a principal, “you can bring in your own textbooks [and] other programs. So, it's not like you're stuck with the one that the district provides.” Stephen reported that at his last building he included teachers in the curricular purchase decisions.

Ross narrated unique support for his principal leadership through participating in additional programs, such as an external leadership program when he first became an administrator. The program provided intensive supports to help him become a successful principal. “So, it's a partnership with [name of the organization] so even to this day, the individuals that I met through [that partnership] and through the district have been a support system when I transitioned to a principal”. Ross shared, “I still have that cohort of people that came through [name of the program] that I came with [and] we [still] lean on each other. [It is] also helpful those individuals from the [cohort are from] two different organizations.”

Ross has also served on a few committees within the district. He said that he has gotten on these committees because he is vocal and tends to speak up with things with which he has issues. Ross said, “So sometimes that's good to sit with district leaders, and even sometimes community leaders to make decisions that impact on us as principals [and] to our schools. That's an opportunity you never want to pass up.”

### **Summary**

This chapter provided for six main findings from the study. These findings were organized around major themes that aligned to the research questions. From one of the themes explored, there emerged an additional sub-theme. Six principal participants were interviewed for this bounded case study. This research data were gathered from individual semi-structured interviews where participants shared their lived leadership experiences as urban principals. Interview questions were structured to gain understanding into the experiences of principals as it related to the research questions. Principal participants were from a variety of demographics with building level leadership experience that either began before the Cleveland Plan implementation, after the implementation had begun or had changed roles during the process. This chapter presented the findings from the analysis of interview data. The analysis was organized around and connected back to each of the research questions.

Consistent with the case study methodology, a process employed included a cycle of initial coding using a framework, analytic memos and lump coding of interview data. With the lump coding process, extensive samples of quotations from principal participants were included. Using the words of the principal participants more accurately provided their descriptions of their realities as it related to the research questions.

Key findings included in the first theme I've Had to Take On More Roles, all principals expressed their roles and responsibilities as an urban principal extend beyond their schools and into the community. Principals need and have to establish relationships, partnerships, and tap into the resources of the community to help students and thus their schools be successful. Principals also expressed the need to take the leadership role for social and emotional learning to build better relationships between faculty and students. Some principals expressed concerns regarding roles such as marketing to recruit and retain students as an area that they had limited expertise.

The next finding, in the theme Creating A Community of Collaboration was that all principals perceived their jobs to be overwhelming, challenging, and stressful. The way that principals have mitigated these characterizations is through collaboration. There are competing demands for principal roles between building manager and instructional leader. Through building capacity of administrative teams and faculty members, and teacher leadership, principals have been able to design and utilize collaborative structures to increase their ability to attend to instructional leadership functions.

Findings from the theme Accountability and Autonomy Are Not the Same are that principals view accountability through three different lenses. While all participants relate accountability to federal and state testing requirements and scores, some also relate accountability to a collective of the entire team. Another subset of principal participants view accountability as a personal responsibility to assure that high quality teaching takes place and for the reputation of the school.

The next theme findings related to principals' perspectives of how they would approach their leadership creatively. Most participants described creating and engaging

in unique “out of the box” opportunities outside of the school building or beyond the school walls. A few participants expressed belief that creative leadership is constrained by either accountability or organizational entities between senior leadership and principals with fixed mindsets. One participant discussed creative leadership in terms of finding unique solutions to problems.

The fifth finding regarding the theme *I Think We Have More Autonomy, But It Doesn't Feel Like It Sometimes* was some of the principals cited instances of the autonomy and decision making that principals were to have according to the Cleveland Plan but were restricted. Curricular decision-making, personnel, and purchasing were all areas that were specifically cited. All principals mentioned structural impediments of the collective bargaining agreement to their school autonomy.

Findings from the last theme, *You Have to Have Formal and Informal Support Structures*, most principals believe the current organizational structure with a Network Support Leader serving as the principal supervisor is a valued support. Most participants had continuous changes with Principal supervisors, but most believe the current Network Support Leader provides appropriate coaching and support. Some principals also have external support and mentoring groups. Another support has been District convened committees which solicit principal participation and input to inform senior leadership decision-making.

Chapter V includes the discussion on the six analytical themes as they relate to the purpose of the research and the research questions. In Chapter V, the findings are discussed in relation to the literature, and I offer a summary and recommendations.



## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this bounded case study research was to explore and describe the experiences of urban principals as they navigate between policy compliance and creative leadership in an era of accountability of student performance outcomes. This chapter includes a discussion of the major findings as it relates to contemporary leadership theory with an emphasis on an integrative theory of creative leadership.

The role of school leaders is quite varied and cannot be singularly focused on instructional leadership. The significant challenges that face school leadership and the rapid change in the urban environment requires multiple solutions. This research was designed to provide new knowledge in this area of principal leadership. Acknowledging that principal leadership matters, research by Grissom and Loeb (2011) note that the identification of essential leadership skills can be daunting due to the complexity of the leadership work of the principal.

To develop a body of useful research on any aspect of principal leadership, it was imperative to include principals' narrated experience through rich, thick description providing the perspectives of individuals who function in these positions daily. These

narrated principal experiences provide an in-depth understanding to be shared with those in the position to craft policy in which school leaders are expected to execute. It is hoped that this research will both expand the study of school administration and leadership in new directions and to contribute to the research base using input from the urban principal.

Information was gathered through a pair of individual semi-structured interviews with principals of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. Participants of the study included six principals. There were three categories of participants, which are as follows: principals who began their leadership prior to the Cleveland Plan implementation, principals who changed roles during the implementation, and those who became principals after the Cleveland Plan was implemented.

This study was based upon the following research questions:

Q1. What are the roles, responsibilities and leadership styles narrated by principals within a context of accountability and efforts toward district transformation?

Q2. In what way do the narratives of principals on their leadership styles reflect compliance with directives outside their building and in what way do the narratives reflect creativity?

Q3. What are the barriers principal narrate and what are the supports as it relates to roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles?

Analytic categories for this discussion chapter are directly aligned to the research questions and the findings from the previous chapter. This chapter moves into the interpretation of the findings, where relevant theory and research are connected to these categories and themes. An additional layer to this discussion will include any pertinent participant narrative that will add to this discussion. The six themes identified in Chapter

Four were developed using the words of the participants. They include the following: (a) “I’ve had to take on more roles,” (b) “Creating a community of collaboration,” (c) “Accountability and autonomy are not the same,” (d) “Having the freedom to actually find unique solutions,” (e) “I think we have autonomy, but it doesn’t feel like it sometimes,” and (f) “You have to have formal and informal support structures.” From these six narrative thematic statements or in vivo themes, six related interpretive categories were developed. These interpretive categories are included in a more complex rendering of the study findings as located in Figure 4, and they will be discussed below.

Theme 1	<i>I’ve Had to Take On More Roles</i>	Changing Roles and Responsibilities of Principals
Theme 2	<i>Creating A Community of Collaboration</i>	Multiple Leadership Styles toward Collaboration
Theme 3	<i>Accountability and Autonomy Are Not the Same</i>	Tensions in Accountability Policy Context
Theme 4	<i>Having the Freedom to Actually Find Unique Solutions</i>	Creative Leadership
Theme 5	<i>I Think That We Have Autonomy, But It Doesn’t Feel Like It Sometimes</i>	Barriers within Structures of Autonomy
Theme 6	<i>You have to Have Formal and Informal Support Structures</i>	Principal Supports

Figure 4 Thematic Statements and Interpretive Categories

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Through the analysis of key responses provided by principal participants, themes and patterns emerged. Even though there were a variety of experience levels of principals, there tended to be areas of consistent response. The six interpretive categories that emerged as a result of this study are described in more detail as they relate to the literature and the research questions.

## **Changing Roles and Responsibilities of Principals**

Principals expressed that their roles and responsibilities as an urban principal extend beyond their schools and into the community. Role definitions in the literature and by principals themselves have been limited due to continually evolving and changing descriptions (Daresh, Gantner, Dunlap & Hvizdak, 2000). Principals, however, need and have to establish relationships, partnerships, and tap into the resources of the community to help students and thus their schools be successful.

There are so many things that principals are asked to do, many things that principals have to do, and things that principal know they need to be doing from their own professional judgment. As a result, the role can be overwhelming and remains a balancing act between serving a variety of constituencies daily. This study narrowed in on three of the areas that emerged as patterns from interviews with principals—connecting with the community, social and emotional needs of students and marketing one's school.

Cistone and Stevenson (2000) in their report of the urban principalship found that due to the variety of conditions in the urban environment – social, economic, and political – the role of the principal in urban districts was more complex than their suburban peers. With the daily realities of the position and the speed of change, previous linear models of strategic organizational planning may not work. More rapid responses are needed in urban environments and relating to data on urban schools.

Sarah reflected this view when she said, “Some days I feel that I'm not doing the same job I used to. In some ways I think I made a lot of change. There's a lot of changes

going on here [constantly]. There's a lot of resistance [also]. The days that you see the change happening, you feel good.”

Principals included in this study represented typically trained educators who began their careers as teachers, but now find themselves as administrators leading faculty through social and emotional learning recognizing that before you can educate children their basic psychological needs must be met. With the complexities of life of students outside of school compounded with poverty, overseeing and supporting social and emotional learning is now an essential role and responsibility of principals.

Principals have to develop cross-boundary resources to meet the needs of children. The greater the resourcefulness and relationship-building with the broader community that urban principals accomplish, the more resources they are able to provide to their schools and their school and students. One area of community partnership that is essential focuses on social and emotional learning for students and for faculty in terms of facilitating this learning. It appears that the role of social and emotional leadership is related to the principals' ability to perform community outreach as well. For some principals, this may be a different and unique role that can be developed through job-embedded experiences over time.

Part of the current principal role includes taking on responsibilities that are often lacking in formal training. In particular, the role of marketing one's school was narrated as daunting and new. Principals noted they have been charged with branding their individual schools. This appears to be a challenging role for some as they lack skills and knowledge in this area. If done well, marketing and branding a school or program could attract students, families, and resources that may be better situated to provide a stable

student population with parental engagement. Although responsibility has been expected of principals by way of school choice as outlined in the Cleveland Plan, principals expressed concern regarding their ability to execute this responsibility well.

The principals' narratives were consistent with the literature regarding difficulty in defining the role of the principal due to the varied and complex evolutionary nature of urban school leadership. Educators are thrust into positions to help solve a myriad of societal and economic ills at the school level requiring human capital that goes beyond what may be understood in their traditional support of education and understanding of teaching, learning and core curriculum.

### **Multiple Leadership Styles toward Collaboration**

Principals perceived their jobs to be overwhelming, challenging, and stressful. The need for collaboration and collaborative leadership strategies has been narrated by all principal participants in the study. Through building the capacity of administrative teams and faculty members, and nurturing teacher leadership, principals have been able to design and utilize collaborative structures to increase their ability to attend to instructional leadership functions.

With the increased focus on student achievement, successful leaders develop school cultures where all professionals within the building are accountable for academic excellence and strive for high learning expectations. The leadership encourages the building of collaborative processes and the appreciation of student capacity to learn.

In contemporary leadership literature, the importance of relationship and collaboration are noted. Instead of leaders and followers or members, there is an evident emphasis on co-collaboration and co-constructors of influence within a social process to

achieve a goal (DeWitt, 2017). Although principals noted a variety of leadership styles, all commented on building capacity and collaborative structures. Along with collaboration, the urban principal has to be agile enough to adapt to different leadership styles as well. Because of increasingly complex demands of the urban principalship, building leaders find themselves constantly navigating between schools as educational institutions, social service agencies, as well as leader of organizational incubators for innovation.

A single principal can have multiple leadership styles. Michelle commented that she exhibits a personal style of leadership by greeting everyone in the morning beginning with parents and students in the parking lot of the school. She believes that modeling expectations showing respect to parents and community members is a part of her personal and authentic style of leadership. Sarah commented that she practices a proactive style of leadership and also greets parents in the morning. Sarah believes she is able to identify and hear concerns early and can mitigate them. Sarah commented that she practices adaptive leadership also because “you have to be able to shift what your plan was to adjust and adapt [to meet the needs of the students].” Schools are socially constructed organizations that must continuously adapt to their community and environment thus principal leadership has to be agile. Michelle expressed, “You have to adapt. If you are not willing to do that, then you’re part of the problem.”

As a component of collaborative leadership, distributed leadership theory conceptually recognizes the importance of the concept of interdependence within an organization and the important work of creating and developing collaborative teams, relationships, shared experiences and social interaction. This type of leadership is shared

and socially distributed and it promotes interdependence and shared responsibility among the members of the organization as opposed to dependence upon a singular leader (Harris, 2005). This leadership theory actually acknowledges the overwhelming demands upon a single leader (the principal) to effectively carry out the mission of the school organization. Timperley (2005) suggested that a shared, distributed or collaborative style of leadership may have emerged in urban schools in response to the growing complexity of the role of the school principal. Collaborative leadership is about working with all stakeholders and not manipulating people to agree with the decisions of a single leader. Collaborative leadership is about bringing collective expertise together to learn together and to foster growth through maximizing the strengths and contributions of all stakeholders (DeWitt, 2017)

In the school setting, contextually-responsive leadership theory can be evidenced through teacher-based teams or professional learning communities that are formed according to the contexts, needs of individual schools and the needs of the students. Within schools, structures and frameworks for practice, professional development and capacity building for collaborative teams require attention to individual strengths as well as creating time and resources for individuals to draw from these resources. The needs of the school and leaders of the teams could be created and developed based upon their creativity, expertise and ability to influence the collaborative group in positive ways to solve problems and achieve goals.

While urban principals may have multiple styles of leadership that they have acquired through their various experiences, all expressed the need as well as the belief in what I call creative collaborative leadership. This allows for the organic nature of people



working together to adjust as necessary given a variety of contexts. Understanding that the role of the principal is complex, varied and has to extend to the broader community, this theme centered around the need for collaboration and intentionally creating collaborative structures within a principal's organization.

Successful school leadership is one that creates conditions for effective teaching and learning to take place and therefore has to develop and build capacity in others (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). However, noting that true creative collaboration is co-constructed based upon the creativity, expertise and strengths of the participant, principals must be willing to yield the leadership when there is a member who may exhibit greater expertise in a particular area. With this shared collaborative leadership is also the belief that there should be a shared accountability and responsibility for student outcomes. Currently only the name of the principal appears on the annual state report card for each school. However, there still needs to be the notion that each member of the learning organization is an active and responsible participant in the improvement of each student and overall school improvement. Urban school principals must establish the initial conditions, climate, and structures for collaboration as well as strategic systems for collective accountability and responsibility for student outcomes. While there was consistency with the research in recognition and acknowledgment for the need for collaboration, utilization of faculty expertise, the capacity building of faculty needs to include the elements of co-construction of leadership practices according to context as well as the development of agility and adaptability of leadership. This implies the capacity within the principal leadership to create an environment that encourages and embraces the diversity of viewpoints and takes advantage of this for the benefit of the

entire organization and for students. Adaptive leaders are able to quickly adjust and change during times of volatility and uncertainty.

### **Tensions in Accountability Policy Context**

Principals narrated accountability to mean federal and state testing requirements and evidence of accountability through meeting test score benchmarks. Some also related accountability to an effort of the entire school team to be responsive to students and their families. Others viewed accountability demands as likely to produce compliance and reduce creativity among principal and staff. Another interpretation of accountability among a subset of principals is the assurance that high quality teaching takes place. Also included in the meaning of accountability was a responsibility for the reputation of the school both during and outside of the school day. These views of accountability were described sometimes at an individual level for the principal and at other times as a collective sense of responsibility.

Jan described how she perceived accountability requirements as reducing principal creativity and increasing compliance:

[Accountability] I think sometimes when you're not creative, everything is so compliant. You don't get to be who you really are. You just dial in [to the] script and there was no transparency there. I'm just doing what I'm told to do.

Jan's narration runs counter to that of authentic leadership theory. Authentic leadership implies that one acts in accord with one's true self and self-expression and leadership behaviors are consistent with inner thoughts (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Research by Lyle Kirtman (2013) conducted on over 1000 educational leaders demonstrated that the highest results come from the leaders who are low on compliance

and rule following and high on innovation. The current complexities and diversity of student needs, trying to be perfect with all policy, state and local demands may create a less effective principal.

Dufour and Marzano (2009) discussed the conflicting trend between the accountability and compliance when they wrote “time devoted to the capacity of teachers to work in teams is far better spent than time devoted to observing individual teachers” (p. 67). In the findings as outlined in Chapter Four, the competing demands on principals’ time left some principals prioritizing classroom visitations and providing feedback to teachers. The research supports that a better use of principal time would be in the teaching and learning process as opposed to compliance driven activities such as providing evidence of a weekly number of visitations. The aspirations of the Cleveland Plan was based, in part, upon the premise that excellent schools are led by exemplary principals. These exemplary principals would then be provided full autonomy over budgets, staff selection and assignment, academic and student support programs, the school calendar and schedules for their schools (Cleveland’s Plan for Transforming Schools, 2012).

Complying with accountability-driven requirements either at the state or district levels can result in building leaders feeling restricted and constrained which may make daily work ineffective but also can circumvent creativity and innovation. The tension associated between creativity and compounding compliance toward accountability policies can lead to a fear of failure among principals. That fear can cause a leader to hold back from the freedom to create and the willingness to try a new approach that may actually result in superior performance (Fullan, 2014).

There was consistency between the findings and the research literature as it relates to principals feeling a tension between wanting to be more creative according to academic plans based upon student needs, but being constrained by the time and resources of accountability and compliance. Although the Cleveland Plan allows for school autonomy and decisions to be made at the school level, there are items of compliance that consume extensive amounts of principal time such as teacher evaluations required by the state, and individualized education plan meetings for students in which Cleveland principals must participate. There is also little autonomy on selections of curricular materials due to requirements that curriculum be selected from evidenced based listings.

The findings also reflected the research literature as it related to principals' fear of failure. The Cleveland Plan calls for the closing of failing schools so that eventually every neighborhood will have only high performing schools. With 50% of the current principal evaluation instrument based upon test scores and the expressed fear and stress of attaining testing performance targets set by the state and the district, principals noted that they have had to narrow their focus. Their narratives include the strain of working with limited resources. Time to execute compliance-driven functions have constrained creativity and innovation. The findings of the study suggest that if left unchecked, compliance will stifle the creativity, innovation and school autonomy that the Cleveland Plan was seeking to support.

### **Creative Leadership**

Real leaders are creative problem solvers. Puccio, Mance, and Murdock (2011) define creative leadership as the ability to deliberately engage the imagination to define

and guide a group toward a novel goal—a direction that is new for the group. Creative leadership can embody several leadership approaches toward problems to be solved or improvements to be made using novel or creative ways. Byrne et al. (2009) allude to the fact that due to the complex behaviors and considerations within organizations, developing the skills to lead innovation needs to occur systemically. Leadership training models to enhance capacity would include collaboration creativity, intelligence, organizational wisdom and idea generation for the common good (Sternberg, 2008).

In seeking novel or unique solutions to problems, creative leadership requires creative thinking. Leading creativity encourages lots of thoughts from multiple minds. As leaders, principals have to establish relational trust by deferring judgement, accepting multiple ideas, making connections, and seeking novelty or unique solutions. It requires understanding that creativity is the intersection of novelty and usefulness. Although creativity is doing things in an original way, unique solutions must also be useful, valuable, and/or appropriate (Mance, Puccio, Reali, & Switalski, 2012).

These dimensions of creative leadership were evident in the findings. Michelle reflected upon the need for principals to set the conditions for creative collaboration among the staff, “if you try to be creative or you try to encourage creativity in others...[the faculty is] more flexible [and] they want to problem solve differently.” By establishing a culture that appreciates creativity and divergent thinking, urban principals may be able to develop safe space for idea generation. Jan provided these thoughts about leading creatively, “it’s caused me to rethink the way we’re doing things...the way we’re teaching...it’s caused me to think about relationships more.” Through the variety of ideas generated, some may provide a workaround for compliance so that creativity is not the

enemy of meeting accountability requirements, but simply the springboard for unique thinking.

Puccio, Mance and Murdoch (2011) describe leadership as a factor that inspires change while creativity is the process leading towards change. Creative thinking and encouraging creative thinking in others is a trademark characteristic of leadership that leads to transformation of an organization. Principal leadership is needed to build relationships and the trusting environment necessary to explore creative thinking and unique solutions. Gong, Huang and Farha (2009) discussed how transformational leadership and creativity are linked through positive leadership experiences toward learning that build a sense of self-efficacy and how employee creativity increases over time resulting in positive impacts upon transformational leadership.

Principals need some level of trust in their work environment and between principal supervisors. In the study findings, there were a few principals when speaking of accountability and compliance, who spoke of fear of not getting resources or not being invested in or losing their job should their school not comply to demands at the state or district level. Organizational trust issues appear to be evident and that may hinder creativity in current leadership expression. Houghton and DiLiello (2010) noted that the perception of organizational support for creativity had a positive impact upon the creativity and belief of self-efficacy when supported with professional development.

The belief that creative leadership is an integrative style of leadership is consistent with more contemporary leadership theory. For this study, creative leadership is viewed as an integrative leadership theory that is focused upon positive organizational behaviors. I have included several dimensions of leadership theory and conceptualized them as

components of creative leadership as a result of a review of the literature of both current and future-focused leadership development literature (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). The integrative styles of leadership approaches of this research initially focused upon adaptive, complexity, distributed, and authentic. From this research, I added an additional leadership style or approach to include collaborative leadership. It appears from the study findings that the added emphasis on collaboration as a dimension of leadership style may be a much-needed ingredient. There is the possibility that collaboration with other administrators, staff, and community leaders may yield greater levels of creativity in responding to the barriers principals often encounter, even within district structures that are designed but do not always lead to building level autonomy.

### **Barriers Within Structures of Autonomy**

The Cleveland Plan described an accelerated school autonomy context for decision-making to take place at the schools by exemplary principals—those responsible for setting the conditions and environment for student learning. However, the principals narrated barriers that exist within the district's structure for building level autonomy. These barriers narrated by principals were categorized in four main areas – time, talent, training and treasure. Treasure being the financial resources and budgeting aspects of the school.

Principals influence and establish the conditions as well as the culture associated with successful schools. Research identifying the conditions that principals influence include: creating and communicating a vision; establishing a culture of high expectations for students and staff; supporting and monitoring learning and instruction; teacher evaluation; hiring, developing, and retaining quality school staff; maintaining the learning

environment (discipline); managing the school budget; and engaging with the community (Bryk, et al., 2010). Additional leadership actions identified with improving student achievement also include resourcing strategically; planning, coordinating, and evaluating curricula in addition to teachers; and participating in teacher learning and development (Copeland and Neeley, 2013). The greater the principal self-efficacy around these areas, the greater the principal sense of having the capacity to adjust their leadership style to meet the demand.

However, with all of the various duties and expectations of the principal, Michelle said, “every year...every year, they add something else to your plate...I don’t get any work done until people leave...we have to do the compliance...your day is all about managing the day.” Stephen concurred. “The amount that a principal is asked to do, I think...can be unrealistic especially with all the constraints with regards to the contract.” There also seems to be an implied over reliance upon the capacity and role of the principal to execute central office strategic plans.

Out of the principals interviewed, half discussed speaking up regarding what they perceived as unrealistic demands. Those who had become principals during the Cleveland Plan implementation were the most likely to be vocal and challenge perceived excessive demands. From challenging the demands, these principals had then been invited or volunteered to serve on various committees. One of the participants had also served on statewide committees as well. This implies that there is a willingness on the part of the district to accept principal input especially when principals assert themselves and advocate for their needs. It appears that when principals perceive that their voice and influence matters, they are more likely to advocate. One of the principals believed that



their advocacy would help support other principals as well. The principals least likely to challenge any processes were those who perceived their positions to be in jeopardy if performance targets were not met. This may create an unintended consequence, however, of not receiving needed support.

All principal participants discussed the collective bargaining agreement as a barrier to their leadership and to school autonomy. Conditions such as system seniority have circumvented principal professional selections to place or retain the best talent in positions. The process of talent selection was also mentioned as a barrier that needed greater efficiency to meet the needs of each school context, but was constrained by the language contained in the bargaining agreement. Principals narrated examples of not being able to select or retain staff to be in compliance with the contract. The collective bargaining agreement also contained language with rigid times for class length and scheduling requirements that are inconsistent with supporting students according to their needs. Principals try to find creative ways to build in systems of support for students that may include external or community partners. Sarah expressed her frustration when her professional judgement particularly in support social and emotional purposes for students gets challenged by faculty. “It’s just hard when you have a [number of the staff] that work for the union and not for the students. So that’s a challenge.” Alternatively, in the collective bargaining agreement, there is a collaborative structure established for the principal and school-based teacher union members to meet at least monthly. Hiring of faculty is done by a personnel selection committee also comprised of the principal and building level union members. This perhaps could be a space to improve school-based collaboration.

With the current complexities and diversity of student needs, trying to be perfect with all policy, state and local demands may create a less effective principal. One of the mediating factors of creative leadership is a sense of self-efficacy. From the study, principals narrated a disconnect with traditional principal preparation programs and speed, agility and adaptability with which urban principals need to be able to function daily. Elena shared that in her principal preparation courses she was the only one working in the urban environment. The issues raised by her classmates in her graduate school principal preparation classes to Elena did not seem like problems at all. She expressed:

They wouldn't last a week in the urban setting...their mountains were like mole hills. I know the classes were necessary, but it was so much on the job training that I went through and did. I wasn't prepared for it in college. I'm just grateful that I was able to come under the leadership of [and experienced principal] in a building...The preparation, I think for urban education principal needs to... [take place in urban schools].

From the study, principals believed that on-going professional development was critical to building their capacity to lead their schools. One principal narrated the belief that more time engaging with other principals would be more beneficial than certain curricular content area training.

The school budgeting process known as Student Based Budgeting [SBB] was seen as both a barrier and a support. The ways in which it can be a barrier was most likely impacting schools with smaller school populations where the funds allocated to the schools are based upon the number of students and any specialized needs or

disaggregated classifications of students the school enrollment may have. Some principals expressed that they were not able to make any allocations for curriculum or instructional support personnel due to the lack of funding available while noting that other schools were able to provide for or had these positions as well as deans. While there is the perception that this funding strategy provides for autonomy as well as equity, in reality it may actually exacerbate the lack of both.

Central office structures have been narrated as both a barrier and a support. Some principal participants have experienced a lot of change particularly in the principal supervisor role. As a principal, Sarah experienced multiple supervisors in one year, noting “we’ve been through ...network leaders [since I’ve been a principal at this school]. So I’ve been through a revolving door of leadership...[and] its challenging”. Ingersoll (2003) cites that turnover of staff presents heavy consequences for organizations that rely upon extensive interaction among colleagues. Ingersoll notes that organizations such as schools, particularly high poverty public schools depend upon commitment, continuity and cohesion to mitigate disruption. In a related matter, a participant spoke of the lack of support experienced with previous principal supervisors. With repeated changes in this role, principals either did not develop trusting relationships or perceived that the supervisor did not have a full understanding of their needs. A few participants discussed that while there is a support structure from central office for the schools for each department, that it is inefficient if no one responds to needed requests. Most principals, however perceived they have the capacity to communicate with other principals or systems of support when they did not feel supported by central office staff or supervisors.

## **Principal Supports**

Principals have systems of support for themselves and their work through the formal structures of the district, external support structures through professional organizations and groups as well as informal structures of colleagues and self-selected mentors. All principal participants shared the existence of some sort of supports.

The principal's role as a transformational leader and human capital manager means that principals have to be able to attract, manage, and develop talent strategically. Building leaders have to use a network approach to recruit and retain talent, convey a shared vision, provide for relevant professional development, increase team efficacy, conduct teacher evaluations with meaningful and timely feedback, use data-driven decision-making, and recognize successes of staff members (Kimball, 2011; Hoy & Tarter, 2011). Formally there are structures of support in the district called networks. The network structure has gone through a few iterations during the Cleveland Plan implementation as principal supervisors have been renamed Network Support Leaders. All principals interviewed provided positive feedback regarding their current Network Support Leader. Elena shared,

The Cleveland Plan did give us a little leeway, but we still have guidelines...I felt supported with the network leaders...I've truly felt that I have been blessed to have those individuals that I could reach out and communicate with via phone, email...they were there to support me...I appreciate the closeness we've been able to establish with the network leader...I can't say anything negative about any of them. There wasn't a time that I needed them that they didn't come to my rescue.

Jan shared about the trusting relationship she has with her current Network Support Leader: “I don't feel beat down [anymore], feel like I can't say anything. The trust is there. Just the willingness to assist and help and get the school back where it used to be.” Similarly, Michelle expressed that the current structure of support is beneficial, “I've always felt like my immediate supervisors, the network leaders, our action team coaches have been there. I've never felt like, I've been alone.”

Just as collaboration, communication and the development of trusting relationship help to develop strong learning environments for students, the same is apparent for developing and sustaining principal leadership. It appears that the current formal structure of support described by those interviewed believe reinforces the self-efficacy of the principal in terms of their leadership capabilities. This seems to help to develop a sense of control among the principals toward what happened within their school environment.

The formal structure also seems to be supportive when building leaders have to make rapid adjustment whether caused by district leadership or situations within the context of the school. From discussion with principals, the formal systems, as they have been described, support the professional judgement of the principal and provides clarifying communication for handling obstacles or barriers.

There also are informal structures among colleagues that principals narrated. These colleagues may or may not be fellow educators or administrators. The additional supports may come from individuals or groups outside of the district. Principals perceive that they have the capacity and autonomy to develop and maintain these relationships to

help support their success as an administrator. It appeared that those principals who had stronger formal as well as less formal systems of support were better able to deal with the stress of their responsibilities.

Some of the principals had been administrators at other schools. In their narratives, these principals all shared systems or leadership styles that were successful in former schools that they in part wanted to translate into their current situations. Principals with a variety of leadership experiences spoke of having or requesting coaches. Principals believed that peer coaching was valuable to developing their leadership self-efficacy. Those principals with other administrative team members, such as an assistant principal, relied upon each other as trusted support and thought partners.

It was apparent that those principals who began their leadership experience after the Cleveland Plan implementation were more vocal about their needs and seemed to be engaged more with district wide committees to provide input to improve schools and principal supports. These principals also discussed providing input regarding principal leadership professional development. In this next section of this chapter, I will offer recommendations for policy and practice in response to the research findings and implication.

### **Recommendations**

As a result of this study, I have identified a number of areas for action as it relates to a creative leadership role of the urban principal. Although current research suggests that defining the role of the principal is challenging due to the variety of situated contexts and rapidly changing needs, there needs to be an operational definition of the role of the

principal that meets the current needs and allows for periodic revision. Any definition should embody creative leadership in its description. From the research creative leadership approaches are acknowledged as adaptive, complexity, distributed and authentic be included.

### **Time for Professional Collaboration**

The study findings suggest that emphasis be placed upon the additional dimension of collaborative leadership. More time needs to be allocated for administrators to collaborate with other administrators, staff, and community leaders. Since the research findings suggest collaboration is a necessary added dimension to more robust creative leadership, on-going professional development of principals is important and should include the creation of spaces for creative leadership. This would include more formal and informal supports for principals; more formal and informal supports for teachers; more structures created for collaboration that can be virtually achieved.

### **Alignment of Principal Preparation Programs**

Since the findings suggest that principals learn much in job-embedded situations, there needs to be more opportunities for this to happen for principals in training. Also included in the role definition of this leadership should be student-centric learning and instruction of the whole child. Professional training should be provided for those aspects that most directly support this leadership role. There is need to revise and align principal preparation programs to better meet the current principal roles and responsibilities. This can be achieved by strengthening and aligning programs in supportive groups or cohorts with an embedded field experience component working with an experienced building principal for multiple years (Darling-Hammond & Davis, 2012). As indicated by the

participants, there remains a gap between traditionally trained principals and current school reality (Kearney & Valdez, 2015).

In particular, principal preparation needs to include job embedded field experience involving cross-boundary training with community resource and school partnership development, social and emotional learning leadership. Key professional development areas include developing collaborative cultures of responsibility for student success, implicit bias training, and follow-on culturally relevant pedagogy for school leaders. Field experience should include real-world, problem-based practice with specific feedback among cohort group members.

### **Re-Examination of School Funding and Budgeting**

The research findings suggest that there is a need to broadly re-examine how school funds are allocated. This examination needs to take place at the local district, state, and federal levels. With the variety of state and federal categories of funding, there are restrictions reflecting policy priorities. Additionally, principal narratives suggested there are inequities in funding from within the district. While the concept of Student Based Budgeting [SBB] was to promote autonomy and decision-making at the school level, the funding protocols may actually cause inequity as narrated by principals. As an example, principal narratives included that some schools have Deans, Assistant Principals and a Curriculum Support Specialist while other schools had only a lone principal. Within the context of a pandemic with funding cuts looming, principals may have even fewer financial resources.

### **Using Creative Leadership for Collaborative and Flexible Problem Solving**



The Cleveland Plan allowed district autonomy and flexibility by enabling the CEO of CMSD to determine the school calendar and the school day. There is also the potential to reconfigure time and organization of the school day. Principals' narratives on collaboration suggest the benefits of working with staff and administration for productive changes that benefit of students. This collaboration might be a starting point for collective bargaining efforts that offer greater room for creative leadership among principals and their teachers. In light of the current COVID-19 situation, desired flexibility and adaptability is needed for principals and all educators. Shifts toward more flexible approaches that are negotiated between the teachers' union and the district leadership would be beneficial in scheduling learning opportunities through meaningful use of course time. Student-centric school calendars, allocations of time, and course schedules should be aligned with the needs of the whole child with greater principal input. This could be achieved through flexible action plan development formulated on an individual school basis with a collaborative team facilitated by the principal to meet the needs of students.

### **Opportunity to Distinguish Principal Leadership from Accountability**

In developing a student-centric school district that seeks to solve the problems currently facing the nation, state, and district, creative leadership is required. We have experienced how rapidly traditional schools have had to adjust to remote on-line learning environments with varying degrees of success. The COVID-19 pandemic situation brought into our consciousness the need for creative leadership within the situated context of changing state flexibilities along with adjustments to remaining federal requirements regarding special education. School leaders need continuous professional

development in creativity, collaboration, idea generation, and communication, along with technology skill and organizational wisdom. They worked diligently to keep pace. A system model that implements on-going professional development for school leaders in creative leadership which includes adaptive leadership skills training would be beneficial both in and through volatile and unpredictable situations. As the revised Ohio Standards for Principals (ODE, 2018a) considers many of these aspects, now is the time to build and develop principal capacity. This provides an opportunity to transition from years of strictly testing data focused mindsets to include all aspects of student learning and well-being within the community. Since principal narratives included a sense of fear and compliance at the expense of approaching their leadership creatively, there is a need for greater transitioning support, coaching and mentorship.

As COVID-19 is a new phenomenon of this century much remains unknown. However, providing knowledge building blocks would be beneficial to inform the education community moving forward.

### **Future Study**

Based upon the findings and analysis of this study, I provide thoughts for the need for further research in a few key areas. When describing the principal role and responsibilities, words such as overwhelming, stressful, and challenging were used. However, each of the participants managed to find ways to overcome all of these descriptors and stay motivated. As the principals in this study had no intention of leaving the district and valued their positions, an area for further exploration would be into their motivation to deal with complexity and change while approaching their leadership creatively. Scholarship in this area would benefit from a correlational study between

certain individual personality traits or characteristics and the principals' capacity to approach their leadership creatively.

In my findings and recommendations, on-going professional development is suggested to build the capacity of principals as well as teacher leaders toward applying creative leadership approaches to problem solving. Perhaps a grounded theory study to determine what would be the best approach to that training in creative problem solving would result in a framework for this professional development. Stoll and Temperley (2009) suggest that some people are naturally creative leaders and others can have their creative leadership enhanced through development. Further research to determine how to provide on-going professional development and coaching is needed.

A multiple case research study could be conducted with urban principals outside of the Cleveland district regarding creative leadership to determine if principal narratives shared similarities or differences regarding the elements of barriers and supports to principal leadership internally and externally as expressed in this urban district.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, for decades, meaningful and effective urban school reform has been a persistent issue. Contemporary leadership theory relative to the school setting has produced models and frameworks for successful school leadership. Previous research suggested urban school reforms that connected to equitable community development efforts were more sustainable and principals played a pivotal role in leading such efforts. This research explored how the creative leadership of the school principal connects with school transformational improvement efforts.

In the urban school setting during a situated context of school improvement as described in the Cleveland Plan, principals identified workload demands and compliance with district directives to be overwhelming and stressful. They described meeting state and district student performance targets as also overwhelming and stressful. The study found that principals placed an emphasis upon developing relationships and meeting the social and emotional needs of students. They understood that before any meaningful learning could take place, these basic needs had to be met. While typically trained as educators these responsibilities were beyond the scope of instructional leadership and created more roles than learned in principal preparation coursework.

The results of this study suggested that there were six themes related to the urban principal creative leadership in a context of compliance, school improvement within an era of accountability: (a) changing roles and responsibilities of principals, (b) collaboration – leadership styles, (c) autonomy and accountability are not the same, (d) creative leadership – finding unique solutions to problems, (e) roadblocks and barriers to creative principal leadership, and (f) formal and informal structures of principal support.

Principals have had to establish relationships, partnerships, and community resource support to help students and their schools be successful. This included new responsibilities of leading social and emotional learning. There are some roles for which principals lack training such as marketing and student retention that would best be handled by a different organizational department such as enrollment services or family and community engagement to support principals.

In this study, principals found they best navigated the competing demands between management and instructional leadership by designing and utilizing

collaborative structures within their schools. It was found that the district designed structure of grouping schools into networks has been beneficial more recently. This district organization structural design has gone through several iterations with the most current reported as the most helpful to principals. The role of Network Support Leader as principal supervisor supports both the internal, within school collaborative structure and cross-school collaborative structure.

This study also determined how principals viewed accountability as federal and state testing and assessment requirements as well as collective responsibility of an entire school team and that each member has a responsibility to each student and to each other to meeting goals and assuring rigorous student learning and high-quality instruction takes place. From this study a third definition of accountability surfaced that included the personal responsibility of each educator for the reputation of the school. This definition aligned with the notion of collective responsibility.

To improve student educational outcomes, urban principals are faced with complex social, economic, and institutional racial barriers that create competing and tensions to their primary responsibility to lead community-based learning organizations. The results of this study have suggested that the role of the urban principal needs to be more accurately defined and those functions that do not support leading the learning for the whole child should be absorbed as function elsewhere in the organization. Creative leadership was found to indeed be an integrated model of leadership that included adaptive, distributed, authentic leadership models and approaches but prioritized needed collaboration and divergent thinking in an organic yet facilitated structure. It is hoped that this research, using authentic urban principal narratives, will lead to future research

using this integrated model of creative leadership to expand the research base and encourage divergent thinking to accelerate student achievement outcomes by solving problems in novel and often unique ways.

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APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Part I – Interview 1

1. How long have you been a principal?
2. How long have you been a principal in this district? In this school?
3. How would you describe your most recent leadership experience at this school?  
*Probe: You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_ . Would this describe a typical day for you?*
4. (If less than 2 years/In another role or different school) How would you describe your leadership experiences at your previous school?
5. What changes have you noticed in your leadership practice?
6. Do feel the context of your work experience has shifted or changed? If so, can you describe this? How does this make you feel?
7. In the past 6 (or if less than 6) years, can you think of and describe the ways that you have felt supported in your building leadership?  
*Probe: You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_ . Can you elaborate on that?*
8. In the past 6 (or if less than 6) years can you think of and describe the ways that you have felt restricted in your building leadership?  
*Probe: You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_ . Can you elaborate on that?*
9. In the past 6 (or if less than 6) years can you think of and describe any barriers to your leadership?

*Probe: You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_ . Can you elaborate on that?*

10. What do you feel causes the most change or shift in your role as a building leader – District policy and practices? State legislation? Federal education legislation/policy?

*Probe: You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_ policy/legislation. Can you elaborate on that? Has this caused you to change your leadership strategy or style?*

11. What characteristics or leadership behaviors do you think an urban principal need?

*Probe: You mentioned the characteristics/behaviors of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. Why? Do you feel these have been the same 6 years ago? Why or Why not?*

12. Can you describe the preparation or support received of needed principal leadership characteristics and behaviors?

*Probe: Is there anything else you would like to tell or share with me?*

## Part II – Interview 2

*Participant reviews transcript from Interview I*

14. Is there anything that you wish to clarify or add?

*Probe: You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_. Could you elaborate on that?*

15. In what way, if any, has the role of principals changed in urban districts?

*Probe: Can you talk about this \_\_\_\_\_.*

16. How much, if any, influence do you feel you have as a principal on decision-making at the local level [school? district?]. At the state level? Can you provide some stories of when you felt you influenced decision-making?

17. What gives you the greatest satisfaction in your experience as principal?

18. When you hear the words creative leadership, how would you describe it?

*Probe: You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_ . Could you elaborate on that?*

19. Can you describe how accountability influences your leadership?

*Probe: You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_ . Could you elaborate on that?*

20. Can you describe how your leadership impacts The Cleveland Plan implementation as you understand it?

*Probe: You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_ . Could you elaborate on that?*

21. Is there anything else you would like to add? Tell me or share with me?

## APPENDIX B



# College of Education & Human Services

### DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM & FOUNDATIONS Informed Consent

My name is Gretchen Liggins, and I am a Ph.D. candidate at Cleveland State University. I am also a principal in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. I am working on my dissertation research with Dr. Fred Hampton and Dr. Anne Galletta, faculty in the Urban Education Ph.D. program.

**What the study is about:** This study will explore and describe the experiences of urban school principals during the time the Cleveland Plan has been in place. In particular, it will look at how principals navigate local, state, and federal educational policy.

**What participants would be asked to do:** If you agree to participate, I will interview you for two separate hour-long sessions. The interviews will take place at a location convenient to you. After each interview, I will give you the interview transcripts, and you can let me know if there is anything you want to clarify or change. I ask that this be done within two weeks of receiving the transcripts.

**Participation is voluntary:** If you agree to participate, you may end an interview at any time. You may choose to not answer a question, if you don't want to respond. Should you be willing to be audiorecorded, you may turn off the digital recorder at any point. The digital recorder belongs to me, and only I have access to the recorder. You may choose to withdraw from the study at any point in time with no consequences.

**Confidentiality:** Your response to the questions will be kept confidential. The interview will be given a code number. It will be transcribed by Gretchen Liggins. In addition to Ms. Liggins, only Dr. Hampton and Dr. Galletta will see the transcripts. This is to ensure your confidentiality. Parts of the interview may be included in a final report, or in related reports during and after the study. Your name will not be attached to the interview or transcripts or any later reports.

(see page two)

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN SERVICES Campus Location

Department of Curriculum & Foundations

2121 Euclid Avenue, JH 376

Cleveland, Ohio 44115-2214

Julka Hall, Room 376 T 216.687.4577

2485 Euclid Avenue F 216.687.5370

Cleveland, Ohio 44115 W csuohio.edu/cehs/c f

**Risks of participating:** One risk of participating in this study involves confidentiality. To address this risk, reports on the research will not include identifying information. Reports will use pseudonyms for the participants, the school, and the district. Also, to lessen the risk that confidentiality would be breached, consent forms will be stored in a locked cabinet in Dr. Galletta's office. The audiorecording file, which will not include your name, will be uploaded from the recording device to Gretchen Liggins' password protected computer and deleted from Ms. Liggins' digital audiorecorder. Interview transcripts and the digital audiorecording files will be also be maintained on a password protected USB in Dr. Galletta's office. Should you not want to be audio-recorded, the hard copy of interview notes would be scanned into digital format and uploaded to a password protected computer, followed by the shredding of the hard copy of notes. Files will also be maintained on my password protected computer for a minimum of three years. Otherwise, there are no risks beyond those of everyday living.

**Benefits of participating:** There are no direct benefits to participating in the study. An indirect benefit may be that you reflect on your own experience as a principal. It may lead to a deepening of your own understanding of this experience. Also, you will be adding to the research. This will help others interested in this topic.

**If you have questions:** If you have any questions regarding this project and/or would like to receive the final report, please call Gretchen Liggins at (440) 465-9324, email: \_\_\_\_\_ or Dr. Anne Galletta at (216) 687-4581, email: \_\_\_\_\_

Please read and sign one of the copies of this consent form and keep the other one for your records.

Thank you for your contribution to this research and for your cooperation and support. Signing below indicates you are 18 years or older and that you agree to participate.

*I understand that if I have any questions about my rights as a research subject, I can contact the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board at (216) 687-3630.*

I have read and understood this consent form and agree to participate.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (Please Print)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX C



**Chief Executive Officer**  
Eric S. Gordon

**Board of Education**  
Anne E. Bingham  
*Board Chair*

Robert M. Heard, Sr.  
*Vice Chair*

Louise P. Dempsey, Esq.  
Sara Elaquad, J.D.  
Jasmine Fryer  
Denise W. Link  
Willetta A. Milam  
Lisa Thomas, Ph.D.  
Kathleen C. Valdez, Esq.

**Ex Officio Members**  
Alex Johnson, Ph.D.  
Harlan M. Sands, J.D., MBA

**Nicholas D'Amico**

Office of Portfolio Planning, Growth, Management, and Accountability

Gretchen Liggins, Doctoral Candidate  
Cleveland State University  
College of Education & Human Services  
2121 Euclid Avenue  
Cleveland, Ohio 44115

Dear Mrs. Liggins,

Thank you for your interest in conducting research that involves the voluntary participation Cleveland Metropolitan School District principals.

The understood purpose of this research is to explore and describe the experiences of urban principals as they navigate between policy compliance and creative leadership in an environment of accountability of student performance outcomes. The contemporary context of the study is the Cleveland Plan implementation.

This study has been reviewed by a panel of district experts and your research approved. The panel found that the subject matter was relevant to the goals of the Cleveland Plan and would help us better understand how to best support principals in our system.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nicholas D'Amico', written over a horizontal line.

Nicholas D'Amico  
Executive Director of School Performance  
October 14, 2019