

QUALITATIVE HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY: THE LIVED
EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL LEADERS WHO WORKED THROUGH A MERGER

by

Olga Nelly Collazo

Liberty University

A Proposal Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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APPROVED BY:

Jose Puga, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Vonda Beavers, Ed.D., Committee Member

Abstract

This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study describes the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers in New York State. The central research question that guided the study was: What are the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of a school merger? In addition, guiding questions were implemented to understand the phenomenon of school mergers. The guiding questions are: How do school leaders maneuver and manage the organizational structures impacted by the processes of a school merger? What role do school leaders play in the environmental demands influencing the processes of a school merger? Organizational theory guided the study. Organizational theory is the study of how organizations operate and how they impact and are impacted by the environment in which they operate. Utilizing the three principles of organizational theory: organizational structure, culture, and design and change the study describes the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers. Study participants were selected through a participant survey screener. The study was conducted through purposeful criterion sampling and data collection methods using individual interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires. The transcendental phenomenological reduction process was used for data analysis.

Keywords: merger, organizational theory, school leadership

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Dedication

First and foremost, I dedicate this dissertation to God, my creator, from whom all amazing things are possible.

Second, to my husband, life partner, and best friend, Edwin. Your overwhelming love for me gets me through the times I doubt myself.

Third, to my children, Abigail, Nathan, Zoraya, and Ellyana, may you pursue knowledge throughout your lives and never have to look too far to see that perseverance and determination are in your blood.

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List of Abbreviations

Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES)

Board of Education (BOE)

Central School District, City School District, Common School District (CSD)

Local Education Authority (LEA)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

New York State (NYS)

New York State Association of School Business Officials (NYSASBO)

New York State Education Department (NYSED)

New York State Education Department Data Site (NYSEDDDS)

New York State Education Department Office of Educational Management Services
(NYSEDOEMS)

New York State Education Department: Office of Teaching Initiatives (NYSEDOTI)

New York State Education Department: School District Organization (NYSEDSO)

New York State School Building Leader certificates (SBL)

New York State School District Leader certificates (SDL)

New York State Education Department: State Education Department Public Reports Portal
(SEDREF)

New York State Education Department: Special Education (NYSEDSPED)

New York State School Board Association (NYSSBA)

New York State Odyssey of the Mind (NYSOMA)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers. Specifically, to describe the connection between the school merger processes and the people, culture, leadership, and systems based on the lived experiences of school leaders. The problem is that the role of this Mid-Atlantic state's school district leaders was ambiguous in the depiction of school district mergers processes (Dinki, 2018; Hart, 2019; Hiatt & Richardson, 2017; Namubiru et al., 2017; NYSASBO, 2014; Silky 2022; Timbs, 2005; Wollscheid & Røsdal, 2021). Chapter one focused on an in-depth background of the proposed problem by examining the historical, social, and theoretical context related to school mergers. The problem statement, purpose statement, and significance of the study were declared and examined through research to highlight the proposed study. The research study aimed to validate the research questions of the processes of school mergers in New York State (NYS). To conclude the background of this proposed study, the research question was introduced along with the definition of pertinent vocabulary words and a summary of the chapter with a synthesis of the topic.

Background

There are sixty-three counties and thirty-seven regional educational areas in New York State. Regional educational areas are divided by the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). There is a total of thirty-seven BOCES encompassing 688 public school districts and 4,807 public schools. NYS employs a total of 207,060 teachers and is responsible for educating a total of 2,606,748 public school students (NYSED DS, 2021; Silky, 2009). The NCES stated that about 43.9 percent of all NYS public school students attended city schools during the 2012-2013

school year. About 37.5 percent attended suburban schools (Ballotpedia, 2022). Approximately 6.6 percent of all students attended schools in towns, while about 11.9 percent attended rural schools. New York spends approximately 19.3 percent of its budget on elementary and secondary education. School system revenue came primarily from local funds. Per-pupil spending is \$ 22,834.84 annually (Ballotpedia, 2022; NYSED DS, 2021). The New York State Education Department (NYSED) serves as the governing body for public educational institutions in NYS. However, there are several different types of school districts in NYS. The various kinds of school districts are common school districts, union-free school districts, central school districts, city school districts, and central high school districts.

When involved in a merger, each type of NYS school district is impacted differently due to the Central Rural Schools Act (CRSA) of 1914, later revised in 1925, and the 1947 statewide Master Plan for School District Reorganization Act (MPSDRA), which was later amended in 1956. At the beginning of the twentieth century, over 10,000 public school districts existed in NYS. Most were common school districts providing education in one-room schoolhouses, grades first through eighth. As of July 1, 2019, the total number of New York State School Districts is 688 (NYSED DS, 2021). School mergers have been the number one reason for NYS's diminution of school districts (NYSED SDO, 2015). New York State Education Department Office of Educational Management Services (NYSEDEM) (2015) reported that since 2012, twelve sets of participating school districts have worked through the processes of school mergers by conducting school merger studies and going through the voting process. Of the twenty-four school districts that worked through the process of a school merger and conducted a merger study, only three of the combined school sets passed a vote to merge in the last decade. Boquet Valley School District was the most recent school district to have a community vote that passed and

implemented a merger. Since 2021, twelve school districts have undergone a school merger and conducted merger studies but have had a failed vote to implement the merger (NYSEDEM, 2015; Silky, 2022). NYS has been looking to increase the number of school mergers since Governor Andrew Cuomo pushed for school consolidations after entering office in 2010 (Hupfl, 2015). The rise in merger studies increases attention to this phenomenon. Yet, there is limited current research giving a voice to school leaders who have lived experiences of the processes of school mergers.

Historical Context

A school merger is the combination of multiple districts with the commitment to eliminating an administrative group and/or duplicate programs regarded as excessive to provide quality educational programming and services (Eacott & Freeborn, 2020; Naicker & Mkhabele, 2020). Since the 1800s, school mergers have been a contentious topic for policymakers, school administrators, and school communities in the United States (Bard et al., 2006; Berry & West, 2010; Cox, 2010). During the mid-1800s, the consolidation of schools was thought to provide students with a comprehensive education by eliminating small schools (Bard et al., 2006; Berry & West, 2010). Social, economic, and technological revolutions with growing metropolitan areas and the growth of industries also contributed to the decreasing need for one-room schools built by small towns and early settlers. By the mid-nineteenth century, federal and state education departments were pushing school districts to merge to professionalize education due to the belief that education could contribute to social order using organizational techniques emulated from businesses (Berry & West, 2010; Boser, 2013). The hard push to consolidate schools district across the United States due to policies and aggressive campaigns resulted in the reduction of American school districts from 117,000 to about 14,000 (Bard et al., 2006; Boser, 2013).

In NYS, the push to consolidate State Common Schools was no different. Like other states during the late 1700s and early 1800s, NYS declared the importance of public education to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. The proclamation to educate resulted in the inauguration of the State aid system to encourage the establishment and support of common school districts with the 1795 Establishment of a Statewide system of support for public schools. Each year, \$50,000 was to be divided among the various towns. Over 1,300 common school districts existed within a few years, enrolling almost 60,000 students (Cultural Education Center, 2022; Hackman, 1985; NYSSBA, 2022). NYS was in a time of rapid growth. Common School Districts utilized the aid to provide general instruction. Still, by the early 1800s, the Common School District aide lapsed, and the state began modifying the school district system and state educational aid (Cultural Education Center, 2022; Hackman, 1985; NYSSBA, 2022).

Common School Districts' inconveniences and financial burdens motivated the state to enact the CRSA of 1914, revised in 1925. The CRSA gave the New York State Department of Education (NYSED) the authority to merge common school districts by arranging central school districts in any region, exclusive of a city school district (Butterworth, 1941; Heffernan, 2021; NYSEDSO, 2015). It was established that newly arranged central school districts had to include studies in agriculture along with reading, writing, and arithmetic. More importantly, the new central school districts needed to be conveniently located for the attendance of scholars and the facilities a suitable size to accommodate the student attending the surrounding common school districts. The fundamental views of the CRSA of 1914 and 1925 were to (1) develop a local school able to provide an adequate educational program for rural students (having less than 4,500 population), (2) give the Local Education Authority (LEA) approval over programs and policy decisions. However, the final decision was in the hands of New York State, which is

directly connected to state aid and state incentives, (3) the district was constructed along geographic lines that make up a community (Butterworth, 1941; Heffernan, 2021; NYSEDSDO, 2015).

In 1947 and later amended in 1956, NYSED implemented the MPSDRA (NYSEDSDO, 2015). Through the MPSDRA of 1947, the Commissioner of Education was authorized to continue the investigations, study, and review of regional areas and school districts to continue pursuing school district mergers across NYS. The commissioner was also given the authority to update the MPSDRA, as necessary. When amended in 1956, the MPSDRA then gave the governor the authority to (1) put together and arrange studies and surveys to review episodically to maintain school merger plans current, (2) hold hearings concerning affected areas to elicit the expressions or opinions regarding school mergers, (3) provide cooperation and financial assistance to the inhabitants of such areas that can be elicited to go through school mergers (New York [State], 1958).

Due to the CRSA of 1914 and the MPSDRA of 1947 and 1956, approximately 9,000 school districts were reorganized in the mid-1900s. In the last decade, numerous other districts have either studied the effect of a merger on their community or have merged. In the current NYSED system, around 700 school districts exist today (NYSASBO, 2014; NYSEDSDO, 2021). Interestingly the CRSA of 1914 did not focus on the transformation of working through a merger, but the MPSDRA provides a general plan for affected areas on which to focus. Yet, the LEA and school leaders were left to figure out the complex interdependencies of a school merger, the school district's systems, and the desired activities and outcomes.

Social Context

The American educational system encompasses 13,800 public school districts containing

98,469 public elementary and secondary schools and approximately 55.2 million students in the United States (Bouchrika, 2021; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010). The influence to consolidate school districts across the United States because of policies and aggressive campaigns reduced American school districts (Boser, 2013; Eacott, 2021). Both globally and nationally, the social context of school mergers is very dynamic and dependent on the many characteristics that are associated with the institutions that influence a school district and the means of the school merger (Berry & West, 2010; Bhatnagar & Bolia, 2022; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010; Eacott & Freeborn, 2020; Hannum et al., 2021). Before a merger is agreed on, demographic, geographic, social, and economic influences are all considered and evaluated factors (Dolph, 2008; NYSASBO, 2014; New York (State), 1958). School districts are driven to agree to merge with another school district because of financial instability, lack of academic programming and opportunities, state and federal assistance, and low academic success and achievement. The social context of a newly established school district results in social change (Heffernan, 2021). School district mergers result in larger school facilities, higher student populations, and more programmatic opportunities (Boser, 2013; McCarthy & Dolfsma, 2012; NYSASBO, 2014). Consequently, the larger student populations also result in larger communities that impact people, culture, leadership, and systems through events, relationships, community associations, and the school districts' structure (Berry & West, 2010; Bhatnagar & Bolia, 2022; Duncombe et al.; Eacott & Freeborn; Hannum et al.). Limited research has explicitly described school leaders' experiences when attaining reorganizational goals or working through reorganization processes due to or for a merger (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017; Namubiru et al., 2017; Wollscheid & Røsdal, 2021).

Theoretical Context

The theoretical context driving school mergers is related to broader social contexts driven by the communities, the economy, and federal and state education politics and policy (Haveman & Wetts, 2019). There are limited definitive theoretical models that dominate research on the topic of school district mergers. However, the functionalism, institutional, industrialization, and efficiency theories can provide a systematic view of school merger processes through the elements of sociological studies within the structures and operations of social organizations (Amis & Aïssaoui, 2013; Cowen & Kazamias, 2009; Johnes et al., 2017; Marklund & Stadius, 2010). Functionalism and institutional theories explain how broader social contexts are driven by the needs of communities, the economy, and federal and state education politics and policy (Amis & Aïssaoui, 2013; Marklund & Stadius, 2010). Gross and Jones (2004) defined the functionalist perspective as focused on the desire for social order. Social order is achieved through social structures that are enforced by the different components that make up society. Education, as one of society's components, ensures stability by educating the masses to understand and follow the set responsibilities of a citizen. According to the functionalism theory, the needs of society drive the shifts in education as an institution. The functionalism theory is one of a global picture of social survival and efficiency.

Institutional theory, defined by Jepperson and Meyer (2021), explains the cultural construction of organizations, states, and identities. One of the most fundamental illogicalities of institutional theory is the understanding that institutions are secure and stable, but they endure change like all other systems and organizations. Institutional theory argues that cultural understandings and shared expectations are the organization's most prominent foundational pieces (Jepperson & Meyer, 2021). The adoption and sharing of formal organizational structures

include written policies, standard practices, and new forms of organization. Functionalism and institutional theories explain how school mergers ensure that more students receive a uniform education on social responsibility and cultural values.

Industrialization theory is directly connected to functionalism and institutional theories, but it explains why school mergers occurred historically. When the industrialization theory impacted the United States, the goal was to transform the nation from one agricultural to one based on manufacturing goods—resulting in larger populated urban areas and increased industries and industry workers. During that same time, John Dewey's belief in progressive education reinforced the need for larger schools by emphasizing the importance of students learning from their environments and the importance of schools emulating businesses to contribute to social order and progression (Johnston, 2017). This continues to drive school mergers into the purpose of functionalism and institutionalism.

As practices and systems of functionalism and institutionalism theories drive the desire for a stable society, social institutions like businesses and schools are also driven to ensure the stability of society, politics, and economics. Present-day merger and acquisition theories provide insight into practices and systems of stable businesses and business mergers and acquisitions within organizational reorganization. Business mergers and acquisitions within corporate reorganization propelled the efficiency theory for mergers and acquisitions (M&A). Current M&A theories provide insight into the motives and process of a school district merger and statistically explain that most school districts merge to improve the efficiency of the community and society (DePamphilis, 2019; Leepsa & Mishra, 2016; Sherman, 2010).

The efficiency theory states that mergers occur because two organizations have different strengths, weaknesses, and efficiency levels (DePamphilis, 2019; Leepsa & Mishra, 2016;

Sherman, 2010). The concept of efficiency ensures the elimination of waste while embracing mechanical, economic, social, and personal improvement. Through mergers, one organization's efficient processes and systems are reassigned to the inefficient processes and systems of the other organization. The goal is for the newly established organizations to improve performance, perform efficiently and attain accounted-based measured goals. Efficiency theory for a newly established school district means improving performance through financial stability, highly effective academic programming, and instruction with options for high student academic success and achievement rate.

The institutional theory as a theoretical perspective in sociology combined with the industrialization theory and the M&A efficiency theory provided insight into the conditions utilized during business and school mergers. In addition, the functionalism theory and the institutional theory as theoretical perspectives in sociology combined with the industrialization theory and the M&A efficiency theory provide a deeper understanding of school mergers. These influential theories provide insight into the historical and present-day beliefs, motives, and opportunities school mergers collectively bring to communities.

For this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study, the lived experiences of school leaders that have worked through the process of a school merger may not be typically dependent on the established school districts' focus on the desire to merge or the objectives behind the merger. By describing how leaders work through mergers, merger research can be expanded to the leadership's roles and reorganizational ability to strengthen staff performance, attain the school district's accounted-based measurable goals, and enhance programming and instruction (McCarthy & Dolfma, 2012). This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study also expanded the social transformation of a school district as it underwent a school merger and the

complex social interdependencies within its system by describing lived experience of the school leaders that worked through the merger process.

The theoretical context provided an understanding of the complex interdependencies within an organizational system. Then it helped rearrange the desired activities and outcomes to meet the social circumstance with an active and multiplicative inverse interaction of the school environment, the school community, and the behaviors that could be driven due to the uniqueness of a school merger.

Problem Statement

The problem was that the role of this Mid-Atlantic state's school district leaders was ambiguous in the depiction of school district mergers processes (Dinki, 2018; Hart, 2019; NYSASBO, 2014; Silky, 2022; Timbs, 2005). Mergers are defined as unifying two or more organizations into a single unit (Daft, 2010; DePamphilis, 2019; Isomura, 2020). Although mergers are more popular in the private sector, they are also a reality in the public sector. Mergers occur in municipalities, law enforcement, fire departments, hospitals, and educational organizations. According to the NCES, 117,108 school districts provided elementary and secondary education in 1939-40. By 2006-07, the number of districts dropped to 13,862 due primarily to school mergers. Though school district mergers have slowed, several district mergers occur yearly in many states (Fast facts: Educational institutions (84), 2021; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010). The NYSEDEM (2015) reported that since 2012 twelve sets of school districts have gone through school merger processes by conducting school merger studies and examining the voting process, but only three implemented the merger. With school mergers being a rare phenomenon in NYS, there was limited research focusing on the role of NYS school district

leaders during school mergers. Through their lived experiences school leaders depicted their lived experiences during each merger process (Dinki; Hart; NYSASBO; Silky).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers in NYS. At this stage in the research, the processes of school mergers is generally defined through historical and current documentation describing organizational structures, organizational culture, and organizational design and changes. Few research studies illustrate the intentionality of school leaders as they are working through the process of merging school districts. The theory guiding this study is organizational theory. Organizational theory depicts how individual work and energies support organizations' practices, purpose, and reality. Through organizational theory, knowledge is gained about how organizations use resources, develop, and implement policies, manage human resources, provide leadership, restructure, and reorganize (Griffin & Heinrich, 2022). Organizational theory helps understand the transformation of an organization and the complex interdependencies within an organizational system and then helps rearrange the desired activities and outcomes in a way that meets many goals (Hatch, 2018; Jones, 2013; Mullins & Christy, 2016). Organizational theory relates to the proposed study in understanding how school leaders perceived the merger process, how the merger influenced their work, and how the merger affected the environment in which they operate (Daft, 2010; Isomura, 2020; Jones, 2013).

Significance of the Study

Globally, school mergers have a considerable debate in research (Berry & West, 2010). In the United States, it is estimated that less than ten mergers are fully implemented in a year,

ultimately changing the demographics and resources of communities, local organizations, the state, and the federal government (Fast facts: Educational institutions (84), 2021; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010). Research shows that school mergers result in the number of national and state school districts dropping, but the number of students being provided with a service does not decrease. As school districts undergo a merger process, leaders need to concentrate on increasing efficiency, providing an education to a higher number of students, and ensuring high student success and achievement (Cox, 2010). In NYS, the number of school districts working through a merger process by conducting merger studies varies yearly and can take multiple years to be completed. However, the voter approval to implement a merger has a very low percentage (NYSASBO, 2014; NYSEDEM, 2015; Silky, 2022; Timbs, 2005). The significance of understanding the lived experiences of leaders working through a merger comes from the fact that different organizational processes also occur as school merger processes occur.

Through this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study, knowledge was gained in understanding the demands on the school districts as they went through the merger processes, including the merger study, the merger vote, and the merger implementation. This study of school mergers is important for societal agencies that directly influence education to understand the demands on the school districts as they are going through the merger processes, which includes the merger study, the merger vote, and the merger implementation (Dinki, 2018; Hart, 2019; NYSASBO, 2014; Silky, 2022). The goal was to depict school merger processes by describing the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers. The purpose was to be the voice for school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers while gaining a better understanding of how the school merger processes, consequently, impacted a school's use of resources, development and implementation of policies,

management of human resources, provision of leadership, restructuring, and reorganization (Griffin & Heinrich, 2022).

Theoretical Significance

Theoretical significance deepens the understanding of organizational theory and its role in school districts and leaders during school mergers. The topic of school mergers is valid in education, with different studies published globally, nationally, and statewide that increase the interest in their failures and successes (Dinki, 2018; Hart, 2019; NYSASBO, 2014). The theoretical context driving school mergers is related to broader social contexts driven by the needs of school effectiveness and success (Greve & Man Zhang, 2017; Hatch, 2002; Hoffmann, 2012). There are a variety of factors that have been researched in association with school mergers. These include the needs of communities, the economy, student achievement, and federal and state education politics and policy (Dinki; Hart; NYSASBO; Silky, 1991; Silky, 2022). However, research is limited to the lived experiences of school leaders who have worked through a school merger process. In organizations, the accomplishment of success, efficiency, and effectiveness is directly correlated to the roles of professionals with their applicable technical qualifications (Hatch, 2018; Jones, 2013). The review of the lived experiences of school leaders working through the process of mergers presents the opportunity to describe how they are applying their technical qualifications to manage the impact a merger has on the organizational structure, culture, design, and change (Silky, 2022; Timbs, 2005).

Empirical Significance

Historically school mergers were a political promotion driving the push for education as an institution. Currently, school mergers are potentially driven by other forces and needs based on federal, state, and individual community and school districts. In their research, Eacott and

Freeborn (2020), Chen et al. (2014), Mei et al. (2013), and Liu et al. (2010) looked at the results on communities, the economy, student achievement, and federal and state education politics and policy the communities and on academic success and achievement for students attending school districts that implemented a merger. This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study on mergers provided a real-life perspective on school mergers. Through personal accounts, information was gained on the school merger processes, the roles the school leaders played during each merger process, and the management and leadership techniques utilized to maneuver the reorganization process of a school merger as a phenomenon.

Practical Significance

This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study on school mergers provided practical significance through the real-life perspective of school leaders. School leaders were able to verbalize their leadership goals for the merger and determined how the school merger impacted the environment in which they operate (Jones, 2013). Effectual school leadership is essential when change and reorganization are at hand in a school district (Acton, 2021). This study contributed to understanding the demand and expectations for efficiency for school leaders while also depicting the responsibilities that arose when working through a merger. As school merger processes took place, different organizational functions also occurred.

Research Questions

The focus of the study was to describe the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers in NYS. Current literature informed readers that school district mergers are an act of survival for school districts struggling to provide students with enhanced educational opportunities (Dinki, 2018; Hart, 2019; NYSASBO, 2014; Silky,

2022; Timbs, 2005). Yet literature does not document well the lived experiences of school leaders as they are working through the process of a merger.

Organizational theory was the theory implemented in this study. The following questions guided this research.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of a successful school merger?

Sub-Question One

How do school leaders maneuver and manage the organizational structures impacted by the processes of a school merger?

Sub-Question Two

What role do school leaders play in the environmental demands influencing the processes of a school merger?

Definitions

1. *Acquisition* – An acquisition is when a firm buys a controlling interest in another firm, a legal subsidiary of another firm, or selected assets of another firm (DePamphilis, 2019).
2. *Horizontal merger* – A horizontal merger combines two firms within the same industry (DePamphilis, 2019).
3. *Merger* - A merger is a combination of two or more firms, often comparable in size, in which only one continues to exist legally (DePamphilis, 2019).
4. *Statutory or direct merger* - A statutory or direct merger is when the acquiring or surviving company automatically assumes the target's assets and liabilities following the

state statutes in which the combined companies will be incorporated (DePamphilis, 2019).

5. *Subsidiary merger* - A subsidiary merger involves the target becoming a parent-subsidiary. To the public, the target firm may be operated under its brand name, but it will be owned and controlled by the acquirer (DePamphilis, 2019).
6. *Statutory consolidation* - A statutory consolidation involving two or more companies joining to form a new company is technically not a merger. All consolidated legal entities are dissolved during the formation of the new company, which usually has a new name. Shareholders in the firms typically exchange their shares for shares in the new company (DePamphilis, 2019).
7. *Organizational theory* - Organization theory is the study of how organizations operate and how they impact and are impacted by the environment in which they operate (Jones, 2013).
8. *Culture of a group* – Culture of a group is defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel concerning those problems (Schein, 2018).
9. *School leader* - The term school leader means a principal, assistant principal, or other individuals who are (1) an employee or officer of an elementary school or secondary school, local educational agency, or other entity operating an elementary school or secondary school and (2) responsible for the daily instructional leadership and managerial operations in the elementary or secondary school building (Cornell Law School, 2022).

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers in NYS. The problem was that the role of this Mid-Atlantic state's school district leaders was ambiguous in depicting school district merger processes (Dinki, 2018; Hart, 2019; NYSASBO, 2014; Silky, 2022); Timbs, 2005). Historically and presently in research, mergers are defined as the unification of two or more organizations into a single unit. Still, the recorded descriptions of the merger processes rely on individualized depictions of human experiences (NYSASBO; Silky; Timbs). Organizational change depicts the processes and systems reorganizations due to a merger. In this study, the research questioned the highlight of the elements of reorganization, such as organizational structure, culture, and design and change, which were associated with the lived experiences of leaders that have worked through the processes of school district mergers.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

School mergers are a rare phenomenon in NYS, resulting in a need for recorded experiences of school leaders working through school merger processes. This study described the lived experience of 12 school leaders who worked through a merger process in NYS. The literature review opened with the theoretical framework to introduce and support the theory implemented during this study. The theory implemented in this study was organizational theory. The organizational theory explains how organizations operate and impact and is impacted by the environment in which they operate (DePamphilis, 2019; Eastman & Lang, 2001; Entezarkheir & Sen, 2018; Leepsa & Mishra, 2016). A summary of organizational theory and a focused examination of its three principles (1) organizational structure, (2) organizational culture, and (3) organizational design and change were presented (Hatch, 2018; Jones, 2013; Mullins & Christy, 2016). The related literature discussed the characteristics of organizational structure, culture, and design and change, by outlining the construction of school districts in NYS. In addition, the literature review included an analysis of the fundamental components needing attention during merger processes. Finally, this literature review concluded with how this study filled a gap in the current literature.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is a foundation on which academic research is based or essentially the blueprint for the study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). As developed by researchers, the guiding theory or theories direct the understanding, direction, and relevant definitions and content related to the topic. The focus of this study was based on organizational theory. Organizational theory studies how organizations operate, impact, and are impacted by the

environment in which they operate (Jones, 2013). Through organizational theory, insight is gained into how organizations use resources, develop and implement policies, manage human resources, provide leadership, and reorganize organizations (DePamphilis, 2019). Organizational theories provide a framework from which to consider organizations' diverse structure and function. Emphasis on the principles of organizational theory includes (1) organizational structure, (2) culture, and (3) design and change, providing three frames to describe and understand the processes of organizations. Organizational structure is how organizations operate. Organizational culture is responsible for controlling the interaction of the members within the organization. Organizational design and change are how the behavior of the members of an organization is controlled by leadership and management. Understanding the organizational structure, culture, design, and change involves managing and transforming organizations to maintain and increase their effectiveness and efficiency (Daft, 2010; Isomura, 2020; Jones; Pershing & Austin, 2014).

Organizational theory is rooted in the concepts of German sociologist Max Weber (2016). Max Weber was the founder of the bureaucracy theory. Bureaucracy theory was defined as a highly structured, formalized, and impersonal organization, which influenced the development of a subfield in sociology centering on organizations. Weber believed an organization must have a defined hierarchical structure and clear rules, regulations, and lines of authority (Haveman & Wetts, 2019; Hinings & Meyer, 2018; Weber et al., 1947). Sociological concepts and organizational theory are related to each other and explain how (1) interrelated units of an organization do or do not connect; (2) individuals behave in social units called organizations; and (3) organizations control the activities to achieve goals through leadership and management (Haveman & Wetts; Hinings & Meyer; Weber et al.). Literature has used

organizational theory to define reorganizational processes and systems focusing on increasing efficiency while focusing on how the accomplishment of success, efficiency, and effectiveness is directly correlated to the roles of professionals with their applicable technical qualifications (Hatch, 2018; Jones, 2013).

As mergers are a type of reorganization, research has also utilized organizational theory to illustrate the change process, the international trend, and how stakeholders are used to measuring progress (Johnes et al., 2017). The organizational theory claims that organizations are driven by how they adopt different organizational strategies in response to changes in their environments, structural design, and experiences (Daft, 2010; Isomura, 2020; Jones, 2013). Organizational theory connects education's inner processes and systems to the cultural construction of outer private and public organizations, including the state and federal identities. In a study done by Berg (2007), the educational system was explored as an institution and school districts as organizations.

Since academic reorganization processes are primarily focused on leadership and learning theories and no coherent theory of academic mergers has been developed, organizational theory research provides an outlined perspective on how the educational system comprises state education departments as a societal institution in combination with single school districts as organizations (Greenwood et al., 2014). The entire educational system as an institution and public school districts as organizations follow the organizational theory in their operations, institutional principles, and practices (Berg, 2007). The principles of organizational theory (1) organizational structure, (2) organizational culture, and (3) organizational design and change; provide insight into the reorganization within a school district caused by a merger. Through the organizational theory principles, a depiction of the lived experiences of the school leaders that

have worked through the processes of school mergers and an investigation of their performance can be attained by looking at the school district's design, operations, and culture. Then looking at redesigning the organization's behavior through the reconstruction, re-arranging, and modification of existing sets of decision rules, norms, and practices while institutionalizing new ones can describe a school district merger (Dacin et al., 2002; Johnes et al., 2017).

Related Literature

The literature review focused on organizational theory and its principles to describe issues relevant to understanding the situations associated with NYS K-12 school district mergers and acquisitions. Through the lens of organizational structure, culture, and design and change, a clear depiction of NYS school district leadership and a comprehensive understanding of the structure of NYS school districts and school district mergers was depicted. Many of the conducted studies measured the positive and negative outcomes of acquisitions and mergers by focusing on contributing factors underlying or associated with why school districts choose to merge (Eastman & Lang, 2001; Leepsa & Mishra, 2016). School mergers are impacted by the interrelated units of an organization that does or do not connect with each other. The behavior of individuals within social units of an organization and the activities utilized by leadership and management to achieve goals directly influences the reorganization caused by a merger (Berg, 2007). Merger research, academic merger research, and the common factors motivating mergers and acquisitions were utilized to depict the processes of school mergers, substantiate the gap in the literature, and further understand the impact school district mergers have on school districts, communities, students, school staff, and school leaders as they worked through mergers and acquisitions processes.

Merger's Definition, Processes, and Purpose

Mergers are defined as two or more institutions united to form a new single organization with a single governing body and chief executive. The newly created organization consolidates resources, obligations, responsibilities, and cultural values (DePamphilis, 2019; Eastman & Lang, 2001; Entezarkheir & Sen, 2018; Leepsa & Mishra, 2016). Mergers are characterized by their strategic motives related to finance and leadership. The four types of mergers are (1) vertical mergers, (2) horizontal mergers, (3) market extension mergers, and (4) conglomerate mergers (Entezarkheir & Sen).

A vertical merger occurs when a company wants complete control over its supply chain, from production to sales to the final customer. A horizontal merger occurs when companies of the same industry merge. A market merger occurs when two companies sell the same general types of products but compete in unrelated markets. A conglomerate merger involves acquisitions in completely different industries, brand extensions, or geographic extensions within the current industry (Entezarkheir & Sen, 2018).

Though the term merger is often loosely used to define different types of institutional arrangements among all types of organizations or institutions, the reality is that a merger is also associated with processes that include the loss and later development of institutional structure, culture, design, and change (DePamphilis, 2019; Eastman & Lang, 2001; Ibrahim, 2018; Leepsa & Mishra, 2016; McCarthy & Dolfsma, 2012). There are three primary stages in the merger process (1) pre-acquisition, (2) due diligence and negotiations, and (3) post-acquisition (DePamphilis; Galpin, 2014; Venzin et al., 2018). The first stage is concerned with the analysis of the merger partners. The goal of this stage is to provide merger participants with an understanding of the major reorganizational changes due to a merger. The second stage of the

merger process is focused on due diligence from the leadership team and negotiations with the stakeholders. The goal of this phase is to develop the merger plan and timeline (DePamphilis; Galpin & Herndon; Venzin et al.). The third stage is the post-acquisition phase. During the post-acquisition stage, a combination of finances, programming, culture, and physical integration plans are implemented (DePamphilis; Galpin, 2014; Venzin et al.). Through each merger process stage, there is interconnectivity with current and desired institutional structure, culture, design, and change. Cautioning those who pursue a merger, it and its processes are impossible to reverse. The successes and failures of mergers are directly impacted by how the processes are followed and performed (Eastman & Lang; Sułkowski et al., 2019).

In addition to providing insight into reorganizational processes, institutional mergers also provide insight into the motives for pursuing a merger (Jackson, 2019). Mergers are primarily pursued to provide income or other personal benefits to the stakeholders involved within the organizations merging. However, the needs and goals of a merger are independent of the needs of the merging organizations (DePamphilis, 2019). The individualized purpose for a merger is heavily influenced by the organization's mission, vision, and desired goals. Moreover, the mission, vision, and desired goals are also significantly influenced by the organization's structure, culture, and leadership process for design and change (Jackson). Institutional mergers aim to acquire new markets within a direct, impactful environment while reducing average costs, increasing product development, and increasing profits as efficiently and quickly as possible (Beuchert et al., 2018; Meglio & Schriber, 2020; Oancea & Kamau, 2020).

Academic Merger's Definition, Processes, and Purpose

Academic mergers are horizontal mergers (DePamphilis, 2019). They are defined and described by the process of establishing a new leadership team and creating new programmatic

and student opportunities. Like the general institutional process of mergers, academic mergers follow the three primary stages in the merger process (1) pre-acquisition, also known as the pre-combination, (2) due diligence and negotiations, and (3) post-acquisition. However, they may be identified differently due to the academic organization's controlling rules, laws, or regulations (Risberg et al., 2015). The processes before the merger are fully lawful and are referred to as the pre-acquisition or pre-combination. A justification is provided, along with a strategy for finding business partners, investigating potential substitutes, and deciding how the merger will happen. This stage lays the groundwork for all of stage 2 and stage 3 activities. The organizations' merger and integration are the main goals of the talks and due diligence procedure. The new entity is solidified and assessed throughout the post-acquisition phase. As the merger takes shape, fine-tuning is a part of this stage (Risberg et al., 2015). Academic mergers and processes generally combine educational resources, academic cultures, academic supplies, and extracurricular opportunities (Liu et al., 2018). Academic mergers aim to advance, enhance and achieve excellence through efficient academic programming, community support, and effective instructional staff (Heiser, 2013; NYSASBO, 2014; NYSEDSDO, 2015).

Organizational Structure

An organization's structure is the formal system of everyday responsibilities that outlines how certain activities are directed to achieve the goals of an organization (Daft, 2010; Hatch, 2018; Isomura, 2020; Jones, 2013; Shafritz et al., 2015). The systems that encompass the structure of an organization control how people work together and use resources to accomplish their goals and responsibilities. Organizational operations, also known as structures, control mission, vision, and goals while shaping the rules, roles, responsibilities, and how information flows between the levels of an organization. Organizational structure shapes the behavior and

expectations of people and the organization (Hatch, 2018; Jones). Organizational structures also outline reactions to unforeseen environmental events, technological advancements, and human resources. Organizational structures evolve as organizations grow and advance through managing the organizational design and responding to change (Daft; Jones; Pershing & Austin, 2014). During a merger, the organizational structure of an organization is directly impacted through the reorganization within the levels of hierarchy, the chain of command, the management systems, the job structures and roles, and the mission, vision, and goals (Daft; Hatch, 2018; Jones).

The Organizational Structure of Public-School Districts

The organizational theory would outline public school districts as nonprofit public organizations (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2021; Saylor Academy, 2016). As nonprofit organizations, school districts' performance depends on how they interact with their environments using vital resources (Saylor Academy). They are also open to anyone who agrees to accept the purpose and principles determined by the organization (Kozirovsky, 2017; Lyon, 2017). Public school districts follow a functional organizational structure: the environment is the neighborhood or municipal area. It is responsible for educating. The customers are the community's stakeholders, including the parents, the students, and the community's taxpayers. Stakeholders also include the employees who make up the staff and the governments that regulate and provide financial support (Kozirovsky, 2017; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2021; Lyon). The goal of public schools is to educate children to become self-sustainable adults in society (Brandell, 2014). Public school districts are sustained at public cost for the education of the children of an outlined community. They are legally bound and responsible for ensuring that all students in the United States receive a Free Appropriate Public Education, which includes

primary and secondary level education (US Department of Education, 2020). Through organizational theory, public school districts focus on organizational efficiency to produce highly academically successful students that feed the economy and cause national survival (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2021; Tyler, 1985).

New York State School Districts' Structure

New York (State) (1958) defines school districts as units of local government established to carry out the State's constitutional responsibility to provide adequate educational opportunities for the children residing within the district. A school attendance unit is a locally defined area where children attend a particular school building. A school district may embrace one or more attendance units. Contracting districts form a portion of the attendance units of other functioning school districts (New York (State), 1958). School reorganization is perceptible through New York State school districts' chronological formation and politically driven structure. In 1784, the New York State Legislature created the Regents of the University of the State of New York. In 1795, establishing a statewide system supporting public schools began the structure of school districts in New York State. By 1812 New York State established the Common School District. Common school districts are the oldest of the existing types of districts. Common school districts were built as one-room schoolhouses housing children ages five to fifteen (Spear, 2014). Due to its structure, common school districts do not have the legal authority to operate a high school.

High school students residing within the limits of a common school district must attend neighboring central or city school districts through a tuition-based program (Spear, 2014). Common school districts are governed by a sole trustee or a board of three trustees elected for three-year terms. In NYS, ten common school districts operate in the state and one non-operating (NYSED, 2019). By the 1840s, the small common school districts became inadequate in

populated areas resulting in the establishment of union free school districts in 1853. Currently, there are 151 union-free school districts educating students. Union free school districts are governed by a board of education (BOE) of three to nine members who serve 3–5-year terms (Spear, 2014).

Central High School Districts were established in 1917 to provide secondary education to children from two or more common and union free school districts. Central High School Districts appointed representatives from the component boards comprised of the Central High School boards. In 1944 Central High School Districts were deemed unsatisfactory and prohibited. Yet in 1981, legislation reinstated Central High School Districts for only Eastport and South Manor areas in Suffolk County (NYSED, 2019).

By the early 20th century, common school districts and union free school districts were not meeting the state's educational needs, so the New York State Board of Regents' activity worked to enhance the educational systems (Spear, 2014). Central school districts were established by actively working to reduce the number of common and union free school districts. Central school districts were established from union free school districts in 1925 (NYSED, 2019). Central school districts were created by merging two or more common and union-free districts through legislation and financial incentives. They were beginning the start of school mergers in NYS. Central school districts are the most common type of schools in NYS. Currently, there are a total of 460 central school districts (Spear, 2014). The school board governs central school districts with five, seven, or nine members elected for 3-5-year terms. Due to the increase in city growth and the development of factories, city school districts were established in 1842 (NYSED, 2019). City school districts are classified in NYS by their city population. City school districts are designated with a city population of less than 125,000 and

city school districts with a city population of more than 125,000. There are a total of 57 cities with a population under 125,000.

City school districts with a city population of less than 125,000 can separate governmental units with their BOE and independent taxing and debt-incurring power (NYSED, 2019). Due to the size of these school districts, they may also cover a larger geographic area than the city resulting in their being enlarged city school districts. City school districts with a city population of over 125,000 are called the "Big 5" (Spear, 2014). They are in New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and Yonkers (NYSED, 2019). The Big Five function as part of the overall city government. They have their BOE. It sets policies for schools in the entire Big 5 system. Funding for the Big 5 is part of the overall municipal budget. Central school districts and city school districts are the prominent type of public in NYS (NYSED, 2019).

New York State School Districts' Leadership Structure

NYS school districts have a decentralized company business structure. In all school districts, one would find that the leadership team has at least a school board and a superintendent. Reliant on the size of the school district, additional school leaders can be needed. All teachers, administrators, and pupil personnel service providers in NYS must hold NYS certificates for employment in the state's public schools (Office of Teaching Initiatives, 2019). Candidates for pedagogical manager positions, superintendent, or assistant superintendent must hold one of the following certificates: School District Leader (SDL) and School District Administrator (SDA). Candidates for principal, assistant principal (AP), education administrator (EA), director, or supervisor of positions must hold one of the following certificates (1) School Building Leader (SBL), (2) School Administrator and Supervisor (SAS), and (3) School District Administrator (SDA).

Conversely, the school BOE members are not required to be educators. BOE members are at the highest authority level in a school district's organizational chart. They hold the position of representative of the community. They are responsible for being stewards to the district's children and its tax dollars and advocates of public education and educated public (NYSSBA, 2015).

As the leadership team is established in the school district, they must create an organizational chart informing the public of the school's leadership and management obligation. In an NYS public school, the chain of command describes to the school's stakeholders the communication levels of authority in the school district. In most cases, the school districts establish the chain of command to provide stakeholders with a guide of whom to speak to when reporting affairs. In a management and leadership role, the chain of command is established to explain to employees who the immediate supervisor is and their roles in managing the staff, school, community, and, more importantly, students.

Types of Reorganization in New York State

At the beginning of the 20th century, there were more than 10,000 school districts in NYS. Due to reorganization through school mergers, there are approximately 700 school districts in NYS (Silky, 2009). In NYS, school district mergers are referred to as reorganizations. Reorganization is a generic term for joining two or more school districts to form one large district. NYS education law lists and describes the following five different ways for school districts to reorganize (1) centralization, (2) annexation for central school districts, (3) annexation for union-free school districts, (4) consolidation with a union-free or common school district, and (5) consolidation with a city school district (NYSEDEM, 2015; NYSEDSO, 2015; Spear, 2014). In a centralization, all districts except city school districts can participate. In this

circumstance, each participating school district must border each other. The participating school districts will be dissolved upon a municipal passing vote, and a new district will be created.

Centralization is implemented through NYS Education Law Section 1801-1804. New school districts are created, encompassing the entire area of the school districts to be merged.

(NYSEDEM; NYSEDSO; Spear).

Like in a centralization in an annexation, all districts except city school districts can participate if they border each other. However, a new district is not created. Rather one district is dissolved and joined to another. Annexation is enforced through the NYS Central School District Education Law Sections 1801 and 1803 (NYSEDEM, 2015; NYSEDSO, 2015; Spear, 2014).

Consolidation of one or more districts with a city school district is similar in impact and procedures to an annexation. The district to be consolidated will cease to exist, and the city school district will be responsible for educating the whole area. The participating school districts of any legal form outside the city district but directly bordering either the city or another district that is also being consolidated into the city can participate in the merger for reorganization (NYSEDEM; NYSEDSO; Spear). Each type of reorganization was developed at a different time to facilitate reorganizing the different types of NYS school districts (Spear). However, when a school district is considering a merger, the processes that must be followed are the same for each reorganization situation described above (New York [State], 1958).

Processes of School Mergers in New York State

Per NYS law, although the Commissioner of Education may authorize or design groupings of districts for reorganization, a district cannot consider or implement a reorganization until (1) an adequate study is available to indicate that the proposal is desirable; (2) the people in the district have been informed of the potential reorganization; and (3) the majority of the voters in the district(s) affected to support the proposal (NYSEDSO, 2015). Law ensures that legal voters can vote and agree before implementing a reorganization order (NYSEDSO). For that reason, when NYS school districts are considering a merger, they must publicly work through (1) a merger study, (2) a community vote, and if a passing vote is achieved, (3) the implementation of the merger.

Merger Study Process

When participating school districts agreed to work through a merger study, they entered the pre-acquisition stage. The pre-acquisition stage is concerned with the analysis of the merger partners. For NYS school districts, these analyses are called merger studies. These merger studies are completed by a selected few consulting companies approved by NYSED to conduct the study. Due to the governing rules, policies, and financial agreements that come from a public school merger, this stage is public knowledge. The participating school districts are responsible for holding open forum meetings for the community and providing information on the findings that the merger study has discovered. Per NYSED law, the merger study must include information on the financial conditions, academic and instructional programming, student population, and transportation factors that impact and will impact the participating school districts if a merger is to be implemented (New York [State], 1958). In addition to the required areas of analysis, other areas that are commonly added in a merger study include the current

condition of the facilities and areas that will require improvement, current staffing, the cost of maintaining that staff, current existing extracurricular programming, and areas of improvement (Silky, 2022). The goal of the merger study is to develop the merger plan and particular timelines for implementation (DePamphilis, 2019; Galpin, 2014; Timbs, 2005; Venzin et al., 2018). Dr. Timbs, one of the leading NYS merger researchers and merger finance consultants, said, “Merger studies are the plan that should be followed when the merger is implemented.” (Timbs, 2005). The detailed merger study would provide a plan to combine and reorganize the united school district. Through this process, the plan for reorganizing the new single organization with a single governing body includes internal and external policies, procedures, staff contracts, financial budgets, communication plans, and rebranding (DePamphilis, 2019; Eastman & Lang, 2001; Galpin, 2014; Silky, 2022; Timbs; Venzin et al.).

The data gathered, implementation plans, and timelines must be provided to the voting communities through open BOE meetings, community-based information meetings, and other comprehensive forms of information. The goal is for community members to have enough information to vote on the merger (NYSEDSO, 2015; New York [State], 1958). A merger committee is created by community members willing to participate in the merger study process to ensure that the voting community receives impartial and correct information. However, the selection of the merger committee members is ultimately decided by the BOE and superintendents of the school districts participating in the study. In addition to the merger committee members, the BOE, and superintendents of the school districts, the superintendent of the regional BOCES actively participate. The active participation of all these individuals makes up a merger study leadership team. Reliant on the participation of the regional BOCES superintendent, they can spearhead the process or active observers. Nonetheless, they are the

state representatives. Their role and responsibilities are to ensure that state laws are being followed.

The merger committee has a central value in the merger study process. The merger committee is responsible for examining the pros and cons of implementing a school merger in their communities. However, all the individuals that make up the leadership team should represent both communities and focus on their own biases and the possibilities of how the merger can improve the education of the community students. When considering the merger possibilities, the merger committee can ask questions, speak to community members, and bring back the community's concerns. Merger committee members are also responsible for asking hard questions and not holding back any due to possible political harm. Silky, one of the leading NYS merger researchers and consultants, openly voiced that for a merger to succeed, "Trust is the foundation of a good merger and merger study" (Silky, 2022). The goals of the merger committee are to look out for the neighbors' well-being as much as their own (Silky). Ultimately, this phase and the merger study process aim to get the merger voted on by the community and optimistically approved.

Community Vote Process

The community vote is the toughest process of a school district merger. A community can receive abundant information and vote no on a merger. NYS law states that:

A Reorganization Order under NY Education Law must be approved by the qualified voters in each school district included in the order. If each district's residents approve the order, the reorganized district begins operation by July 1, following the vote. If either district rejects the order, the question may not be presented again for one year. If the proposal for reorganization is passed by one district and not the other, only the district in

which the proposition was defeated can revote it. If the order is not again presented within two years of the first vote, or if it is presented and again rejected, the original order becomes null and void. If the reorganization is presented to referendum a second time and is approved, the reorganization order becomes final (NYSEDSO, 2015).

Ultimately the vote of the participating communities is the deciding factor on the future of the participating school districts and their ability to merge. As addressed in Chapter one, the NYSEDEM (2015) reported that since 2012, twenty-four school districts adequately requested NYSED to merge with their neighboring school district and worked through the merger study process. Of the twenty-four community votes, eighteen voted negatively toward merging their community schools, and six voted positively toward merging their community school districts (NYSEDEM, 2015). In 2021, ten school districts embarked on the school merging and reorganization process and completed the pre-merger study process. However, none of the communities voted positively for their community schools to merge. The large number of school districts pursuing a merger in 2021 yet receiving a negative vote is a phenomenon on its own. Comparing the lived experience of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers study and the community vote can provide insight into what directly impacts the communities' votes.

Implementation of the Merger Process

When a positive vote is accomplished, the final process, the implementation of the merger, begins. Since 2012, six school districts have worked through the implementation process of a school merger (NYSEDEM, 2015). Within the implementation process, school districts embarked on the reorganizational stage. Within the reorganizational stage, the focus is on diligence from the leadership team and stakeholder negotiations. The goal of this phase was to

implement the merger plan and timeline. The merger plan created during the merger study phase provided the public with how leadership planned to implement physical integration and combine finances, culture, and programming (DePamphilis, 2019; Galpin, 2014; Venzin et al., 2018).

Though there was a merger plan in place with understandable flexibility, this was the time when school mergers experienced growing pains (DePamphilis; Eastman & Lang, 2001; Galpin; Silky, 2022; Timbs, 2005; Venzin et al.).

School district organizational functions are built on organizational structures that are impacted by established powers and emotions (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). Historical practices, community political ideologies, and organizational structures are meticulously interconnected with an organization's structure and culture. Power positions within the community and schools are then acknowledged to support the newly implemented objectives, goals, and key results. The lines of power overlap and overshadow the reorganization due to past practices from the historical school districts' agendas and the newly established norms, systems, plans, and leadership roles. This act causes disturbances during the implementation phase because power and emotions rule, not facts, because people love their kids (Silky, 2022).

Research does not portray school mergers as a positive accomplishment. However, when merging two school districts, leveraging the stakeholders' role while simultaneously utilizing the strength of the reason and goals for the merger is vital to the implementation process (DePamphilis, 2019; Galpin, 2014; Venzin et al., 2018). Through this study, the lived experience of school leaders who worked through the processes of implementing a school merger provided a vital insight into how to maneuver through the historical practices, community political ideologies, organizational structures, culture, change, and design. These areas are habitually interconnected with an organization's reorganization.

Factors That Influence School District Mergers in New York State

Literature on academic school mergers has maintained the focuses on measuring, describing, or analyzing the impact of mergers on programming, academic achievement, community structures, and financial sustainability of the merging organizations (Beuchert et al., 2018; Boser, 2013; Chen et al., 2014; Eacott & Freeborn, 2020; De Haan et al., 2016; Karakaplan & Kutlu, 2019; Mei et al., 2013; Naicker & Mkhabele, 2020; Pon & Duncan, 2019; Silky, 1991; Taghizadeh, 2020; and Timbs, 2005). The experience of school mergers within the literature reviewed had similarities and differences. Still, as expected, the factors influencing school mergers were based on the individualized needs of the academic organizations merging. In most studies, mergers occurred because of the needs of communities, the economy, and federal and state education politics and policies. The literature also pointed out that the merging academic organizations anticipated the result to be students' high ability to attain academic achievement and success. However, the reality is that finances and state impositions are the primary reason for academic organizations opting to merge (Beuchert et al.; Boser; Chen et al.; Eacott & Freeborn; De Haan et al.; Karakaplan & Kutlu; Mei et al.; Naicker & Mkhabele; Pon & Duncan; Silky; Taghizadeh; and Timbs).

In NYS, public education funding comes from three sources (1) federal funding, which equals out to approximately five percent; (2) state formula aids and grants, which equals out to 49 percent; and (3) local property taxes, which equals out to 46 percent (Analysis and Research Unit, 2003). Within these sources are formulas, regulations, and laws that specify how the money is attained, should be spent, and the school budget is to be kept. This makes a school district's finances complicated. However, for schools barely having financial sustainability, the bottom line is that as costs inflate, expenditures for a school district increase, resulting in a rise in per

pupil expenditure. Like around the nation, in NYS, finances are the primary factor behind pursuing school reorganizations. NYS laws and incentives have made it simple to understand that for a school district financially in the red and a community that is feeling the local property tax burden. A school merger can provide some relief. Along with the financial relief that the school district and the local community would feel temporarily, reorganizations can also enhance educational opportunities in merged districts. A merged school district can (1) enhance pupil and financial base, (2) provide a wider range of educational programs and opportunities for students, (3) upgrade facilities and equipment to support program requirements, (4) provide competitive salaries to teachers, and (5) provide specially equipped classrooms for specific subjects (Heiser, 2013; Silky, 1991; Spear, 2014; Timbs, 2005).

New York State law provides an incentive to school districts wanting to merge. By a plan approved by the Commissioner of Education, a newly established merged school district would receive a reorganizational incentive. The Reorganization Incentive is made up of (1) Formula Operating Aid which can equal out to about 40% of the school year, and (2) Incentive Operating Aid which can increase the school district's Approved Operating Expenses up to 95%. There is also additional building aid with an additional 30% on approved costs, based on the ratio of students. Reorganized schools receive state aid for the first 14 years of the merger implementation process (Spear, 2014; Timbs, 1997). Therefore, the basic objective of school district mergers is to secure financial stability and be educationally better off. Through this study, the lived experience of school leaders who worked through the processes of a school merger could provide vital insight into how finances were impacting programming and influencing the merger processes.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is the set of shared values and norms that controls organizational members' interactions with each other and with people outside the organization (Jones, 2013). People, ethics, and structure create the organization's culture. Organizational culture shapes and controls behavior through influences that directly impact how people respond to situations and interpret the environment surrounding the organization (Daft, 2010; Gross & Jones, 2004; Hatch, 2018; Jones; Shafritz et al., 2015). Though an organization's culture can be taken for granted, it is powerful enough to imply the norms of stability within a group simultaneously as it designs a sense of group identity. An institutional, organizational, or group's culture and identity meaningfully control the direction and the purpose while shaping the behavior of people and the structures of an organization. Culture and identity are so intermixed that they are separated from an organization's structure, design, change, vision, mission, and goals. Culture and identity are then rooted in the expectations for the internal stakeholders and the people outside the organization.

The sense of belonging that culture provides for the stakeholders steadfastly impacts the structural decisions made. Ultimately culture is emotionally influential in the organizations, causing any change or reorganization to become a possible challenge unless there is agreement and acceptance. People do not like change, and when they perceive that the culture provides stability, it is not given up easily. Institutions, organizations, and people value and thrive on stability because it provides meaning and predictability (Shafritz et al., 2015). Like organizational structures, organizational culture can evolve as organizations grow and advance (Daft, 2010; Jones, 2013; Pershing & Austin, 2014). However, because organizational culture is the set of common values, attitudes, beliefs, and norms, which are either obvious or obscure

when a change is needed, and reorganization is required, culture can be the greatest challenge for the process (Teasley, 2017).

Organizational Culture in School Districts

A community's values determine the school district's organizational culture, the initiatives of federal and state policies, the organized pathologies inside and outside the school, and the structural behaviors within the school. A school district's culture may be invisible. Still, the uniqueness of its culture comes from the philosophically embedded obligation to educate children and the structures inaugurated to meet the obligation. Resulting in school culture is an area of continuous focus for school-based professionals. The distinct ethical belief and heart-pulling requirements of educating community children are the foundation for all educational institutions when creating structure, designing change, and determining how to achieve the goals (Teasley, 2017). A school district's culture contains soft and hard organizational knowledge and individual spoken and unspoken assumptions, motivations, beliefs, values, and knowledge (Hanson, 2001). These elements provide internal stakeholders and the people outside the organization a compendium of information that instructs interpretation and responses to the school. Stakeholders view all these elements as the culture. The interpretation of the school district's personality directly impacts how its stakeholders see through their cultural glasses.

In NYS, the culture of education begins with the requirement to be licensed and the guidelines of the Department of Education as an institution. All educators must go through predetermined, NYSED-accepted curriculum standards and sign a code of ethics when they receive their educators' license and again when appointed to an educational position. The code of ethics for educators directly impacts the vision and philosophy of educators when they walk in the door of the school district that employs them. Educators are reminded by the code of ethics

that public servants are responsible for inspiring professional excellence. The six commonly held principles guide educators in the individual exercise of professional judgment, values, and beliefs while directly influencing the institutional culture of education (NYSEDOTI, 2019). Along with the code of ethics to personally inspire educators, federal policies and NYSED policies and regulations impactfully influence the culture of education as an institution.

As a national initiative, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was passed to ensure school districts are measuring performance in reading, math, and science (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education [OESE], 2020). Through the ESSA policy, school districts can define student success indicators. According to Hall (2017), the areas of focus are (1) school climate and safety, (2) student access to post-secondary resources/preparation, (3) student engagement, (4) teacher engagement, (5) parent engagement, (6) quality of instruction, (7) elementary and middle school readiness, (8) post-secondary readiness, and (9) social-emotional learning and persistence. The nine areas of focus are to be applied to programming and support services to ensure a culture and structure focused on student achievement and success (Acton, 2022; Hall, 2017; Kalkan et al., 2020; OESE). As a federal law, ESSA is a driving force on the structural systems of school districts; it also impacts the culture by imposing the nine indicators as academic initiatives through compelling financial aid and grants.

In NYS, the educational department has responded to ESSA by creating its version of the Common Core State Standard, the Next Generation Learning Standards, which focuses on social-emotional learning and equity-based instruction. Along with the Next Generation Learning Standards implemented to drive academic achievement, there is also the School Quality Guide. The school quality metrics focus on directly impacting culture and climate. The purpose of the initiative is to move education to an equity-based system for all students. NYSED has defined

these elements as (1) rigorous instruction, (2) a supportive environment, (3) collaborative teachers, (4) effective school leadership, (5) strong family-community ties, and (6) trust (NYSEDSPED, 2014; TNYCED, 2021).

Along with federal and state initiatives, school districts have individualized missions, visions, and structural systems to achieve their goals and create a culture where the school district can thrive. When employed by a school district, cultural expectations are embedded through hard and soft knowledge of structural and organizational skills. Soft knowledge skills are formal and informal documents, processes taught and provided during professional development, imitation of peers and leaders, socialization, and professionalization. The hard knowledge skills are school rules, interpreting federal and state initiatives, school policies, educational laws, routines, processes, schedules, standard operating procedures, responsibilities, and roles (Hanson, 2001). The combination of federal and state policies and soft and hard knowledge organizational skills provide the stakeholders with the competencies to interpret and behaviorally respond to multiple school district environments (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). These developed and learned comprehensive competencies, circumscribing school districts' individualized culture.

Overview of Culture in a Merger

Even though research on mergers is still dominated by finance and strategy, there is very specific scholarly research indicating how culture and human integration can interfere during a merger and how it directly correlates to the success or failure of a merger (Dao & Bauer, 2021; DePamphilis, 2019; Galpin, 2014; Jackson, 2019; Meglio & Schriber, 2020; Sherman, 2010; Silky, 2022; Timbs, 2005). Each participating organization's culture and cultural compatibility must be considered through the three primary stages of the merger process. Suggesting that before a merger or acquisition takes place, there must be some emphasis on identifying a

potential merger partner or acquisition target that embodies a good strategic and cultural match. With the individuality of cultures within an organization, it is understandable that different cultural types are present for organizations participating in a merger. On the other hand, when cultural differences between the primary and secondary organizations participating in the implementation of a merger are present, there is an increase in the overall human resource needs (Dao & Bauer; Jackson).

During a merger, the cause of most merger failures is the differences between the cultures. Organizational identity and culture change are monumental for leaders in determining appropriate integration approaches (Dao & Bauer, 2021). Organizational dominance's role during mergers has been observed by applying multiple facets of social identity theory and types of cultural theories. No matter the theory implemented, the conclusion is that the type of culture the participating organizations value varies, and that variation causes a spectrum of difficulty when merging two organizations. Knowledge of the variation in the culture types is a valuable piece of information when working at integrating the stakeholders of the organization and developing a new organizational culture (Dao & Bauer; DePamphilis, 2019; Galpin, 2014; Jackson, 2019; Meglio & Schriber, 2020; Sherman, 2010). Once there is an understanding of the intended cultural goals, whether to preserve the old culture, transfer one culture onto the other, or create a new one, directing the reshaping of policies, soft and hard knowledge, organizational skills, values, and structures is essential when providing the stakeholders, the newly expected cultural values.

School Culture in a Merger

School district mergers, in many ways, are established to strengthen staff performance, attain the school district accounted based measurable goals, and enhance programming and

instruction (McCarthy & Dolfsma, 2012). Therefore, mergers may seem straightforward in education because the bottom-line cultural philosophy is educating students. However, that cannot be farther from the truth due to small-town politics, internal and external ideologies, and other institutional factors that rule the school districts' identity and culture. When discussing the culture and human response to organizational mergers, the researchers noted that there is always a sentiment that one organization is better than the other (Jackson, 2019; Meglio & Schriber, 2020; Wei & Clegg, 2018). That sentiment is fiercely seen in academic mergers due to the communal connection to the community school districts (Silky, 2022; Timbs, 2005). For the stakeholders of a school district, the school culture is the quality and character of life based on the academic community's patterns of experiences (Tus, 2020). In addition, the organizational culture and how it is managed and nurtured directly impacts a school district's and its students' academic progress. Therefore, developing a new organizational culture is necessary during a merger but is strenuous and challenging in many facets.

Merging cultures requires (1) an understanding of the acquired organizational cultures, (2) an understanding of the differences between them, and (3) having a multiyear plan for integrating the cultures (Dao & Bauer, 2021; Silky, 2022; Timbs, 2005). Throughout NYS school district mergers and acquisition research, Silky (1991, 2022) and Timbs (2005) both concur through their research that for a school community and school district to have a successful merger. Three things are vital (1) good leadership, (2) communication, and (3) trust. All mergers are loaded with emotions (Dao & Bauer). School districts enjoy the informed support of families and community members as much as families and community members feel vested in their community schools. Intensifying public opinion and emotions when a school merger is discussed and increasing the expectations of trustworthy leaders who regularly

communicate about the decisions and changes occurring (Jackson, 2019). Communities that interact regularly are more likely to have successful mergers than communities that do not interact (Silky; Timbs). This experience is attributed to cultural overlap between shared community resources, school resources, and programming.

The community cultural overlap of school districts is established through shared student resources, transportation, extracurricular activities, and instructional staff (Silky, 2022). Yet even with the shared resources, there is no guarantee that the merging of the participating districts will be smooth. After communities have approved a merger between schools, there is no turning back, but the reality is that an organization's culture is difficult to change because it is the heart of the organization with founded patterns and rituals (Farrell, 2018). Implementing the merger includes developing a new organizational culture and creating a new identity for the newly established school districts. Establishing new structures, behaviors, and beliefs, the community will accept as the new identity will take time, communication, and leadership.

Research does not portray the merging of school cultures as an easy task. In a general school, culture change can take decades. However, when merging two school districts' cultures, change takes the forefront for reorganization (DePamphilis, 2019; Galpin, 2014; Venzin et al., 2018). Through this study, the lived experience of school leaders who worked through implementing a school merger provided an understanding of how to operate and lead through the established culture while working on implementing a new one. Historical practices, community political ideologies, and organizational structures are habitually interconnected with an organization's reorganization.

Organizational Design and Change

Organizational design and organizational change can be defined separately though they are directly interlinked and collectively utilized to select and manage the various dimensions and components of organizational structure and culture (Daft, 2010). Organizational design is the process utilized by management to control culture and structure. Organizational change is the processes organizations utilize to move from the present state to the future desired state. Design and change processes are used to implement organizational change management through redesign and transformation (Jones, 2013). Organizational design and change allow the organization to frequently adjust and renovate its structure and culture to respond to a changing global environment (Daft, 2010; Jones; Pershing & Austin, 2014). The importance of organizational design and change comes from the organization's leadership and a leader's ability to deal with circumstances, accomplish a competitive advantage, manage diversity effectively, and increase its efficiency and ability to innovate (Jones). The implementation of design and change processes by leaders is seen through organizational change management programs (Bree, 2021; Fullan, 2007; Kotter et al., 2021a; Stanford, 2018; Tang, 2019; Worren, 2018).

The Process of Design

The change process is about improving, solving problems, and confronting challenging issues (Daft, 2010; Fullan, 2007; Hage & Finsterbusch, 1989; Jones, 2013; Kotter et al., 2021a; Pershing & Austin, 2014). Organizational change is introduced into corporate settings through projects, programs, and portfolios to deliver organizational value. However, it is only the beginning of embedding and implementing organizational change (Fullan; Hatch, 2018; Kotter et al., 2021a; Fullan; Grenny et al. (2013); Kotter (2012); and Kotter et al. (2021) all recommended various approaches for the process of designing and implementing change. Bolman and Deal

(2017) and Kotter et al. declared that leaders usually follow practical and logical approaches when change is implemented due to the limited experiences and training leaders may possess. Due to the wide range of potential changes that might take place in an organization, research on the outcomes and process of change is also limited and incomplete (Bolman & Deal, 2017). When considering the range of structures, systems, and cultures that organizations have, these limitations cause anxiety when framing one process to pursue over another.

The goal is a smooth change that ensures the organization's morale, culture, and energy stay positive to bring success to the organization and the established goals (Fullan, 2007). By considering the needs of the organizations, leaders can combine organizational change models that could provide better change results. The change process intertwined with the redesigning process through innovativeness while focusing on transformation creates a multi-step change management program. Kotter's 8-Step Change Model was established in (1995) and updated in (2012). ADKAR Model by Hiatt (2006), Lewin's Three Stages Change Model (1951), and Jick's 10-Step Change Model (1991) provide research-based programs for implementing change that also follows a redesigning process. Similar to the design process, the change process programs focus on (1) knowing the organization's audience, (2) identifying the supporters of change, (3) communicating with the stakeholders by preparing them for the change, (4) creating a safe environment, (5) being a leader during the creation of the new systems and processes, and (6) sustaining the change by focusing on the mission, vision, and goals (Fullan, 2007; Hiatt; Hussain et al., 2018; Kotter, 2012; Kotter et al., 2021; Lewin; Mento et al., 2002; Tang, 2019).

Change Management During a Merger

A merger is the combining of the interest of two or more companies into a new enterprise (DePamphilis, 2019; Leepsa & Mishra, 2016; Sherman, 2010). A merger is reorganizing and

reconstructing two or more enterprises' structure, culture, design, processes, and purpose (DePamphilis; Galpin, 2014; Venzin et al.). With that understanding, it is fair to say that merging embodies the meaning of design and change. Having a clear plan and efficient practices to follow during the design and change process can ensure the success of the restructuring implementation. The overabundance of approaches to organizational design and change provides general practices for implementing a merger. It also shows that during design and change, there needs to be a focus on the informal and formal elements of structure and the culture of the participating organizations. Organizational change management is the discipline that guides how leaders plan, prepare, supply, and support stakeholders to adopt change successfully. It is also essential for leaders to focus on and evaluate the organizational success and outcomes of the change management processes being used (Tang, 2019).

Organizational change management programs require leaders to formulate change initiatives, generate organizational buy-in, implement the initiatives as faultlessly as possible, and generate a repeatable model for confirming sustained success in future change efforts (Tang, 2019). The change management program utilized during a merger follows a systematic organization-wide change initiative. Through this process, the two participating agencies that agreed to a merger withstand a transformational change process which includes (1) the development of the merger plan, structuring the deal, performing due diligence, developing the financing plan, and developing the plan for integrating the acquired internal and external stakeholders, (2) obtain the necessary approvals, (3) implementation of the merger plan (4) implement the post-closing integration and resolve post-closing issues, and (5) conduct the post-closing evaluation of the merger (DePamphilis, 2019).

A merger is a unique organizational reconstructive circumstance and a multifaceted experience that does not follow traditional organizational management systems (DePamphilis, 2019; Galpin, 2014; Venzin et al., 2018). In many ways, a merger is like a marriage of convenience (Chow et al., 2022). The benefits created by the union emanate due to many different reasons. However, once the participants are joined by law, they sustain monumental changes directly affecting their normal daily practices. Like a marriage, the participants in a merger commit to accepting that change happens, and due to legalities and desired ambitions, the intention is to make the merger work. Therefore, in addition to the change management program processes, some very intricate details and situations need to be handled because of human factors that do not always fall under the change management processes but must be dealt with finesse and resilience (DePamphilis; Friedman & Greenfield, 2021; Galpin; Venzin et al.). Literature repeatedly states that most post-merger studies presume that three years is sufficient to assess the direction of long-term post-merger operating performance. Many business strategies take far longer to implement and display success or efficiency. During a merger, the first goal is establishing a culture that embraces change (DePamphilis; Silky; Tang, 2019; Timbs, 2005; Venzin et al.).

Merger Leadership

Merger changes can be efficient, but only through leadership and managerial departments and teams that are prepared to face the constant changes that a merger environment brings (Kotter et al., 2021a). There is a surplus of merger leadership books, articles, and do's and don'ts guides. Still, the message is that effective leadership is undeniably the key to merger and change management success. That excess literature also identifies necessary community development skills, communication and interpersonal skills, analytical skills, technological skills, political

skills, visioning skills, ethical reasoning skills, risk-taking skills, and cultural competence/diversity skills as essential for leaders working through mergers and acquisitions (DePamphilis, 2019; Silky, 2022; Tang, 2019; Timbs, 2005; Venzin et al., 2018). During organizational change and through the phases of a merger, leaders are expected to lead and manage, be highly experienced in mergers, and guide the human element throughout the merger processes (Eastman & Lang, 2001; Risberg et al., 2015). Therefore, beyond the executive-level skills listed, changing leadership and the ability to inspire the desired behaviors of all stakeholders are essential and need support at all levels of the organization (Friedman & Greenfield, 2021).

Leadership characteristics are also influential during organizational change but can be tested more during a merger. Leaders with natural attributes that enable collaboration, communication, curiosity, empathy, and creativity are seen to develop transformational team approaches during organizational changes (Kotter et al., 2021a; Holten & Brenner, 2015; Holten et al., 2019; Tang, 2019). As leaders working through a merger, the idea of inevitable change should fuel the desire to be trained in research and best practices related to organizational change, organizational training strategies, and performance improvement (Hastings & Bauman, 2020). This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study gained knowledge about the demands placed on school leaders who worked through a merger process, what skills they relied on most, and why. Along with that knowledge, understanding how leaders managed the change as both managerial and instructional leaders was enlightening. The research defines the necessity to implement time to practice new behaviors, skills, and structures as a leader to ensure that when employees are going through training, they have seen it practiced (Fullan, 2007; Hiatt, 2006; Hussain et al., 2018; Kotter, 2012; Kotter et al., 2021; Lewin, 1951; Mento et al., 2002;

Tang, 2019). During a time when transformation and reconstruction providing a point of reference to the stakeholders ensure solidarity and consistency. Being a leader is about setting an example for everyone in the organization while being the teacher of the new desired behaviors to ensure the success of the change (Grenny et al., 2013).

Summary

School mergers have been the number one reason for the diminution of school districts in the NYS (NYSEDSO, 2015). This study aimed to describe the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers in NYS. The theoretical framework has been presented with an explanation of the organizational theory and its three principles (1) organizational structure, (2) organizational culture, and (3) organizational design and change. As of July 1, 2019, the total number of NYS school districts is 688. (NYSEDDS, 2021). Since 2012, twenty-four school districts have worked through the processes of school mergers by conducting school merger studies and going through the voting process. Three combined school sets passed a vote to merge and underwent an implementation process. A thorough synthesis of related literature has been included in this chapter to discuss fundamental components needing attention during the implementation of mergers. Relevant research shows the short-term and long-term effects on a school district due to a merger, but little is known about the learned experiences of the leaders and the short-term and long-term effects on their leadership styles (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017; Namubiru et al., 2017; Wollscheid & Røsdal, 2021). This study's gap in the literature and discussion seeks to describe school leaders' experiences during a merger.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers. The theory guiding this study was organizational theory. Chapter three described the research procedures, design, and analysis for a hermeneutic phenomenological study. This chapter also included the design of the study, the research question and guiding questions, the study setting, and participants. The IRB and other required approvals processes were included. My role and the method of data collection steps described and carried out with a systematic approach that could ensure the study could be replicated by other researchers ensuring trustworthiness and ethical considerations. Specially prepared questionnaires, personal interviews, and focus groups from the study were used to describe the real-world experiences of school administrators who dealt with school merger processes.

Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers. The problem was that the role of this Mid-Atlantic state's school district leaders is ambiguous in depicting school district merger processes (Dinki, 2018; Hart, 2019; NYSASBO, 2014; Silky, 2022; Timbs, 2005). This study utilized a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological method. Qualitative research methods were applied to provide clear accounts of multifaceted phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Kakkori, 2009). A phenomenon can be understood, described, developed, or discovered using qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell; Creswell & Poth; Denzin & Lincoln; Kakkori). Events were also

interpreted through the different perspectives of the eyewitnesses. Researchers gave voice to those whose views were rarely heard while conducting initial examinations to develop theories and move toward explanations (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative studies are also best suited to explain or understand concepts and phenomena when little to no research is available (Creswell & Creswell).

Phenomenological studies are rich and descriptive, making them well-suited for exploring any experience or occurrence (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Kakkori, 2009; Miron, 2021; Van Manen, 2017; Zahavi, 2020). Phenomenological researchers seize the opportunity to study phenomena retrospectively of those who have experienced them (Van Manen). Through phenomenological studies, the meanings of lived experiences are described in the representation of what and how. The resulting lived experiences explored helped scholars learn from the experiences of others. I sought to describe the processes of school mergers through the quintessence of the experiences and viewpoints of school leaders by asking about school merger processes, making a phenomenological study the best suitable qualitative research approach. The hermeneutic phenomenology method was used as explained meanings that, in some senses, were understood through human actions. We know things through how our bodies, our relations with others, and our interaction with the things of our world cause us to react (Hill, 1997; Kakkori; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen). Through this study, each participant provided their perspectives regarding their experience of school mergers, and I analyzed the school leaders' lived experiences. The study identified the experiences and interpreted the universal essence of the experiences (Creswell & Poth; Denzin & Lincoln; Kakkori; Van Manen).

According to Van Manen (2016), six research activities occur during a hermeneutic

phenomenological study. First, the researcher commits to making sense of a specific aspect of human existence. Second, the researcher explores lived experience in all its modalities and aspects. Third, the researcher continuously reflects on collected data. Fourth, the researcher must be prepared to write and re-write throughout the study. Fifth, the researcher must maintain a solid and oriented relationship (meaning the researcher will not settle for superficialities and falsities) with the study. Most importantly and sixth on the list, the researcher is to balance the research context so that the significance of the study is not lost. Maintaining a solid relation to the inquiry topic and supporting the participants' comfort is essential (Moustakas, 1994).

Additionally, as a researcher with professional experience working through a school merger, I refrained from any conclusion or judgment. To avoid personal ideas and opinions interfering with the study, I used journaling to disentangle, reflect and unpack the information (Hill, 1997; Moustakas, 1994). An in-depth analysis of the problem by focusing on the organizational theory principles of organizational structure, culture, and design and change, while reflecting on the essential themes ensured I am focused and aligned throughout this study.

Research Questions

The focus of the study described the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers in NYS. Current literature informs readers that school district mergers are an act of survival for school districts struggling to provide students with enhanced educational opportunities (Dinki, 2018; Hart, 2019; NYSASBO, 2014; Silky, 2022; Timbs, 2005). Yet literature does not document well the lived experiences of school leaders as they are working through the processes of a merger. Organizational theory was the theory implemented in this study. The following questions guided this research.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of a successful school merger?

Sub-Question One

How do school leaders maneuver and manage the organizational structures impacted by the processes of a school merger?

Sub-Question Two

What role do school leaders play in the environmental demands influencing the processes of a school merger?

Setting and Participants

The setting of this study was NYS. Participants recruited are NYSED-certified school leaders employed in a school district when the school underwent a merger process. The NYSEDEM (2015) reported that since 2012 the following twelve sets of participating school districts underwent school mergers processes (1) Oppenheim-Ephratah CSD and St. Johnsville, (2) Ilion CSD and Mohawk CSD, (3) South Seneca CSD and Romulus CSD, (4) Southampton CSD and Tuckahoe CSD, (5) Arkport CSD and Canaseraga CSD, (6) Elizabethtown-Lewis CSD and Westport CSD, (7) Schenevus CSD and Worcester CSD, (8) Brocton CSD and Westfield CSD, (9) Fort Edward CSD and South Glens Falls CSD, (10) Mayfield CSD and Northville CSD, (11) Panama CSD and Clymer CSD, and (12) Livingston Manor CSD and Roscoe CSD. As defined by NYSED, the 24 listed school districts are units of local government established to carry out the state's constitutional responsibility to provide adequate educational opportunities for the children residing within the district. The school leaders' experiences varied based on the merger process they worked through, the organizational structure and culture of the school

district, and the social dynamics of the local community and government (Timbs, 2005). The variations of experiences encouraged a complete description of the merger processes and school leaders' experiences.

Setting

NYSEDEM (2015) reported that since 2012, twelve school districts had undergone multiple merger processes, including conducting school merger studies, going through the local government voting process, and implementing the merger. In this study, the setting encompassed school districts across the NYS that had gone through a merger process. The State Education Department is led by the Board of Regents and the Commissioner of Education, who also holds the title of President of the University of the NYS. The following main branches then have directors that fall under the direction of the Commissioner of Education (1) Office of P-12 Education (P-12), (2) Office of Higher Education (OHE), (3) Office of Cultural Education (OCE), (4) Office of Performance Improvement and Management Services (PIMS), (5) Chief Financial Officer, (6) Office of Counsel, (7) Office of the Professions, and (9) Office of Adult Career and Continuing Education Services (NYSED, 2022).

The Board of Regents sets the overall education policy for the NYS and heads The University of the State of New York (USNY). While USNY has one main purpose - providing knowledge and skills to all - it carries this policy out in many ways. The Board of Regents includes 17 members elected by the State Legislature for five-year terms. Thirteen of the Regents represent the state's 13 judicial districts, one from each district, and four are at-large. (Judicial District III is currently vacant). The Regents serve without salary. The Regents choose a Commissioner of Education who heads the State Education Department and serves as the President of the University of NYS. Generally, the Regents set policy while the Commissioner

has responsibility for carrying out policy.

NYS was selected for this study because I am an NYS resident and school district leader. School districts were not addressed by their real names. I issued the participants pseudonyms upon the completion of their consent forms. Participants met through Microsoft Teams meetings due to COVID-19 restrictions and availability. The participants chose the date and time of the meetings so they would be physically and mentally at ease during the interviews. Discussion regarding this study occurred during the selected available hours of the school leaders. This study did not interfere with the work responsibilities of school leaders.

Participants

Participants in this study included school leaders who are NYSED certified and working in one of the following districts while the school district was going through a school merger process (1) Oppenheim-Ephratah CSD and St. Johnsville, (2) Ilion CSD and Mohawk CSD, (3) South Seneca CSD and Romulus CSD, (4) Southampton CSD and Tuckahoe CSD, (5) Arkport CSD and Canaseraga CSD, (6) Elizabethtown-Lewis CSD and Westport CSD, (7) Schenevus CSD and Worcester CSD, (8) Brocton CSD and Westfield CSD, (9) Fort Edward CSD and South Glens Falls CSD, (10) Mayfield CSD and Northville CSD, (11) Panama CSD and Clymer CSD, and (12) Livingston Manor CSD and Roscoe CSD. The participants held one of the following positions during their employment with a school district going through a merger process (1) school superintendent, (2) assistant superintendent, (3) principal, (4) assistant principal, (5) special education supervisor, (6) facilities supervisor, (7) transportation supervisor, and (8) business manager. Participant demographics included the following information (1) type of NYSED certificate, (2) the number of years of experience as school leaders, (3) age, (4) gender, and (5) race for individualization purposes. To support the description of a school merger

and the lived experiences of school leaders working through merger processes, ten school leaders who have worked or are working in an NYS school district that has experienced a school merger process were recruited for this study. Saturation, which occurred when collecting additional data without continuing to produce new insight or expose new features, was necessary for an appropriate sample (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Researcher Positionality

1 Corinthians 12:12-31 embodies an organization's workings by describing one body and many parts (Zondervan, 2011). When processing the reorganization process and exchanging information between the systems to ensure organizational efficiency and effectiveness, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 guided the vision. Though the organizational theory was utilized as the framework for this study, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 was utilized as a reminder that an organization has many parts, and those many parts directly affect the success of the organization.

Interpretive Framework

The social constructivism perspective naturally balances my beliefs on how, as humans, we learn and how those learned experiences guide our actions. Social constructivists believe humans learn primarily through interactions with their peers, teachers, parents, and environments. Through a social constructivist lens, researchers are called to adopt the theoretical lens of a social scientist researcher. In a social constructivist world, people are active participants in creating their knowledge, and researchers address the process of interaction by acknowledging the interactions the participants' experience within their environment (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Philosophical Assumptions

Human experiences and multiple perspectives are opportunities to learn and understand the world. I am not a realist, nor can I call myself an idealist. I generally have a positive outlook

and hopeful feelings for the future. Still, I am grounded and understand my limits and the limits that may come from my environment. In my life, I have overcome obstacles. Though they have shaped my knowledge and perception, they do not hold me back from being ambitious and willing to try and learn new things. I believe in having a balanced outlook on life, from practical contact with the natural world and observing facts or events. Respecting the experiences of others through acknowledgment is another way to experience the world and gain knowledge. There is a time for idealism, a time for realism, and a time for learning through the exploration of complex viewpoints.

Ontological Assumption

The ontological assumption addresses the nature of reality and its characteristics (Creswell & Poth, 2016). As a social constructivist, I accept that multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences and interactions with our environment. My ontological assumption of a study is that each participant will show evidence of multiple experiences, viewing their knowledge of the phenomenon as different. Yet, there will be similarities throughout all their experiences. My role and responsibility were to take note of their experiences.

Epistemological Assumption

The epistemological assumption addresses what counts as knowledge, how knowledge claims are justified, and, more specifically, the relationship between what is being researched and the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Accepting that multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences and interactions with our environment allowed me to understand that my world perception may differ from my participants. However, my role was to understand the participants' perceptions of nature. My epistemological assumption of knowledge within

research is that the reality being studied is shaped and co-constructed between me as the researcher, the participant, and our individual experiences.

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption describes the extent to which researcher values are known and brought into a study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). I accepted that multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences and interactions with our environment and that my role was to understand the nature of the participant's perceptions. My axiological assumption as a researcher was to be vigilant of my values as I worked at respecting the values and experiences of the participants. As an NYS-certified school district leader previously employed by one of the school districts that implemented a school merger, my experience of the many responsibilities it took to implement a merger is recognized. My past experiences and knowledge were valuable guides to the inquiry into school mergers. My education and knowledge based on school mergers have led me to consider mergers an experience worthy of investigation. According to Van Manen (2016), hermeneutic phenomenology is a methodology that does not rely on bracketing biases but gives the researcher a chance to interpret the descriptions gathered using their personal life experiences. The phenomenon's reality will be constructed between me as the researcher and participant and our individual experiences.

Researcher's Role

The researcher's role is to stand apart from what is being studied, with his or her biases and values excluded through exploratory design and control (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The role of a researcher is to be an active and attentive learner (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 2016). For this study, my role was to research, write, and develop all parts of the submitted dissertation. This involved creating the interview questionnaire and collecting and

analyzing the information obtained from the different types of data (interviews, documentation, and direct observations). My responsibilities consisted of (1) determining the design most appropriate for the research, (2) creating a proposal for the research, (3) ensuring that every participant gave informed consent before entering the study, (4) securing IRB approval for the study, (5) collecting the data using the three methods discussed in the data collection section of chapter three, (6) analyzing the data using the methods of coding, (7) maintaining and protecting electronic databases, (8) respecting confidentiality, and (9) reporting the findings of the research in a narrative format that was consistent with the qualitative research template (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Liberty University Doctoral Programs Dissertation Handbook, 2021). The role and responsibilities required by Liberty University were to complete this research. Since I am not currently employed or connected in any personal or professional matter to any of the school districts that have undergone a merger process, there was no loss or gain by participating in this study. The only gain was to add to the literature associated with school mergers.

Procedures

Fraenkel et al. (2012) stated, "The essence of all research originates in curiosity." Creswell and Poth (2016), Hatch (2002), and Liberty University Doctoral Programs Dissertation Handbook (2021) presented the procedures for conducting a qualitative study and a process of interwoven steps. It was necessary to obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) to deliver organizational value to conduct any portion of participant selection and data collection (Appendix A). Once IRB approval was obtained, contact with the participants began. However, determining and defining research questions was the first step before that happened. After the development of the research question, subsequent steps included the selection of the participants, the techniques of data collecting, and the methods of data analysis. Once IRB approval was

obtained (Appendix A), the recruitment of the participants began. Participants were provided with a letter explaining the purpose of the research (Appendix B). Through the letter, participants were informed of the risks and benefits of participating in the research. In addition, the purpose statement letter asked participants about their interest in participating in the study. These were distributed to school leaders through district email addresses, BOCES, and NYSED school leader listservs.

Once participants returned their signed interest to participate, all the proper IRB and consent forms (Appendix C) and a participation survey screener (Appendix D) were distributed to the selected 12 participants. Upon the participants completing the consent forms, they were returned, used for demographic data purposes, and safely stored. The participants were given a participant ID number to ensure confidentiality and protection from institutional vulnerability. Questionnaires (Appendix E) were then distributed to the participants. The participant survey screener and questionnaire were in an online survey format for easy accessibility from the participants and to also allow for immediate return once complete. The participant survey screener and questionnaires were coded using Excel.

Once the selected 12 participants completed the questionnaire (Appendix E), interviews were scheduled and conducted through e-conference using Microsoft Teams. Interviews were video and audio recorded for efficiency purposes and the ability to watch and listen to interviews multiple times for data collection and journaling precision. The survey responses and recording collected was also shared with participants for their reflection and to ensure they agreed with their responses. Themes were developed, and aligned with the theory-based research questions, outlining any limitations or gaps found within the study to analyze the data (Hatch, 2002). A full report on the findings was prepared. Finally, the understanding and the essence of the experience

were presented in written form.

Permissions

The first step of this process was to secure approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) through Liberty University. In addition to the IRB Chair or Coordinator's review, additional IRB committee members, alternates, or consultants reviewed and, in some cases, expedited research proposals when their expertise areas fit the characteristics of the research proposal. The Chair or Coordinator requested such reviews and additional specialized consultation as appropriate. The IRB approved a research study or continuation request for up to one year (Liberty University Institutional Review Board Handbook, 2018).

Once approval was received (Appendix A), the recruitment of participants began. There was no need to gain permission from any site for the research study. Permission for participation is based on individuals and not a site. No individualized school data or student data was collected for this study. As explained below in the recruitment plan, I first sent all possible participants an email containing the purpose of the study letter (Appendix B) and asked for their interest in participating. Participants were recruited through gatekeepers. Participants were interviewed using the virtual platform Microsoft Teams. I explained in intricate detail to participants how confidentiality would be key when conducting all components of collecting data. Participants' names were used under a pseudonym. Once I collected the contact information for the educational leaders interested, I emailed the recruitment letter. Written permission from the participants was obtained through email. Upon receiving written permission and signed documents, responders received a second email containing a link to the first data collection, the questionnaire, through Google forms. Individual interviews will be scheduled with each participant via email or phone. Written permission was a part of the research, collected and

scanned into the secure file, and paper copies were stored in a secure file cabinet. All collected documents and information will be securely kept for a calendar year after completing the written and approved dissertation.

Recruitment Plan

Purposeful sampling was used to select educational leaders who had worked through the processes of a school merger and could provide in-depth and detailed information about the phenomenon under investigation. “Purposeful sampling, sometimes referred to as purposive and selective sampling, is a sampling strategy used by qualitative researchers to choose individuals who can provide in-depth and specific information about the topic under study” (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

In this study, I examined how school leaders experienced school merger processes in the districts that NYSEDEM (2015) had identified as having undergone a merger process. The first approach started with school leaders I know, as qualified school leaders who have also worked in a recently merged school district. I also reached out to the regional BOCES superintendents informing them of the study, providing a copy of the purpose of the study letter (Appendix B), and requesting for the letter to be emailed to the current regional school leaders. Additionally, I developed a working relationship with Dr. William Silky, NYS’s foremost merger researcher and leading school merger study consultant, and Dr. Rick Timbs, one of the most prominent merger researchers and merger finance consultants in NYS. They both agreed to act as gatekeepers so I could find suitable participants. They agreed to introduce me to potential participants and were willing to have introductory discussions with participants on my behalf. In addition, they agreed to provide me with a list of possible participants. My initial contact with all possible participants was by email. The email contained the purpose of the study letter (Appendix B) and asked for

their interest in participating in the study.

Data Collection Plan

This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study described the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the school merger processes. A vital qualitative research phase was thorough and purposeful data collection and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2016). For this study, three different data collection methods were used, (1) a questionnaire, (2) individual interviews, and (3) a focus group. As coding was the foundation of high-quality analysis and ensured data transparency, this study coded the data collected using a hybrid deductive and inductive coding (Saldana, 2021). Coding occurred in two cycles and seven phases, with at least three coding practices (Lester et al., 2020; McMillan, 2021; Saldana, 2021). Since data collection and analysis are cyclical (Saldana, 2021), the data was imputed into an Excel workbook spreadsheet after acquiring the raw data by collecting the questionnaires and transcribing the individual interviews. Focus group interviews and selective highlighting coding practices began.

With the use of the tools found on an Excel spreadsheet, the coding practices included changing the font color to blue to highlight the statements that addressed the central research questions: What are the lived experiences of the school leaders who worked through the processes of a school merger while determining if a school merger was in the best interest of their district? Next, highlighting and color-coding statements or phrases addressed the two guiding questions. A second font color identified the organizational structures that impacted the processes of a school merger. A third font color identified the environmental demands that influenced the processes of a school merger. The highlighting colors assisted with identifying themes and categories shared across the questionnaires and transcriptions of participant interviews. Identified themes and categories were tagged by utilizing the filter tools in Excel.

Lastly, isolated thematic statements were used to create a new incidental and essential themes spreadsheet.

The thematic theory analysis was utilized for the individual interview during this research. Thematic analysis provided classifications and patterns that related to the data collected from the interviews. Using thematic analysis explained data through comparative details and assorted subjects because of the interpretations (Boyatzis, 1998). Through the thematic analysis process, one can (1) familiarize oneself with the data by watching it or listening to it repeatedly, (2) generate initial codes, (3) combine similarities, (4) search for themes, and review the themes. The thematic analysis approach also requires line-by-line coding. All the interviews were transcribed using speech-to-text software and listened to numerous times to edit transcriptions and ensure precision. Coding began upon reading the questionnaire answers and the individual and focus group interview transcripts line-by-line. Reading the raw data line-by-line will identify phrases that seem essential and reveal the phenomenon and shared experiences (Saldana, 2021; Van Manen, 2017;). Important statements and phrases to identify themes were color-coded, highlighted, tagged, and categorized (Saldana, 2021; Van Manen, 2017).

Questionnaires

The questionnaire method allowed for a useful data collection tool that often worked particularly well in combination with interviews and focus groups. Questionnaires also allowed data to be fleshed out with greater depth and detail while eliminating researcher bias because the participants filled out the answers independently. Hence answers were more authentic and accurate (Lambert, 2019).

Questionnaire Questions

1. I was an active supporter of the merger. CRQ

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

2. I actively worked at swaying the merger decision in the school community. CRQ

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

3. The result of the merger process directly impacted me personally. CRQ

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

4. The impact of the merger process was monumental to my daily work schedule and responsibilities. CRQ

- Strongly Agree

- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

5. The merger process was challenging. CRQ

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

6. The outcome of the merger process (merger study, voting process, or merger implementation) was the best outcome for the districts. SQ2

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

7. The merger process supported student achievement. SQ2

- Strongly Agree
- Agree

- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

8. The merger processes were highly effective.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

9. The NYSED department was a partner in the merger process.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

10. Rank the following eight areas of leadership and management effort: 1-8, based on how much time had to be devoted to each area due to the merger process.

____ Personnel Issues, Union, and Labor relations

____ Community Relations

____ Internal Communication

- ___ External Communication
- ___ Finances
- ___ Facilities and Transportation
- ___ Curriculum and Extracurriculars
- ___ Branding

Questionnaire Data Analysis Plan

As coding increases data transparency and serves as the basis of high-quality analysis, a hybrid approach of deductive and inductive coding was employed to code the data collected for this study (Saldana, 2021). In this research, the first phase of coding included inputting all the raw data into the Excel spreadsheet and was highlighted by assigning different color fonts for statements that addressed the central research question and sub-questions. The second coding phase is tagging by utilizing filters in Excel to identify statements that address leadership experience with school merger processes. A second filter for statements regarding the school merger process's impact on their organization. A third filter for statements addressed the environmental demands that impacted the school merger process and its leadership. The fourth coding phase was a cross-tabulation to filter responses and compare experiences and demographics. Finally, isolated tags were identified to complete visualization charts of incidental and essential themes.

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

A phenomenological study describes, clarifies, and interprets the everyday life experiences of individuals (McMillan, 2021). Interviews were an essential data collection method in collecting participants' interpretations of their lived experiences and served as a resource for understanding a phenomenon (McMillan; Van Manen, 2016). The interviews were

semi-structured with open-ended questions to guide the discussion. “A semi-structured interview is a qualitative research method that combines a pre-determined set of open questions (questions that prompt discussion) with the opportunity for the interviewer to explore themes or responses further” (Leavy, 2020).

The semi-structured interview was conducted through e-conferencing using the Microsoft Teams application for the convenience of the participants. All the interviews were video recorded with the signed consent of the participants. The interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participants. The allotted time for the interviews was 60 minutes, so the interviewee could meet in one session. If multiple sessions were needed, the interviews were in 30-minute sessions for up to 90 minutes. The semi-structured interviews included fifteen open-ended questions that allowed the participant to elaborate and tell their story. The open-ended questions were written to prompt the experiences and perceptions of the participants. Open-ended questions allowed the participants. The interviews were video and audio recorded. Speech-to-text technology was utilized to attain accurate responses. As the interview was occurring, notes were also taken to annotate any noticed behavior and mannerisms of the participants while responding.

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please describe your educational background and career in your current position. CRQ
2. Describe your role and responsibilities before, during, and after the merger process. CRQ
3. How were you impacted personally and psychologically by the school merger process?
CRQ
4. What rewards were experienced because of the merger process in your school district?
CRQ

5. How did the reality of the merger process compare to your initial expectations? CRQ
6. How prepared as a leader did you feel when working through the school merger process?
CRQ
7. What tools or skills did you rely on the most as you worked through your responsibilities during the merger process? CRQ
8. How was the school district impacted before, during, and after the merger process? SQ2
9. What were the environmental demands that influenced your leadership because of the merger process? SQ2
10. How did your role and responsibilities change because of the merger process? SQ2
11. What did you find most challenging about the merger process? SQ1
12. How did the merger process impact the culture of your school? SQ2
13. How did the merger process influence your relationships with the organization? SQ2
14. What advice would you give another school administrator as they are going through a school merger process? SQ1
15. What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with school mergers that we haven't discussed? SQ1

Question one was an introduction question to build a rapport with the participant and provide background information. The design of these questions promoted a relaxed interview session. The interview questions listed open-ended questions to promote a relaxed interview environment, get to know the participant and understand the participants' leadership experience with school merger processes. Questions two through seven led participants to discuss their professional and personal involvements regarding the merger process. Questions eight through fourteen asked the participant to share their perspective on the impact the school merger process

had on their organization and share their perspective on how the environmental demands impacted the school merger process and them as leaders. Question fifteen was a wrap-up question that allowed participants to share whatever they felt was essential or missing to ensure a deep rich description of their lived experience was recorded accurately during this study.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

The interviews were listened to multiple times, and transcriptions were edited for precision. Completed interview transcriptions and notes were read numerous times, and member checking was also used before beginning the coding process. (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Member checking is commonly used in qualitative research to maintain validity (Candela, 2019). Through member checking, the participants were asked to review and approve the interview transcript for accuracy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). After the study, the information collected will also be shared with participants.

Since coding promotes data transparency and serves as the cornerstone of high-quality analysis, this study used a hybrid deductive and inductive coding approach to code the data obtained (Saldana, 2021, p. 40-41). Utilizing the tools from an Excel workbook selective highlighting approach was implemented to identify words and phrases that addressed the research question and sub-questions (Van Manen, 2017). In this research, the first coding phase included inputting all the raw data into the Excel spreadsheet and assigning different color fonts for statements that addressed the central research question and sub-questions. The second coding phase was tagging by utilizing filters in Excel to identify statements that address leadership experience with school merger processes. A second filter for statements regarded the school merger process's impact on their organization. A third filter for statements that addressed the

environmental demands impacted the school merger process and their leadership. Finally, the isolated tags were utilized to create a chart of incidental and essential themes.

Focus Groups Data Collection Approach

Focus groups were conducted where personal perceptions on a specific issue were collected in a neutral setting where the participants were comfortable and non-threatened (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Five participants were chosen for the focus group discussion (Appendix G) based on their participation agreement. The focus group was held through e-conference using Microsoft Teams or Google Meets. Interviews were video and audio recorded for efficiency purposes and the ability to watch and listen to interviews multiple times for data collection and journaling precision. The focus group intended to collaborate with the participants who experienced a merger study and compare experiences between the leaders that experienced negative and positive votes on whether or not the merger was permitted. This allowed participants to compare their experiences and provide a different perspective from the individual interviews. The questions concentrated on understanding the merger process through the assembled exchange of the focus group experiences.

Focus Group Questions

1. How did the merger process impact your time prioritization? CRQ
2. How has experiencing a school merger process shaped your leadership style? CRQ
3. How did the merger process influence your relationships with the teachers? SQ1
4. How did the school merger processes impact your views on the politics and structure of the community? SQ1
5. Describe successful practices you used to manage your school district during the school merger process? SQ1

6. How did the merger process influence the climate and culture of the school? SQ2
7. If you could change one thing in the merger process, what would it be?
8. Describe your challenges when working with the community during the merger. SQ2

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

The focus group interviews included video recordings and transcripts. As the interview occurred, notes were taken to annotate any noticed behavior and mannerisms of the participants while responding. The interviews were listened to multiple times, and transcriptions were edited for precision. Completed interview transcriptions and notes were read numerous times, and participant checking was also used before beginning the coding process. (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A hybrid approach of deductive and inductive coding was used to code the data gathered for this study, as coding encourages data transparency and serves as the foundation of high-quality analysis (Saldana, 2021). Utilizing the tools from an Excel workbook selective highlighting approach was implemented to identify words and phrases that addressed the research question and sub-questions (Van Manen, 2017). In this research, the first phase of coding included inputting all the raw data into the Excel spreadsheet and assigning different color fonts for statements that addressed the central research question and sub-questions. The second coding phase, tagging, was conducted using Excel filters to identify statements addressing leadership experience with the school merger processes. A second filter for statements regarding the school merger process's impact on their organization. A third filter for statements that addressed the environmental demands impacted the school merger process and their leadership. Finally, the isolated tags were utilized to create a chart of incidental and essential themes.

Data Synthesis

Qualitative data analysis consists of intense preparation and organizing of data. Many factors must be considered beforehand to ensure efficient and meaningful analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2016). All the data collected were analyzed and synthesized by using coding. Since coding promotes data transparency and serves as the cornerstone of high-quality analysis, this study used a hybrid deductive and inductive coding approach to code the data obtained (Saldana, 2021). At least three coding practices were used during the two cycles and seven phases of coding (Lester et al., 2020; McMillan, 2021; Saldana, 2021). Since data gathering and analysis are iterative processes (Saldana), after gathering the surveys and transcribing the individual and focus group interviews, the raw data were entered into an Excel workbook spreadsheet, and the process of selective highlighting and coding started. In addition, each data source resulted in charts. The charts provide codes categorized into clusters of meaning and themes, including direct quotes regarding personal and professional experiences of being a school leader that worked through a school merger.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) conceptualized parallel words for these qualities of qualitative research, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, in response to criticism from positivists concerning a perceived lack of rigor, reliability, and objectivity. This section outlines the steps to guarantee a rigorous investigation using the Lincoln and Guba framework. These phrases have different meanings and implications for the quality and rigor of a qualitative investigation, even though they frequently serve as synonyms for terminology used in quantitative studies.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the study's internal validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thyer, 2009).

Credibility was seen through triangulation and proper analysis of the data collected.

Triangulation is using several techniques or data sources in qualitative research to create a thorough understanding of a phenomenon (Patton, 1999). The participants met specific criteria to be involved in the study. Credibility was seen through the credentials of the participants and their credibility and honesty. Member checking is commonly used in qualitative research to maintain validity (Candela, 2019). Through member checking, participants were asked to review and approve the interview transcript for accuracy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). After the study, the information collected will be shared with participants.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the study's external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thyer, 2009). From a qualitative perspective, transferability is primarily the responsibility of the one doing the generalizing (Trochim, 2020). Transferability of research occurs when research is conducted in a clear, valid, and ethical manner. As stated in chapter one, about ten school mergers happen annually nationally, and in NYS, only twelve sets of school districts have attempted a merger in the last ten years. Though this research was based only on the NYS merger, readers looking into other school mergers in the United States could find this qualitative research as a resource if they desire to replicate the study. However, it is up to the reader to determine transferability.

Dependability

Dependability refers to establishing the research study's findings as consistent and repeatable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thyer, 2009). Dependability of data depends on the

researcher and the precision and attention to details when collecting the data. The reliability and dependability of the participants are also essential for the dependability of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Unreliable data obtained is not valid and cannot be used. Dependability is accomplished through an inquiry audit, which at Liberty University occurs with a thorough review of the research process and the research products by the dissertation committee and the Qualitative Research Director (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Trochim, 2020).

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the level of confidence that the research study's findings are based on the participants' narratives and words rather than potential researcher biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thyer, 2009). A dependability audit can be done to guarantee that the research is sound and that the participant is reliable (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Trochim, 2020). The dissertation committee and the Qualitative Research Director at Liberty University conducted a detailed examination of the research's methodology and results as part of an inquiry audit. They were ultimately ensuring the confidence of the data collected. Techniques establishing confirmability in this study included triangulation, reflexivity, and member checking. Triangulation promotes using several data collection methods in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena. Reflexivity is when a qualitative researcher considers how their values, beliefs, and experiences impact their research. Member checking promotes validity by ensuring that the data and the researcher's interpretations of the results are accurate (Candela, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Ethical Considerations

The data must be obtained morally and ethically. Confidentiality will be the most important ethical consideration during the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thyer, 2009). Not only are they participants they are also peers and possible colleagues. Keeping positive relationships is a necessity and my responsibility. The participants received informed consent and assent forms. The participants' interviews were anonymous. Participation was voluntary and confidential, and the participants were given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality and protection from any institutional vulnerability. Participants' names were not shared or published. The participant could have withdrawn from the study at any time without any consequence, harmful or otherwise. The data obtained was password encrypted for protection. Data will be stored for a year after the completion of the study and then destroyed by deleting files permanently and shredding documents. This study will cause no harm to any of the participants. This study presents no health or loss of employment risk to participants.

Summary

Chapter three focused on the procedures to be used during the research. This research was a qualitative transcendental phenomenological study focused on describing the processes of school mergers through the experiences of school leaders that have worked through the processes of school mergers. This transcendental phenomenological study devoted comprehensive attention to the organization's structural and contextual dimensions, including relationships between individuals, environments, systems, and procedures. The participants were school leaders that directly worked through a merger study, the voting process, and/or the implementation of the merger. Participants participated by completing questionnaires, individual interviews, and, if willing, a focus group. The data collected was analyzed to discuss emerging themes. The data

collected was analyzed to discuss emerging themes to compare the lived experience of the merger process.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers in New York State. The problem is that the role of this Mid-Atlantic state's school district leaders is ambiguous in the depiction of school district mergers processes (Dinki, 2018; Hart, 2019; NYSASBO, 2014; Silky, July 12, 2022; Timbs, July 20, 2022). School mergers are a rare phenomenon in New York State, resulting in limited research focusing on the role of New York State school district leaders during school mergers. A significant and expanding body of research has examined this issue and found that effective leadership is crucial to a merger's success (DePamphilis, 2022; Silky; Tang, 2019; Timbs; Venzin et al., 2018). However, few research studies have examined the undertakings that school leaders face during a school merger (Hiatt & Richardson, 2017; Namubiru et al., 2017; Wollscheid & Røsdal, 2021). This chapter includes a description of each participant, results, themes with sub-themes identified, and research question responses. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Participants

The sample consisted of 12 NYS-certified school leaders. The list of possible participants was created by utilizing the NYSEDOEMS (2022) report of the 24 school districts that underwent a school merger process between 2012 and 2022, the NYSED SEDREF main information page on titles and times of employment in the reported schools, and a list provided by Dr. William Silky, Director of the Castallo & Silky, LLC, as the active gatekeeper. Participants' contact information was obtained from Dr. Silky and retrieved from the NYSED SEDREF main information page. Participants were selected using purposive sampling.

Recruitment emails were sent to 33 possible participants (see Appendix B). Out of the 33 possible participants, 14 completed the participant survey screener. All 14 participants met the criteria to participate in the study. Thirteen participants expressed interest in this study, but only 12 returned participant consent forms. Participant consent forms were provided through email with a link to a shared folder between participants and this principal investigator (see Appendix C) to complete. Upon receipt of the consent form, participants were assigned pseudonyms. The pseudonyms do not correspond with the participants' interview order. Participant demographics include years of experience in educational leadership, NYSED certifications, position during the merger, merger process experience, and reason for the merger (see Table 1). Before diving into the research results, a detailed description of each participant is provided.

Table 1

School Leaders Participants Demographics

School Leader Participant	Years of Experience in Education Leadership	NYSED Certifications	Position During Merger	Merger Process Experienced	Reason For Merger
Adam	21	School District (SDL)	Superintendent	Merger Study, Voting Process	Programing, Imposed by the Community, Low Student Enrollment
Andrew	6	School Building (SBL)	Principal	Merger Implementation	Low Student Enrollment
Elizabeth	15	School District (SDL), School Building (SBL), School Business	Superintendent	Merger Study, Voting Process	Financial Turmoil, Programing, Low Student Enrollment

		Official (SBO)			
Issac	9	School District (SDL), School Building (SBL)	Principal	Merger Study, Voting Process, Merger Implementation	Financial Turmoil, Programing, Low Student Enrollment
Jacob	32	SAS old SBL and SDA old SDL	Interim Administrator	Merger Study, Voting Process, Merger Implementation	Financial Turmoil, Programing
Josephine	19	SDA	Superintendent	Merger Study	Financial Turmoil
Lucas	18	School District (SDL)	Superintendent	Merger Study	Financial Turmoil
Mathew	8	School District (SDL), School Building (SBL)	Superintendent	Merger Study, Voting Process, Merger Implementation	Financial Turmoil, Programing, Low Student Enrollment
Natalie	10	SBDI	Supervisor of Transportation	Merger Study, Voting Process, Merger Implementation	Financial Turmoil, Programing, Imposed by the Community, Low Student Enrollment
Noah	17	SDA (the older version of district leader)	Superintendent	Merger Study, Voting Process	Programing
Paul	17	School District (SDL)	Superintendent	Merger Study, Voting Process, Merger Implementation	Financial Turmoil, Programing
Samuel	19	School District (SDL), School	Superintendent	Merger Study, Voting Process	We were approached by

Building
(SBL)

neighboring
school district

This study focused on school leaders who experienced working the NYSED processes of school mergers. The number of years of experience as school leaders ranged from 6 to 32 years. All participants are appropriately NYSED certified to work in a school district in their hired leadership positions. All the participants reside in New York State. The following section provides a detailed description of each participant from the participant survey screener, participant questionnaire, and interview sessions. There is a digital copy of each data collection.

Adam

Adam is a white male between the ages of 45 and 54. He holds an NYSED School District Leader certification. He has been an educator for 29 years, with 21 of them in educational leadership positions. The conversation with Adam included a summary of his education and work history up to his current employment. Adam worked as the superintendent for both districts undergoing merger processes. He has been with District 1 for 18 years and District 2 for 14. The school merger was pursued because of the need for academic programming. As the superintendent, he worked through the merger study and the merger community vote.

My impressions of Adam were, “Adam is authentic, honest, and believes the merger to be the best opportunity for both school districts.” He welcomed my interview questions and was confident and comfortable discussing his experiences. He was authentic and straightforward about his feelings, struggles, successes, and dedication to the merger processes. He was down to earth, smiled throughout the interview, and displayed cheerfulness about his career. As I

rewatched the interview and reflected on my journal entry regarding this interview, it was evident that he is confident, highly skilled in his profession, and truly cares for his communities and schools.

Adam expressed multiple times that this merger was not just about a work site but instead about the communities he grew up in, went to school in, rooted his family in, and professionally decided to stay in and cultivate. He proudly described, “When given an opportunity to move back to the area in which I grew up in, I took a technology education teacher position.” He also facially and vocally expressed the seriousness of the merger processes and how those processes impacted both the communities and him personally and professionally. When asked how the merger process impacted him personally and psychologically, his response was,

I got my ass kicked. It took a toll emotionally and physically; it was exhausting because, with my situation being shared between both districts, it was a constant 24/7, seven days a week. The process for me was either working on stuff related to the study or conversations with faculty, staff, students, community members, board members, during school, outside of school about the merger.

Adam’s recalling of his experiences expresses how he had devoted his career to the educational well-being of the schools in his communities.

Andrew

Andrew is a male between the ages of 45 and 54. He holds an NYSED School Building Leader (SBL) certification. He has been an educator for 22 years, six in educational leadership positions. The conversation with Andrew included a summary of his education and work history up to his current employment. Andrew was employed as a principal for the merger process after the positive vote for the centralization of two districts. The school merger was needed because of

low student enrollment. Andrew worked through the implementation processes as the principal of the newly established school district. He worked in the district for four years.

My impression of Andrew was, "Andrew is reflective." Andrew was honest about the struggles, successes, and monumental work he is responsible for due to the positive merger vote. He welcomed my interview questions and was comfortable speaking about the positives and negatives of his experiences. As I rewatched the interview and reflected on my journal entry regarding this interview, it was evident that he wanted to do well, but there were struggles. He stated the obligations and tasks necessary to fulfill school leaders' duties during the implementation of a merger. In particular, he focused on the new systems that must be built.

Consequently, he also pointed out, "There's no course. There's no book. There are no experts. Maybe we are the walking experts at this point. We might be the crawling experts at this point."

For Andrew, the merger process is not over; it is happening every day and interwoven with the normal day-to-day responsibilities of the building principal. When he needs to make decisions, an extra layer of considerable organizational elements impacts the school community positively and negatively. When asked how he was impacted personally and psychologically by the school merger process, Andrew explained,

It was my first role as a building principal, but one of the pieces that I think we are continuing to work through is how do we blend the adults together.

Significantly he also mentioned,

There is nothing in the academic work you do and your administrative building-level teams that prepares you for how to walk into a merger situation where you're trying to

blend schools and students and teachers and parents and community organizations, even the PTA.

As he spoke about the status and the needs of the district, he expressed the need to blend the staff, systems, and procedures, but the merger implementation is not an easy task, and it is taking years to see progress in some areas.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a white female between the ages of 45 and 54. She holds an NYSED School District (SDL) certificate, an NYS School Building (SBL) certificate, and a School Business Official (SBO) certificate. She has been an educator for 27 years, with 15 of them in educational leadership positions. The conversation with Elizabeth included a summary of her education and work history up to her current employment. Elizabeth was the district superintendent for 4.5 years during the merger process. As the superintendent, she worked through the merger study and the merger community vote. This merger process would have resulted in the annexation of her district. The school merger was pursued because of financial turmoil, programming needs, and low student enrollment.

I re-watched the interview and thought back on my journal entry regarding this interview. My impression of Elizabeth was, "Elizabeth is sincere and passionate about her career, students, her staff, and education. She is a go-getter who has worked hard to advance in her career and is ready to tackle any assignment." Due to going through the merger process, Elizabeth was open about her accomplishments and setbacks on the personal and professional fronts. She was open to my interview questions and at ease discussing the good and bad aspects of her experiences. I found the traumatic experiences she encountered during the merger processes due to community beliefs and misrepresentations of the truth and Elizabeth as a person very moving.

As Elizabeth shared her story on how the merger process impacted her personally and psychologically, she warned me by expressing, "I'll probably get emotional because it's still, you know, it's still fresh for me, but it was awful. It was. It was downright awful."

Elizabeth was vague and provided little detail on situations, but she expressed that there were personal attacks by the community she vowed to serve educationally. Yet even with all the personal and professional attacks that she experienced; she explained,

When people have said to me, would you do it differently? And I said no, I wouldn't because I felt my obligation as a superintendent was to see the process through. And if the merger process had been set up differently. It would have worked the right way because, for that district, it was the best thing that could have happened in so many different ways. And I and I will say that forever because our kids were suffering because they didn't have what other kids had, and the merger was a way for them to get that. So as an educator, I would never have done it differently.

As I reflected on Elizabeth's interview, I saw that her experience displays impressive perseverance. The awful occurrences she endured did not prevent her from continuing to be an educational leader and working in the educational system, displaying courage and conviction to do what is best for students.

Issac

Issac is a white male between the ages of 55 and 64. He holds an NYSED School District (SDL) certificate and an NYS School Building (SBL) certificate. He has been an educator for 34 years, nine in educational leadership positions. The conversation with Issac included a summary of his education and work history up to his current employment. For the merger process, Issac was originally employed as the building principal for one of the districts. After the positive vote

for centralizing the two districts, Issac continued employment as one of the principals in the newly established district. He worked in both the historic district and the recently developed district for a total of five years. The school merger was pursued because both historical districts were coping with financial turmoil, programming, and low student enrollment. As a building principal, he worked through the merger study, the merger community vote, and the merger implementation.

Issac welcomed my interview questions and was confident and comfortable discussing his experiences. He was straightforward about his feelings, struggles, successes, and the work he put into the merger processes. As I rewatched the interview and reflected on my journal entry regarding this interview, my impressions of Issac were, "Issac is confident and really wanted the merger to be a success to provide the best opportunities for his historic school districts." Issac explained why he was so pro-merger,

I was a student, and then I taught in a merged district for 20-something years. I knew the benefits of a merger and what they could provide a community, and what they could provide a school. So, I was very pro-merger. Unfortunately, I think. I was convincing people to be pro-merger because I was so pro-merger because of my experience. But then, as I started to go, the process really started happening. I felt. I don't think it was the best thing for both communities. And I was. I was convincing people at my school's community to be part of a process that they really didn't need to be part of just because I felt it could give them benefits that they didn't have before.

Issac no longer believes centralizing the two districts was the best outcome. "Issacs's experiences after the positive vote for centralization were not positive. Issac explained,

Community members asked my opinion after the merger process, and I gave my opinion. I feel that. They're not getting what I thought they would, and now I feel that my word impacted that.

Issac disclosed that after the positive vote for a centralization occurred, difficulties for him appeared,

Professionally, I was. I was under leadership that I felt was over their head. I was being pushed to do things that. It didn't need to be done. I just think it put a bad taste in my mouth and made me not feel like I was doing the right thing for students and for education. I think a merger would be tough for anyone, even a very experienced superintendent, because there is no training for that. There is none. It happens very, very rarely.

Issac resigned from his post but continues to be an administrator. He returned to the school district that had merged twenty or so years earlier, where he had previously attended school and worked as a teacher.

Jacob

Jacob is a white male between the ages of 55 and 64. He holds an NYSED School Administration and Supervision license, the older version of NYSED's School District (SDL), and NYS School Building (SBL) certificates. The conversation with Jacob included a summary of his education and work history up to his current employment. He has been an educator for 42 years, 32 in educational leadership positions. He worked for two different districts that underwent merger processes. For his first merger process experience, Jacob was employed for five months as an interim building principal after the positive vote for centralization. During his second merger experience, he was the acting superintendent for one year of a school district that

would undergo an annexation if a positive community vote passed. As the superintendent, he worked through the merger study and the BOE vote. Both school districts pursued a merger because of financial turmoil, programming, and low student enrollment.

Jacob welcomed my interview questions and was confident and comfortable discussing his experiences. He was straightforward about his feelings, struggles, successes, and the work he put into the merger processes. As I rewatched the interview and reflected on my journal entry regarding this interview, my impression of Jacob was, "Jacob is seasoned in his career as an educational leader. He was calm due to his experiences and didn't take much personally." Jacob's interview was unique since he held two distinct leadership positions in two distinct school districts undergoing merger processes and spoke from the perspective of an interim leader. When he compared the two experiences, he described the principalship as a time to unite people. The superintendency was about communicating with people, calming emotions, and providing information.

I was the principal that sort of worked with the two staffs that came together, and it was really a big responsibility for them to realize they were one staff and not district 1 staff and not district 2 staff. The superintendent's experience was a bit different. Once they found out that it wasn't even going to be a centered merger. It was more of an annexation. Certain community members went a little nuts.

When asked which tools or skills he relied on most as he worked through his responsibilities during the merger process, he responded.

Making sure that the door was open, and I don't care what side you were on. You should feel welcome to come into the office and talk about it. I didn't want either side to think that they could not come in and see me. I didn't want either side to think. That I was

gonna dismiss them in any shape or form. I guess patience and understanding. I guess on this, empathy was the biggest part. Understanding these people are giving up something they've had for forever.

Jacob expressed a detachment from the school districts compared to the other school leaders because he was an interim. When asked how the school merger process influenced him personally and psychologically, he responded,

There was a lot of shameful stuff on the Internet. I mean, for me, it wasn't so bad, you know, it's part of the job. But they were very, very vicious to board members. I was an interim. You know it. It wasn't like I was gonna lose my job or anything or my career, so it didn't hurt me.

Though he still held the responsibilities at hand as vital, made connections with the staff, students, and community, and displayed empathy to the community working through the process, he made decisions more based on need and the data reported from the merger study than as if he also had something to lose. When asked how the merger process influenced his relationships with the organization, he stated,

With the organization, it wasn't bad. I mean, I would, you know, being an interim, you get a little bit more. How do I put it? A little bit more leniency. I had more flexibility to be honest with people and say things. My livelihood didn't depend on it. Versus if I was trying to survive to have a contract for the next, you know, five years.

Josephine

Josephine is a white female between the ages of 45 and 54. She holds an NYSED School District Administrator license, the older version of NYSED's School District (SDL) certificate, and the NYS School Building (SBL) certificate. She has been an educator for 27 years, with 19

in educational leadership positions. The conversation with Josephine included a summary of her education and work history up to her current employment. For 11 years, Josephine worked as a district superintendent with no financial difficulties, programming issues, or poor student enrollment.

Compared to other schools, her district is also one of the largest in the area. Therefore, the school experiencing financial problems, low programming, and low student enrollment approached her about working through a merger. In this merger procedure, Josephine's school district would have annexed the smaller school if there had been a favorable community vote. Due to these circumstances in the merger process, as the superintendent, she was in a comfortable position regarding her employment. She worked through the merger study and the BOE vote.

My impression of Josephine was, "Josephine is confident and highly skilled in her profession. She was also vested in the opportunity to change the NYSED merger processes." Josephine was down to earth, smiled throughout the interview, and displayed cheerfulness. She was candid about her feelings and concerns regarding the NYSED merger process, how antiquated it is, and how it impacts communities and school districts. However, she expressed hope that with this study and as school mergers get more attention, there will be more opportunities for improvement. She welcomed my interview questions and was comfortable speaking about her experiences. As I rewatched the interview and reflected on my journal entry regarding this interview, I noticed Josephine did not display anxiety about how the merger process impacted her. She was calm and matter-of-fact about her experiences. For instance, when asked how the school merger process had affected her personally and psychologically, she replied,

Well, I mean, I think for me, how I was impacted personally was hours of my life that I'll never get back, but I mean, it's just part of the job, right? It was just that new thing. I would say I'm not affected psychologically because, like, I wasn't in a position, right? Like I was the school district that was, I wasn't gonna lose my job because I was a superintendent of the bigger school. There was nothing for me in it, except that I live in the district, and so when I think about like really having the knowledge base, how are you impacted personally is when you're a Superintendent, you live in the district, and you see a value for your students that could have been there not only for the next 14 years but what you do with that 30 years from now. I think that for me was an impact.

Though Josephine did not describe acute feelings during her interview about her experiences, it was clear that she still endured emotional situations. Her descriptions focused on the tasks at hand due to the merger processes. She expressed that she wanted the best result for all the students and as a community member for both communities. She described how she worked collaboratively with the other district superintendents and shared all her available resources to ensure transparency and success of the processes for both communities. When asked what advice she would you give another school administrator as they are going through a school merger process, she replied,

I would say you; I keep my own emotions out of it. Yes, I was a community member, but this is really about our community. It's not about one person or one organization or that. It really lets the data allow you to follow it. If it's, if the data isn't good, own up to that as well. I would also say that when the information is coming back, you live it as well.

Lucas

Lucas is a white male between the ages of 45 and 54. He holds an NYSED School District (SDL) certificate. He has been an educator for 25 years, with 18 of them in educational leadership positions. The conversation with Lucas included a summary of his education and work history up to his current employment. Lucas was employed as the district superintendent during the merger process, coping with financial turmoil. After a positive vote, this merger process would have resulted in the annexation of his district, costing Lucas his job as superintendent. As the superintendent, he worked in the district for five years and oversaw the pre-merger and merger studies.

Lucas welcomed my interview questions and was confident and comfortable speaking about the process, the district, his feelings, struggles, and successes. As I rewatched the interview and reflected on my journal entry regarding this interview, my impression of Lucas was, "Lucas is conscientious, with businesslike composure, and extremely positive about all events being seen through encouraging opportunities and rewards." Lucas saw the issue of school merger processes as an opportunity to care for small school districts and a door for impactful professional growth, though personally, it impacted him most significantly with his family. When asked how the school merger process affected him personally and psychologically, he responded,

So personally, I would say that the work that needed to be done for that takes up time, and happy to do the work. Wanna do it. Well, it's very important for that community, and small communities are very important to me, and I wanted to do it right. So, but the time I had to commit to that took away from the time to do my other duties, which meant oftentimes any duties that could be done when students and other staff were in the

building I was doing on off hours or at home, you know, on the weekends and in the evenings. So personally, I spent. In retrospect, I spent less time with my family than I should have. So, it had a strain on our family for certain, but they were. They were kind of used to it, but it doesn't mean that it wasn't impactful to them, and now that I think about it, and in retrospect, it was impactful to me. Both my kids are now in college, so they're away, and my wife is like, 'My God, I can't believe that that went by so fast,' and we think about the things that we missed or wish we could have back for just a few minutes, and there is a long list of things we wish we could get back, and nothing against the school or the process, whatever it's, just the work required the time, and that's a fact. Professionally, in a couple of ways, I think there were a lot of positives. So very quickly, you know, in the first couple months of me being a superintendent in a small school district, I was thrust into having to become very good at telling my story to legislators. Very good at making my way around the capital, and for certain, I was blessed to have an experienced district superintendent help me. Very quickly to come up to speed, supported me and got me in with the right people, and hat that lives on for me today.

Lucas acknowledges that he was able to build a professional network and develop expertise that continues to influence his school leadership experiences today.

Mathew

Mathew is a white male between the ages of 35 and 44. He holds an NYSED School District (SDL) and NYS School Building (SBL) certificate. He has been an educator for 20 years, eight of them in educational leadership positions. The conversation with Matthew included a summary of his education and work history up to his current employment. Matthew was originally employed as the superintendent for one of the districts for the merger process. After

the positive vote for the centralization of the two districts, Mathew was hired as the superintendent for the newly established district. He worked in both the historic district and the recently developed district for a total of eight years. The school merger was pursued because both historical districts were coping with financial turmoil, poor programming, and low student enrollment. Mathew is one of the few superintendents who has worked through the pre-merger study, the merger study, the merger community vote, and the implementation of the merger.

Matthew welcomed my interview questions and was confident and comfortable speaking about his experiences. He was down to earth, smiled throughout the interview, and displayed a sense of ease as he answered the questions. As I rewatched the interview and reflected on my journal entry regarding this interview, my impressions of Mathew were, "Matthew is appreciative that the positive vote for a centralization went through." When compared to the other school leaders, Matthew has the vastest experience with school mergers due to his opportunity to see all the merger processes from beginning to end in the role of superintendent. Mathew emphasized, "The merger process, of course, is a long process." For Mathew, the merger process took four years to complete, from start to finish.

For Matthew, the NYSED merger process was where the school merger issue was more clearly seen and where he has been affected the most as a school leader. When asked how the school merger process had an effect on him personally and psychologically, he responded,

It was a lot. I have said this before, and I think this is a true statement. I think the pandemic was easier to deal with in a lot of ways than the merger process, from start to finish. The pandemic almost was predictable in some ways. Like how you thought different agencies are gonna react, you know, throughout that process, you had people telling you exactly what you were allowed to do and what you couldn't do. Yet, the

merger process, a lot of the merger process very much seemed like, We merged, and NYSED said, ohh, we weren't expecting that. Good luck. You know, so there just wasn't even support. You called to ask questions about it, and the number of people that didn't even know we had merged, they didn't even know what that meant—then you'd be explaining to State Ed the merger processes.

The NYSED merger process was evidently very frustrating for Mathew and continues to be. For Mathew, the merger process is not over, it is happening every day, and it is interwoven with the normal day-to-day responsibilities of a superintendent. Though he admits that the merger process was a long road and is still impacting his daily decisions as he reorganizes a new organization, it had a direct impact on him professionally and personally. He continues to work on a balance, but he also explains his feelings about the process as an opportunity. He stated,

I am hopeful that at the end of my career, I can look back and say that was the hardest thing I ever had to do. You know if I if there's something harder. I don't think I wanna know what that is. I think I'm going to use the word lucky; fortunate maybe that I ended up in the position that that I was in had I not followed the path and the merger process that that I followed.

Natalie

Natalie is a white female between the ages of 55 and 64. She holds an NYSED School Bus Driver Instructor certificate. She has been in education for 22 years, with 10 of them in leadership positions. The conversation with Natalie included a summary of her education and work history up to her current employment. During the beginning of the merger process, Natalie was originally employed as the transportation supervisor for one of the districts. After the positive vote for the centralization of the two districts, Natalie continued employment as the

transportation supervisor for the newly established district. She worked in both the historic district and the recently developed district for a total of 21 years. The school merger was pursued because both historical districts were coping with financial turmoil, low programming, and low student enrollment. As the transportation supervisor, she worked through the merger study, the merger community vote, and the merger implementation.

Natalie welcomed my interview questions and was confident and comfortable speaking about her experiences. She provided her perspectives as a school leader and community member for some questions. She was straightforward in her feelings, struggles, perceptions, and the work she put into the merger processes. As I rewatched the interview and reflected on my journal entry regarding this interview, I was emotionally moved. As a school leader, you could hear and see Natalie's inner battle on what was best for kids and what was best for the community. She wanted the merger to be a step forward and a way to provide the best opportunities for students. She also wanted the best for her community. When asked what environmental demands influenced her leadership because of the merger process, she responded with a memory of her having a conversation with a community member from the other school district,

I know when I was on the committee, and I was sitting. There was a member from the opposing community beside me, and you could tell he'd get upset every time I tried to explain to him why I felt the way I did. It seemed like that every time we met. And You know, it was hard because I knew that some of the public out there were so against it and wouldn't let It affect me. I was adamant right up until I was on the fence. I just kept doing the pros and cons and the pros and cons. The length of the bus ride and, you know, the kids all getting together, having better ball teams, having more classes of kids could go to, but again, it came down to, in my opinion, at the very end. I'm going to be honest. I

went with a No vote because I didn't think it was gonna end up being the best for the children.

Natalie confessed she still believes the centralization of the two districts was not the best decision. Although she thinks the kids get along, they have more possibilities, and in some ways, school is going on as usual; her experiences as the transportation supervisor after the positive vote for a centralization were not positive. When asked how the school merger process had an impact on her personally and psychologically,

Natalie responded,

I feel like I've lost a lot of rights, personally. I feel like this merger has taken something away. I don't feel like I'm doing as much as I was doing before. I feel like. It's kind of hard to explain. I don't have the same job requirements as before, but at the same point, it seems like I'm putting more time in. It has been a struggle to try to put the two together. Because I'm not like high up on the chain, I'm down in the middle. There were a lot of things going on below me, and I couldn't get them fixed because the people on the top didn't really know what they were doing. It made it very stressful. It made it seem like it was very disorganized. Psychologically, I don't remember a day since we merged. It's not been a struggle. It's been very stressful. It's been very chaotic. Poor, Poor management, poor. To merge takes a lot of leadership, and if you don't have the leadership. It's hard to keep everything together, and what happens is everybody down below just starts to feel crazy.

For Natalie, the merger process is still ongoing and is intertwined with her daily duties as a transportation supervisor. There is a significant amount of additional reorganization when she

needs to make decisions, which influences her transportation team in both positive and negative ways.

Noah

Noah is a white male between the ages of 45 and 54. He holds an NYSED School District Administrator license, the older version of NYSED's School District (SDL) certificate, and an NYS School Building (SBL) certificate. The conversation with Noah included a summary of his education and work history up to his current employment. He has been an educator for 27 years, with 17 of them in educational leadership positions. During the merger process, the district dealt with programming concerns. As superintendent, he worked through the merger study and community vote. Noah was employed as the superintendent of the district for eight years. If the merger had resulted in a positive vote, his district would have been annexed, and Noah could have lost his job as superintendent.

As I rewatched the interview and reflected on my journal entry regarding this interview, my impression of Noah was, "Noah is seasoned in his career as an educational leader. Noah welcomed my interview questions and was confident and comfortable discussing his experiences. He was straightforward about his feelings, struggles, successes, and the work he put into the merger processes. He was relaxed when describing his experiences." Noah explained that his role during the merger process was to advocate for his community. "It really was about my community being able to make that decision and not necessarily putting me at the forefront of, you know, hey, let's lead the way."

When asked how the merger process impacted him personally and psychologically, his response pointed out that he was torn between the benefits of the merger for his students and

school and the possible negative outcomes for him personally. While speaking of the outcome, he stated,

That it was going to potentially mean. I was not going to become the new school district superintendent. However, personally kind of a personal reaction is just the amount of work that went into everything, and then just kind of having that come down to an unsuccessful vote was just disappointing, disappointing for sure.

Noah's passion and care for his students were evident in all his answers and as he explained his actions during his experiences. It was also evident throughout the interview that he was unimpressed by the NYSED merger processes and how they are set up. When asked what tools or skills he relied on the most as he worked through his responsibilities during the merger process, he emphasized the importance of communication, data gathering, and interpersonal relationships.

You know, my expectation going into it was that this was a detailed itinerary and step-by-step process. NYSED knew what they were doing. They had a person that was, you know, our liaison, that knew what they were doing. And it would be, you know, very much laid out and presented to us in timely manner. Hey, you know, two months from now, you got to do this, you know, two weeks from now, you got to do this, and that just was not the case. We had circumstances where like, all of a sudden, somebody would call or contact the BOCES District Superintendent and say oh yeah, by the way, you know, this needs to be done within three days. Then I think. Very eye-opening, and I guess not in a necessarily good way.

Paul

Paul is a white male between the ages of 45 and 54. He holds an NYSED School District (SDL) certificate. The conversation with Paul included a summary of his education and work history up to his current employment. He has been an educator for 25 years, with 17 of them in educational leadership positions. For a short time before the merger process started, Paul was employed as the shared superintendent for both districts that eventually underwent the merger processes. During the merger process, Paul was the superintendent for one of the districts. Between both districts, Paul served ten years as superintendent. After the positive vote for centralizing the two districts, Paul was not selected as superintendent in the newly established district. As the superintendent, he worked through the merger study and the merger community vote.

My impressions of Paul were, "Paul is heartfelt, logical, and believes the merger to be the best opportunity for the students and both school districts." He welcomed my interview questions and was poised and relaxed, speaking about his experiences. He was candid and open about his feelings, struggles, successes, and the work he put into the merger processes. As I rewatched the interview and reflected on my journal entry regarding this interview, it was evident that he was extremely vested in the well-being of the communities and was not afraid to tell them the pointed truth. Paul explained how he saw his role and responsibility during the merger process,

I felt it to be my duty to educate the community about the definition of educational insolvency. To be open and transparent with the finances. To show a longer-term financial picture. Given the demands of state standards, given the demands of serving children, what we feel is the right way, given the overall financial conditions of the great recession and then the implementation of the State's tax cap, those factors together we

forecasted that the future wasn't gonna go well for our school. Merger consultants would say that it was not my role to advocate for the merger. I did not follow that guidance at all. It would be very easily perceived in the communities that I was pro-merger. I thought it was the right thing to do for kids. We were articulating to the communities if we merge, here is what we forecast. If we don't, here's what we forecast. Being very plain and matter-of-fact.

During the interview, Paul said he walked into the merger process knowing it could cost his employment. When asked how the school merger process influenced him personally and psychologically, he responded,

Being the advocate for the merger. Carrying the flag for one community certainly drew the attention of other communities. So personally, many things were called into question, my hairstyle, my weight, my kids. Lots of mud slander from the other community. The other community would take verbal shots at my school at the time, our students. That's just not something that I can't accept, and I might have fired back a few times. It definitely had some personal impact in those kinds of things because up to that point, I would think I've got a pretty solid career in our county. I had never experienced anything like that before. Certainly, personally, it was strange. It was a time strain on my family.

Paul continued describing that as he was advocating for his community school, not only did his personal life suffer, but his career suffered also.

Professionally, in taking on the merger, I bowed out of many other professional engagements that I really was given fuel by. For example, I was a very prominent local representative in the New York State Council and school superintendent. I pulled off the House of Delegates. I gave up my seat on the hood. I gave up my seat on the Legislative

Committee, the Curriculum Committee. I stripped away a lot of additional community responsibilities. So personally, in the profession, I gave up a lot of things that gave me some light and some networking opportunities for the merger.

Yet even with all the personal and professional incidents that he faced; he explained,

I believed the whole time that I was doing the right thing, and though it could cost me my job, I knew that the whole time I did, but I kept on going, even to the end.

Paul's ability to be an educational leader and work in the educational system, displaying courage and conviction to do what is best for students, makes his experience diligent and honorable.

Samuel

Samuel is a Hispanic Latino male between the ages of 45 and 54. He holds an NYSED School District (SDL) certificate and an NYS School Building (SBL) certificate. He has been an educator for 25 years, with 19 of them in educational leadership positions. The conversation with Samuel included a summary of his education and work history up to his current employment. For five years, Samuel has worked as a district superintendent with few financial difficulties, programming issues, or poor student enrollment. The school with issues with finances, programming, and low student enrollment approached him as the superintendent of a well-regarded school to discuss working through a merger. In this merger process, Samuel's school district would have annexed the neighboring school if there had been a favorable community vote. Due to these circumstances in the merger process, as the superintendent, he was in a comfortable position regarding her employment. He worked through the merger study and the merger community vote.

Samuel welcomed my interview questions and was confident and comfortable speaking about the process, the district, his feelings, struggles, and successes. As I rewatched the interview

and reflected on my journal entry regarding this interview, my impression of Samuel was

"Samuel is thorough and precise with his answers while carrying a businesslike equanimity."

When asked how the school merger process had affected her personally and psychologically, he replied,

Well, personally, it was a lot of time. We spent hours and hours doing merger items. So, in addition to your regular day-to-day, you would spend those times creating meetings or being at meetings and then trying to plan.

Samuel also expressed concerns about the NYSED merger process and some of the so-called experts' incompetence.

We found a very big surprise in what we thought was a straw poll vote. It was actually a binding vote, and had we done nothing, we would have been merged. So that that was not explained to us, and we actually kind of stumbled on it with our attorney as we were reading documents and said wait a second, are you reading this the same way I am?

Because I'm reading something different than what we're being told. I felt like we were building the airplane, going down the runway in some in some respects, so that, I would say, caused a lot of surprises.

For Samuel, the merger process brought more positives, professionally and in the organization.

Samuel confirmed that knowledge was developed all around him in his community and at his school. He also develops expertise that continues to influence his school leadership experiences today.

Results

This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study describes the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers in New York State. This

study focused on describing what all the participants had in common as they experienced the phenomenon of being school leaders while their districts were undergoing school merger processes. The qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study approach was appropriate to understand the lived experiences of each participant. Three data sets were collected via individual questionnaires, individual interviews, and a focus group to gather the essence of being school leaders during a merger. Due to COVID, all data was collected through Microsoft Teams and Google Forms. Participants submitted their questionnaires during the data collection period. The analysis began when the interview recording and the focus group were recorded and transcribed, and all the individual questionnaires were completed. Each transcription and document was downloaded and saved as a Microsoft Word file using the participant's pseudonym to protect their privacy.

Each participant received a copy of the recorded video and the recording transcripts. To establish trustworthiness, I asked each participant to confirm their transcript for accuracy by adding comments on the shared documents. The study's data triangulation involved comparing individual stories from the interviews and the questionnaire and comparing experiences from the focus group. Data saturation occurred after collecting all the needed data sources from each of the twelve participants. Saturation is when gathering new data no longer results in new themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To code, the transcription of the three data sets was read several times. The video recordings of the focus group and the individual interviews were watched several times. The transcripts of the three data sets were examined for words, phrases, or concepts that separate text sections to spot patterns or themes. Throughout the data collection process, I used a reflective journal to record my observations, thoughts, and personal responses,

along with the collected raw data regarding school leaders' experiences while working through school merger processes (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Clustering is a process for logically creating categories or theoretical concepts (Moustakas, 1994). Selective coding was utilized for this research. The clustering process segregates the codes found when reading the text. All codes found were noted in the right-hand margin of the text. After reading all the texts, codes were added to a data sheet and categorized into clusters to build themes. Themes were established to describe each cluster group. Three themes resulted from the clustering and selective coding: (1) the NYSED merger process, (2) leadership and management, (3) stakeholders, and seven sub-themes: (1) motivations, (2) deficiencies, (3) roles and responsibilities, (4) dealing with contingencies, (5) professional and personal sentiments, (6) relationships, and (7) emotions (see Table 2). The three themes directly correlate to organizational theory by emphasizing its three principles. Emergent themes were compared to the transcripts to ensure the information reflected the participants' shared perception of the merging phenomena. Each participant shared their firsthand accounts of navigating a school merger process by describing their role and responsibilities, professional and personal difficulties, and how they dealt with contingencies associated with the internal and external environments influenced by the NYSED merger process.

Results identified that working through a merger process personifies organizational theory and its three principles: structure, design and change, and organizational culture. Each code found correlates to organizational theory studies and how organizations operate, impact, and are impacted by the environment in which they operate. The organizational structure emphasizes the organizational structure of how the NYSED school merger processes operate. Organizational design and change are how the behavior of the members of an organization

emphasizes leadership and management. Organizational culture controls the interaction between internal and external members, emphasizing stakeholders.

Table 2

Themes and Sub-themes

Organizational Theory		Organizational Structure		Organizational Design and Change			Organizational Culture	
		Theme/Sub-Themes						
		NYSED School Merger Processes		Leadership and Management			Stakeholders	
Codes	Occurrence	Motivations	Deficiencies	Roles and Responsibilities	Dealing with Continuities	Professional and Personal Sentiments	Relationships	Emotions
More Work	158			X	X	X		
Board of Education	72	X	X	X	X		X	X
Collaboration	9	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Communication	46	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Community	154	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Day To Day	9			X	X	X		
Fiscally								
Responsibility	5			X	X	X		
Frustration	3		X	X			X	X
Impact	96	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Incentives	8	X		X	X		X	X
Leadership	40			X	X	X	X	X
Merger Study	64	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
NYSED								
Process	419	X	X	X	X	X		
Parents	27			X			X	X
Personally	44					X	X	
Politics	11	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Possibilities and Opportunities	33	X				X	X	X

Professionally	11					X	X	X
Program	24	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Relationships	27	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Research	11			X	X	X		
Responsibilities	61			X	X	X		
School	255			X	X		X	X
Staff	44			X	X	X	X	X
Students	56			X	X	X	X	X
Teacher	62			X	X	X	X	X
Time	145			X	X	X		
Vote	93	X	X	X	X	X		X

Questionnaire

All participants submitted a questionnaire (see Appendix E). After receiving their consent forms, the participants received an email with a Google link containing the questionnaire.

Participants could not correct their questionnaire after it was submitted, which resulted in one participant emailing the principal investigator with corrections. Short answers were also not allowed in the questionnaire, which resulted in one participant emailing further responses to 4 of the questions.

Interviews

Interviews were scheduled based on participant availability. Participants' changes in schedule or unexpected events resulted in the rescheduling of two interviews. Each interview was recorded through Microsoft Teams. Individual videos and transcripts were shared with each participant through the shared Google folder for their review. The length of the interview was typically 45 to 80 minutes. Participants shared their experiences as school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers in New York State. All participants were eager to

participate and provided honest, well-thought-out responses to the interview questions (see Appendix F).

Focus Group

Five superintendents participated in the focus group. The principal investigator scheduled the focus group. Participants were allowed to partake in the focus group at the end of their interviews. The focus group was recorded through Microsoft Teams. The length of the interview was longer than the scheduled 60 minutes due to all participants having the chance to share their experiences as superintendents who worked through the processes of school mergers in New York State while also having the opportunity to have a fluid conversation in which they compared experiences and asked each other questions. Due to the focus group lasting longer than 60 minutes, two superintendents left the meeting before the focus group questions were all asked (see Appendix G). The two superintendents who left the meeting did not answer questions 7 and 8. The remaining three superintendents did not answer question number 7 but did answer number 8 (see Appendix G). The two superintendents' departure caused the remaining group members to shift their attention to each other and became more unstructured. The need to finish the focus group quickly became apparent.

NYSED Merger Process

For this study, the NYSED School Merger Law processes are the impetus for the experiences that school leaders had while working through school mergers. According to NYS law, the Commissioner of Education can authorize or design groupings of districts for reorganization. However, a district cannot think about or do a reorganization until (1) an adequate study shows that the proposal is a good idea, (2) the people in the district know about the possible reorganization, and (3) a majority of voters in the district(s) affected by the proposal

agree with it (NYSEDSO, 2015). Before implementing a merger order, specific steps need to be taken. The law ensures that everyone allowed to vote can do so and that everyone agrees.

Because of this, when school districts in New York State want to merge, they must go through (1) a merger study, (2) a community vote, and (3), if the vote is in favor, the merger itself. The twelve participants shared their experiences with the two outcomes of the NYSED School Merger Process: (1) a failed vote and (2) a successful vote, and the merger was put into effect.

The types of reorganizations the participants in this study worked through were either centralization or annexation for central school districts. In a centralization, new school districts are created, encompassing the entire area of the school districts to be merged. In an annexation, a new district is not created. Instead, one district dissolves and merges with another (NYSEDEM, 2015; NYSEDSO, 2015; Spear, 2014). On the participant screener and the questionnaire eleven of the participants noted that they experienced the pre-merger study, nine experienced the merger vote, and six experienced the merger implementation (see Figure 1). For the school leaders who experienced the vote failure, the consequence was to mend the community and run a school that still has the same issues it had before.

Jacob said, “Now the community can start to heal. It definitely needs to heal after all that.”

Lucas said, “ It was unfortunate to see people do that and put kids in the middle and not being able to have a civil conversation with somebody who has a viewing, a different viewpoint.”

Adam said,

But there is a groundswell on both sides to look at it again. Umm. Yeah. And I think some of that has to do with, you know, District 2 going out with the \$28 million capital project that's got a tax impact and, you know, District 1, looking at 11.54 tax levy

increase and needing to do an override the tax cap. Otherwise, it's going to be a slash-and-burn. You know, when it comes to staff and programs, you know, I could potentially be tuitioning out my 9 through 12 kids from District 1 to District 2 in September. If my budget goes down. So, we're gonna be merging without merging and not get the aid, and I'm doing, you know, almost a \$30 million capital project with a \$12 million maximum cost allowance. So, the vast majority of its, you know, getting rammed down the taxpayers' throats in a tax increase. So, you know, I think the the politics of people not wanting to get involved. Umm, you know, really, really hindered the process, and it's kind of changed the dynamics of both communities a little bit. With more support for it and more kind of like. You know, if you fucking would have shut your mouth and stop spreading misinformation, this probably would have went through, and we wouldn't be in this spot. You know, but it's kind of too late for those conversations. You know, if that had happened before we voted, you know, maybe with the results would have been different. But here I am, finding solutions.

When the school districts voted yes to the merger and implemented it, the process was to create a new school, with new systems, structures, and a culture.

Matthew expressed,

So then coming together. You were left with, in theory, I guess you know, teachers, staff, students who did wanna be there, and that, from a hiring perspective, I felt was one of the most exciting years to hire. Just because everyone seemed to be coming in with a very open mind, you know that they, they, everyone knew that this is a brand new district. They knew what that was and the kind of the possibilities there. And so, I just think it was an exciting time too. To interview, and we definitely had more candidates.

Andrew stated,

Through that process, we found that because of the merger, we can offer our students quite a few opportunities. Our students have art music every other day. They have technology and library every other day, and we have an offset of character ed in there. But we also offer physical education every day. So, our students have a variety of options and opportunities for classes.

This study is about the experience of school leaders who worked through school merger processes, the NYSED School Merger Process is a theme. The participants represented a variety of the three merger processes. Each of them also stated if the outcome of the merger process was a benefit or a detriment to their school districts (see Figure 2). In addition, as they were speaking of the processes, the participants spoke about the motivation for pursuing a school merger and the deficiencies of the process.

Adam stated,

If you are, neighboring school districts that have the opportunity to get together and provide the opportunities for students, it's certainly a worthwhile endeavor, and working with the adults or through the adults as necessary to open up those opportunities is certainly worth the effort that it that needs to happen.

Natalie described,

When the state was up talking to us, they made everything sound a little bit better, a little bit sweeter. Then what? The reality was of the merger did not even come close.

Lucas detailed,

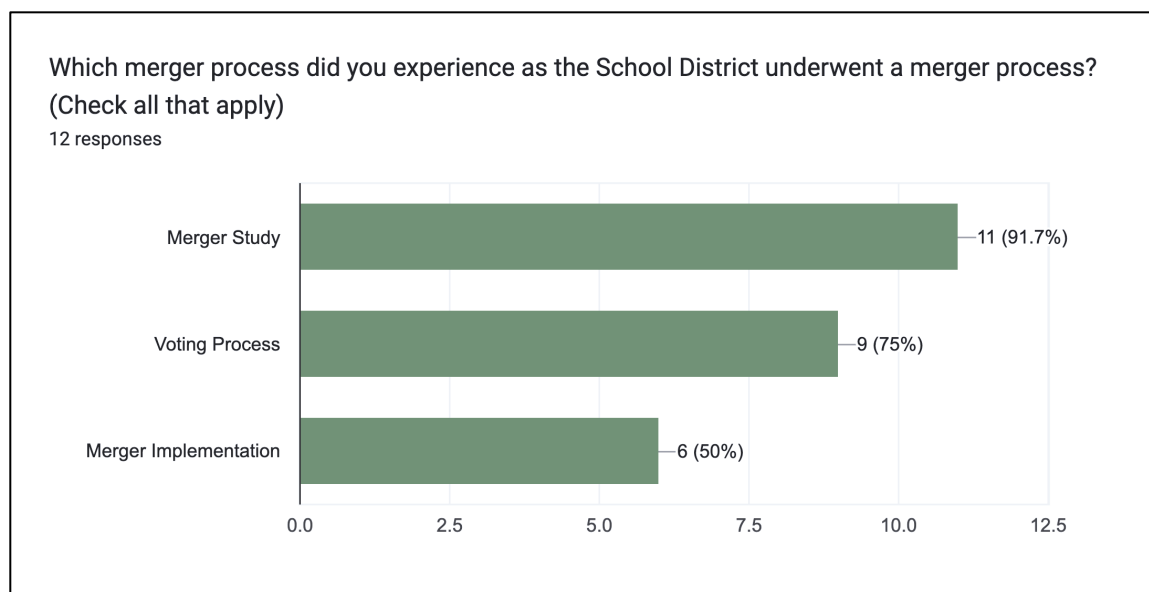
We had a lot of conversations about different pieces of that and conversations with folks from state at, to be honest, there's. There's a lot of nobody really knows how this process

plays out until you get into the middle of it, and even when you're in the middle of it. Sometimes you try to call, you know you have a conversation with somebody from the state education department and. They don't know the answer, and they're interpreting things that have been around for 50 years or longer and so.

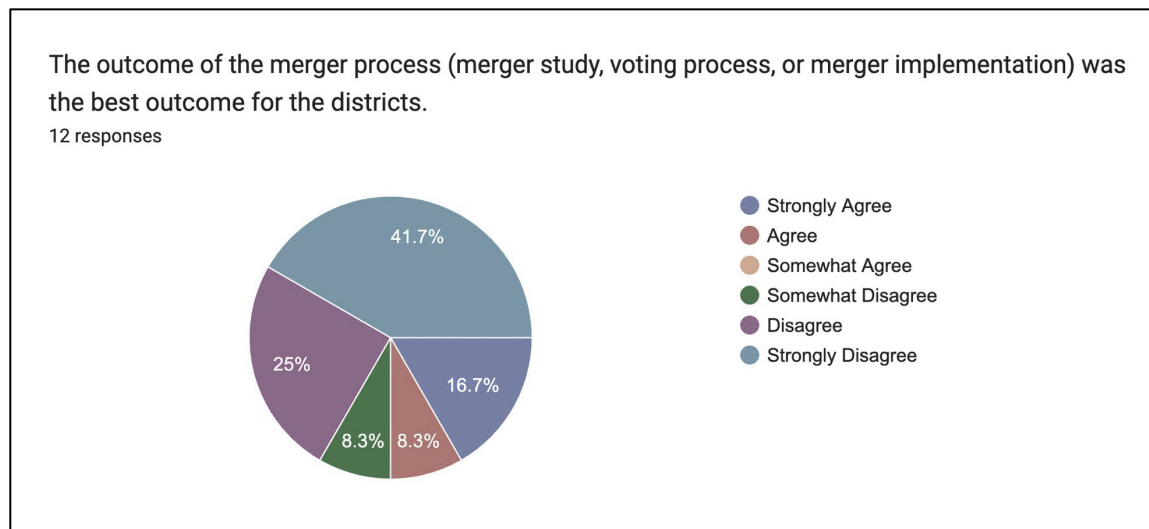
Resulting in motivations and deficiencies being primary sub-themes.

Figure 1

Merger Processes Experienced



Note. Merger process experienced by participants.

Figure 2*School Merger Processes Outcome on the District*

Note. Merger process as a benefit or a detriment to their school district.

Motivation

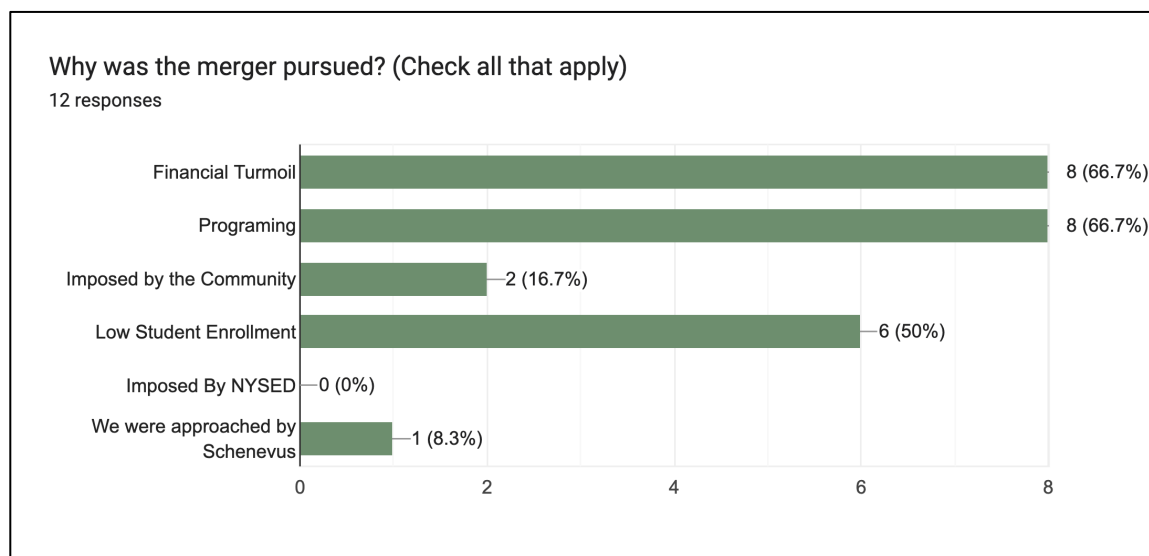
In most instances, pursuing a school merger is the last chance to provide students with the prescribed educational programs required in New York State and the opportunity to enhance the educational program. School districts are driven to agree to merge with another school district because of financial instability, a lack of academic programming and opportunities, state and federal assistance, and low academic success and achievement. Participants shared why the mergers were pursued when they completed the screening survey (see Figure 3). During the data analysis, they provided descriptions of the possibilities behind pursuing the merger. The participants agreed that having the money to provide more academic offerings and programs was vital to pursuing school mergers. Financial and tax incentives were the number one motivator for schools that were in dire financial need and could not provide the prescribed programming. A positive vote would result in a progressive change to ensure the best outcome for the school districts and student achievement (see Figure 4).

Mathew explained,

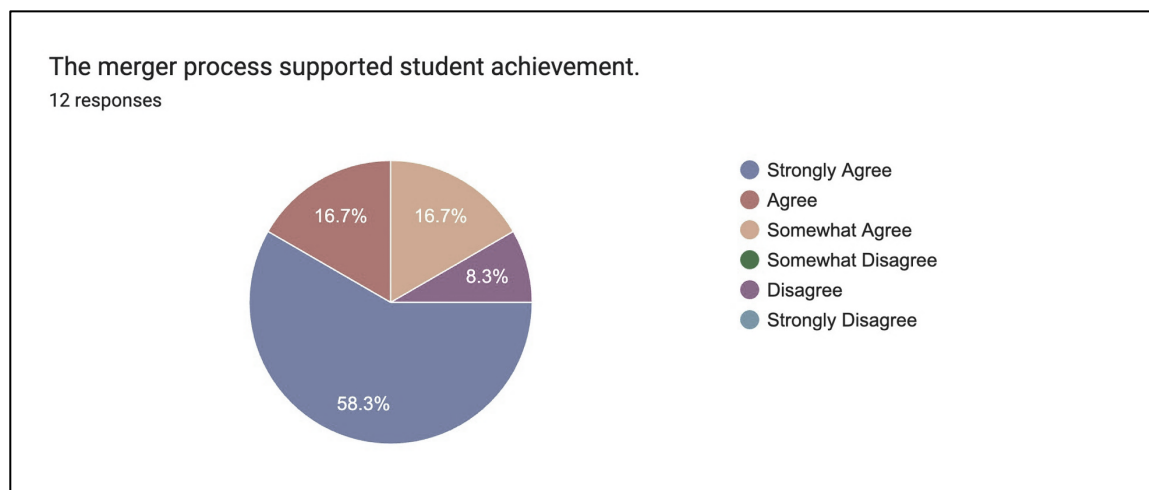
Opportunities and experiences that the kids were the students were missing out. So that that was kind of the before, and I mean, I think that that certainly was very, very influential as to why the district enter merging. And, of course, they were all financially driven, but they were real. Opportunities and experiences that the kids were the students were missing out.

Figure 3

Motivation to Pursue a Merger



Note. Reason to pursue a merger.

Figure 4*Merger Processes Impact on Student Achievement*

Note. Merger process correlated to student achievement.

Deficiencies

All twelve participants voiced their frustrations as they experienced the NYSED School Merger Process. Their frustrations are best described as deficiencies in the NYSED School merger reorganization structure and procedures. The structure and procedures of school mergers that need to be followed are written as legalities.

For example, Paul shared, "Some of the legal guidance out-of-state would come out, and it would change, and it was changed again. That was definitely a challenge."

The participants explained how NYSED claims that though the reorganizational process is laid out with expectations, ultimately, the decision to merge is that of the community, which is why they can be publicly withdrawn from the system. The participants desired the opportunity to utilize NYSED to get guidance. During the interview, all the participants voiced at least one area where they found the NYSED process ineffective.

Elizabeth said,

Regulations around school mergers are so antiquated, old, and just ridiculous. They make no sense, and they don't apply to anything in current times. Was another frustration because then you cannot ask people to close their or not to close their school, but to cancel their district and make it their choice. You can't do it, it's just does not work, and we you can see from the history of mergers, it just does not work.

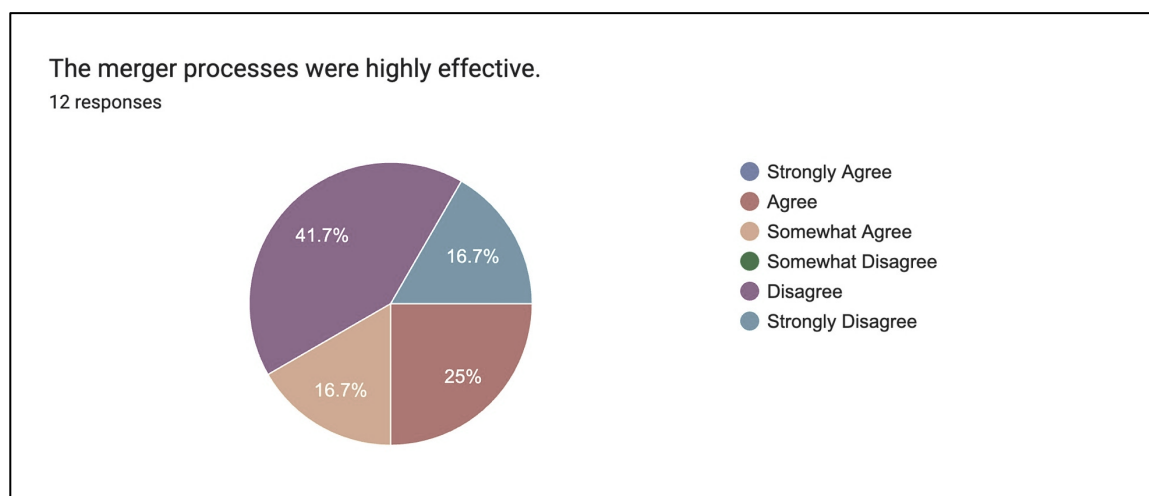
The participant questionnaire visually represents their feelings about the NYSED merger process (see Figure 5). Participants exemplified the deficiencies as the lack of an outline or a checklist of the procedures and processes that must be completed, the lack of having process experts assigned as liaisons, the lack of timeliness on items needed, the vague understanding of the law themselves when providing directions, and the lack of keeping their word on items promised. Matthew shared, "It felt like we were pushed to merge through financial constraints, but when we finally did, NYSED didn't have any instructions for us, or helpful hints, or suggestions."

During the focus group, participants voiced how working with NYSED during the processes at times left a bad taste in their mouths. There were multiple occasions where the participants claimed that their NYSED liaisons were not always the most versed in the structure or procedures of a school reorganizational merger process. Due to the liaisons' incompetence or lack of knowledge, many times, the school leaders had to research the steps on their own with the school lawyers to make sure nothing was missed, and the communities and school districts were not harmed because of a misstep when working through the process. Another frustration is how antiquated the law, the Master Plan for School District Reorganization Act of 1947, later amended in 1956, is. Applying the law now causes concerns when working through the legalities. In addition to the behind-the-times law, the out-of-date true value tax rates for districts

merging have not been updated since 2007. The participants emphasized how much they desired NYSED to support them in working through the merger processes, but in many ways, the liaisons did little themselves. Making the NYSED merger process in ways ineffective.

Figure 5

Effectiveness of the Merger Processes



Note. Effectiveness of the NYSED merger processes.

Leadership and Management

Through this study, knowledge has been gained about the demands placed on school leaders who worked through a merger process and what skills they rely on as the demands of a merger transpire. While discussing their roles, responsibilities, and skills, participants agreed there is no academic instruction that prepares leaders for the roles, responsibilities, and eventualities that come from a merger. Participants expressed the challenges of a merger, had limited academic merger management experiences, were expected to be as successful as other school leaders, and at times given less leeway because of the stakeholders' emotions.

Josephine expressed,

I think it's like anything, right? Like, I guess the mergers, like COVID, like it's just like whatever you know; you're not trained on anything you know, essentially, but for me, the pre-merger piece, I think, helped me. So I would say I would in the beginning. I felt like I was a zero prepared, but because of, like, you have to just know, right? Like when we closed down COVID, I was zero prepared. But then you have to do work. And so, you know, I would say still I don't feel like I'm at, you know, a ten if I was upgrading myself on a scale. But I can talk the process to an eight at this point.

Paul stated,

Here are our challenges, and there are not just hurdles that we jump over today. We're looking at some longer-term issues that are very concerning about our future.

However, all the participants relied on their own leadership experiences. They explained how their time on the job provided a sense of customary skills that they relied on while working through the processes.

Natalie expressed,

I felt like I had prepared as a leader. I felt like I could handle what I was doing. I did not feel like, at times, I had full support. Sometimes I just went ahead and did what I thought was best and then worried about getting the OK. I knew the challenges were gonna have impacts, some good, some bad.

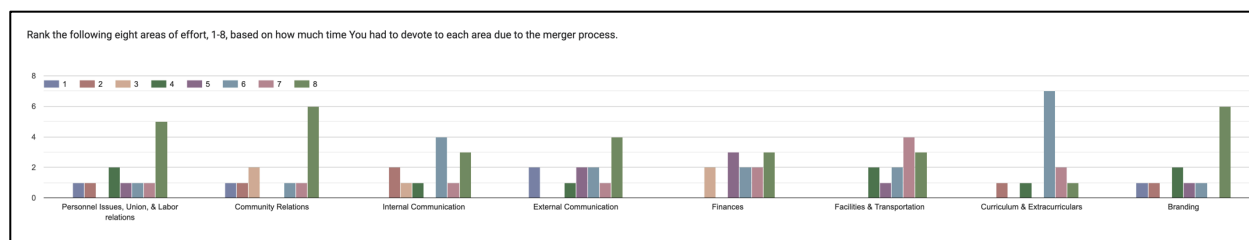
As they spoke about their experiences, common themes emerged: roles and responsibilities, the skills needed to deal with contingencies, and the professional and personal sentiments regarding the merger process. For leaders, the idea of change before it occurs drives the desire to make plans, be trained, and execute the change utilizing best practices (Hastings & Bauman, 2020).

Roles and Responsibilities

The school leaders provided lists of how their roles and responsibilities changed because of the merger process they were working through. Not only did they have to manage the day-to-day responsibilities that come from running a school, but they also had to manage the additional responsibilities that were added due to the merger processes. A normal day for a school leader working through a merger process would include the day-to-day responsibilities that provide strategic direction in the school building or district and meet all the required responsibilities to execute the merger process efficiently. The participants ranked eight areas of effort to synthesize roles and responsibilities. The ranking was based on how much time they had to devote to each area due to the merger process. All twelve participants ranked the following eight areas of effort on a scale of 1–8, with 1 being the most important and 8 being the least (see Figure 6). The eight areas of effort are (1) Facilities & Transportation, (2) Curriculum & Extracurriculars, (3) Branding, (4) External Communication, (5) Internal Communication, (6) Community Relations, (7) Personnel Issues, Union, & Labor relations, (8) Finances.

Figure 6

Areas of Effort



Note. Areas of effort to synthesize roles and responsibilities.

During the interviews the participants listed additional responsibilities as (1) researching best merger practices, (2) communicate with the stakeholders utilizing multiple communication platforms and methods, (3) attend merger meetings which include multiple committee meetings

and additional BOE meetings, NYSED meetings, merger consultant meetings, and school lawyer meetings, (4) provide information and data regarding the schools and district to the merger consultants, (5) have meetings political representatives to support the merger while also advocating for the situational issues that motivated the need to merge, (6) be the face of the merger for their district communities by not only educating the community through different forms of communication but have an open door policy to answer questions, (7) blend people, structures, and systems, (8) create new visions, missions, goals, structures, systems, and policies, (9) negotiate new contracts with the different union organizations, (10) create new schedules, mascots, transportations routes, and (11) create a budget with new fiscal goals that secure fiscal well-being (See Table 3).

The list of responsibilities during a merger process was tremendous, and the emotions working through the processes created were seen and heard during the interviews and focus group. The participants shared how the merger processes not only multiplied their responsibilities in monumental and immeasurable ways (see Figure 7). It also required them to do more research, build a larger network, be content providers, be community advisors, and continuously be on without a break.

Lucas shared,

You can't work more hours than I was working at 40 in, the difference being is now the school events and things that was attending weren't at the district where my children were going to school, you know, so you can kind of do two things at once. You're at those events supporting the events, and your kids are there. And when you're working at a district about 10 miles away, you're trying to balance that. So I was still attending. At every event at the Fort Edward Union Free School District, while trying to do the merger

work while trying to do the work of a superintendent. While trying to get to see some of my kids, my kids, activities, and events, you know, just two school districts away. So it had a strain on our family for certain, but they were. They were kind of used to it, but it doesn't mean that it wasn't impactful to them.

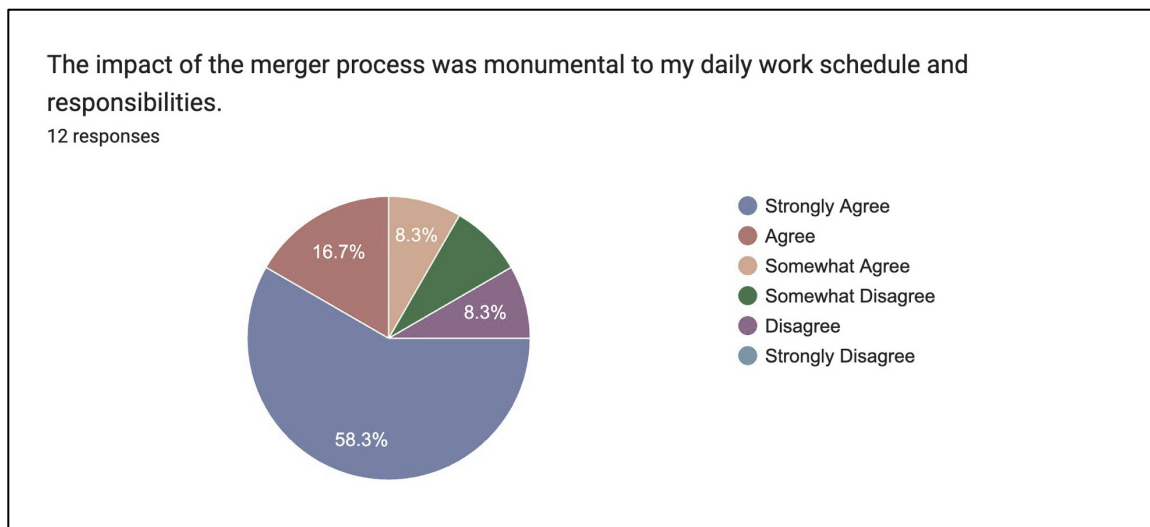
Mathew shared,

The responsibilities of creating a new school district were endless. New structures, procedures, policies, contracts, schedules, transportation routes, financial procedures.

Though pre-merger was time-consuming, the creation of the new school district was, in many ways, enormous.

Figure 7

Daily Work Schedule of Leaders during the Merger Process



Note. Impact on work schedule and responsibilities.

lawyer meetings, Provide information and data regarding the schools and district to the merger consultants, Have meetings political representatives to support the merger while also advocating for the situational issues that motivated the need to merge, Be the face of the merger for their district communities by not only educating the communit	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
			X				X			X	X	
	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X

y through different forms of communi- cation but have an open door policy to answer questions, Blend people, structures , and systems, Create new visions, missions, goals, structures , systems, and policies, Negotiate new contracts with the different union organizati- ons, Create new schedules , mascots, transporta- tions routes, and Create a budget with new fiscal goals that	X	X	X	X			X	X	
	X	X		X	X		X	X	X
		X					X		
		X					X	X	
	X			X	X	X	X		X

secure
fiscal
well-
being

Dealing with Contingencies

Dealing with the unknown was also a considerable experience for the school leaders. All school leaders spent unimaginable time planning for the unidentified situations, questions, meetings, or reports needed to work through the process. All the participants who worked through the merger process had contingency plans for the least-expected or most-expected situations, regardless of position.

Samuel explained, “You spend a lot of time and good quality time, you know, trying to navigate the process.”

The school leaders that worked through the merger study and the merger vote were always working on one contingency plan encompassing a positive vote and the implementation of a merger.

Elizabeth shared, “So, we started trying to get the kids, you know, on board and ready and all that kind of stuff.”

Paul shared,

We did some pretty cool things. Like, uh, you know, Joint Student Council meetings. We did a student visitation day where the District 1 kids came over to District 2, and some of the elementary kids went to District 1. We did some cool things to engage the kids to try to get them, give them a merger focus, and then get them back to academics.

The second contingency plan was what if the merger vote was a no and it did not pass; then the undertakings were (1) how to return to normal business, (2) how to heal the

communities, (3) how to provide programming while still being fiscally insolvent, and (4) how to resume normal operations, however that might appear in each district.

Adam explained, “Dealing with the aftermath and next steps is a priority” when discussing the end of his process.

Jacob stated that he told his community the plan was,

I said whatever the vote comes out to be, I'm supporting it 100%. But if it if it's to go forward, I'm going to fight for that. If it's, you know, start preparing for the next three years financially, I'll start working on that.

The school leaders who went through merger implementation created contingency plans to work on the unknowns of creating a new school district.

Matthew described, “During the merger implementation, it’s about, at times, making decision on the fly.” So, the contingency plans took time to ensure most unknowns were addressed.

Matthew also shared his experience of implementing a merger,

I Think That Because I was so excited and just had and still have this vision of what this district can look like on one campus, you know, doing all these amazing things. That idea, that vision. Gets me through any. Lack of preparation, or, you know, if I'm not sure about something. So I would say this that I can't imagine that anybody. You know, even the most experienced Superintendent would sit in that first summer of a merger and say, ohh yeah, no problem, I got this. I if so, I would love to meet him or her and say you have. How did you do that? Even if I had to do it again? I mean, there are 100 things that more than that, thousand things I do differently, I'm sure. And you know, when superintendents call and ask, you know, I give him everything that I would that I would suggest for them. But even doing it already, I can't. I don't know that. I would feel any

more prepared. I just think that every situation's different and. So how prepared did I feel I? I work. I what? OK. We knew what we knew a couple things, right? We knew we were opening the doors in September, right? We knew that one way or another, we knew that, you know, our, our, this, our school signs right. Like we needed school signs that said the new name on those, those were hung during the day on day one, right. So they weren't even up when the kids arrived. So that that was like, you know, that was disappointing. Was that a lack of preparation? I don't know. We ordered them like pretty early in July. You know, it was just a matter of having them actually made and getting them hung up. You know, it's so that that was always kind of symbolic to me is. Was anything perfect on day one? I am sure nothing was perfect on day one, but we opened the doors, the kids were there, and it got better. You know, it got better every day. I hope. I think we continue to get better.

The most important tasks for creating good contingency plans were communication, examining the current situation, and thinking about possible situations and solutions. If none of it goes as planned, then make the best decisions now that ensure students are taken care of. Significantly, all the participants stated that all forms of communication are the most important tool and skill to be used during a school merger process. In addition, they also listed (1) organization, (2) data gathering, (3) interpersonal communication, (4) collegiality, and collaboration, (5) transparency, (6) common sense, (7) people skills, (8) research, (9) empathy, (10) salesperson, (11) politician and (12) knowing your community as also necessary tools and skills utilize when working through the responsibilities of a merger (See Table 4).

Table 4*Tool and Skill to Be Used During a School Merger Process*

Tool and Skill	Participants											
	Ad am	And rew	Eliza beth	Iss ac	Jac ob	Josep hine	Lu cas	Mat hew	Nat alie	No ah	Pa ul	Sam uel
Communi cation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Organizat ion	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Data Gathering	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Interperso nal Communi cation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Collegiali ty And Collabora tion	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Transpare ncy	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Common Sense	X				X	X			X	X		
People Skills	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Research	X		X		X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Empathy	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Salespers on	X			X								
Be a Politician							X				X	
Knowing Your Communi ty	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Professional and Personal Sentiments Regarding the Merger Process

When working through a school district merger, the processes quickly become the impetus for everything professionally and personally. More than 50 percent of the participants

found the merger process challenging (see Figure 8). As school leaders described the school merger process and how it impacted them professionally and personally, it was evident that the merger experience was immensely impactful in their lives and still plays a part in who they are as leaders (see Figure 9). When describing how the merger processes impacted them personally, they described the experiences as (1) full of frustrations, (2) a lot of work, (3) hard to draw the line when identifying themselves separate from the school, (4) impactful to their families and their time with their families.

For example, Samuel said,

You know, personally, it was time away from home and time away from other duties to try to balance the new duties and responsibilities psychologically. I mean, you're preparing for something and and you're you have to be in the mindset of it's going to happen. Because when it happens, then you have to be ready to shift gears and and take on that whatever new responsibility is, and when that doesn't happen, you know, as I said, there was a big letdown of. OK. Well, is it relief? Is it frustration? What is it? So, there is a definite, you know, kind of psychological, I guess, component to either merging, in our case, not merging.

In some ways, going through a merger process was personally and psychologically injurious because of the requirements and demands of the job and the merger.

Elizabeth explained,

We started doing a lot of the work from the straw to the final, trying to get ready because if the final vote passed, it would have been in December, and we would have six months to a new district. So, we started trying to get the kids, you know, on board and ready and all that kind of stuff. And so, it was psychologically exhausting and traumatic.

Interestingly, when comparing the twelve participants' professional experiences, not all had negative impacts on their careers due to the merger experience. Most of the participants made professional gains.

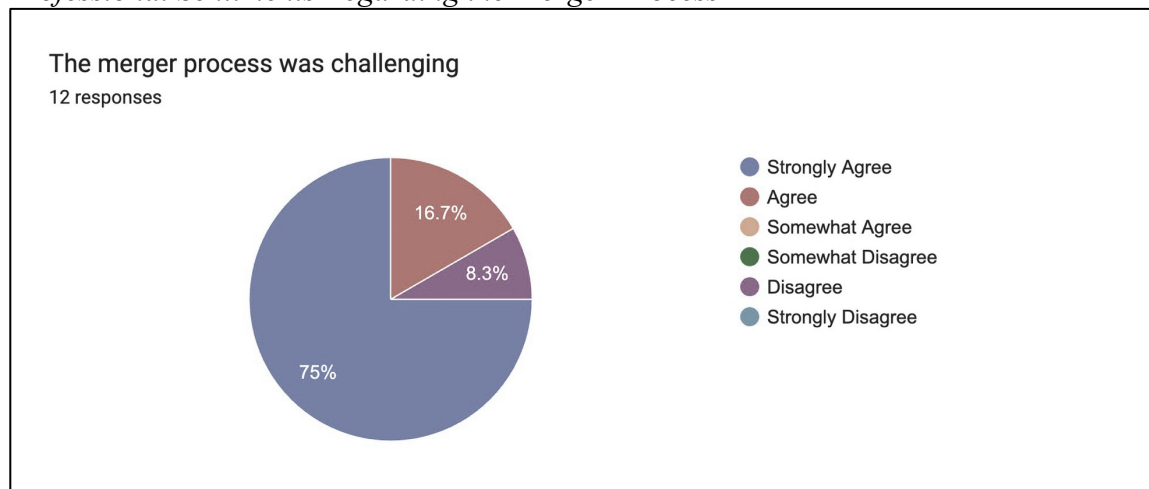
Matthew shared,

So, I think that it just kind of all worked out where I was still able, you know, I guess kind of on a positive trajectory if that makes sense. So professionally, yeah, I think I'm not sure that I would. I'm not sure that in 2019 I would have been sitting in another superintendent chair. Had it not, and I had not followed the path and the merger process that that I follow.

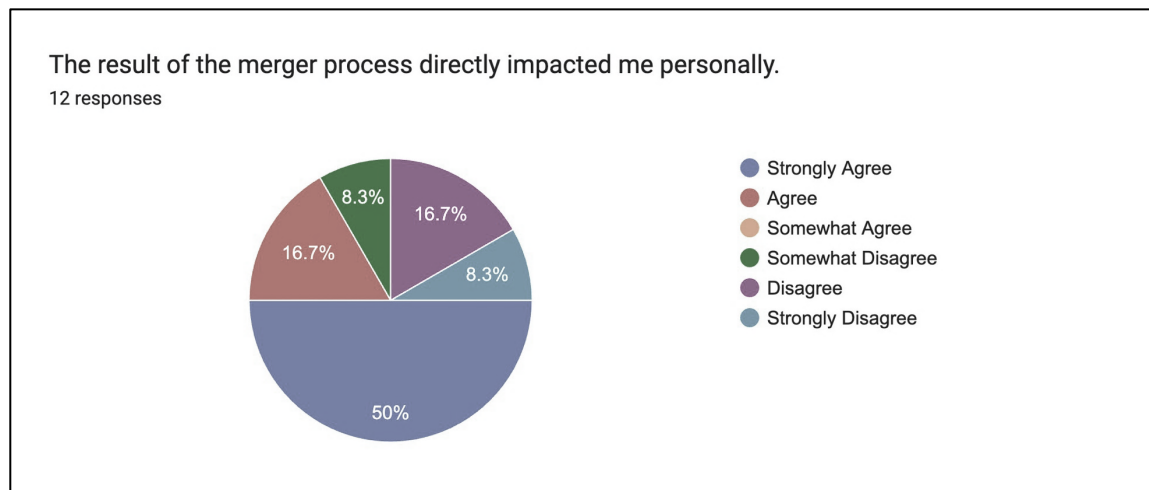
Some could proceed in their current roles with more support from their districts and communities than before they went through the process. Some moved on to better jobs because of their professional experiences gained through school mergers. All the participants admitted that going through the process provided them with professional experiences that they could not have gained if not for working through this unique process.

Figure 8

Professional Sentiments Regarding the Merger Process



Note. Professional feelings on the merger processes

Figure 9*Personal Sentiments Regarding the Merger Process*

Note. Personal feelings on the merger processes

Stakeholders

For this study, the stakeholders were described as teachers, students, parents, and voting community members. For the participants, the stakeholders were sometimes the most significant challenge and the piece that took the most effort. Participants described the stakeholders as obstacles in the merger processes. Stakeholders were described as afraid of losing their local identity. The stakeholders had a perception of us versus them when discussing the affiliated community. There was this perception that one community may benefit more than the other, resulting in one group of school leaders from one community being villainized and attacked. According to the participants, emotions, beliefs, and ideologies that logically and practically had nothing to do with the reasons for the merger frequently cast a shadow over the process.

Relationships

The NYSED merger process focuses on tangibles. However, school leaders must focus on relationships as the most important aspect when seeking a positive community vote. The

participant maintained the importance of communication throughout the process of developing relationships with the stakeholders. For each stakeholder group, the communication was different, but it was continuous and pivotal. Many participants noted that while communication was never interrupted, relationships in the individual groups either improved or suffered.

To build relationships with the staff, the school leaders utilized the open-door policy and always provided staff members the opportunity to ask questions, attend informational meetings, and join merger committees; for the most part, school leaders desired to utilize employees as strategic partners.

Josephine admitted,

It's funny because I think that, you know, obviously all my, all my unions were involved. I highly recommended that my Union presidents be involved. I think I think, quite honestly, some of those relationships became stronger because when you haven't been involved in another school district in a while, and now you see the breakdown of certain things, and you know, like union president to union president, conversations like, I feel like, you know, some of my relationships became stronger.

Paul mentioned,

I was very much in favor of it and and I think that you know, it certainly hurts some of those individual relationships with the teachers. But for the teachers that actually stuck it out, I do think that it was able to strengthen some of those relationships.

Jacob stated,

Although not successful in my case, but you know it did its strength and relationships, you know, and I think it brought a lot of my administration and me closer with some of the teachers and some of the community.

To communicate with the students, school leaders visited classrooms and discussed the merger process.

For example, Matthew stated,

The students are part of the conversations, you know, these are conversations that were happening in the classrooms. They just they couldn't be avoided. The students, they didn't have a vote per se. It couldn't be avoided happening in the classroom. So, we made more of an effort to make sure the conversations were happening, you know, in respectful manner and all that.

School leaders ensured communication for the community by having multiple forms of communication that included newsletters, road shows, face-to-face meetings, BOE meetings, presentations, and informational meetings with local agencies and establishments.

Adam pointed out,

You know, we had the whole series of meetings. The communication was nonstop. You know, we had a media service working with both schools, so you know newsletters coming out, you know, every other month, all the meetings were live streamed. Nobody came to the freaking meetings. But you know, I did a traveling road show to 18 different community organizations over like a one-month period leading up to the vote. And it didn't seem to matter how much we communicated with people; they they already had their minds made up before the process even started. And you know, they would look at the data and and talk about the stuff that was in the study. And just be 100% incorrect about what they were. You know, talking to each other about. So, it was very, very frustrating, you know.

The school leaders had a public relation responsibility that they considered vital in the school merger process, though not all the communities took advantage of it.

Emotions

Emotions were described throughout the study. Participants discussed their feelings regarding the NYSED merger processes, their feelings about how the merger processes affected them, and how the emotions of the stakeholders affected the processes. The emotions of the stakeholders were a driving force in how the merger processes proceeded in each district. During the focus group, the participants described how, within the communities, there was emotional division. A community could be split between pro- or anti-school merger groups, and those groups drove the collective emotion of the community. Participants also felt that the emotions of the stakeholders dictated the results of the processes.

Adam stated,

The process itself is just set up for failure, and it's that emotion piece. It's not the, you know, everything else that we do is based on, you know, either fiscal responsibility or educational responsibilities. And these things involve both of that. But they're a nonfactor because emotions are what dictate whether they go through or not. It has nothing to do with what's right and wrong on paper and what's right and wrong educationally. It's, you know, somebody's 80-year-old mascot and, you know, some other ridiculous bullshit that has nothing to do with education.

Jacob said, "To take away the emotions so that they would think about what their children really would and wouldn't have 3-4 or five years out."

There was also this us versus them mentality that, in many ways, divided communities. Six of the twelve participants identified fear as the main emotion communities are experiencing.

Fear was seen in stakeholders' concerns about (1) contracts, (2) histories and traditions, (4) mascots and colors, (5) school building uses, and (6) a sense of loss. That fear then evolved into other feelings that caused inappropriate public behaviors and comments utilizing open forums and social media to discredit the merger process, the consultants, and the school leaders, including the school board.

Paul explained,

In the beginning, I think you know, as this was happening, there was a lot of mixed emotions. There were lots of people who were excited about it because of the possibilities it could provide for them and their community, and their kids. There were lots of people that were nervous about it. But didn't know what to expect, and there were plenty of people that were very against it. But it was almost like, you had this one town group that really just didn't like this other town group and this one town group, that there was a lot of butting heads there. Right, so. you you throughout the whole process, you had those three groups, ones that was very excited, another one that was nervous, didn't know what to expect, which way to go, and the other ones that were completely against it. All driven by emotions.

Samuel explained, "So I think it did bring up some some feelings as we were going through it for our community. I think that they know whether they were for or against."

Josephine asserted,

We'll talk about budgets, and we'll talk about this and that, but this is the one thing that is the most fiscally responsible. If it works for a merger, great but emotion can cut that in the knees based on New York State's rules.

Three participants also explained how school board member, though not credited as leaders for this study, were also attacked by the groups that were against the merger.

Jacob explained,

They bullied a number of people off at the school board, forced the number of people on the school board, and we got to the point where we held numerous meetings which are online. The board meetings were a zoo. My poor, you know, the poor board president. You know, you got people in the front row. Kill the cockroach. I mean that kind of crap that went on. People just screaming, not listening. Trying to keep a good a good board meeting, I basically told the board that if they, there are certain things happening, I was gonna, you know, pretty much tap the board president and tell him to go into an executive session. You know, just to hold up the meeting and for the board to leave the your auditorium and go into the boardroom and that I would stay behind and tell people how they need to behave if we're gonna resume the meeting or I would clear it.

Leaders said they worked hard to keep their emotions out of the process but also mentioned the challenge when they were personally attacked. For three participants, not only were they being attacked, but their families were also attacked through social media and publicly. Participants agreed that, though it is not possible, the only successful way to run a merger process is by taking away emotions. Emotions blind the stakeholders when determining their children's needs and what could be provided. However, negative emotions overshadowed the events for more than half of the participants. Positive emotions were also described. School leaders described how, in some ways, communities became more educated about their schools' fiscal and programming needs. The desire to ensure students receive a positive education opened conversations and relationships with stakeholders and school leaders.

Outlier Data and Findings

Through the interview, participant survey screener, and individual questionnaires, the data showed that advocating for a merger to support their school districts had a professional effect on all participants. Participants talked about both professional and personal effects. Since the attention was on the impact of the phenomenon, the later results were added to the data due to the participants' personal experiences. All participants were concerned about the indication that a school leader's job is at risk because they are working through the NYSED School Merger process. Yet the data painted an outlier correlation between pursuing a merger and school leaders' job attrition.

Outlier Finding – Impact On Professional Careers

The outlier finding was the school merger process's impact on the school leaders' job attrition (see Figure 10). For this study, there were a total of 33 possible participants recruited statewide. Out of the 33 participants, twelve consented, resulting in a 36 percent participation rate. Three of the twelve participants moved on to other positions, and three were terminated. Four of the six participants who separated from the school district attributed the school merger process to their separation. Two participants shared details on their separations from the district. Elizabeth shared,

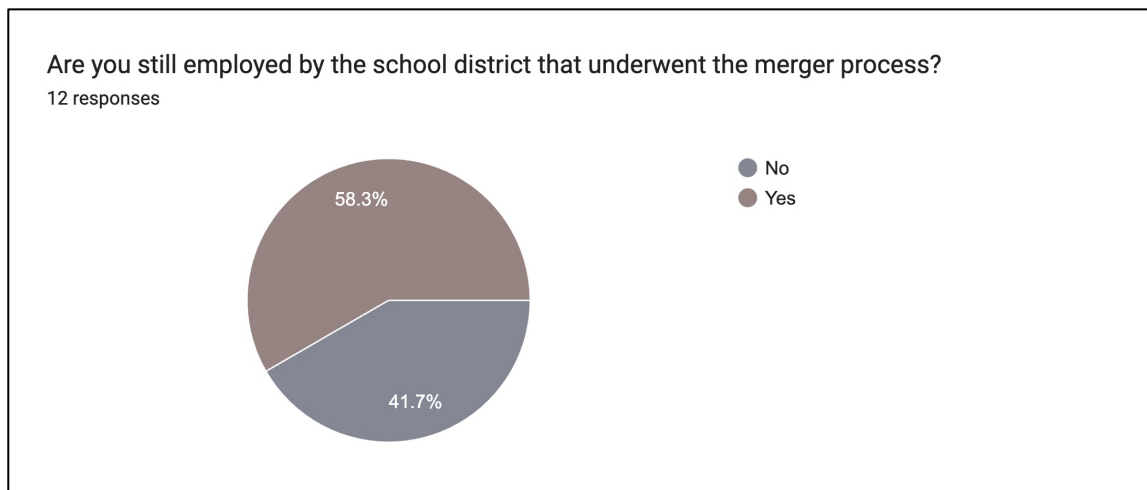
The merger vote failed on December 1st. On December 2nd, the board pulled a special meeting and had an executive session specifically to discuss my performance. Which prior to that, I had four highly effective evaluations, and so you know that you know, without sharing executive session stuff with you. But that conversation basically was we don't think that our thoughts and goals are in the same direction, and we would suggest that you start, uh, evaluating where you wanna be. And you know we're gonna do things

differently now that the vote failed. So, from that point on, so that was December 2nd until I left about a year later, just December 31. It was professionally it was scary because, you know, I mean, I had this contract to protect me. It took me to retirement, and I worked obviously with NYSCOS attorney just what's the right thing to do, and I didn't wanna leave without certain things that I had in my contract, like health insurance and retirement, because I'd work towards that. Then it just was a What do you do? And then I had this reputation of, you know, good, bad, or indifferent of supporting a merger and going against my board. Not every board wants to hire someone with that reputation.

Issac shared,

It had a professional impact on me that was very negative. I started; I was being pushed to do things that. Didn't need to be done and. I just think it put a bad taste in my mouth and made me not feel like I was doing the right thing for students and for education.

Six participants continued to work in the school district, where they experienced the merger processes. While this was not a major part of the study, the consequential impact on the careers of school leaders who worked through a merger process is an area that needs further exploration.

Figure 10*Employment after Merger Process*

Note. School leader attrition after working through a merger process.

Research Question Responses

The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers in New York State. There was one central question and two sub-questions that directed this study. The alignment of the central research question and each sub-question with the themes are visually described (see Table 5). Each participant completed a questionnaire and an individual interview. A focus group made up of five superintendents concluded this study. Participants responded to the main question and its sub-questions through the focus group, questionnaires, and interviews, producing themes.

Table 5*Thematic Alignment with Research Questions*

	Theme/Sub-Themes							
	NYSED School Merger Processes		Leadership and Management			Stakeholders		
Research Question	Motivatio ns	Deficienci es	Roles and Responsibilities	Dealing with Continge ncies	Professi onal and Persona l Sentime nts	Relation ships	Emoti ons	
CRQ	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
SQ1	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
SQ2			X	X	X	X	X	

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of a successful school merger? Each participant describes their experiences with both positive and negative occurrences. Interactions with NYSED and stakeholders promoted lived experiences that impacted the participants professionally and personally. Participants' interviews allow them to describe their individual experiences and the challenges they had to overcome from their perspectives.

For example, Jacob shared,

The thing that was challenging was some of the nastiness that people were making out about the district next to us by calling it suicide high and things like that. It was not pretty. I mean, there were some, and the other part is it brought out people that came out just that they could, you know, they love being cheered, and there are people that don't normally get cheered, so they would come out and make the most outrageous claims and

screams.

Adam shared,

I'm more jaded and negative sometimes. And frustrated and angry. It's just mind-boggling how something that can make so much sense and have so many positive things connected to it can be turned into something negative.

Matthew shared,

So, two things. One, I have never trusted NYSED less than I do today. And two, really to, to the points that the rational argument isn't always enough. You know that that there's that whole emotional piece, and so just trying to understand that, you know, whatever the situation might be. So I look at those, those two things and and seriously, I know. Kind of joking about NYSED at the beginning but but but really, you know I, I just out of a matter of practice now, you know, make sure that if things are said, I'm getting them in writing, you know. You know, just make sure that I can very easily say, well, on this date, you said this and those kinds of things.

Finally, Elizabeth shared,

Well, I tend to be an optimist, and I try to be really positive. So, I think, you know, in my Mary Poppins land, I thought this was gonna be a like no-brainer, right? And and when you? And when you live outside of the district, you know, and you, you didn't graduate from there, and your grandfather's mother's sisters' brother didn't graduate from there, right? And you didn't win the 1964 Basketball championship. You can objectively look at it and say this makes sense, and that's what the study is supposed to do, right? Take the data side of it and look at. Is this a good idea if this happens? And if it isn't a good idea? Why? So, I just figured, like, come on, people are not dumb. Like, why wouldn't you

want more classes for your kids and more sports opportunities, and less taxes? And, like, you'd be stupid not to want those things. So that was me going into this like, OK, this is just a, the study is just a hoop, right. We'll just do what we need to do, get it done. And so, I just assumed everything would work out. And then, obviously, my rosy-colored glass optimistic idea was absolutely not what happened. It was completely opposite.

Sub-Question One

How do school leaders maneuver and manage the organizational structures impacted by the processes of a school merger? Participants relied on communication as the biggest tool for reducing fear and uncertainty. Utilizing communication along with other leadership skills was the only way to maneuver the expected norms.

Adam said,

Communication was 100% of my time for a year, was involved in communicating with the community and communicating with the people within the districts. You know it was. Everything else became secondary.

Paul explained,

I'd like to pride myself on how I work with our school team to transmit school communications. So, I think that we had a very good communication plan in the merger process. We utilized our BOCES' resources. To do newsletters and informational pieces and things, we used our community connections. The local newspaper was very involved. They printed editorials on both sides of the issue. They hosted Forums in our local network, interviewed the other school superintendent and me.

Lucas shared,

I would say interpersonal relationships, communication, networking, and research had had to be the skills and tools I relied on. Spent a lot of time on the phone, had to spend a lot of time doing some research on documents that people don't even know. I was called upon to gather and provide all necessary data to the consultants, communicate with committee and community members to address all merger questions, and provide information to the employee associations throughout the process.

Samuel shared,

So, communication was key to whether it would be to our board, to our community, to our teachers, to our our students, we we had to give them correct information, and even when the information was changing on us, we would give them what we know at the time and. I think that was probably the. The biggest scale that we needed was communication and being able to synthesize whatever information we're giving and putting it out in a way that was gonna be understandable to everyone that we weren't talking over people or or, you know, taking information and putting it in a way that people aren't understanding.

Sub-Question Two

What role do school leaders play in the environmental demands influencing the processes of a school merger? Participants perceived that the stakeholders were the environmental impact that plays a significant role in the outcomes of a school merger. From the participants' point of view, the idea of school district mergers causes uncertainty, strong emotions, and some community collaboration. Still, it is also often met with stakeholder pushback. As school leaders, they were seen as the faces of the merger process and the ones responsible for educating the public and keeping the peace between the groups that disagreed on the merger processes. For some, they were also the ones seen as responsible for the merger.

Josephine said,

For this piece of this politics and structure of the Community, it really goes back to any process. Right now, we don't know if we're talking to the loud minority or the loud majority in life today, right. But what we do know is the quiet ones are that maybe value your opinion or what you're doing are never going to speak up. If they're worried that they're only gonna get trampled on.

Noah stated,

UM, you know, I you'll probably know this, but a lot of times in education, you know, people say don't confuse me with the facts, and I think that I think that's one thing that you know really was there in the context of you know people not necessarily wanting to listen to the information and really at being about an emotional reaction, which I understand. But I think that's one thing that is paramount in leading through the process of understanding this is an emotional thing for people. However, the participant pursued the mergers processes because they strongly supported the benefits that could be attained for the students and the school district. The stakeholders that wanted to continue to have positive relationships with the district relied on communication.

Andrew shared,

So being able to have conversations with community groups was, I believe, helped and allowed community to ask questions of where we stood with the merger process, but also how their involvements with the community would be in a position to continue.

Summary

This chapter exhibits the findings from data obtained from twelve participants who shared their experiences as school leaders working through school mergers in New York State.

Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identities. Data from each participant included the participant survey screener, participant questionnaire, semi-structured interview sessions, and a focus group interview session. This process allowed an in-depth look into the participants' lived experiences as school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers in New York State. A description of all twelve participants who contributed to the study is provided. I provided descriptions of the three themes and seven subthemes that emerged from the data. The emerging themes included the NYSED merger process, leadership and management, and stakeholders. Following the description of the themes, I used the themes and participant quotes to provide narrative answers to the central research question and each of the sub-questions.

The participants' experiences formed the outcome of this study. Data demonstrated that school leaders work through school mergers because they believe it is their professional responsibility to be fiscally responsible and provide their students with the best programming possible. Through their descriptions of their experiences, the data showed that, in their entirety, school merger processes impact school leaders personally and professionally. Depending on their leadership style, the culture of the school districts, and the communities they serve, school leaders may choose to navigate the procedures in a certain way. However, communication is a key component at every step. Organizational theory and its three principles—organizational structure, organizational design and change, and organizational culture guided this study. The organizational structure pointed out the organizational structure of NYSED school merger processes. Organizational design and change pointed to leadership and management. Organizational culture pointed out the interaction of the stakeholders. The results of this study showed that school merger processes involve more than just combining school districts but encompass several other variables that must be considered. The experiences of the twelve

participants were similar, and they provided insight into the significance of the human element throughout the NYSED merger process.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers in New York State. Twelve participants provided their perspectives on NYSED school merger processes. This chapter uses interpretations and ideas to refine and interpret the study's findings for readers. Accessing participant responses uncovered a conceptual understanding surrounding the themes of the NYSED merger process, leadership and management, and stakeholders. Their responses reinforce literature that indicates mergers should be focused on organizational structure, organizational design and change, and organizational culture. The chapter discusses how the results should be interpreted, what they mean for policy and practice, what they mean for theory and method, and their limits and boundaries. To conclude the chapter, there are recommendations for additional research and a summary.

Discussion

This section demonstrates how the results of the hermeneutic phenomenological study were interpreted by discussing the themes that emerged during data collection. I will talk about how the results should be interpreted, what they mean for policy and practice, and what they mean for both theory and practice. The discussion will end with the study's limitations and delimitations.

Interpretation of Findings

The following interpretation of the findings describes three main themes derived from analyzing the three data collection methods discussed in Chapter Four. The findings align with the current literature on organizational theory. Previous research has examined the organizational

theory and its three principles when working through mergers. However, only some have discussed how school leaders maneuver and manage the organizational structures impacted by the processes of a school merger.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Data from the participants' survey screener, questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and focus group interviews were used for a thorough analysis, which led to the discovery of three themes (1) the merger process, (2) leadership and management, and (3) stakeholders, as well as seven subthemes (1) motivations, (2) deficiencies, (3) roles and responsibilities, (4) dealing with contingencies, (5) professional and personal sentiments, (6) relationships, and (7) emotions. The theme assertions first needed to be broken down into individual codes, after which they could be put together to form logical categories or theoretical concepts to analyze these data. The selective approach required reading and highlighting statements essential to the phenomenon or experience described (van Manen, 2017).

This study was based on organizational theory and its three principles (1) organizational structure, (2) organizational culture, and (3) organizational design and change (Hatch, 2018; Jones, 2013; Mullins, 2016). The themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis and how they correlate to organizational theory were identified. Organizational structure gives weight to the motivations and deficiencies of NYSED school merger processes. Organizational design and change emphasized leadership and management throughout the merger processes. Due to the merger processes, the stakeholders' interactions, relationships, and emotions highlighted organizational culture. According to the participants' perspectives shared in this study, the NYSED merger process, leadership and management, and stakeholders influenced the experiences of school leaders as they worked through the NYSED merger processes.

Identifying the need for The NYSED Process to be Updated. The theoretical context influencing school mergers is related to broader social contexts influenced by the need for school effectiveness and success (Greve & Zhang, 2017; Hatch & NetLibrary, 2002; Hoffman & Books, 2012). Various factors associated with school mergers have been investigated. These include community needs, the economy, student achievement, and federal and state education politics and policy (Dinki, 2018; Hart, 2019; NYSASBO, 2014; Silky, 1990; Silky, 2022; Silky, 2022; Timbs, 2022). School mergers are influenced by the need to merge academic institutions. Most research attributed mergers to community, economic, federal, and state education policy. The literature also indicated that academic organizations merging expected students to excel academically. However, budgets and state mandates drive academic organizations to consolidate (Beuchert et al., 2018; Boser, 2013; Chen et al., 2013; Eacott & Freeborn, 2020; Haan et al., 2016; Karakaplan & Kutlu, 2019; Mei et al., 2014; Naicker & Mkhabele, 2020; Pon & Duncan, 2019; Silky, 1990; Taghizadeh, 2020; Timbs, 2005).

Ten of the twelve participants pursued a merger process due to their school district experiencing financial turmoil, programming needs, and low student enrollment. Two of the twelve were approached to participate in a merger process due to a neighboring school's unique needs. The first interpretation of the themes found during data collection recognized that schools that experienced school mergers had similarities and differences. As participants were sharing their experiences, they concurred with the research that the factors influencing the school mergers they worked through were based on the individualized needs of the academic organizations merging. The motivations to pursue a merger for the participants were to improve financial turmoil, improve programming, and increase student enrollment in the schools in which they were employed.

According to organizational theory, leadership and management help businesses achieve goals (Jones, 2013, Tang, 2019). The 12 participants' experiences showed how their leadership and management guided their technical skills to handle the merger processes. The participants understood the structure, culture, design, and change processes of their individual organizations. As they worked through the merger processes, the knowledge they had and gathered of the processes and the law helped them evaluate likely outcomes. Through organizational structure, school leaders worked through the NYSED merger process. Knowledge of the motivations to merge and the deficiencies of the NYSED merger process and their own organization's structure; offered mechanisms to work through the merger processes. Through their understanding of organizational design and change, the leaders were able to use their organization's capacity to adapt, manage their roles and responsibilities, deal with contingencies, and be aware of their professional and personal sentiments while working toward attaining the goal. Through knowledge of the organizational culture, leaders could shape structures that aided the management of the relationships and emotions of the stakeholders.

The twelve participants shared their experiences of the two results of the merger process, (1) vote failure and (2) vote passing and merger implementation. Out of the 12 participants, 11 participants worked through the merger study, nine worked through the voting process, and six worked through the merger implementation. Similarities between the pre-merger study process and the NYSED merger procedures were mentioned. Since the NYSED merger processes are structured with legalities, participants expected that NYSED would be subject matter experts and that there would be regulated procedures in place. However, through the data analysis, it was recognized that this was different. All participants referenced the need to gather data, attend meetings, and complete reports for the consulting company or NYSED. However, the sense of

frustration was a genuine common experience for all the participants when discussing the overall NYSED merger process. Participants believe the idea and need to merge are significant for NYS school districts. However, the merger process needs improvement, making it a system that is set up for failure.

Noah stated,

That SED doesn't. Really fully understand what they're doing. The process should be pretty easy and should be pretty much laid out. Like, don't don't let the process impede what you ultimately want to happen, and having less school districts in New York State.

They expressed that the merger process is set up for failure due to (1) an antiquated system with antiquated procedures, (2) lack of support or guidance documents, (3) lack of organization of the procedure, and (5) lack of knowledgeable liaisons.

For example, Adam said,

There's a lot of shit that we have to do that is stupid. The fact that you have to do the straw vote, and it's not legally required because it's a lot of work for state, and they don't want to have to vote unless they think community support it. That whole 2 voting stuff. Voting twice will really you're voting 8 times because you're boards have to vote to do the study, and your boards have to vote. After the study, to put it to the voters, the voters have to do the straw vote. Then the voters have to vote to actually do it. Then you gotta vote again to hire a board? So there's just the number of times you have to go back to the community for them to say no to something. It's mind-boggling, and this whole process is set up to fail. State Ed says they want these mergers to happen because it's not cost-effective to have 750 school districts, but they have not done anything in decades to make the process easier. I think State Ed needs to do a better job of communicating what's

involved in this, and I also think if the governor and the legislature want to if they believe that merging schools is something that's gonna financially help the state? Then they need to fix the process legislatively because the fact that they're formulas that are associated with this use data points from 2006-7. The existing formulas so irrelevant and so inappropriate for where schools are right now in 2023. It's set up for failure.

The participants all shared a commonality when they expressed their deep sense of organizational commitment, as they spoke of how much they advocated for the merger and felt a sense of loss when the merger processes did not end with desired outcomes.

Leadership and Management. The study's participants admitted that navigating a merger required many new duties and a significant amount of time. A typical day for a school leader going through a merger process would involve the regular duties that give the school building or district strategic direction while also fulfilling the obligations needed to complete merger processes. School leaders prioritized the following eight areas of work that combine tasks and responsibilities (1) Facilities & Transportation, (2) Curriculum & Extracurriculars, (3) Branding, (4) External Communication, (5) Internal Communication, (6) Community Relations, (7) Personnel Issues, Union, & Labor relations, (8) Finances.

When looking at the themes and findings of this study about leadership and management, it was clear that the experiences of the school leaders working through a merger support merger management research that states (1) community development skills, (2) communication and interpersonal skills, (3) analytical skills, (4) technological skills, (5) political skills, (6) visioning skills, (7) ethical reasoning skills, (8) risk-taking skills, and (9) cultural competence/diversity skills are important to have when managing the many processes of a merger. Similarly, as stated in the research, for the participants, the primary focus area and an essential skill and tool to be

used during a merger process in all situations was communication. School leaders must have strong management and leadership skills to handle all their tasks and responsibilities. During a merger, much attention is paid to the skills, tools, determination, and time needed to prepare for the tasks and how they prepare for the next step or process. Participants talked about how the law lays out processes. Still, more importantly, they talked about how they relied on their instincts and experience as school leaders to make choices and move through the processes and systems. Noah stated,

It really comes back to the NYSED piece and making sure that, you know, you're asking questions ahead of time and, you know, kind of almost constantly saying, OK, what's the next step? What's the next step? What are my next deadlines? And you know, just trying to get out ahead of it with your community. And really trying to help people understand what the key focus is.

Noting how school leaders can use their instincts and past experiences to get through different situations is vital for this study. However, it is also important to note that school leaders lack education, training, and at times, understanding regarding how school mergers are a form of reorganizational reconstruction. Additionally, school leaders are sometimes blindsided by how the merging of schools impacts their personal or professional lives. With the additional responsibilities and contingency plans, school leaders are left to rely not only on the skills they have developed from their experiences but develop new ones at a quick pace.

Given that the participants have stated the many flaws within the school merger processes, it is important to point out that six of the twelve participants left the school district where they went through the merger processes, and six stayed. The six that left correlate their departure to their merger experiences. Participants shared how the added duties and

responsibilities impacted their professional, personal, and family lives. The unforeseen amount of time consumed with the responsibility of working through a school merger process was strenuous for all participants. They experienced emotional sacrifices. Nevertheless, professionally, they saw working through the merger process as a form of professional growth because of the experience. Ultimately, when school leaders wanted and supported school mergers, they stuck with the process, no matter how hard it was, how little support they received from NYSED, or how much pushback they received from the stakeholders because they thought it would give students the best chances.

Stakeholders. School leaders vow to protect their school, students, and community. That vow creates an emotional link that drives the daily decisions of school leaders but also requires a relationship of trust with the stakeholders. However, given that the NYSED School Merger System has flaws, the highs and lows of a school leader's career depend on how well the stakeholders accepted the merger and how well, as leaders, they were perceived to meet the many demands of the merger processes. The participant described the stakeholders and their emotions as the trickiest component requiring the most work during the merger processes. When looking at the themes and findings of this study about stakeholders, it was clear that the experiences of the school leaders working through a merger support merger management and organizational culture research. For the school leaders, the mergers were carried out to provide income or other personal benefits to the internal and external stakeholders, which encompassed the (1) staff, (2) students, (3) parents, and (4) community members. However, the stakeholders' attachment to the identities and customs of their local school districts and communities sometimes led them to ignore the evidence and resist change.

The stakeholders' reactions to the merger processes encouraged the spread of emotions throughout the school districts, with the loudest or most passionate voices likely to be heard. Causing drifts in school communities. The participants occasionally found the actions and words of the stakeholders to be frustrating and unexpected because the school leaders frequently viewed emotions as irrational. School leaders agreed that the emotional response often conflicted with the decision that the stakeholders would have agreed with if they just applied rational reasoning. Ultimately, the emotions and viewpoints of all stakeholders, including the school leaders, directly impact the processes of school mergers. In more than half of the school merger attempts, there was a negative vote to merge, resulting in school leaders searching for other opportunities and methods to improve the district's financial conditions and academic programming. It is evident from the experiences of school leaders that the NYSED school merger process has procedural laws to follow that provide structure. However, stakeholder emotions rather than academic student needs and requirements are the deciding factor in a school merger.

Implications for Policy or Practice

The following section includes discussions of the implications for policy and practice to improve school leaders' experiences during school merger processes. Derived from the findings of this study the implications for policy and practice may benefit NYSED professionals, researchers, school leaders, and policymakers when they aspire to facilitate the implementation of school merger processes.

Implications for Policy

The implications for policy discussed in this section discuss the need for improvements to the NYSED merger process and greater awareness of the responsibilities of school leaders during

a school merger. There is also a need to better understand the impact discussions of a school merger have on stakeholders and school communities. This study complements previous research showing that leaders are vital for the success of school merger processes. This study's findings support the need to update the merger processes and provide school leaders with education and guiding documents when working through the processes. NYSED needs awareness of ways to support NYS school leaders and NYS communities as they are working through school merger processes.

Implications for Practice

The implications of practice in this section discuss the need for improvements to the NYSED merger process and greater awareness of the impact discussions of a school merger have on school districts, students, and communities.

Lucas reflected on the implications of school merger processes in a school and said,

Many times, people talk about options for kids. And other folks talked about opportunities for kids. And I think that's important. Certainly, an important thing that's small school people will say. Majority of my career being in small schools. Options do not equal opportunities. You know. Certainly, options can be opportunities, but options in and of themselves do not equal opportunities for kids. Uh, so just having more options should not be seen as that makes something better for kids. Because an option could take, could be actually taking away an opportunity for a kid to have something that's really special in their school district. And I'm all for opportunities. I would say to anybody who's in a small school who community is looking at it. Uh, to go in with an open mind and to look and to really way out, is it just options that you're gonna get from this, or is it opportunities that you're gonna get from this? And I would tell them to take a look at the

studies that have been done. And the school districts that have and haven't been successful.

Though there are many positives to school mergers, the practices directly impact all stakeholders, including the school leaders, positively and negatively, indicating that the entire organizational structure and design and change of NYSED school mergers should be examined and improved. Participants voiced areas of improvement starting with (1) updating the law, (2) providing a guide to the process, (3) educating school leaders and the stakeholders on the process, and (4) providing all community members the initial opportunity to vote.

Additionally, the experiences shared by the participants corroborated that in many respects, a merger resembles a convenient marriage. Multiple factors contribute to the emergence of the union's advantages. As in a marriage, participants in a merger commit to accepting that change will occur, and the intention is to make the merger successful due to legal requirements and desired goals (Chow et al., 2022). However, society provides an education to engaged or married participants. Roles and responsibilities before and during the marriage are identified reliant on culture, expectations, emotions, and relationship goals. However, for a district working through a merger process, roles and responsibilities are not defined, explained, or taught. Instead, the merger processes are learned as they are experienced in live time by all stakeholders.

The merger process could be improved if NYSED utilized activities and procedures governed by a comprehensive resource management philosophy and assumed responsibility for delineating and educating all stakeholders on their roles and responsibilities in mergers. Have NYS merger experts available to assist and instruct school administrators on managing systematic merger processes that include sharing staff, combining extracurricular teams, and sharing programs, but also provide incentives as opposed to penalties for wanting to grow a

community before a merger. Require NYSED merger liaisons to work with all stakeholders, participate in all meetings, and meet the community throughout the merger processes, including the merger study, the merger vote, and the merger implementation. Before committing a school district to a merger process, invite school districts to participate in more shared programs so communities can connect. Provide communities with opportunities to collaborate before a school district is in need. Make district-to-district collaboration and participation the norm rather than something to dread. Design a change that fosters a culture that focuses on students and is open to collaboration between school districts without fear of loss for the community.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

This study of school leaders who lived through the experience of working through school mergers is added to the empirical and theoretical literature. The problem that shapes the foundation for this study is that the role of this Mid-Atlantic state's school district leaders was ambiguous in the depiction of school district merger processes (Dinki, 2018; Hart, 2019; NYSASBO, 2014; Silky, July 12, 2022; Timbs, July 20, 2022). The theoretical results of this study suggest the ideology of the organizational theory and its three principles: organizational structure, organizational design and change, and organizational culture.

This study focused on describing how leaders work through mergers. Empirical literature supports that leadership plays an essential role in the merger processes (Fullan, 2021; Hiatt, 2006; Hussain et al., 2018; Kotter, 2012; Kotter et al., 2021; Lewin, 1949; Mento et al., 2002; Tang, 2019). Through this study, merger research can be expanded to understand the organizational structure, culture, design, and change, which involves managing and transforming organizations to maintain and increase their effectiveness and efficiency (Daft, 2010; Isomura, 2020; Jones; Pershing & Austin, 2015).

Limitations and Delimitations

There were three limitations in this study. The limitations of your study reflect the practical or theoretical constraints that a researcher encountered (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). The first limitation was a tiny participant pool. Out of the thirty-three recruited participants, twelve consented to participate, resulting in a thirty-six percent participation rate. Those twelve participants only represented four of the twelve sets of school districts that underwent a merger process in the last decade. A more balanced participant pool could result in different outcomes. Three school leaders were in middle management positions and seven held superintendent positions. Due to a higher rate of participants holding superintendents' positions, their voices and experiences were stronger in this study. Additional participants in the middle management positions could clarify whether the mid-level school leaders and superintendents had similar perceptions of the merger processes.

The second limitation was the timing of the study created limitations. IRB approval was received during the first week of March. From March to mid-May, school leaders manage their school district responsibilities and the New York State-restricted spring schedule, including spring break, administering NYS Assessments, and carrying out 504 and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or Special Education Annual Reviews. These school obligations restricted meeting schedule times and participant availabilities. Due to responsibilities, two participants had to reschedule their initial meetings. The final limitation was technology failures. Most school districts use Google Meet. However, this study used Microsoft Teams as the primary video conferencing platform. Resulting in three scheduled meetings needing technical support, starting late, and placing the participants on time restraints.

Delimitations of this study include the participant requirements, the qualitative design, and the approach. The delimitations reflect your decisions regarding the concentration and scope of your research objectives and questions (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). To address the gap in the literature, participant requirement in this study included school leaders who are NYSED certified and working in one of the following districts while the school district was going through a school merger process (1) Oppenheim-Ephratah CSD and St. Johnsville, (2) Ilion CSD and Mohawk CSD, (3) South Seneca CSD and Romulus CSD, (4) Southampton CSD and Tuckahoe CSD, (5) Arkport CSD and Canaseraga CSD, (6) Elizabethtown-Lewis CSD and Westport CSD, (7) Schenevus CSD and Worcester CSD, (8) Brocton CSD and Westfield CSD, (9) Fort Edward CSD and South Glens Falls CSD, (10) Mayfield CSD and Northville CSD, (11) Panama CSD and Clymer CSD, and (12) Livingston Manor CSD and Roscoe CSD. The participants held one of the following positions during their employment with a school district going through a merger process (1) school superintendent, (2) assistant superintendent, (3) principal, (4) assistant principal, (5) special education supervisor, (6) facilities supervisor, (7) transportation supervisor, and (8) business manager. Participant demographics included the following information (1) type of NYSED certificate, (2) the number of years of experience as school leaders, (3) age, (4) gender, and (5) race for individualization purposes. Qualitative studies emphasize natural settings and understanding verbal narratives and are flexible by design (McMillan, 2021). The phenomenology approach is best for this study because participants shared their experiences. Finally, the hermeneutic style is best for this study because it focuses on the experiences of school leaders and what it is like to be a school leader working through a school merger process. As the researcher, I learned from each participant's experience about school mergers and how

school leaders used their leadership skills and dealt with their daily lives as they worked through NYSED school merger processes.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study provided an in-depth perspective on the lived experiences of twelve school leaders. However, additional research may include altering the participant pool. Future research should include school Board of Education members as school leaders. A qualitative study may be best suited to explain or understand the experiences of school board members holding office during a school merger process. It would also be interesting to continue the research on school mergers by exploring the stakeholders' experiences, i.e., teachers, students, parents, and community members. Due to possibly having many participants and a variety of data points when exploring the stakeholders' experiences, a mixed-method design would be best for reporting the data. Mixed method approaches allow researchers to use diverse methods, combining quantitative and qualitative research to maximize the strengths of each data type and facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Additional research could take place in a different region of the United States and add to this study by comparing school merger legalities and processes.

Conclusion

This phenomenological investigation supports the literature showing how crucial leaders are when mergers are pursued or implemented. More importantly, this study shed light on the experiences of twelve NYS school leaders dedicated to bettering the institutions and kids they worked with. They offered information to readers who might pursue the phenomenon of a school merger. This study acknowledged that mergers are challenging for those working through them while reinforcing positive outcomes. This study indicated that school leaders were very

dedicated to the success of merger processes. They kept moving forward since they were improving their school's customized needs. Though they did not always approve of how NYSED supported the merger processes, the school leaders remained committed to the processes to provide a wider variety of educational programs and improve opportunities for students. Even in the face of difficulty in the community, they pressed forward. Ultimately, school administrators showed their commitment to their students, staff, and the communities they serve.

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Appendices

Appendix A

IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 2, 2023

Olga Collazo
Jose Puga

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-829 QUALITATIVE HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL LEADERS WHO WORKED THROUGH A MERGER

Dear Olga Collazo, Jose Puga,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office

Appendix B

Recruitment Letter/Email

Dear School Leader,

As a Doctoral Candidate at Liberty University's School of Education, I am conducting research to better understand lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers. The purpose of my research is to describe the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers. Specifically, describing the connection between the school merger processes and the people, culture, leadership, and systems based on the lived experiences of school leaders. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be school leaders 25 years of age or older. Participants will be asked to complete an online survey screener/take part in a one-on-one, video/audio-recorded, interview and take part in a video/audio-recorded focus group. It should take approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes to complete the procedures listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested for this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed.

To participate, please click here: [Screening Survey](#) to complete the screening survey. If you meet my participant criteria, I will contact you to schedule an interview.

The consent form will be emailed to you with a link to a shared folder if you meet the study criteria. The consent document contains additional information about my research.

If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

For more information about this study, please contact the principal investigator, Olga Nelly Collazo, by phone or email.

If you are interested in participating in this study, you may either contact me directly or give me permission to contact you by filling out the information below. I greatly appreciate your help and look forward to meeting you.

Thank you,

Olga Nelly Collazo
Principal Investigator

Appendix C

Participant Consent

Participant Consent
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Liberty University

TITLE OF STUDY:

Qualitative Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study: The Lived Experiences of School Leaders
Who Worked Through a Merger

Principal Investigator:

Olga Nelly Collazo, Doctoral Candidate at Liberty University's School of Education.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?

You have been invited to participate in this study because you have been identified as an NYS-certified school leader that has been employed by a school district that underwent the following merger processes.

- a. Merger Study
- b. Merger Voting Process
- c. Merger Implementation

Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

WHAT IS THE STUDY ABOUT AND WHY IS IT BEING DONE?

The purpose of the study is to describe the lived experiences of school leaders who worked through the processes of school mergers in New York State.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Complete a 10-question questionnaire.
2. Participate in a semi-structured interview through e-conference using Microsoft Teams. All the interviews will be video and audio recorded with the signed consent of the participants.
3. The allotted time for the interviews will be 60 minutes, so the interviewee can meet in one session. If multiple sessions are needed, the interviews will be in 30-minute sessions for up to 90 minutes.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There are no direct benefits to the participants from participating in this study. The final dissertation study will benefit society by providing insight into school merger processes and a school merger's influence on leadership and experiences.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. The risks involved in this study include sharing personal and confidential information with the researcher, possibly the researcher's committee, and classmates. However, your identity will not be revealed.

It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures. Still, the researcher has taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential but unknown risks.

HOW WILL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION BE PROTECTED?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Participant responses will be anonymous. Names will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms. Research

records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Individual interviews will be conducted through Microsoft Teams. Participants and the researcher will be in a private setting without disturbances. All cameras will remain on during the session in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Focus group interviews will be conducted through Microsoft Teams. Participants and the researcher will be in a private setting without disturbances. All cameras will remain on during the entire session, microphones muted when not speaking, in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other focus group members may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group. Data collected from you may be used in future research studies and/or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you will be removed beforehand. Data will be stored on a password-locked flash drive in a locked safe. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked flash drive for three years and then deleted. The researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to data collected and recordings.

WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

No, you will not receive compensation for taking part in this study.

WHAT WILL IT COST ME TO PARTICIPATE?

There is no cost for participation.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your participation will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw without affecting those relationships.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I DECIDE TO WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included located in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you apart from focus group data will be destroyed immediately. They will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

WHOM DO I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS ABOUT THE STUDY?

The researcher conducting this study is Olga Nelly Collazo. Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to participate in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact the researcher. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Jose Puga. A copy of this consent form will be provided for your records.

WHOM DO I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT MY RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and want to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered, and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

YOUR CONSENT

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy of the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

- The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

Date

Appendix D

Participation Survey Screener

First Name

Last Name

Phone Number:

Email Address:

Current Place of Employment:

Current position:

Gender:

- Male
 Female

Race/Ethnicity:

- African American
 American Indian
 Asian
 Hispanic
 White
 Other

I hold the following NYSED Certifications:

Total Years of Experience in Education

Total Years of Experience in Education
Leadership

Which merger process did you experience as the School District underwent a merger process?

- Merger study
 Voting Process
 Merger Implementation

Why was the merger pursued?

- Financial Turmoil
 Programming
 Imposed by the Community
 Low Student Enrollment

Imposed By NYSED

Please check the school district(s) you were employed by/or provided services for during the merger process. CRQ

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Oppenheim-Ephratah CSD or | <input type="checkbox"/> St. Johnsville | <input type="checkbox"/> Now known as Oppenheim-Ephratah-St. Johnsville CSD |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ilion CSD or | <input type="checkbox"/> Mohawk CSD | <input type="checkbox"/> Now known as Central Valley CSD |
| <input type="checkbox"/> South Seneca CSD or | <input type="checkbox"/> Romulus CSD, | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Southampton CSD or | <input type="checkbox"/> Tuckahoe CSD, | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Arkport CSD or | <input type="checkbox"/> Canaseraga CSD | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Elizabethtown-Lewis CSD | <input type="checkbox"/> Westport CSD | <input type="checkbox"/> Now known as Boquet Valley CSD |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Schenevus CSD or | <input type="checkbox"/> Worcester CSD | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Brocton CSD or | <input type="checkbox"/> Westfield CSD, | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fort Edward CSD or | <input type="checkbox"/> South Glens Falls CSD, | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mayfield CSD or | <input type="checkbox"/> Northville CSD, | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Panama CSD or | <input type="checkbox"/> Clymer CSD | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Livingston Manor CSD | <input type="checkbox"/> Roscoe CSD | |

What leadership position did you hold when working through a merger process?

- Assistant Principal
- Principal
- Supervisor of Student Service
- Supervisor of Facilities
- Supervisor of Transportation
- Business manager
- Superintendent
- BOCES Superintendent

Are you still employed by the district?

Yes _____ No _____

Total Years employed by the school that underwent the merger process. CRQ

Appendix E

Questionnaire for Participants

Name: _____

Please answer the questions by putting a check (✓) in the appropriate box for each question.

Please answer all the questions.

Q.1 I was an active supporter of the merger.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Q.2 I actively worked at swaying the merger decision in the school community.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Q.3 The result of the merger process directly impacted me personally.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Q.4 The impact of the merger process was monumental to my daily work schedule and responsibilities.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Q.5 The merger process was challenging.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Q.6 The outcome of the merger process (merger study, voting process, or merger implementation) was the best outcome for the districts.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Q.7 The merger process supported student achievement.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Q.8 The merger processes were highly effective.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Q.9 The NYSED department was a partner in the merger process.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Q.10 Rank the following eight areas of effort, 1-8, based on how much time had to be devoted to each area due to the merger process.

- _____ Personnel Issues, Union, & Labor relations
- _____ Community Relations
- _____ Internal Communication
- _____ External Communication
- _____ Finances
- _____ Facilities & Transportation
- _____ Curriculum & Extracurriculars
- _____ Branding

Appendix F

Participant Interview Questions

The following are the interview questions I will ask each participant. The order of the questions may vary depending on the responses. Additional questions may evolve depending on responses.

Individual Interview Questions

- Q.1 Please describe your educational background and career in your current position.
- Q.2 Describe your role and responsibilities before, during, and after the merger process.
- Q.3 How were you impacted personally and psychologically by the school merger process?
- Q.4 What rewards were experienced because of the merger process in your school district?
- Q.5 How did the reality of the merger process compare to your initial expectations?
- Q.6 How prepared as a leader did you feel when working through the school merger process?
- Q.7 What tools or skills did you rely on the most as you worked through your responsibilities during the merger process?
- Q.8 How was the school district impacted before, during, and after the merger process?
- Q.9 What were the environmental demands that influenced your leadership because of the merger process?
- Q.10 How did your role and responsibilities change because of the merger process? SQ2
- Q.11 What did you find most challenging about the merger process?
- Q.12 How did the merger process impact the culture of your school?
- Q.13 How did the merger process influence your relationships with the organization?
- Q.14 What advice would you give another school administrator as they are going through a school merger process?

Q.15 What else would you like to add to our discussion of your experiences with school mergers that we haven't discussed?

Appendix G

Focus Group Interview Questions

The following are the interview questions I will ask the focus group. The order of the questions may vary depending on the responses. Additional questions may evolve depending on the responses.

Focus Group Interview Questions

- Q.1 How did the merger process impact your time prioritization?
- Q.2 How has experiencing a school merger process shaped your leadership style?
- Q.3 How did the merger process influence your relationships with the teachers?
- Q.4 How did the school merger processes impact your views on the politics and structure of the community?
- Q.5 Describe successful practices you used to manage your school district during the school merger process.
- Q.6 How did the merger process influence the climate and culture of the school?
- Q.7 If you could change one thing in the merger process, what would it be?
- Q.8 Describe your challenges when working with the community during the merger.