ORGANIZED FOR LEARNING: A CASE STUDY RELATING DISTRICT ORGANIZATION TO PRINCIPAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Principal professional development is a factor in creating effective schools. The school leader’s effect on student outcomes is second only to classroom instruction (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Existing literature identifies effective development practices such as providing coaching or mentoring support and principal participation in professional networks or cohorts. However, beyond these suggested practices, little guidance is offered to school district leaders tasked with creating professional development for their principals that engages them as learners and improves school and district outcomes. This single-site case study was aimed at understanding how a school district was organized to provide principal professional development and subsequently, impact principals as learners. The study was guided by two research questions: (1) How is one selected school district organized to provide professional development for principals? and (2) How does district organization around principal professional development support the needs of principals as adult learners?

Data from interviews, surveys, and an observation of principal professional development were analyzed leading to several conclusions. First, the district developed a strong commitment to ongoing learning among the principals by aligning multiple levels of district leadership to principals’ professional development. Second, principal learning supported development in a variety of broad leadership skills, but was contextualized to their day-to-day work through the district’s organizational structures. This led to higher levels of motivation among principals and more problem-oriented learning. Lastly, the principles of adult learning promoted improved performance in the district, directly influencing principals’ development and work.
Dedication

I would like to first dedicate this paper to my family, who have always supported me to pursue my interests and passions. When I first told my wife I wanted to go back to school again, I talked about time, cost, and the implied commitment for our entire family. She never hesitated to support my decision and has maintained that same loving and supporting stance throughout the course of the past four years. She and our four children have patiently tolerated my absence from fun times and even vacation breaks when I was engaged in long nights of work and weekend writing sessions. Their love and support inspire me to be the best version of myself in all that I do.

My parents emphasized the importance of education and drove me to love learning from a young age. I am certain that this emphasis, at least in part, led both my sister and I to become educators, even though no one in our immediate or extended family had previously worked in the education field. My mother and father are shining examples of commitment and hard work. The examples they have set for me as a child and as an adult have served me well in my own marriage and in my professional and educational pursuits. I dedicate this paper to them as well.

Without the influence of many colleagues and mentors that I have had the privilege to know over the span of my career, I would not have pursued this degree. Some inspired me directly, encouraging me to pursue additional credentials or pushing me to take a bold career step. Others provided a more indirect nudge, by serving as an example of professional excellence and causing me to desire a deeper knowledge within my profession. I continue to be inspired by the passion of the educators with whom I work. As a leader, I hope I can inspire someone else to take their next step, whatever that means for them.
Finally, I thank God for the opportunities He has granted me, including writing this dissertation. My career has followed a path that I know is guided by His hand. I have had many chances in my career to serve in roles that were unique, fun, impactful, and unlike any I could have imagined when I first started teaching middle school science 16 years ago. His grace has afforded me a meaningful and exciting career thus far, and I trust Him to use what I have learned through the pursuit of this degree to His glory in the future.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This study describes how one school district supports professional development for the district’s principals through organizational means. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) identified principal leadership as accounting for approximately 25% of a school’s total effect on student outcomes, second only to classroom instruction in its impact. Strategies to improve teaching and learning often include or specifically target the development of educators’ skills and capacities. Increasingly, these professional development strategies are focused on the development of school leaders. As school districts engage in the implementation of strategies to improve district and school-level performance, the district leaders are faced with organizational decisions that can support or detract from the effectiveness of the selected improvement strategies (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & King, 2011). Principal development programs, whether oriented toward pre-service or in-service administrators, are considered most effective when designed to accommodate the characteristics of adult learners (McQuarrie & Wood, 1991; Versland, 2013). This study will examine principal professional development opportunities through the lens of adult learning and identify how organizational elements at the district level support administrator learning opportunities that reflect the assumptions of Knowles andragogical model (Knowles, Horton III, & Swanson, 2015).

Research Problem

When considering student achievement outcomes, principal leadership matters (Leithwood et al., 2004; Waters and Cameron, 2007). However, the quality of principal preparation and development is a point of concern nationally. Levine (2005) labeled the state of school administrator training through university-based graduate programs as a “race to the bottom” (p. 24). The programs that are preparing today’s principals to lead all too often suffer
from weak curriculum, low standards for admission and graduation, and anemic clinical experiences. With 88% of school leaders graduating from programs like these there is little wonder why principals are often regarded as being unprepared to assume their first leadership role (Levine, 2005). Consequently, school districts are obligated to address leadership development as an element of school and district improvement. The majority of research on professional development in education is focused on teacher professional development while fewer studies are devoted to professional development for principals. While connecting specific aspects of professional development to increased student achievement is tenuous in the current research, it does provide suggestions for key elements of effective professional development for administrators. Specific practices that have shown promise include mentoring programs for principals, grounding learning in on-the-job practice, and participation in collaborative support networks for problem solving and collective learning (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007). Many of the suggestions for professional development strategies and methods have clear links to supporting the needs of adult learners. However, there is a diminished amount of literature addressing how districts should be organized to do this work or meet the needs of their principals as they are learning to lead.

**Purpose of the Study**

In an environment influenced by formal and informal politics, limited monetary and human resources, external mandates, and a variety of other factors, district leaders face a multitude of issues and decisions when attempting to engage in sustained improvement efforts of any kind. The purpose of this study was to address the challenges faced by many district leaders as decisions are made about how to best support their school principals in developing their capacity to lead. It was intended to clarify how district organizational elements could be
leveraged to support learning for principals. Attention was drawn to the importance of the
district leaders and the district priorities when growing and developing principal capacities,
which can be highly contextualized to the schools and districts in which they work. As it relates
to personnel development, Knowles et al. (2015) suggested, “Adult learning becomes a powerful
organizational improvement strategy when it is embedded in a holistic performance
improvement system framework” (p.153). Therefore, rather than focus on the district’s ability to
provide an ideal-mix of strategies or methods for professional development, the study aimed to
clarify the influence that district organization had on the needs of the adult learners engaged in
the professional development opportunities.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How is one selected school district organized to provide professional development for
principals?

2. How does district organization around principal professional development support the needs
of principals as adult learners?

Definition of Terms

School district and district leader. Throughout this study the term school district
represented the single body of schools that operate under a local educational agency. District
leader described the individuals responsible for managing schools, principals, and teachers
working within the school district. District Leaders were responsible for decision-making that
impacted “how things got done” in the district, and for the purpose of this study were those
engaged in planning, facilitating, or evaluating principal professional development activities for
the school district. District leaders included the superintendent or school director, assistant
superintendents, principal supervisors, and other administrators across a variety of departments within the school district.

**Principal.** While the more prevalent literature on principal development was tied to pre-service preparation programs and supports for novice principals, the term *principal* was used in this study to describe the lead administrator currently working in the schools participating in the study. Assistant or vice principals were not being considered specifically as a part of this study although observations that were made of the principals in structured group settings also included those serving in these roles. No differentiation among principals of varying experience levels was made. The *principals* observed and interviewed represented different levels and years of experience.

**Professional development.** A variety of synonymous terms were used in the literature to describe *professional development* including human resource development, staff development, and professional learning. Guskey (1986) defined staff development in education as a systematic attempt to bring about change in practices, attitudes and beliefs, and the learning outcomes of students. This definition captured several important aspects of the researcher’s definition of *professional development*. First, professional development was systematic and did not happen by accident. It was the result of formal structures and established relationships within the school district that resulted from a larger organizational plan. Second, the professional development interactions were intended to result in a change in the practices, abilities, or beliefs of the participant. One-time information sharing sessions with little expectation for how the information would translate into action or changes in the participant’s practices did not qualify as *professional development* under this definition. Lastly, the changes that occurred or the skills
and knowledge acquired by the participant ultimately related to improvements in teaching and learning.

**Adult learning.** The elements of adult learning emphasized in this study were based upon the work of Knowles et.al (2015) and the andragogical model for adult learning. Knowles et al. (2015) identified six things that learners were likely to require as they mature and increase their knowledge and experience: the need to learn new information, opportunities that honored their self-concept as independent and self-directed learners, learning opportunities that build upon their experiences, learning experiences that were timed to meet the learner at their level of development or readiness for new knowledge, learning that was problem-oriented and applicable to relevant tasks, and motivation to learn, especially internal motivation. Throughout the study, Knowles’ et al. (2015) assumptions provided a framework through which a variety of professional development methods and strategies may be viewed for common themes.

**Organization.** Elements of the school district’s organization were defined by the factors identified in the Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) Coherence Framework. The PELP Coherence Framework was designed to support district leaders to create coherent alignment among organizational elements and the environmental factors that often complicate and at worst derail district-wide improvement strategies aimed at teaching and learning (Childress et al., 2011). Organizational elements highlighted within the PELP framework included systems, structures, resources, stakeholders, and culture. The manner in which these elements were shaped and aligned to support professional development for principals and the interactions between these elements and an environment of external mandates, politics, and funding sources were examined during the study.
Rationale for the Study

Guskey (2009) believed the quality of research in the field of educational professional development was lacking overall. Even though the need for continued development of school leaders was acknowledged, there was diminished focus in the professional literature regarding principal professional development, especially when compared to the large representation of studies focused on teacher professional development (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) recognized that focus on the core elements of effective professional development in the literature still left considerable room for investigation to understand how these elements apply in different conditions, which conditions impacted the implementation of the elements, and how the conditions related to the quality of learning and learners’ commitment to the work. An important aspect of this study was the focus on district leadership and the organizational decisions that supported professional development for leaders. Through interviews with principals and district leaders, observations of professional development opportunities, and principal surveys, themes were identified that related organizational and environmental factors to district provided professional development opportunities for principals.

Researcher

The researcher has 15 years of experience working in public education in a variety of settings and positions. Along with classroom experience, the researcher has held administrative roles at the school and district level. Among the administrative responsibilities the researcher has assumed is the supervision and management of a comprehensive school-based reform program implemented within the researcher’s district. The school reform model combined teacher leadership, robust instructional expectations, job-embedded professional development, and a performance-based compensation system into an aligned and strategic effort to improve
student outcomes through increased teacher instructional capacity. An integral component to the success of these programs was the leadership provided by the principal. Throughout the time of the program’s implementation, the principals’ leadership capacity was a factor that greatly influenced the quality of the reform implementation. In spite of efforts on the part of the researcher to provide training and support to develop administrators understanding for the elements of the reform model, at times the lack of principals’ ability to navigate the needs of their individual schools or the demands of multiple district initiatives inhibited their ability to effectively lead such a comprehensive effort. The researcher’s experience with the types of professional development and support provided to principals reflects content that was too often managerial in focus and existed as isolated incidents free from expectations for learning or application. The challenges of leading a reform effort that was subject to varying levels of principal leadership and a perceived lack of focus upon developing principals’ skills and capacities for leadership in an ongoing way highlighted the importance of the topic for the researcher.

Summary

Details of the study described the learning experiences in which principals are engaged by understanding how district leaders prepared to create professional development opportunities through the management of the district’s organizational components. The study added to the literature on professional development by expanding the knowledge base surrounding how districts go about creating environments where professional learning occurs and commitment to learning is fostered. Additions to the limited literature on professional development for working principals were also made, and the learner was brought to the forefront of the professional development conversation by using the andragogy framework to characterize the learning
opportunities. Finally, the study supported the researcher in understanding the needed organizational and professional development considerations for future district-wide initiatives to be led by the researcher.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

The leadership abilities possessed by a school’s principal were often cited as an impacting factor on student achievement and school outcomes. School leadership, both direct and indirect, accounted for more than a quarter of the total effects of a school, second only to classroom instruction (Leithwood et al., 2004). In nearly all documented cases where a struggling school was turned around, the intervention of a powerful leader was a factor. While there were many ways to define or label school leadership, the leader was called upon to fulfill a variety of roles that may be characterized as managerial, instructional, and even political in nature. Principals were called upon to demonstrate expertise in curriculum and instruction, school finance, and organizational culture all while handling innumerable requests from stakeholders, board members, and superiors.

Levine (2005) found that while principals were faced with a unique, complex, and dynamic variety of school environments, principal preparation programs were notably deficient at teaching the authentic skills that principals needed to be successful. Policymakers and educational researchers recognized that most principals were not adequately prepared through their university preparatory programs to assume the responsibilities of the job (Shannon, 2007). Once hired, learning from experience was possibly more problematic since the daily realities of the tasks that principals face and the minute-by-minute decisions they were required to make offered little time for reflection or intuitive learning (Peterson & Cosner, 2005). Ongoing embedded and sustained professional development provided by district leadership was needed to ensure that principals were equipped to face the challenges of the job and had the chance to improve their performance over time (Derrington & Sharratt, 2008; Duncan, Range, & Scherz, 2011). As districts identified principal growth as an instructional priority, they were required to
leverage their organizational resources and their environment in a way that would support better outcomes.

For the purposes of this study, the researcher will begin with a review of the literature relating to principal development. Next, Knowles adult learning theory will be examined and connections between the literature on effective professional development and adult learning theory will be established to highlight some themes related to adult learning from the professional development literature. An organizational model that can support school districts in prioritizing their work around key points of impact, like principal leadership and professional development, will also be examined to develop a basis for how district leaders might create a coherent approach to the work of principal development and support.

**Principal Development**

Principal preparation programs and licensure requirements vary from state to state. These programs that certify new administrators are often the first layer of professional development related to school leadership. Other methods and tools may be used to address the needs of working school administrators including on-the-job supports for assistant principals, mentoring for practicing administrators, and professional standards for practice that can serve as a guide for leadership development.

**Administrator preparation programs.** Educational leadership programs that were successful at preparing school leaders had several common attributes (Versland, 2013). First, these programs were often paired with school districts that played a role in recruiting skilled educators into leadership programs and provided mentoring experiences for aspiring leaders. School districts invested in supporting or creating preparation programs that identify potential school leaders amongst the existing personnel could theoretically create an unlimited supply of
new leaders for the future (Taylor, Pelletier, Trimble, & Ruiz, 2014). In effective preparation programs, instructional leadership was emphasized as an embedded part of the coursework and practicum experiences (Versland, 2013). Hattie’s (2009) meta-analysis on leadership’s impact on student achievement identified two important types of leadership, instructional and transformational. Instructional leadership demonstrated the greatest impact on student outcomes, which confirmed the necessary connection of this principle of leadership to all other areas. The coursework in successful programs most often incorporated instructional delivery methods rooted in adult learning theories (Versland, 2013). The faculty members of effective programs were experienced practitioners in the field, which increased participants’ access to relevant practical knowledge. In addition, Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012) identify characteristics like cohort groups to foster collaboration, practice-oriented situations, and problem-based learning as common among the stronger preparation programs.

While successful examples of leadership preparation programs existed, there were concerns that these programs are the exception rather than the standard. In Levine’s (2005) case study of 28 schools of education, the administrator preparation programs were among the weakest of all the programs offered. Administrators surveyed identified nearly matching curricular offerings as part of their respective leadership programs with some of the most common courses focused upon instructional leadership, school law, history of education, and research methods. However, barely more than half of alumni principals ranked these courses as “high quality.” The core curriculum that was commonly the focus of principal preparation programs did little to prepare administrators for the challenges of the modern school leader’s role or to develop practical leadership knowledge that would impact teaching and learning. This correlates in practice to the problems Elmore (2006) identified with the typical focus of
administrator duties. He suggested that historically, the status of the educational administrator has been defined by their distance from the classroom and instructional matters. This left too many administrators focused on largely irrelevant tasks. It was possible that this status was representative of the offerings of their preparation which resulted in a lack of capacity to act or lead in areas that could substantially impact the core instructional work of the school. The quality of pre-service programs also indicated the potential for continuing professional development as a leader through university coursework. Grissom and Harrington (2010) found principals were more likely to be rated less effective by their staff when the administrator identified university coursework as their chosen method of professional development. Findings like these suggested that principals often finish their pre-service university training without the experience and skills needed to successfully lead a school (Levine, 2005; Shannon 2007).

**The assistant principal role.** Many administrators began their careers as assistant principals. In these roles, they gained their first exposure to the day-to-day responsibilities of the school administrator. Efforts have been implemented to grow and develop head principals through experiences and professional growth opportunities as an assistant principal. The state of Florida developed a unique approach to credentialing school administrators (Taylor, et.al, 2014). The certification process required two steps. The first (Level 1) was an educational leadership certification that qualified the candidate to be an assistant principal. This certification was provided through universities and colleges throughout the state. The second level of certification, principal certification, was required to be a school principal and was provided through programs established by the districts and LEAs. This provided an additional layer beyond the college track before candidates were considered ready to lead a school. This type of practice was one that Elmore (2006) saw as essential to correcting the issues with traditional principal preparation.
programs that were at the sole propriety of universities and colleges. Elmore (2006) believed that correcting the issues with lackluster leadership programs was best achieved through a systemic approach that empowered school districts to engage in their own strategies for human capital development, which included creating independent licensure pathways for school administrators aligned to the needs of the district.

Assistant principals’ development was often limited due to the duties they were typically assigned and an overall lack of opportunities for meaningful professional learning. Oliver (2005) found that in spite of the willingness of assistant principals to participate, most of their professional development offerings were in managerial aspects of the job. Oliver made several recommendations for districts and principal preparation programs alike to improve the professional development of aspiring principals. First, Oliver (2005) suggested engaging them in outside opportunities for professional development like conferences and workshops, but also connecting them to peer support networks and study groups, possibly incorporating the use of individual reflection journals. The importance of planning learning opportunities relevant to the needs of the individual and the organizational goals was also identified. Oliver (2005) saw the use of principal mentors who could serve as models for effective instructional leadership practices as important to the growth of administrators. The use of mentor relationships along with the inclusion of professional growth plans were both ways to ensure that the learning for the novice administrator was more than a “one-stop” session and that application over time coupled with reflection and refinement were part of the package for their professional learning. The connection to professional networks also honored the administrators’ experience as a part of the learning process as they interacted and shaped their understanding in a collaborative environment.
**Job-Embedded Coaching and Mentoring.** Coaching for school administrators was commonly found in the literature as a means of providing professional development or support for novice administrators. Principals often identified a desire for a coach or mentor (Warren & Higbee, 2007) and identified mentoring or coaching as a preferred method for professional development delivery (Spanneut, Tobin, & Ayers, 2012). Daresh (as cited in Lochmiller, 2014) indicated two potential benefits for novice principals working with a coach. The novice’s understanding of policy, procedure, and district norms increased, and opportunities to refine leadership practices based on feedback from a more experienced mentor were created. The resource of having a coach provided principals with a safety net when difficult decisions needed to be made. As a result, participants in Celoria and Roberson’s (2015) study of a new principal induction program identified decision-making as a key area of growth through their coaching partnerships. Learning opportunities created through the coach-principal relationship were naturally connected to practical knowledge as they are happening on-the-job and provide authentic contextualized learning (Warren & Kelsen, 2013). There may also be benefit in the area of emotional support, a lesser researched aspect of principal support, provided by the coach who can serve as a judgment free sounding board for principals to openly express their concerns, regrets, and fears (Celoria & Roberson, 2015). Emotional support was seen as an important addition to other measures of support that focused only on the instructional or managerial aspects of the school leaders’ roles. Coaches may focus their supports on a variety of other areas as well such as using data to make decisions and building school culture.

Mentors are most effective when they are intentionally matched with a principal based on leadership style and prior experience (James-Ward, 2011; Warren & Kelsen, 2013). James-Ward (2011) examined one potential structure for using principal coaches, in a California school
district that took on the development of a principal coaching model to reform school leadership and student outcomes in the face of academic failure. Principal coaches met regularly with district leaders to receive timely and relevant information for the principals they supported. This allowed them to provide support on a variety of issues including personnel, teacher evaluations, and assessments that were current to the organizational goals or focus of the district. Zepeda, Parylo, and Bengtson (2013) suggested when districts are intentional in prioritizing the content of professional development, the resulting learning can be designed to be more responsive to both learner and system needs. Also, the ongoing interaction of coaches with district leaders to stay current with system-wide initiatives was of importance to the process and overall impact.

**Educational Leadership Standards as a Focus for Principal Development.** Various states, agencies, and educational organizations developed standards that have served as frameworks for the evaluation, support, and development of effective school leaders. The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) cited the use of professional standards for leadership by states and local education agencies as an effective practice supported by research (National Policy…, 2008). Leadership standards “clarify expectations for professional development and the performance of veteran principals” that helped “states create a seamless set of supporting policies and activities that span the career continuum of an education leader” (National Policy…, 2008, p.4). NPBEA’s former leadership standards, the Interstate Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, were cited in at least one study by principals and superintendents who were using the standards as a principal evaluation tool. Derrington and Sharratt (2008) identified the specificity of the standards as a strength that improved consistency in the conversations leaders were having across the district.
Superintendents saw the use of standards as a beneficial tool for hiring principals and providing professional development as well.

**Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards.** Tennessee modified its Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards (TILS) after adoption of a new and robust model for teacher evaluation. The transition to more rigorous standards for teacher practices shed light on some areas of needed focus in the realm of leadership such as providing feedback to teachers around evaluation and developing shared leadership structures (Tennessee State…, 2013). Revision of the standards was seen by the state as being part of a larger strategy aimed at impacting the “talent life cycle” of Tennessee school leaders shifting them from the preexisting “individual manager as leader” model to a “shared instructional leader model.” Developing standards like TILS and others can be foundational to principal preparatory programs and evaluation models for practicing administrators alike. In their study of exemplary principal development programs, Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) identified alignment of the program to state and professional standards as essential to increasing focus on instructional leadership and school improvement. These standards supported district and state leaders with identifying potential areas of support and development for principals that align with the expectations of licensing agencies and leadership accountability expectations.

**Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015.** The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015 were the latest iteration of the educational administrator standards from NPBEA. NPBEA issued the first standards for educational leaders, know as the ISLLC standards, in 1996 (NPBEA, 2015). The ISLLC standards developed in the mid-1990s went through a significant revision in 2008 and served as the basis for an increased focus on instructional leadership and its relationship to school improvement (Canole & Young, 2013). At
least 16 states required candidates for principal licensure to pass the School Leaders Licensure Assessment, which is based upon the ISLLC standards. Over the past two decades, 45 states and the District of Columbia adopted the standards or relied on them to provide a framework for the development of educational leadership policies (NBPEA, 2015).

The original ISLLC standards placed great focus on the instructional leadership responsibilities of the school leader (Canole & Young, 2013). Professional practices connected to instructional leadership are often self-identified by principals as needing support and development (Spanneut et al., 2012). The 2015 standards expanded the focus on instructional leadership to more adequately address the skills and knowledge that leaders must possess to foster school and student achievement in the modern era. Equity and ethical norms were areas that were not addressed by the previous ISLLC standards and received additional needed focus in the 2015 standards (Superville, 2015). With a clear focus on equity and research-based practices at their foundation, the 2015 standards were intended to emphasize the type of school leadership that results in achievement for each student, regardless of their ethnic or demographic background.

Like the ISLLC standards before them, the new Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015 were developed to shape assessment and licensure guidelines in years to come. Ten standards were clearly outlined and were intended to serve as an anchor document to guide the development of practitioner standards as well as accreditation criteria for programs that prepare aspiring educational leaders. The ten standards spoke to a variety of leader abilities. First, the leader was responsible for the establishment and execution of the school’s mission, vision, and core values (National Policy…, 2015). The success of each student and collaborative practices that can drive the development and implementation of the vision were both important
priorities. The principal was expected to communicate and model the core values of the school through their words and actions to clearly define the school culture.

Not only must the leader model the core values of the school, they were also expected to act in an ethical manner and operate according to professional norms in their relationships with other professionals, as they allocated resources, and selected methods for communication (National Policy…, 2015). Their treatment of students and understanding of the unique needs across a diverse student population was crucial to their ability to provide leadership that was culturally responsive and equitable, another expectation within the standards. Fairness and operating with integrity were important to school leaders’ interactions with teachers, students, and all stakeholders.

The next two standards spoke to the school environment and program as it pertains to students. Principals were responsible for developing systems for the implementation of effective and rigorous curriculum, instruction, and assessment (National Policy…, 2015). The leader was charged with ensuring that classroom instruction is challenging and relevant for students. Differentiated instruction and the incorporation of instructional technology were also expected as part of the modern curricular package. The ability to analyze data to monitor student progress and shape instructional decisions was part of the effective leaders program as well. The focus on the academic program was coupled with an understanding of the social and structural supports necessary to provide a safe and caring learning environment. Each student is expected to be “known, accepted and valued, trusted and respected, cared for, and encouraged” (National Policy…, 2015, p. 13). Enriching the school environment with supports for positive behavior, the cultures and languages of the student population, and a variety of extracurricular activities and
community supports were part of an effective leader’s program to support a diverse student population.

The 2015 standards also provided guidance on the school environment for staff. Standards six and seven speak to the leader’s responsibility to develop the capacity of the school’s professional staff and provide a professional community where continuous growth is welcomed, expected, and facilitated (National Policy…, 2015). The leader was first responsible for the recruitment and retention of effective teachers and staff. In order to ensure the sustainability of an effective program, the leader needed to also plan for succession and provide mentoring for new personnel. The standards suggested providing teachers with meaningful feedback related to their instruction was a crucial development tool as were differentiated professional development opportunities. Job-embedded professional development structures that allowed staff members to engage in learning together through collegial inquiry supported the kind of collective accountability and faculty-initiated improvements that characterized a professional community of teachers where student learning is prioritized.

The principal’s engagement of student families and members of the community in the school program in ways that benefit both the students and the stakeholders was another expectation within the standards (National Policy…, 2015). The leader was responsible for making the school an approachable place that welcomes stakeholder involvement. The effective school fostered relationships that supported student learning inside and outside the school environment. The leader was also expected to be an advocate for the needs of the communities and families served by the school.

The 2015 Standards required that leaders were effective school managers (National Policy…, 2015). This included allocating resources to most effectively staff and support the
instructional program. Providing systems for the communication of data and other information to staff and stakeholders was an identified responsibility, as was employing technology to improve the efficiency of management. The leaders needed to maintain productive relationships with those in leadership positions in the central office support more efficient school level practices. Ultimately, effective leaders managed and monitored their resources to reach the mission and vision for the school.

Lastly, effective leaders were committed to continuous school improvement (National Policy…, 2015). Effective leaders actively sought out opportunities to improve the quality of the school program for all stakeholders. Leaders identified and communicated the importance of improvement efforts and promoted commitment and accountability for the changes that needed to occur. They worked to manage change through the development of coherent systems for improvement. Effective leaders promoted leadership in other staff members, empowering them to initiate and implement improvement efforts.

Defining effective leadership skills may be best accomplished by comprehensive standards like Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards and the 2015 standards. Professional standards like these served as more illustrative examples that can be used, not only to evaluate, but also to determine areas to further support and develop school leaders, guiding professional development and growth-plan objectives. Johnson and Uline (2005) suggested that the development of these important skills could not be left to chance. Using professional standards to guide personnel development decisions can support district leaders to intentionally focus on developing the capacity of principals in areas that will impact instruction and school outcomes and increase the coherence of provided professional development.
Adult Learning

The learning required to be an effective school administrator was characterized as scattered and at times lacking a systematic nature (Wilson & Berne, 1999). Development for many principals happened formally through graduate coursework that culminated in licensure or certification and also informally through the educators’ experiences as they worked in teacher or assistant principal roles prior to accepting the head principal role. Wilson and Berne (1999) identified informal interactions with colleagues that occur throughout the day as additional opportunities for development and growth. Learning continued through the professional development opportunities that principals experienced during their tenure, sometimes through the design of state departments and local education agencies, and at other times through their individually initiated pursuits and affiliations with educational organizations. As professional learning was designed for school leaders or any educator, adult learning theory could highlight critical considerations of the design to ensure that principals are set up for effective learning opportunities.

Knowles and Adult Learning. Malcolm Knowles’s theory of adult learning outlined the needs of adults as they engage in learning opportunities and served as an important foundation for professional learning and development in a variety of contexts, including education (Knowles, Horton III, & Swanson, 2015). Over the course of Knowles’s life, his theory evolved. At first, andragogy, or the science of teaching adults, was seen as being distinctly separated from pedagogy, the science of teaching children. Over time, Knowles saw both pedagogy and andragogy as parts of a continuum, which required those charged with instruction to be keenly aware of their learners’ needs (Peterson & Ray, 2013). At first exposure to a completely new concept or content, even an adult needed more teacher-driven pedagogical approaches to support
them as a learner. However, as learners moved along the continuum of learning, through increased maturity or experience, their needs as learners changed. In response to these needs, the instruction provided to them needed to move from being more instructor-centered to being more learner-centered (Gilstrap, 2013). The number of andragogical principles grew over time from the original four propositions to the most current model that included a total of six (Knowles et al., 2015). These six assumptions of the andragogical model are described in the following paragraphs.

Knowles, Horton III, & Swanson (2015) identified several needs unique to adult learners, which were foundational to adult learning theory. These needs had implications on the professional learning that was provided to adults. First, adults tended to learn what they needed to know. The adult’s pursuit of knowledge increased as he or she understood the rewards for gaining the knowledge or the potential risks of not acquiring it. Facilitators of adult learning were therefore required to help adults establish a relevant need for the information being shared or presented (Gregson & Sturko, 2007). At a basic level, helping the adult learner develop a need for the learning was accomplished by simply providing an intellectual justification for why the knowledge is beneficial. Other stronger examples of helping adult learners recognize the need for learning involved engaging them in the analysis of data related to their performance or other methods that highlighted the “gaps between where they were and where they want to be” (Knowles et al., 2015, p.44). Szemcsak (2011) found the need to know was an important factor impacting teachers’ sense of efficacy related to the professional development they were experiencing. The need that teachers most often identified for their learning through professional development was increased student achievement. When teachers in Szemcsak’s (2011) study could see clear practical application of the learning, 100% cited they were motivated to learn the
material being offered. This connected to another of Knowles assumptions, the importance of motivation.

When compared to the young learner, the adult learner had a more developed and independent self-concept (Knowles, et al., 2015). Knowles leaned upon several definitions for the term adult in the development of his andragogical model, but found the psychological definition the most relevant when it came to influencing the adult as a learner. Psychologically, humans were considered adults once they became self-directed and took on responsibility for their life and decisions. As adult learners, this translated into the need to be engaged in identifying one’s own learning needs and be involved in developing one’s educational plans whenever possible. When facilitators of adult learning engaged learners in this way, Gregson and Sturko (2007) believed it honored the adult’s sense of autonomy. Hinkson’s (2010) study of the preferences among community college students identified their appreciation for instructors who provided assignments that supported them with understanding their strengths and weaknesses and then allowed for more student-directed activities. Teachers in Szemesak’s (2011) study demonstrated a decreased sense of efficacy, or belief that a professional development experience would benefit their practice, when the learning was externally directed, reinforcing Knowles et.al (2015) assumption that adults need to be empowered to make choices related to their learning. Teachers also demonstrated their self-directedness by commonly seeking out additional professional development opportunities outside of their districts’ offerings when the available learning did not meet their professional needs (Szemcsak, 2011).

The fact that adults have lived longer than youths and have had more life experiences and a greater variety of experiences highlighted another important concept for the adult learner. Knowles et al. (2015) believed that the range of adult learners’ experiences must be taken into
account as a part of the learning process and those experiences served as important learning opportunities. Gregson and Sturko (2007) suggested that teacher professional development programs that included opportunities for collaboration, group-based learning support, and recognition of learning styles created stronger alignment to the variety of backgrounds and experiences that adult learners had. Experiential learning techniques like simulation exercises and problem-solving activities acknowledged and drew upon the learner’s prior experience. Failing to recognize the learner’s experience was detrimental to the adult educator’s efforts because of the tension it created with the learner’s self-identity (Knowles et al., 2015). Knowles believed youths’ self-identities were primarily defined by environmental factors like families or community affiliations, but more and more by their experiences as they age. By adulthood, experiences were no longer something that simply happened to a person. Rather, who the person was became defined by their experiences. Inadequately identifying the value of the learner’s experience was perceived as not valuing the learner as a person. Rickey (2008) found that principals attempting to apply adult and transformational learning concepts to the training of their staffs labeled the self-concept assumption as important when working with their more experienced teachers. The principals expressed concerns that the older more experienced teachers were less likely to see a need to change and were perceived to be more resistant to trying something new. Over the course of the administrators’ practice with adult and transformational learning theories, they recognized the importance of using more reflective questioning and coaching activities to help learners make their own connections and label their own experiences rather than have the answer come from the administrators.

Adults should be provided with learning opportunities that “coincide with periods of readiness to learn” (Gregson & Sturko, 2007). At different stages in development, the need for
learning certain concepts took precedent over others. When considering adult learning, Knowles emphasized the importance of timing to meet learners at the moment they were ready to learn new information (Knowles et al., 2015). Knowles et al. (2015) did not suggest that the adult educator should wait passively for the learner to be ready, instead this principle related strongly to the adult learner’s need for a strong purpose for his or her learning and a relevant application for the new learning, which is yet to be addressed. The need to learn could be developed or reinforced through exposure to more effective performance models, or participation in simulation exercises. Hinkson (2010) identified this assumption among the community college students in her study, who desired information about their strengths and weaknesses. Once equipped with an understanding of their areas of weakness, they could use the information to make better decisions about their learning. The students also wanted professors to support them instructionally at first, but release responsibility for learning over time, as their readiness to direct their own learning increased.

Another unique aspect of the adult learner was the adults’ orientation to more problem-centered (application-oriented) learning rather than content-oriented (Gregson & Sturko, 2007). In order to maintain a motivation to learn, adults typically needed to see the relationship between their learning and the ability to improve performance as they completed tasks or addressed real-world problems they faced (Knowles et al., 2015). Presenting new learning in the context of real-life situations was an important support to the adult learner’s acquisition of skills and knowledge. Hinkson (2010) labeled important connections between how adults learn best and the instructional model used to deliver the learning. Hinkson’s participants identified the use of real-world scenarios as an impactful way to teach and support community college students’ understanding of new concepts.
Finally, adult learners responded best to internal motivators rather than external motivators (Harper & Ross, 2011). Internal motivators such as increased job satisfaction or quality of life had more powerful influence on adults’ desire to learn than external factors like salary increases or career advancement (Knowles et al., 2015). Honoring the self-concept or identity of learners and their experiences increased their motivation to engage in the learning and increased the relevance of the content (Gilstrap, 2013). There were also barriers that impacted motivation like limited access to resources, opportunities for learning, and time (Knowles et al., 2015).

Knowles et al. (2015) theory developed over time after many decades of research. While many originally accepted the andragogical model as a recipe that all adult educators should apply at all times, Knowles stance on these assumptions and what they meant was more flexible (Knowles et al., 2015). After years of study, Knowles et al. concluded that the andragogical system could be adopted in part or in whole and could even be modified to meet the situational context of the learning and the learner. This drew criticism from some, but Knowles actually saw this flexibility of the model to be one of its greatest strengths. Knowles adult learning theory provided a framework for the teaching of adults. The theory suggested that in adult learning settings, considerations must be made to address adults’ understanding of the need to learn new things. Adults should be offered opportunities to make decisions that guide their learning when possible and facilitators must build upon the adults’ life experiences. Finally, when adult learners were ready for the new knowledge, saw relevant ways to apply the new learning to their current life, and were motivated to learn they would be best prepared to acquire new knowledge.
**Adult learning and professional development.** Over the past three decades a variety of groups and agencies have issued mission statements and standards regarding expectations for performance in the field of education (Wilson & Berne, 1999). Standards like TILS and the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (formerly known as ISLLC) were two such examples for principals. These changes had real implications for school and district leaders faced with meeting these new more rigorous expectations while at the same time elevating the level of performance among their staff members. The call for more professional educators required more opportunities for professional learning and development for teachers and administrators in the areas highlighted by these standards. McQuarrie and Wood (1991) suggested that personnel improvement efforts like these must accommodate the characteristics of adult learners. Throughout the literature on professional development, the assumptions of Knowles’ theory were evident in the professional development practices characterized as effective for educators. Several themes related to adult learning theory were identified from the literature on professional development to illustrate ways that professional development providers can support the adult learner through a variety of methods.

**Oriented Toward Application.** Professional development that provided clear connections between learned content and the world in which the educator worked supported the learner in several ways. As learners with problem-centered orientations, adults were more motivated to learn when they saw the acquisition of knowledge or skills as having impact on the problems they face in their lives or work (Knowles et al., 2015). This suggested that leaders and facilitators should center professional learning opportunities upon the tasks that educators face each day rather than the transmission of content. Loucks-Horsely (1995) described the importance of the problem-centered learning as a part of the concept of learner centered schools,
where a culture of learning for the school staff was a priority. Learner centered schools were characterized in part by their shift away from the traditional views on professional development where learning was provided by an external expert. In this environment, job-embedded learning was the norm and teachers planned and experimented based upon their own students and specific problems. Learning in this way required no special effort to transfer new knowledge to the classroom or school because the learning was packaged for clear and relevant application.

Even though the field of research on effective principal development programs was limited, Darling-Hammond, et al. (2007) identified several qualities of effective principal development programs based on the suggestions of available research. Programs where principals worked in cohorts with others in practice-oriented situations and experienced instructional strategies that connected theory and practice in problem-based learning scenarios were deemed to be more effective. In addition, the most effective examples of teacher and principal professional development were ones where the learners were addressing their everyday work within their respective role and simplifying the connection between learning new knowledge and application in the real world (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Grissom & Harrington, 2010). Strong connections between learning and application also supported the adult learner in establishing a need for the learning and increased their motivation to learn.

Recognition for the individual. Assumptions in Knowle’s et al. (2015) theory such as the importance of the adult’s self-concept (i.e. the desire to be independent), the role the each adult’s unique experience plays in learning, and his or her readiness for new learning highlighted the need for professional development programs that recognized and accommodated for individual learners’ needs. Learning Forward, previously known as the National Staff Development
Council, provided seven standards for professional learning in education oriented to increasing school outcomes (Learning Forward, n.d.). Underlying those standards were four prerequisites that were deemed fundamental to the standards. These prerequisites highlighted the importance of collaborative learning where educators recognized and respected one another’s distinct experiences. Also noted were the individual differences of the learners and the condition that professional learning was timely and appropriate to meet the learners’ needs. A defining trait of effective professional development was the inclusion for opportunities where learners identified their own professional development needs and even shared in the design of their learning experiences (Patton, Parker, & Neutzling, 2012).

**Coherence.** Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon (2001) emphasized the shortcomings of professional development that consisted of individual one-stop activities. Professional development opportunities that were part of a larger coherent program of teacher development opportunities were more likely to impact teacher skills. Garet et al. (2001) saw coherence as the degree to which the professional development built upon the background knowledge and experiences of the teacher, focused on content that was aligned to national, state, or professional standards, and provided sustained opportunities for teachers to communicate with other teachers that were trying to solve problems similar to their own. When the learner saw professional development as being aligned to other standards, initiatives, and his or her own experiences, there was increased impact on teacher practice. In a case study of one rural district’s approach to providing professional development for assistant principals through socialization, Enomoto (2012) observed the importance of hierarchy in the administrators’ commitment to professional development. Whether or not professional development tasks were ultimately completed was influenced by who assigned them and the individual administrators’
prioritization of their administrative tasks. Enomoto (2012) suggested that the professional development of the individual administrator must not be seen as an isolated incident. Rather, it must be part of larger investment in the school district that was supported by the district leaders. As an element of this, she also emphasized the importance that the multiple levels of leadership worked in concert and district level leadership became partners in the effort rather than “top-down” managers. In the area of principal professional development, alignment to standards like ISLLC, participation in ongoing principal networks, and comprehensive approaches aimed at growing the individual and the organization at the same time all supported a more coherent approach to administrator professional development. In relation to Knowles’ et al. (2015) assumptions, more coherent programs supported the adult learner to see the need for the learning, provided a stronger sense of motivation, and placed value on the learner’s prior experience.

**School District Organization**

With the complexity of the principal role and the high demand for quality principal leadership in the American education landscape, district decision makers tasked with helping school leaders grow and develop in ways that will impact leaders’ effectiveness face an enormous challenge. While little empirical research existed on the effects of principal in-service programs, research provided suggestions related to core features of successful programs and recommendations for district leaders charged with this work (Darling-Hammond et al. 2007, Peterson & Cosner, 2005). Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) stated:

> Even with consensus about the core program features, the field lacks knowledge about the efficacy of these features under different conditions, the specific dimensions of the features that are required to produce powerful learning, the conditions that affect their
implementation, and the combination of factors that must be in place for learning to be robust and for candidates to develop a deep commitment to the work (p. 13).

The conditions impacting the implementation of any professional development program and its utility for supporting principal learning were influenced by the district leaders’ abilities to align the district’s organizational elements in support of the effort in a way that sustained learning and motivated the participant.

**Public education leadership project.** The Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) was a joint initiative of the Harvard University graduate school of education and the Harvard business school (Childress et al., 2011). The PELP Coherence Framework was based upon organizational alignment models from the business and nonprofit sectors like Tushman’s (Nadler & Tushman, 1980) congruence model of organizational behavior. Congruence was the overall *fit* of organizational components, according to Tushman’s model. The congruence model described the behavioral patterns of an organization based on the interactions of these components. Key organizational features like the tasks to be completed or products to be made were example outputs of an organization. In a factory model, things like the individual workers’ skills were viewed as a resource while the workers’ perceptions of the organization’s expectations and goals were an environmental factor. Both of these served as inputs to the system. The organization responded to these factors by creating strategies that addressed these inputs and others, which ultimately impacted the outputs of the organization. When the different components of the organization fit together well, like the workers skills and characteristics matching the demands of performing a task or building a product, the result was a more effective organization. The congruence model was structured upon the hypothesis that the greater the degree of agreement
that existed between the various organizational components, the more likely the organization was to meet the expected outputs at an individual, group, and organizational level.

The PELP Coherence Framework also described the agreement between organizational elements, but was designed to support educational leaders. Figure 1 highlights the interdependent organizational elements that impact school districts’ improvement efforts.

Figure 1. Organizational elements of a school district. The PELP Coherence Framework outlines the organizational factors that align to support improvements in teaching and learning. Adapted from “Note on the PELP Coherence Framework,” by Childress, S. et al., 2011, Copyright 2007 President and Fellows of Harvard College.
Coherence occurred when “the elements of a school district worked together in an integrated way to implement an articulated strategy” (Childress et al., 2011, p. 1). The strategy was a set of actions aimed at improving the core work of the district, teaching and learning. The PELP framework established a model for understanding how organizational elements interacted, supported, and impeded effective implementation of such strategies. When these elements were intentionally aligned with one another and with the strategies aimed at improving teaching and learning, leaders were better able to guide actions of those carrying out the work at all levels.

Environment. District leaders often lack control of environmental factors, as they are largely external to the district. However, they must recognize and address environmental factors in order to effectively carry out strategies for improvement (Childress et al., 2011). Environmental factors often restricted the district’s ability to operate or at times empowered districts to pursue initiatives that are encouraged by state mandates or funding. Environmental factors included the political and climate in which the district operates, the availability of funding from a variety of sources, contracts between the district and other agencies that may have influenced operations, and the legal guidelines that governed the day-to-day operations of the school district from local, state, and federal levels.

Stakeholders. Stakeholders can be internal or external to the school district. Eliciting support from stakeholders is often a difficult proposition, because of each group’s unique interests and the various definitions of success across stakeholder groups (Childress et al., 2011). In a school district, some examples of stakeholders were the formal governing bodies like school boards or politicians responsible for establishing policies that influence district procedures. Parents and students were types of stakeholders as were district and school employees. Teachers’ unions or bargaining associations as well as community leaders and organizations were examples
of less formal political bodies that must also be considered. District leaders must examine the strategies they wished to implement and understand the implications for the different stakeholder groups they represented.

**Culture.** Webster’s defines culture as “a way of thinking, behaving, or working that exists in a place or organization” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Childress et al. (2011) believed that districts must work hard to establish a culture that reflects the instructional priorities and beliefs that are held about teaching and learning (Childress et al., 2011). Leaders influenced the culture of their district by establishing expectations for performance and redefining roles and responsibilities to better align to higher performance standards. District leaders needed to identify the types of beliefs that were needed to support the mission of the district and what norms supported these behaviors. These norms could relate to beliefs about accountability or conflict resolution, to name a few.

**Resources.** The alignment of resources was required to support districts in effectively implementing strategies for improvement (Childress et al., 2011). With the limited nature of resources in most school districts, the process of allocating resources required a balance between increasing support for some practices and decreasing support for others. Because the largest part of school districts’ budgets were invested in personnel, the district plan must ensure that human resources were managed in a way that was aligned with their strategies for improvement. If the district’s strategies were going to impact teaching and learning, those implementing the strategies needed the skills necessary to do the work well and they must be in a position to carry out the work. District leaders were also responsible for managing the often-limited financial resources. Being creative about the way that resources were allotted was part of a larger financial
plan for supporting a district-wide strategy. Discontinuing programs or activities that are no longer in line with district strategies allowed for the redistribution of financial resources.

**Structures.** Structures can either be formal or informal and they function to define how work is done in the district (Childress, 2011). Formal structures typically related to how people were oriented to do the work of the district. Some were permanent features like the district organizational chart or the membership of an executive leadership team. Less permanent features could be a smaller advisory committee that was convened for a specific project. Equally as important were the informal structures of the district that dictate how things were done outside the formal structures. These informal structures rested upon the balance of power among influential people within the district that were seen as experienced and trusted advisors. Informal structures supported the efforts of the district or detracted from them if those with influence were working against the districts’ strategies for improvement. To be successful, district leaders were at times required to emphasize or diminish the influence of those who hold informal power.

**Systems.** Closely related to structures are the systems that provided the processes and procedures that facilitate the work of the district (Childress, et al., 2011). When a district identified a needed change and developed a strategy to address that change, systems were developed to support those carrying out the work and prevent them from shouldering the responsibility of figuring things out on their own. Systems for functions such as promotion, compensation, and accountability supported those implementing the improvement efforts. Like structures, they were formal and informal. Ultimately, the purpose of a system was to make the implementation of a strategy more efficient and effective.

Districts were tasked with addressing countless issues that impact the core work of the school, teaching and learning. Like the congruence model before it, the PELP Coherence
framework served as a reminder that focusing organizational elements towards clear strategies for improvement and aligning organizational elements to one another increased the likelihood of having a tangible impact on the intended outcomes of the organization. As district leaders identify their beliefs related to improving schools and plan for strategically addressing those beliefs, frameworks like PELP can be used to assess how well they are prepared to facilitate the necessary changes.

**Summary**

The training and development of school principals was a process that contained multiple stages throughout the career of the administrator. While administrator preparation programs often represented the first formal development of the content knowledge and skills for aspiring principals, districts that were intentional about identifying and creating opportunities for potential administrator candidates created opportunities to drastically increase their instructional leadership pool (Taylor, Pelletier, Trimble, & Ruiz, 2014). Beyond credentialing programs, which varied in their ability to adequately prepare today’s school leaders, it was imperative that districts and educational authorities also assumed the responsibility of supporting and developing the skills of practicing administrators (Derrington & Sharrat, 2008, Shannon, 2007).

As district leaders assumed the responsibility of meeting the professional learning needs of today’s school leaders, they were required to make decisions that maximized the district’s ability to support principal professional development strategies. Principals, like all adults, required opportunities for learning that were founded upon the tenets of andragogy (McQuarrie & Wood, 1991, Versland 2013). As an adult, each administrator brought a unique set of needs, experiences, and beliefs to their administrative tasks, and plans for providing professional learning opportunities were most effective when they addressed the unique characteristics of the
principal learners and the variety of contexts in which the principals’ were called upon to apply their learning.

From an organizational perspective, districts that made principal growth and learning a strategic priority to improve teaching and learning profited from intentional alignment between the organizational elements and the instructional tasks at hand. Decisions about how to leverage a district’s environment, structures, systems, and resources in support of principal professional development and other improvement strategies increased the likelihood of district success. Understanding how stakeholder influence and culture could support or inhibit progress was also necessary to clear and coherent improvement plans.
Chapter 3: Methodology

“Research is a systematic process by which we know more about something than we did before engaging in the process” (Merriam, 2009, p. 4). Merriam (2009) identified several key elements that characterized qualitative research. First, qualitative researchers were most interested in uncovering the meaning of a phenomenon rather than describing it in terms of its frequency or statistical relationship to another phenomenon. Understanding was the goal, and the research was not necessarily directed toward predicting future events. Instead, the research was aimed at deeply considering multiple facets of a situation and the uniqueness with which the phenomenon occurred in context. Second, in a qualitative study, the researcher was the primary instrument used for data collection and analysis. The researcher was able to be responsive to the observations made and data collected while conducting the study, allowing the research study to adapt in ways that enabled new and deeper levels of understanding. Third, qualitative research was inductive in nature. The researcher in a qualitative study collected data to build towards a theory or a hypothesis rather than testing them. Theoretical frameworks were used to focus the study, but were not actually tested. Ultimately, the frameworks that were used were informed by the themes that emerged from the study. Last, Merriam (2009) characterized qualitative studies as being richly descriptive. Findings and conclusions from qualitative studies were depicted in words and images, both of which were informed by descriptions of the people and context involved in the study as well as field notes from observations, interviews, and a variety of other communications. In combination, these collected records aided the researcher in painting a thorough portrait of the phenomenon under examination.
Case Study

In order to explore the current organizational practices of a school district and the resulting impact on principal professional development, a single-site case study was conducted. Yin (2009) defined a case study as an “empirical inquiry that investigates contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context” (p. 18). Yin (2009) posited three elements that should be considered when selecting the case study research method: the nature of the questions, the focus on current events, and the researcher’s control over behavioral events. First, research questions that guided a case study were typically why or how questions which sought explanatory answers related to current events. In the study of the school district, the researcher investigated how organizational elements were aligned to principal professional development and how this influenced the learning opportunities for the principals in terms of their needs as adult learners.

According to Yin (2009), case studies were preferred over methods like histories and experiments when the researcher has access to the actual events and those engaged in the events. The researcher was able to engage with current school leaders and made observations of a professional development opportunity as it was occurring. District leaders and principals were interviewed to capture their experience and to understand how the planning, provision, and participation in professional development for school leaders reflected organizational decisions that influenced the alignment of professional learning experiences to the principles of andragogy. The observation of principal professional development as it occurred provided the researcher with an opportunity to examine the nature of the professional development through the lens of the learners’ needs while examining the role played by leaders and the overall influence of organizational elements. The decisions made by the district leaders that influenced the
organizational factors under study and the resulting professional development program were current and impacted the principals within the district as they were being observed.

Finally, the case study method was chosen when the researcher had no control over the behavioral event that is being studied (Yin, 2009). In this case, the researcher did not manipulate the behaviors being observed or the decisions made by district leaders related to their organizational structure or priorities. The researcher’s collection of data through interviews and surveys was designed to capture the situation as it was currently being experienced. There was no attempt to influence those from which the data were collected. The professional development observations were conducted with the researcher acting in what Merriam (2009) labels the observer as participant role. In this manner, the researcher engaged with those being observed with the primary role of observer. Those being observed were aware of the observer’s activities, and the researcher’s participation in the group was only to the degree necessary to access the information under study. True to the case study method, the researcher attempted to only capture the current scenario within the district (case) being studied.

Setting

The researcher began the process of case selection by establishing criteria for the desired case study. These criteria were then shared with state-level education leaders familiar with a variety of school districts and district leaders. Based upon the criteria, the state leaders made recommendations for districts where a higher degree of leadership development activity was occurring. To support a potentially richer case study, the case district was selected from these identified districts.

The selected case district was located in the southeastern region of the United States. The district was comprised of 13 schools including a pre-school, eight elementary schools, two
middle schools, a traditional high school campus, and a smaller non-traditional high school centered upon personalized learning for students. Approximately 468 teachers served more than 7,300 students across the pre-k to 12th grade span. Because district organization was an element being investigated, another important aspect of selecting the district was the amount of time under the current district director. The researcher identified this as potentially important to having more consistent and established structures, goals, and departmental hierarchies within the district that support the current strategies for principal development. Although some changes had recently occurred among the executive district leadership, the director of schools in the case district had served in his current role for more than four years.

**Participants**

The researcher worked with the district research coordinator who identified potential district leaders for interviews. These leaders were purposefully selected based on criteria communicated by the researcher related to the district leaders’ responsibilities in the areas of principal supervision and professional development. Three district leaders were identified and agreed to participate in the study. District Leader 1 and District Leader 3 served as Chief Academic Officers for the secondary and elementary schools respectively, supervising and supporting school principals. District Leader 2 functioned as the Director of Professional Learning, tasked with providing a system-wide program for professional development across all personnel and departments, including school administrators.

The researcher requested three principal interviews across the different elementary and secondary grade levels. Three principals with varying roles were selected. Principal 1 was an elementary school principal. Principal 2 was in a blended role overseeing a small alternative setting for students where she served as the principal, but also contributing to the district
development of systems for behavioral intervention across all campuses. Principal 3 was the
leader for the district’s smaller non-traditional high school. While these principals were the only
ones selected for interview, observations were conducted of larger principal groups as they
engaged in professional development at the district level. These groups included other
administrators not included in the interviews as well as assistant principals. Surveys were sent to
all current principals working in the district.

**Instrumentation**

An interview protocol was developed and used with the district leaders to examine their
understanding of district organizational elements as identified through the PELP framework
(Childress et al., 2011) and the organizational decisions that district leaders made regarding
principal professional development. A separate interview protocol developed for principals
centered upon the professional development experiences in which they were engaged. The
principal interview elicited information related to their experiences as adult learners and their
organizational interactions within the district. District leader and principal interview protocols
can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B respectively. Follow up requests for examples of
district documents were made by the researcher as a result of interview participants’ references
to specific items or procedures that were central to professional learning decisions or outcomes.

The researcher worked with the district coordinator to identify opportunities to observe
professional development in which the district principals were engaged. A monthly combined
principal meeting and smaller elementary principal cohort were observed. The observation was
conducted to evaluate how structures, systems, and other organizational elements were applied to
support principal learning. There was no specific protocol developed for these observations.
Instead, the researcher scripted the observed events and analyzed the script following the
observation. The group observations included some of the principals interviewed during the study as well as additional district administrators.

The third form of data collected was through a survey of the 10 remaining district principals. The electronic survey was provided through an email link, which was sent to the districts’ principals by the district research coordinator. Participation in the survey was voluntary. The survey collected administrator impressions related to their professional development experiences and their needs as adult learners, and closely mirrored the interview questions used with the previously interviewed principals. Final development of the survey occurred after the interviews had been conducted to help clarify and extend the data collection and the emerging themes from the interviews. As a result, items specifically related to the organizational element of culture were included in the survey. The survey protocol is included in Appendix C.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collected through interviews, observations, and surveys were transcribed and ultimately coded to identify categories or themes that are represented in the data. A priori codes were developed according to the principles of adult learning and the PELP framework, guiding the first layer of categorization. The researcher created a matrix that allowed the assumptions of Knowles et al. (2015) andragogical model to be aligned with the various organizational elements of the district (i.e. structures, systems, resources, culture, etc.). Collected responses and the observation script were mined for key information according to the a priori codes. The coded info was entered into the matrix as it aligned to associated learner and organizational elements. Through this process, trends in the responses of interview and survey participants were identified and the researcher was able to establish connections between adult learners’ needs and the
organizational elements that were impacting them. Themes emerged as the researcher established the common relationships between learner needs and organizational factors. Documents shared by the district leaders were also analyzed to understand more specific examples of district practices and learner experiences. An adapted example of the coding matrix developed from the interview with Principal 3 is included in Appendix D.

Limitations

The study did not aim to ascertain the quality of professional development or the impact of any specific professional development strategies or methods. Instead, it focused on principal perceptions of their learning experiences as they relate to Knowles’ et al. (2015) andragogical model. Observations made by the researcher were key in identifying the elements of adult learning during the observed professional development and interviews. Also subject to the researcher’s observations were the connections between the district organization and potential effects on the learning environment for professional development. As with all case studies, the researcher was the primary instrument of data analysis. Any meaning derived from the data collected through the research study was subject to the instincts and skills of the researcher (Merriam, 2009). The researcher addressed the issue of reliability by sharing the preliminary findings and conclusions with key study participants for verification prior to completing the study.

The district was relatively small in size, made up of only 13 schools. The size of the district contributed heavily to the district leaders’ ability to work closely with the principals to support their learning. Principal supervisors and the superintendent knew the principals well, spent time with them monthly, and were able to maintain regular communication with the principals to inform next steps for the collective group. The consistency of this communication
and interaction was aided by the size of the district. Larger districts may experience challenges creating or sustaining a similar model for principal professional development if the district leader to principal ratio is significantly higher than the case district.

The study described a phenomenon bound within a single school district. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other settings and contexts in the way in which they were observed in the case study site. The study described the decisions made in a single district with regards to their organizational structure and how those decisions relate to principal learning. It does not necessarily suggest a path for all school districts to follow. Alternatively, it highlighted the strategies and philosophy of a single school district and the resulting perceptions of the school and district leaders.

**Ethical Considerations**

The primary ethical concern with case study research is related to researcher bias (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). Ethical behavior can be a matter of concern when the researcher engages in case study research to support a preconceived belief or fails to include data that could impact the final results of the study. The single-site case study was designed without a proposition that related district organization to the adult learning environment provided through professional development. All possible connections and data points were considered as a part of the study.

Participants were also offered protections as a part of the research design. All interview and survey participants were provided informed consent letters prior to participation (Merriam, 2009). Sample consent letters can be found in Appendix E and Appendix F to participate. Expectations for how collected data would be used were clearly communicated to all participants at the onset of the study. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research and reporting.
stages of the study. The school district, district leaders, and principal participants were never named in the data or reporting and collected documents were kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s private office.

Summary

The goal of the study was to investigate the organizational decisions and arrangements that influence the learning opportunities principals experience through district-provided professional development. With the goal of understanding a current phenomenon, the case study method for qualitative research was applied to study a single school district and its leaders. Using the assumptions outlined in Knowles et al. (2015) as a framework to characterize professional development as learning, principal interviews, surveys, and observations were conducted to analyze the nature of their learning experiences. These experiences were examined in relation to the district’s organization as outlined by the PELP coherence framework.
Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this research study was to describe how a school district was organized to provide professional development for its principals and the influence of those organizational elements upon the principals as adult learners. The researcher had access to participants and events occurring within the bound system of a single school district, which justified the selected case study research method (Merriam 2009; Yin, 2009). Data was collected through a combination of interviews, observations, and surveys. Interviews with district leaders and current school principals from within the district provided multiple perspectives on organizational elements, organizational decisions made by the district leaders, and the subsequent impact on principal learning. A single observation of a principal professional development meeting was conducted. Surveys were sent in follow-up to the remaining school principals in the district to gather their impressions related to district organization and their experiences through professional development. The following sections of this chapter will provide a description and an analysis of the data collected to address the research questions that guided the study:

1. How is one selected school district organized to provide professional development for principals?
2. How does district organization around principal professional development support the needs of principals as adult learners?

Describing the District Organization

Childress et al. (2011) designed the PELP framework to identify the key elements that school district leaders must consider when implementing any improvement strategy. They posited that the more aligned these elements become around an instructional improvement
strategy, the greater the impact would be on teaching and learning. The elements outlined within the PELP framework provided a structure to examine the organizational setting at the district level that contributed to principals’ professional development. From the initial data analysis, one element of the organization surfaced as most influential to principal professional development. These structures, the monthly professional development opportunities known as *collaboratives*, were foundational to the two themes that emerged around Research Question 1 (RQ1). Figure 4.1 identifies the two themes that describe the relationship between organizational elements and provided principal professional development. Based on the analysis of the collected data, the district appeared to be organized to support a culture of collaborative learning among the principals and to maintain a strong internal focus for their learning.

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RQ 1: Theme 1

- **A Culture of Collaborative Learning**
  - **Structures**
    - Principal Management/Support
    - Monthly Collaboratives
  - **Systems**
    - Visioning Process
    - 100-Day Planning
  - **Resources**
    - Investment in Common Learning Experiences

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RQ 1: Theme 2

- **A Strong Internal Focus**
  - **Structures**
    - Monthly Collaboratives
    - Guiding Tenets
  - **Environment**
    - Training
    - Principal Evaluation
  - **Stakeholders**
    - Partnerships

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*Figure 2.* Research question 1 themes. Two themes emerged that described how the district leveraged their organizational elements to provide professional development for principals.
Research Question 1: Presentation of Themes

Research Question 1 was designed to support the researcher in understanding how organizational elements within a single school district were being employed to provide professional development for principals. After initial coding of data from the interviews, surveys, and the observation of a principal professional development session, themes emerged that brought additional clarity to how the organizational features were shaping principal professional development.

Theme 1: A culture of collaborative learning. Culture was defined as an individual element of the organization within the PELP framework (Childress et al., 2011). This aspect of the district organization played a significant role in their approach to growing and developing their principals. A culture of collaborative learning was an outgrowth of a variety of structures and systems, and was evident in the districts treatment of resources.

Structure: Principal management and support. The working relationship between principals, their supervisors, and other district leaders was identified early on in the data analysis as an important organizational mechanism that supported their professional development. Principal interactions with their supervisors both individually and through the series of professional development sessions were indicative of the collaborative culture. District Leader 1 described himself as the supervisor for secondary principals, but felt his primary role was to “support them.” He explained how his support for individual principals was typically conducted:

We have individual collaborations where I meet monthly [with principals], obviously we meet more often than that, but this is more structured. We have this standing meeting, each principal and I… they are really driving all of that. A lot of times what we are doing during that is we will do walkthroughs. You know we will have for example a failure
report, and we will problem solve what can we do to address that. You know a big portion of it has been response to instruction and intervention (RTI\textsuperscript{2}). I have an extensive history with RTI\textsuperscript{2} so its one of those support things that I can do for them.

Like District Leader 1, District Leader 3 was also a principal supervisor, but for elementary school principals. District Leader 3 saw professional development and principal management as “a big piece” of his responsibility. Each of the three interviewed district leaders also cited additional coordinators in the areas of educational technology, math, and literacy that served as content support for the principals and teachers in the district. The content coordinators led principal academies but also collaborated with principals to conduct classroom walkthroughs that aligned to their content-specific initiatives. These leaders were all part of the curriculum and instruction team.

The superintendent maintained regular contact with school principals as well. He was seen as a contributor to their professional learning, often sending research articles for discussion and meeting monthly with principal groups. Principal 3 stated:

The superintendent sends out a newsletter each week. Within that memo, he links to and cites research. So he may paraphrase… a paragraph or two… but he will link it to the article so you can go and read it. We often discuss those in our collaboratives each month. So, I feel like everything is aligned… it keeps me focused and grounded.

Principal 2 felt the superintendent’s role in supporting principal learning had a positive impact on the learning culture in the district:

I think that we have a very strong learning culture here. It is overwhelming the amount of knowledge and love of learning that we have in this district. It’s kind of contagious…. I think being surrounded by people who want to learn more and want to hone their craft
and want to do better, helps…. When you have your superintendent sending articles sometimes it feels like overkill, but at the same time [principals] feel like, you know at least he is learning. He’s not just collecting a paycheck. He is trying to change things. I think [principals] know that. The culture is great and it has grown.

Under the supervision of the district’s superintendent, the principal supervisors, content coordinators, and the newly established Director of Professional Learning (District Leader 2) were primarily responsible for the management of instructional initiatives as well as the support and development of the district’s teachers and administrators.

**Structure: Monthly collaboratives.** District leaders 1 and 3, along with the superintendent interacted with the district principals through a series of regular monthly meetings called collaboratives. Each interview and survey participant labeled these meetings as a meaningful part of principals’ professional development, and this was the primary ongoing district structure used to provide principals with new learning. There were several different collaboratives in which principals participated each month including an individual collaborative with their principal supervisor, a superintendent collaborative as an elementary or secondary grade-level group of principals, and a grade-level collaborative (elementary or secondary) with their grade-alike principal colleagues and grade-level supervisor.

During the individual collaborative, the principal supervisors visited the individual schools of the principals whom they supervised each month for approximately an hour and a half. Both principal supervisors labeled the principals’ individual needs and desires as significant factors used to determine the focus of their monthly meeting. The supervisors labeled classroom walkthroughs as a typical activity that might occur during the collaborative. The walkthrough often offered a chance to front-load or reinforce the administrators’ understanding
of content area practices that were being simultaneously addressed through teacher and principal training at the district level. District Leader 3 stated, “Right now we’re using [an observation tool] in literacy walkthroughs to look at the read aloud component and learn how to most effectively use that as a coaching tool.” Principal 1 appreciated the opportunity to collaborate with her supervisor:

It’s a collaborative discussion, an open dialogue, and he’s always very supportive with any resources or questions we might have. He’s great at saying, “Here is this [resource],” or “Let me share this with you.” If he does not have something [we need], he will find it and make sure that we get that, and that’s a big support… He has a lot of experience in the district, so I look forward to those collaborations.

These individual collaboratives were labeled as an opportunity to support principals with areas of weakness as well. Both principal supervisors identified working with separate individual principals on school culture, one as a result of the principal’s prior evaluation results and the other in response to the superintendent’s concern over building level survey data from the previous year. Principal learning in these areas of refinement was often approached as an opportunity for collaborative support. District Leader 1 stated:

We use the [principal] evaluation. That is a driver in professional learning because what I might identify for a principal as a refinement… my commitment is, “I’m going to help you do this right,” and working to find you a resource. So an example would be developing a cultural survey and using that to drive outcomes. That’s been my support to one principal in particular.

The superintendent collaborative brought the grade-level principals together with the superintendent to target specific goals and objectives. These goals were typically established at
the Summer Principal Retreat and were aligned to the district identified priorities. The principal supervisors did not participate in this meeting, and principals established the agenda and co-facilitated the meeting. The secondary and elementary principals participated in separate superintendent collaboratives in time slots occurring adjacent to the monthly district leadership meeting, one before and one after. The district leadership meeting often included a learning component for principals, but also allowed district leaders to discuss a variety of school business items. The researcher observed both the district leadership team meeting and the elementary superintendent collaborative.

During the observed collaborative, the elementary principals had prepared the agenda, which focused on their progress toward a project they had been charged with during the Summer Principal Retreat. The project had required ongoing cooperative planning and development among the elementary principals, and they had engaged with a variety of district and teacher leaders to develop their plans. One of the principal participants set the purpose for the meeting:

The first thing on our agenda is the thing that I think we want to talk most about and the thing that we are most excited about. That is that targeted support for low SES and minority students…So this is based on work that we started this summer… we did a lot of talking prior to our last principal collaborative about how are we going to identify those kids and what measures we are going to use to make sure that we are picking those [students].

The role of the superintendent during the collaborative was to probe for understanding, strengthen the alignment of their efforts to previously determined goals, suggest next steps for their learning and their work, and offer connections to research and resources. For example, the superintendent stopped the elementary principals discussion to question a disparity between the
number of students they were including in their intervention plan and the agreed upon percentage of 40%, which was established during the Summer Principal Retreat:

When you looked at [the different cohorts of students], did it meet that target of 40%?

Even though each school would be different, when you put them all together… you have like 600 total [students]. Are you getting to 40% of that 600?

The superintendent challenged them to ensure they were committed to address both math and science to support the district’s STEM focus as they planned for enrichment programming. He shared an observation with the principals and reminded them what research said about being specific with their enrichment focus. After attending teachers’ planning meetings at one of the district’s elementary schools, he stated:

I sat there through those [meetings]… Only one group got to that enrichment piece. All of those discussion were about the [students] that were at risk and in interventions. There was one group, and I was sitting at the end of the table… and I was grinning…and I was getting excited. We finally got one group that was talking about enrichment. We have to remember that we have got to have those discussions in the [meetings]. I’m afraid that it’s at the end and often not gotten to. I bet it’s that way everywhere because we are so used to spending time on those interventions. But if you look at research, what research really says is it’s just as important that you are targeted with your high-end [students] as you are with your low-end. You can’t just provide these fun enriching things. You have to look at their skills and understand where their strengths are and how we are going to build on that.

Principals left the superintendent collaborative with plans for discussion at their next elementary collaborative and ideas about next steps for their project.
Grade-level collaboratives (elementary and secondary) occurred monthly with principals meeting collectively with their grade-level supervisors to work on problems and initiatives that were specific to elementary or secondary schools. Principal supervisors facilitated the meeting, and principals were given the opportunity to contribute to the agenda. District Leader 1 described the focus of the secondary collaborative:

I have some standing items that we agreed to in our Summer Principal Retreat as priorities that we cover each time and items that I feel like they really need to know, or [items that] I need input from them in terms of bigger system issues. But, they are driving the agenda in terms of what we need to discuss or what we need to work through.

District Leader 2, who was responsible for district professional learning, described the role of the principal supervisors in maintaining the learning focus during these collaboratives:

With the elementary, [the other district leaders] wait to be invited. I have three things [on which] I’m needing input from them, and I asked District Leader 3, “How best can I do this? Can you get the information and report back to me? Can I step in for five minutes?” It’s really driven by them not us. I have plenty of things for us to be working on with them, but it needs to be their learning.

Similar to the individual collaboratives, District Leaders 1 and 3 sought to create a balance of input from the principal participants and the priorities of the district to drive the learning that occurred during the collaboratives.

As a professional development structure, the series of monthly collaboratives provided principals with a regular time of learning and collaboration. District Leader 3’s anecdote regarding the origin of the principal collaboratives paints a picture of a very different culture that
once existed among the principals. He recalled an incident that occurred during a district
training five years earlier:

We were looking at [the collaborative work] as a way to really build capacity. That was
initially the thought on bringing [the trainer] in… I think people were seeing how the
work he was leading was really affecting the collaborative culture. That’s how the
principal collaboratives were born. There was a conflict that arose between two
principals in one of his meetings. I had two elementary principals who were ready to
take each other out. It was really a competitive thing… he said she said. Out of that was
a discussion, “I think that this is happening because we are not getting together enough
and talking through issues. This is a misunderstanding.” I remember one of the principals
looking at me and saying, “Why can’t we meet every month and why can’t you be the
facilitator?” Let’s work through these issues. And so that’s how, through his work, this
all started.

Principal 3’s experience as a current administrator articulated a significant shift in culture among
the principals over the past five years, one that she attributed to the collaborative structures in
which principals were engaged. Principal 3 stated:

The level of collaboration with my colleagues has been the best professional learning
experience that I have had. We are a supportive, collaborative group. We are not
competitive. There are some school systems where that’s the goal… “You’re going to be
better than this school over here.” It’s not about that… We want each other to do the best
that we can do, so we are going to work together. I feel like that’s been the most
invaluable professional development or learning experience that I’ve had as a principal.
When asked what her district had done to make this happen, Principal 3 replied:

They foster it. They allow it. They provide opportunities for us to collaborate at the district level, secondary level… with [District Leader 2]. I can step out if I need to and go meet with another principal or collaborate. After school I can go. I think they foster that. They encourage that. As a result of that, I think that’s who we are.

Principal 1 was also able to affirm the current collaborative culture and the impact of the collaborative structures in which principals participate:

I am privileged to work in a system where we are able to come together as that group of principals or as the leadership team here today, and have that constant collaboration because it gives you so much validation in what you are doing. But, it also gives you a sounding board when you need that help. Any of us can call each other at any time. If we don’t get one, we’ll call the other and say, “Here is the situation, how would you handle it?” That network has been wonderful. I can’t imagine not having that.

While the district leaders and collaborative structures described above put the culture of collaborative learning into action, a range of other organizational decisions and factors worked in concert with these primary features to support greater learning through collaboration, both formally and informally.

**System: Visioning process.** Childress et al. (2011) defined *systems* as processes and procedures through which work gets done. Systems promoted more efficient processes and prevented practitioners from “reinventing the wheel” when faced with complex tasks (Childress et al, 2011, p. 9). There were several systems employed by the district to support a collaborative learning culture.
Principal 2 and Principal 3 were both tasked with developing new initiatives in the district. At the time of the interviews, Principal 2 was developing plans for the alternative school campus over which she was principal, but also developing a vision for the behavioral management system for the entire district. Principal 3 had recently developed a program for a high school campus structured around blended learning. District Leader 2 was in a newly created position as Director of Professional Learning and was also engaged in the defining the parameters of her department. It was the expectation in the district that the process of creating new initiatives or departments would be a cooperative learning and development process.

Each of these leaders implemented an established visioning process to guide their learning about and development of their respective initiative. The visioning process was a system instituted by the superintendent to guide the development of any new initiative or effort. The visioning process positioned the leader to seek out independent learning, but also required them to share learning with a team of other leaders. Based upon several leaders description of the visioning process, the researcher requested additional details from the district. The full seven-step process is described in Appendix G.

District leader 2 was working closely with the elementary and secondary principal supervisors as a team to develop the vision for the professional learning department. Principal 2 identified the secondary principals’ supervisor, an assistant superintendent, and the superintendent as the team she was collaborating with through the visioning process. This team was integral to supporting and vetting her learning as she investigated a new model for the district’s approach to behavior management and intervention. Principal 2 identified the visioning process as an important part of her professional development. She described the process and the way she interacted with her collaborative team:
It kind of gives you a structure with which to work... I report to the assistant superintendent or the secondary principal supervisor and even the superintendent, but through the process, he (the superintendent) doesn’t guide you. It starts with research. What do alternative programs look like everywhere? In this role now, site visits have been the best professional learning experience I’ve had. I’ve been to seven different alternative schools... So that was huge to be able to go back to [them] and be able to say, “Look, here is some research from a site visit, and I saw their alternative settings and this has worked for them.”

She also labeled ways that her team supported her learning through the process:

So in thinking about a new program… that’s part of the reason they have flooded me with all of these things, like “This may be something that you want to investigate for our district.” Anytime something comes across their email or desk that seems like it’s a good fit for me and my learning now, to try to build a new program, they will forward it to me and offer me the opportunity to go.

When Principal 3 was asked, “So if you can justify through that visioning process, ‘This is somewhere I need to go, this is something I need to learn,’ then the resources will be available to do that?” She replied:

You better believe it. [The superintendent] has tight yet loose leadership. That can be scary because he’s going to give you the freedom to do what you need to do. But you need to make sure that it’s aligning to the work and we’re going to get something from it… not just words but action steps that we can take to meet the vision.

**System: 100-day plans.** The previously described training that the district had participated in years earlier, which had begun the focus on district-wide collaboration, also
brought other processes into place that related to the principals’ strategic planning. Principals began each year developing a 100-day plan. In actuality, the 100-day plan was a professional development plan for teachers that was to be executed in the first 100-days of school. The development of this plan began during the Summer Principal Retreat, and the plans were an ongoing topic of discussion and collaboration at the monthly grade-level collaboratives.

Principals began by identifying a problem of practice that needed to be addressed in their building. This required them to think about the challenges they were facing and the potential gaps in knowledge or skills that could be contributing to those challenges. District Leader 1 talked about revisiting this system with principals as they began developing their 100-day plans the previous summer to ensure they had a clear understanding of their needs and a strong purpose driving their plans. He stated:

This year we have created a common template for them to capture the *why*. Our focus of professional learning with principals regarding this was starting with the *why*, because if you can’t establish the *why* with your leadership team, you’re going to go right to *what*. You can easily develop steps for [the *what*] and then people are just going to go through the motions. Where in this, the focus is on *why*, which is a little messier. But, when teams really come to terms with, “This is why it’s important for our school to focus on this,” and they create action around the structure… that really begins to drive school improvement.

The second phase of the 100-day plans made the focus on clear purposeful outcomes even more important.

After the 100-day plans were developed, they were implemented in each school to address the professional development needs of teachers during the first 100 days of the school
year. After the first 100 days, the learning was being implemented into the classroom practices of the teachers who had participated. Each school would then prepare for a visit during the last-half of the school year. During the visit, a team of leaders and teachers from another school would conduct instructional rounds, or walkthroughs, to look for evidence of the learning from the 100-day plan. District Leader 2 described the process:

Another piece is the instructional rounds, which is a culminating event of the 100-day plan. They develop their problem of practice for their schools, then they visit each other, and that is very meaningful. The principals take a team with teachers, and they go to another school. The other school has defined what they want you to be looking for. It’s a really great process because you don’t have to worry about them getting defensive. You remove all the judgment because you are giving them feedback on what they said they wanted. It really is a nice process we’ve done for several years now, and teachers and principals find that it’s one of the most meaningful things that we do on both sides. One is we get into a school and really know the work that they’re doing. Two, when you’re receiving feedback in that school on your problem of practice, it helps define your next steps within that.

District Leader 1 saw this as establishing a cycle of learning for principals and their teams. He stated, “It was almost the assessment of the 100-day plan, and then it helped us drive the 100-day planning for next year and created that cycle that we were after [for] continuous improvement.” When Principal 1 was asked about her most beneficial professional learning experience in the district, she highlighted the 100-day plan process:

Especially coming on as a new principal… we write the 100-day plans. But, behind that work, a lot of professional development was provided about the whole process and the
meaning behind it, and how it mirrors going to the doctor, and how they complete their rounds. So, we partner with schools… and to have other colleagues and I be able to partner up… and go into our schools… and visit classrooms… and bring our faculties together to share feedback has been really powerful, not just for myself, but for everyone involved in that process. So, I think that’s probably the strongest and most beneficial [professional learning].

District Leader 2, a former principal, and current Director of Professional Learning also talked about the value of this professional learning for principals. She said, “The instructional rounds has [sic] been a huge opportunity… [it is] job embedded, real-time, developed by them around the problem of practice that their faculty has identified, and it’s meaningful to them.”

**Resources: Common learning experiences.** Both time and financial resources were invested in professional development that increased principals’ capacity to work and learn collaboratively. One such investment was related to determining each leader’s individual leadership strengths. As a part of the book study that principals completed during the Summer Retreat, each principal was taken through a process of determining potential areas in which they demonstrated strong leadership skills. District Leader 1 labeled this as important knowledge that contributed to their collective work. He stated:

I have used that in my work with them to say, “Ok, we are going to work on this together, and I know that you are achiever and you are the [motivator]. You are going to market and communicate this, so here’s what I need you to do…” sort of connecting everybody’s strengths. I think it’s been profound for them to understand that when you work with any collaborative group, it’s important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the group.
It was evident from other interviews that the identification of these strengths was shaping the way that principals and district leaders interacted and supported one another. Principal 1 described how principals’ understanding of their strengths was shaping their work and their culture in the district:

I love tapping in and pulling the best out of others and seeing that come alive when you’re working on a project, and saying “You’re great at the planning, I’m great at organizing” and watching it bring individuals together and create that power for all of us. Our system is very much a collaborative group and you got to see that today [reference to the superintendent collaborative]. I think it is also embedded, even though it might not be documented, that we are here to support each other and tap into each other strengths and be a part of the leadership team. What solidified my own beliefs and what I was feeling about that is we did a book study this past year and spent a lot of time in our principals’ retreat in June talking about our strengths. We did the strengths-finder test…that interpersonal piece was still a strong one for me.

The principals’ identified strengths that emerged from the summer book study were documented and made available as a resource within the district. District Leader 2 identified how the development of this common knowledge around leadership strengths was contributing to collaboration between both school and district leaders:

We’ve done the strength-finders for leaders… to know which leadership domain that we function out of as leaders whether it be executive functioning or that kind of thing. We can draw on each other’s strengths and reach out to that person. Maybe someone’s strength is research. You can say, “Do you have a resource, or are you familiar with a resource to help my thinking as I explain this to a parent or to another stakeholder or
something?” We’re planning for a conference, and I was trying to think about who could help and I pulled up the [spreadsheet] to look at peoples’ strengths information and then asked three people to help.”

Another common learning experience supported by the district was more costly than the aforementioned book study and developed a common strategic planning framework and vocabulary for principals. The district regularly sent principals to be trained by an outside non-profit group focused on strategic organizational improvement. The superintendent’s vision was for all principals to participate in the process of becoming a certified evaluator for this system.

District Leader 1 described the process principals participated in:

[The method began as] a business improvement [and] has now been captured in an educational criteria improvement model. So, each year a new set of principals, usually 5 to 6, go through the training, which provides them with enough training to be an examiner. What they do is go off with a group of examiners to whoever has applied for criteria support in the state, and they apply the criteria to supporting strengths and weaknesses for that business or educational facility or healthcare facility. And, that’s been profound because it has provided us with a systems approach, which is what we’ve been after, and it’s given us structure to what we do organizationally.

District Leader 3 talked about the district’s financial support for principals to learn the strategic improvement process. When asked if the district paid for principals to attend examiner training, he replied, “The district does. There’s also a cost associated not only with the process but depending on the site visit and the examiner level. [They] will typically have to travel and spend time away from work. So, our school system picks up the cost for that.”
Multiple interview participants were able to identify the value of this common learning. Principal 1 believed going through the strategic improvement training had a “large impact” because all the principals “were gaining the same knowledge.” Principal 3 talked about how it supported a common vocabulary among the principals. She said, “When someone says strategic plan, we’re not like ‘What is that?’ We know that.” District Leader 2 also saw value in this common language. She described the training organization as “performance excellence at its best.” She stated, “Even if they haven’t been an examiner, they know that language and they know that we’re all driven by those same ideas.”

The single survey participant, a principal in the district, was questioned directly about the culture of the district. The respondent agreed that the district displayed a “culture of collaboration.” The respondent attributed this to participation in the monthly collaborative meetings, labeling them as “a crucial part to our success.” The collaborative structures and support from district leaders were core components that dictated principal growth and development. Within, and sometimes as a result of these important structures, systems and resources were used to create common processes and common experiences that further accentuated principals’ abilities to think and work collectively. This confluence of organizational elements fostered ongoing teamwork, a spirit of interdependence among the school principals, and a shift in the district’s culture.

**Theme 2: A strong internal focus for learning.** The district organizational fostered a focus for principal professional development that was aligned to the specific goals of the district. Understanding the structure of the monthly collaboratives was crucial to identifying this theme. However, as previously described with the culture of collaborative learning, the connections between these collaboratives and other organizational elements resulted in the prioritized
internal focus for principals. The district structures shaped and even limited the focus for principal learning to be prioritized around the goals and values of the district. The impact of this focus was evident in leaders’ interactions with their environment and external stakeholders.

**Structure: Guiding tenets.** Multiple interview participants highlighted the importance of the district’s Guiding Tenets (see Appendix H) in setting the direction for principal learning. District Leader 1 referred to the Guiding Tenets document as their “Bible.” He described the document:

This is basically our big fat strategic plan boiled down into one page. These are the main strategic goals that we feel are important. We have core values. We have our goals, our core competencies, our key practices, and we center all our collaboration around the four [professional learning community] questions. As it relates to goals, we try to correlate all of our work to these big goals, which is easily done because if you read them, they are large enough that you can do that. As it relates to [principal professional development], everything we do with strategic planning and supporting principal growth is captured here.

District Leader 1 added how the development of the Guiding Tenets had impacted district focus and planning over time:

We started with this giant strategic plan that captured everything we did, and it wasn’t really strategic. It just captured everything. So, now we’re driving to the priorities… I think we are doing better at… prioritizing that plan to really connect to things that matter to us most.

The alignment between principal growth and the Guiding Tenets that was suggested by District Leader 1 was evident in the observed *superintendent collaborative* as principals discussed their
plan for addressing the needs of their low-socioeconomic and high-ability students. Principals’ development of this effort aligned with several of the district’s Guiding Tenets including the Core Value of “exemplary student learning,” the Core Competency of offering a “rigorous, comprehensive, and engaging curriculum,” and the Key Practice of [incorporating] problem-solving and innovation into teaching and learning.”

Principal 3 saw herself as someone who had benefitted from the structured focus provided by the Guiding Tenets. She described the collaboratives as her most meaningful professional development, but further described how the Guiding Tenets gave the district an identity and provided direction for the collaboratives:

All the meetings that we have each month… they’re always aligned. It’s not like we’re going from one thing to the next. For someone like me, I appreciate that being aligned… I feel like it’s the same thing from [the] top-down. We always go back to our Guiding Tenets. If we have a great idea, “How does that align to who we are and what we expect to do in [our district]?” When we meet… we are trying to help each other and encourage each other through resources and discussions that we have, and going back to our Guiding Tenets and our vision to make sure everything is in line.

District Leader 2 believed that the clear and commonly understood focus was one of the most beneficial things the district had done to support principal professional development. She stated, “[The] common focus on where we are as a district, our Guiding Tenants, and our core values… That should drive everything that we do, and it’s okay to say “no” to something if it does not fit within that framework.” As environmental elements that influenced the district were discussed with interview participants, the effect of the internal focus, determined in part by the guiding tenets, became more apparent.
**Environment: External training.** The district was selective about the types of training that principals engaged in and used external training most often to achieve specific goals set by the district. Principals 2 and 3 described participating in a variety of trainings outside the district. Their participation in the external conferences and workshops they described was typically justified by their involvement in the visioning process or their responsibility for specific initiatives they were leading and the initiatives led by these principals were an outgrowth of the district’s mission and vision. Principal 2 stated:

> Through [the visioning] process I feel like if I can relate any type of professional learning need back to this, they [the district leaders] will make it happen for me. The same thing is true for our Special Education Director and [District Leader 2] being our Professional Learning Director.

Principal 3, who led the district’s blended learning high school campus, had recently attended several national conferences related to technology and online learning. District Leader 2 suggested that the district only “sometimes” chose to participate in principal leadership trainings provided by the state. Most often, the district would do so by sending selected district leaders, who would then redeliver it for their principals. District Leader 2 suggested that participation in state provided trainings was something that they needed to continue to be selective about. She stated, “We can do some of that internally. [We are] really trying to move away from *sit-and-get* types of things as much.” This process of approving and selectively participating in outside training suggested that the district’s support for principal growth was prioritized around the internal priorities that had been developed.

**Environment: State system for principal evaluation.** The state within which the district operated had a recently redesigned model for principal evaluation. The primary tool used to rate
principal performance in this model was a rubric that described various levels of performance across a variety of state-identified instructional leadership standards. Principals had multiple observations and discussions with their evaluators over the course of a year. They were also required to collect evidence for the indicators in the rubric to demonstrate their performance within specific standards.

Each interviewed participant was asked about the principal evaluation process as it related to principal professional development. While the interviewees’ answers generally supported the idea that evaluations could be professional development opportunities for administrators, it was evident that the standards and indicators in the rubric and the conversations between principals and evaluators that occurred through the prescribed evaluation process were not viewed as being critical to principal growth. The evaluation process and instructional leadership standards were seen as less impactful to principal development because they were not tightly aligned to specific aspects of the district’s focus.

District Leader 2, a former principal, believed that professional growth was possible through the evaluation process but felt the focus was disconnected from the “work” of the district. When asked if she believed that principals saw the evaluation process as a growth opportunity, she replied:

I think they do. For me, the growth piece of it was more about the self-reflection in the process. I would dare say that’s the common theme. It’s less about the feedback. Often times, [you receive one or two visits over the course of the year]. It’s not truly embedded in the work.
Principal 3 demonstrated a similar sentiment:

I feel like the expectation that we are held to is so high, that when I look at that rubric, I feel like we are hitting those indicators all the time… We don’t have to look at that rubric and go indicator-by-indicator to say, “Are we using data the way that we need to?” or “Are we leveraging whatever the way we need to?”… I love that we’re trying to meet [those standards] but also go beyond that. We’re not letting that just box us in… I appreciate that doesn’t drive the work that I have to do, that it’s really about that vision and what we believe in [our district] and staying true to that… But we do use [the rubric] because it is part of what [the state] expects.

While all principals and leaders participated in the process required by the state, its perceived value was only in how well it aligned to the work principals were expected to do and the established vision in the district. Thus, the rubric and standards found within were not emphasized aspects of principals’ learning unless corrective support from a principal supervisor or the superintendent was deemed necessary.

**Stakeholders: Partnerships.** Like most school districts, the case district had a variety of outside agencies and organizations with which they worked and partnered. The concept of having a strong internal focus, did not breed isolation. Instead, it shaped the way in which the district communicated their goals and vision and dictated the terms of how they would work with outside partners. District Leader 2 described how the district entered into partnerships with outside stakeholders:

We are always driven by our guiding tenets, with any partnership or community [group], whatever that may entail. One of the things embedded is that we will ask people, “How can what you are asking us to partner with or do… How is this going to help us achieve
one of these things or how does it relate to one of our core values?” And principals know that as well, even if it’s trainings within their own building. We are all driven by that same framework of guidelines, and they know that.

Principal 3 had coordinated with a variety of district partners during the visioning process. She stated:

In the development of this vision, I have met with every executive at [anonymous business]. I have been to their boardroom and shared our vision. I have been to [business] meetings and shared our vision. I think that comes from the superintendent and the [strategic improvement] process. Our stakeholders have to know who we are so they know how to best support us. But also, they know why we are coming at them and saying, “We need these resources.” So, I feel like [my district] is a great place in that [respect]. Because we have that [vision] in place, everyone knows how they can help support us.

As outside groups aimed to partner with the district, whether related to principal professional development or not, the strong internal focus of the district was used to shape those interactions and agreements.

**Principals as Adult Learners**

Knowles’s et al. (2015) andragogical model was selected as a framework to analyze the learning experience of principals within the case district as they engaged in district provided professional development. The andragogical model evolved over time to ultimately include six assumptions about the needs of adult learners. These assumptions were meant to inform the practices of those charged with leading various types of adult learning. However, Knowles et al. (2015) did not propose that all six principles were required in order to provide effective or
meaningful learning experiences. Instead, Knowles et al. (2015) believed the model could be “adapted or adopted in part or in whole” (p. 78), and the application of andragogy as a process model was necessarily dependent upon the context where application occurred. One contextual factor worth noting in Knowles’s et al (2015) andragogical model is the nature of the goals or purposes for learning. Knowles et al. (2015) suggested that the goals and purposes of adult learning, though separate and distinct from the assumptions about adult learners, “serve to shape and mold the learning experience” (p. 79). The purpose for learning dictated the developmental outcomes for adult learners. Goals could be categorized as targeting individual, institutional, or societal growth. In the case district, the nature of these goals was observed to be primarily institutional, leading to improved school and district outcomes.

**Research Question 2: Presentation of Theme**

Research Question 2 (RQ2) was designed to assist the researcher in understanding how the district organization around principal professional development supported principals’ needs as adult learners. As was previously labeled, multiple school and district leaders identified the collaborative meeting cycle as the most beneficial professional development provided to principals. These structures contributed greatly to the collaborative learning culture in the district. The primary focus of the ongoing collaboratives and principal support conversations with district leaders were often school-level practices and issues facing the school administrators in their daily work and projects that specific groups of principals were leading to address student needs identified at the district level. Principal 2 identified her participation in the district’s visioning process as the most beneficial professional development she had received. Through that process, she was tasked with developing a district-wide behavior management plan to support not only her alternative school campus, but students and schools across the district. Both
the collaboratives and the visioning process were guided by strong alignment to the districts’ Guiding Tenets.

Principals appeared to place a high value on their individual and collective work and saw it as key to their development as a leader. The district seemed to leverage systems and structures to direct principal professional development toward improvements in school and district outcomes. The needs of principals as learners were met as a result of the close connection between acquiring new knowledge and addressing the goals of the district or the principals’ individual school. In this manner, the tasks associated with school and district improvement became professional development for the principals engaged in the work.

**Theme: School/district improvement as professional development.** Across the different collaboratives and interactions with district leaders, principals were primarily engaged in learning and development to attain the goals of the district or to address the needs of their particular schools. Principal learning related to school and district improvement initiatives demonstrated correlations to the andragogical assumptions. Figure 4.2 highlights the andragogical principles that correlated to principals’ participation in district professional development as well as the specific indicators within the data that aligned to these principles.

![Figure 3](image)

*Figure 3.* Research question 2 theme. The case district’s focus on goals related to school and district improvement correlated to support for principals’ as adult learners.
The need to know. According to Knowles et al. (2015), building learner awareness for a need to know something new is often the first step for those charged with teaching adults. District leaders created a need for learning in principals that supported school/district improvement in several ways. First, the Guiding Tenets, which outlined the district’s strategic vision, values, and goals, were seen as a controlling factor that determined what would be learned. District Leader 2 was asked to identify the professional development experiences in the district that were aligned to the goals identified in the Guiding Tenets. He stated, “I think all of our professional learning experiences are aligned, and nothing that we’re providing is outside the scope of those. I know that because we always start with that in mind [when planning].” Principals understood that their learning in the district was always aligned to the Guiding Tenets. Principal 3 recognized that this focus was impacting the “quality and quantity” of her professional development, while Principal 3 believed “having a clear focus certainly [was] affecting the content” of her professional development. The Guiding Tenets set a standard that suggested where principals should invest their time and energy learning new information.

Awareness for the need to learn was also created at the school level as principals participated in walkthroughs with district leaders and the instructional rounds to evaluate the impact of the schools’ 100-day plans. These activities provided principals with an assessment of their schools’ current states, which could suggest direction for their own development. District Leader 1 labeled the work that principals were currently engaged in to deepen their knowledge of curriculum and instruction in literacy. He labeled how he was using individual collaboratives with his principals to expose them to new material even before principals attended training:

We have recognized [the need]… to provide the ongoing support [for] what [administrators] need to know and understand about curriculum. We have developed
what we call admin. academies for lack of a better word. So, what we will do is during the academy, we will learn about the [observation] tool… and we will go into 8-10 classrooms, …[give] feedback to the teachers, and then [identify] next steps for principals. [We are] sort of modeling how to use that as a next step tool, and then taking that to collaboratives to work through… The math [academy] won’t start until December. The math will start with the [observation tool]. We will do some learning about that first and then the same thing, go into the classrooms. We have already started in my individual collaborations with my principals, because I wanted to front load it. We’ve already started using [the observation tool] as I walkthrough with them.

District Leader 1 was using these opportunities to create labels for practices that administrators were going to learn about in the upcoming academy, and creating an awareness of what was currently happening in their schools. This established a need for the upcoming principal learning to address gaps in instruction and support better practices in the classroom.

Similar to the example above, the instructional rounds that followed the 100-day plan implementation highlighted areas of needed development for principals and their leadership teams. District Leader 2 saw this as a powerful process. She stated, “It’s one of the most meaningful things that we do… When you’re receiving feedback in that school on your problem of practice, it helps define your next steps.” District Leader 1 shared an example of how the high school had used the instructional rounds and highlighted the 100-day plan process as a cycle of improvement:

The instructional rounds happen at the time of year where you can capture, “Did we do this well?” It was almost the assessment of the 100-day plan, and then it helped us drive
the 100-day planning for next year and created that cycle that we were after… of continuous improvement.

The feedback provided through the instructional rounds was used to set the stage for the next year’s 100-day plan. Undoubtedly, some of the next steps that were identified through this process, as District Leader 2 referenced, would point out areas of learning and development for principals as they attempt to support needed changes in their schools. Both the walkthroughs that occurred during individual collaboratives and the instructional rounds offered assessments of the schools’ and leaders’ current states and created awareness in the leader about next steps for learning and leadership.

The superintendent’s expectations for principals also supported their need to learn new information related to specific district initiatives. The structure of the observed superintendent collaborative provided elementary principals with the opportunity to have their work and learning vetted and directed by the superintendent around a district-wide problem of practice that had been identified during the Summer Principal Retreat. Principals were tasked by the superintendent with developing an enrichment program for the districts’ high-ability, but low-socioeconomic status students. Collectively, they had engaged in several weeks of learning and collaboration to develop a plan. This had included calling on other district personnel, such as counselors and teachers who had worked with similar programs in the past, to support their learning. The superintendent collaborative did not include the elementary supervisor, leaving principals with direct access and accountability to the superintendent. This created a sense of urgency and expectation to ensure they were engaged in meaningful learning and developing a high quality outcome for the district.
The need to be self-directed (self-concept). The second principle related to adult learners, the need to be self-directed, suggested that those charged with leading adult learning should honor the adults’ concept of self (Knowles et al., 2015). This meant that leaders must recognize learners were capable of decision-making and capable of directing their own learning. In light of the institutional growth nature of the goals observed within the case district, self-directed learning did not necessarily appear in the data as free choice or something as concrete as personalized professional development plans for principals. However, there were opportunities through the collaboratives for principals to contribute to the direction of their learning, even while aimed at the school/district improvement goals.

Survey participants were asked, “How do professional learning experiences within your district build upon your own needs and/or prior experiences as a learner?” Only one principal response was collected. The single principal respondent, answered, “We share our needs for professional learning through leadership team meetings and collaboratives with our director.” Principal 1 recognized that her self-identified needs were addressed through the individual collaboratives she had with District Leader 3. She described the individual collaborative saying, “It’s a combination [of formal and informal support]. It depends on the needs. It might be a question I have that day, or it might depend on the needs of the school that day.” District Leader 3 believed that it was up to the principals to direct these visits. He described the individual collaborative saying, “We might also look at scheduling, personnel issues… You know it’s really up to them to bring to the table what their needs are. It’s very personalized in approach… the support that I give them.” District Leader 1 and District Leader 3, the principal supervisors, highlighted principals’ opportunities to contribute to the agendas in the grade-level collaboratives, which they facilitated each month. District Leader 2 was a former principal who
had participated in the *grade-level collaboratives*. She stated:

[The principal supervisors] facilitate [the collaboratives] but [they are] driven by the principals. I was a principal for the last four years. That work was driven by our needs for our schools and what we saw as a group collectively. [We identified what] we could work on together that would help the entire district, but then also benefit our individual schools.

Her statement suggested that the principals felt like they were able to contribute to the direction of the district and their own learning as they pursued district goals.

*The role of learners’ experiences.* Knowles et al. (2015) recognized that adults vary greatly from one another in their approach and motivation to learn, due in large part to the variety of experiences they had. These experiences were a key consideration when planning learning for adults, and failure to recognize them could quickly lead to feelings of rejection. Knowles et al. (2015) suggested that leaders of adult learning might build upon the rich experiences of their adult audience by engaging them in learning techniques that draw out and build upon their unique experiences. He suggested group discussions, collaborative problem-solving, and other techniques rather than the traditional learning delivery models. These types of techniques were observed during the superintendent collaborative. Principals that participated in the superintendent collaborative had been involved in a range of conversations and collaborations with each other and with other stakeholders from within the district as they designed a model for a math and science focused student enrichment program. The time spent in the collaborative gave the administrators the opportunity to share their learning and planning with the superintendent. Principals were also able to offer additional support or guidance to the group discussion. For example, one principal had been working with District Leader 2 to learn
more about social and emotional supports for the districts’ pre-K and special education students. She offered her learning to the group as she saw common needs among the districts low-socioeconomic students. Principal 1 saw the discussion and collective problem-solving techniques that were observed during the superintendent collaborative as common to the way the principals worked. She said:

We have our principal collaboratives. We have our [grade level] collaborative with [District Leader 3], and [another] with [the superintendent]. You would find, if you could listen over the course of a month, [there is a] focus on our priorities that we’ve identified [and] the progress that we are making or lack of… if we’re feeling like we are stuck… you saw some of that today.

Leading collaboratives in this way created opportunities for learners’ experiences to be valued and recognized.

**Readiness to learn.** Evidence related to principals’ readiness to learn was somewhat limited. Knowles et al. (2015) suggested that adults were most ready to learn things when they were presented with situations in their life that required new knowledge in order to respond to the situation. In working toward the institutional goals tied to school and district improvement, readiness for new knowledge did not seem to be primary a factor in principal learning. However, there were some situations in principals’ learning experiences that exposed them to new models of performance that might have created a higher degree of readiness for them as learners. These models were typically aimed at district-wide adoptions of new practices or initiatives.

For example, content coordinators in literacy and math conducted walkthroughs with school principals, supporting them with labeling and identifying best practices in specific content
areas. District Leader 2 talked about the importance of the principal walkthroughs with coordinators:

Our coordinators of math and literacy will often do walkthroughs with their principals, and that is very helpful, especially if you are coming from a different setting. If you’ve been high school person and you are now going to be in an elementary school, it looks very different. So, they provide that bug in the administrator’s ear as they are doing walk-throughs… “This is why this is happening… with the reading groups… why they’re structured this way.” So, it really helps [the principals] as they go in to do observations to have the correct lens in which to be looking.

The coordinators’ support for principals exposed them to expert models for observing and providing content specific feedback to teachers.

District Leader 1 and 3 were both creating online courses to facilitate their grade-level collaboratives using the district’s newly adopted learning management system. This was meant to model use of the system to support principals in developing and modeling it for their respective schools. Principal 1 identified the adoption of the learning management system as part of the “technology integration.” She stated, “We’ve just been given a little professional development so we can start learning as leaders and be able to take that back to our schools.” Principal 1 also expressed the desire to learn more to support this work in her school. She was asked “When you consider professional development offered to you by your school district, what do you wish you had more of?” She responded:

Thinking about innovation and our 21st century learners, there is such urgency for me to be on top of the technology and more abreast of all the components of connecting to the classroom. Our system is offering that… but just having more [offered].
These models of performance increased principals readiness to learn especially as it revealed gaps in principals understanding or ability that might negatively impact their ability to support others in their school.

**Problem-centered orientation to learning.** Because of the institutional nature of the goals that were driving principal learning, application of principals’ learning into the day-to-day work of the school or district was rarely disconnected from the learning event. Knowles’ et al. (2015) posited that adults were most likely to learn when they understood how the new learning would benefit them in dealing with issues they faced in their everyday lives. When learning could be presented and applied in the context of the adults’ lives, adults were more motivated to engage. In the case district, professional development for principals was primarily built around tasks and activities that established a cycle where learning was followed closely by application in the school or district context. There was a high degree of what Knowles et al. (2015), called life-centered or problem-centered orientation for learning.

The alignment between learning and work existed across the school year, beginning with the Summer Principal Retreat. District Leader 2 saw the Summer Principal Retreat as the starting point of the learning and planning cycle. She said, “We have the principals retreat, which takes place in July, where we all go away together. So, there is learning involved in that and applying that learning to the planning for the upcoming school year.” Principal 1 explained how the retreat established their focus and determined their work for the year. She stated, “Our priorities are always identified usually during our principal retreat. A lot of work is done over a two to three day period and we have time to plan so that it’s all aligned within the strategic plan.” The observed superintendent collaborative was focused on priorities established during the retreat. From the initial identification of the district goal during the retreat, to the time of the
observed collaborative, principals had been engaged in a cycle of learning, problem-solving, and application to develop enrichment programming for the districts’ high-capacity low-socioeconomic status elementary students. For the principal learners, there was a strong connection between learning and developing new ideas to address the identified district need.

District Leader 2, who was responsible for district professional learning, identified moving to more action-oriented professional development experiences for principals, and all educators, as priority. She also acknowledged the need to have relatively immediate application for learning as one of the reasons the district had become more selective about attending state trainings. She stated:

[We have been] trying to move away from sit and get type things as much… One of the things that has been an emphasis for me is to make sure that [educators] leave with something. [I have tried] even changing a [professional development] so it is called a work session. So, they know they are going to work, and they are going to leave with something. That’s where frustration sets in I think, when you learn a lot about something and then you’re overwhelmed with all this knowledge. You get back, and there’s no time, and you don’t know what to do with it. So, if they actually have time within [the] structure that we have determined for that learning to take place to develop [something] whether it be an action plan or [whatever]… but… they leave with something.

From the interviewed school and district leaders, it appeared as if the monthly collaboratives were one place where principals were engaged in learning and then had opportunities to develop their learning for application. District Leader 1 labeled how a recent secondary collaborative had resulted in the creation of a product which principals could use to communicate with stakeholders about the districts newly adopted learning management system:
This last time, we talked about how to differentiate for students using [the learning management system]. So we had some articles and things in [an online module] that we had sort of flipped. I had asked them to do that prior to coming in, read those and discuss in the [online] board. Coming out of that, [we had] some results for developing a product that we could share later in relation to beliefs about next steps [for differentiation].

Because the district was early in the process of implementing the new learning management system, learning more about the system through the district leaders’ modeling was just as valuable to principals as the development of the product. Both increased principals’ readiness to return to their schools and support teachers with the transition.

District Leader 2’s experiences as a principal participating in the district collaboratives mirrored District Leader 1’s recent example. District Leader 2 saw the connection between learning and application as a strength in the collaboratives and felt it supported principals as learners while they were addressing the institutional goals that drove their work. She said:

I was a principal for the last four years, and [the collaboratives were] driven by our needs for our schools and what…we could work on together that would help the entire district, but then also benefit our individual schools. That was probably one of the most meaningful [professional development experiences]. I mean its sort of the same concept [for teachers]. We have lots of teachers that the most meaningful experiences are the ones that are job embedded, that are applicable and authentic, that happen in real time, [that generate] things that we can take back and use immediately, developing the work products so that you’re not just talking about something, but you’re actually leaving with the product and what you hoped to use.
The principals’ development of the 100-day plan was based on the needs of their teachers and was built around a problem of practice they had identified for their schools. After implementing these plans for teacher professional development, the subsequent instructional rounds brought teams of colleagues into their schools to provide feedback and assess the results of the 100-day plan. District Leader 1 recognized how the feedback provided, which was a learning opportunity for the principals and teachers involved, ultimately drove principals back into planning for the next year. He felt the process had given them a structure for strategic improvement:

That’s where that structure comes in and that’s where that 100-day plan and instructional rounds structure comes in… We started to merge those [even though they started as two activities]… The reason we merged them was because the instructional rounds happen at the time of year where you can capture, “Did we do this well?” It was almost the assessment of the 100-day plan and then it helped us drive the 100-day planning for next year and created that cycle that we were after… of continuous improvement.

District Leader 1 felt the 100-day planning process had changed the way they looked at professional development in the district:

What we learned from [this process] was … we sort of shifted away from the go-and-get. We had been a system that did a lot of that because we are a high performing system, and we [had] access to revenue. So, we sent people everywhere. But, it was not translating necessarily… even though we made it part of the expectation that the information would be shared. [The 100-day plan] was a more job embedded approach. You might have an exemplary teacher on a team that is doing the questioning well, and other teachers are
[able to see] that through the instructional rounds. Taking that back and implementing a next step… that’s strategic. So, it was a game changer for us.

Across the district, the structures and systems in which principals were engaged maintained tight connections between learning, strategic planning, and application to address the needs of specific schools and the district. Learning nearly always occurred in-context for principals as new knowledge was closely tied to the district and school goals driving their work. This resulted in learning for principals that exhibited a strong problem-oriented nature.

**Motivation.** Tough (1979) stated that normal adults are typically motivated to learn unless external factors inhibit their motivation. Two examples of factors that might inhibit adult learning were failing to address learners’ needs and insufficient time for learning. As previously described, the focus of principals’ professional development on school and district outcomes supported the learners’ needs in a variety of ways, but especially in terms of what Knowles et al. (2015) called the learners’ need to know and orientation toward real-world problems. The district professional development structures and systems established time that was focused on principals learning collectively about how to improve their work. This led to a higher degree of motivation and ownership for district goals.

Principal 1 labeled her motivation to participate in district professional development and how it impacted her and her staff. She made connections to her motivation to learn collaboratively as a teacher and likened that experience to one that was more recently fostered through the 100-day plan/instructional round process. This was a job embedded example of time being allotted for principal and organizational learning. She stated:

I was very motivated [to participate in the process]. Coming into my school, and I don’t know why, but we were a school that had not had [the 100-day plan] process established.
So, my first year was me really digging in and learning and visiting other schools to understand what I needed to do with that [process]. But, just connecting to my growth as an educator in the classroom, the most powerful learning that occurred for me was when we had the chance to collaborate and visit each others’ classrooms. So, I knew for the school it would be powerful, for my teachers to hear that positive feedback. Because the focus is on the specific thing based on your problem of practice… So, I was 100% onboard and excited in being part of that learning and sharing that with my staff.

Principal 2 appreciated the time devoted to learning through the visioning process as she was engaged in developing a district wide system for behavior management and a revised alternative school program. She labeled her motivation to learn as well as the importance of building research and learning into her work:

I feel like in a leadership role there is that inner motivation to do your best. We wouldn’t be in the role we are in if we didn’t’ seek to grow and learn… In this role, I have the most difficult students in the district. So, I have to figure out, “How can I make them successful while they are with me? How can I make them successful when they go back? How have other people done that?”… Research is probably the most important thing for me, to have the time to devote to research, because there are people out there that are doing it right, or at least pieces that are right. So, for me to have the opportunity to build a program in this community, this is a game changer for these kids… If they are successful and they get a high school diploma, they are going to be productive members of society. I want them to be that. So, if all I have to do is research and find an article or find a best practice out there and that will help them, I’m going to do it. So, I applaud this process because they do allow us the time to figure it all out and put it all together.
Principal 2’s response highlighted her personal sense of ownership for the district’s goals around more effective behavioral interventions for students which seemed to increase her motivation to succeed in her learning and work.

In the case district, principals operated under the clear focus of school and district growth goals. Alignment to these goals was a strong support to the principal learners’ needs. They were provided with resources, structures, and time to support their learning. The above factors addressed many of the barriers that might otherwise have inhibited their natural tendency to learn, resulting in a higher degree of motivation overall.

**Summary of Findings**

The case district had invested time and other resources into creating a focused and collaborative environment in which its principals could learn and grow through supportive networks with each other as well as their district leaders. The culture of collaborative learning, which was executed through the district structures and systems, relied on the clearly defined vision of the district. That vision allowed principals to coordinate their work and their learning around common goals. These goals were not always personalized to the individual administrator. They were more typically aligned to the needs of the district as a whole. However, principals saw their development as leaders as tightly linked to the collaborative work in which they were engaged as they pursued goals that were more institutional than individual in nature. Principals demonstrated evidence that they were motivated to learn and the district was providing them with direct and indirect opportunities from which they might grow. District leaders saw themselves as facilitators and supporters of principal learning and they orchestrated cooperative networks of principals to solve the problems within their schools and within the district.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand how the organizational features of a school district generated professional development experiences for current principals and how those experiences supported them as adult learners. The PELP coherence framework provided a system of organizational elements that helped to define the functional parts of the organization under study (Childress et al., 2011). Principal professional development was then examined through the assumptions proposed in Knowles’s et al. (2015) andragogical model to describe the influence of professional development on the needs of the principals as they engaged in learning. A qualitative single-site case study design was used to answer two guiding research questions: (1) How is one selected school district organized to provide professional development for principals? (2) How does district organization around principal professional development support the needs of principals as adult learners?

Data were collected through a series of interviews, surveys, and an observation of a single principal professional development session identified by district leaders. Three district leaders were interviewed, each with responsibilities tied to principal supervision or professional development. Three current principals were interviewed. A voluntary survey was sent to the 10 remaining district principals. The researcher observed and scripted a professional development session for elementary principals facilitated by the district superintendent.

Related to Research Question 1(RQ1), the researcher identified two themes that suggested how organizational features were shaping principals’ professional development. First, the district used a variety of professional development structures and systems to build a culture of collaborative learning among the principals. While culture is a stand-alone feature of the organization according to the PELP framework, which was used to examine the district’s organizational features, in the case district it appeared to be an outgrowth of other organizational
features (Childress et al., 2011). A monthly cycle of *collaboratives* brought principals together in groups and with their individual supervisors to address the needs of the district and their specific schools. Principal learning was inherent to this work. The district invested in additional common principal learning experiences, which supported principals in understanding how to work together in ways that accentuated their talents and developed a common vocabulary that supported collaboration around the initiatives of the district.

In addition, the district maintained a strong internal focus for their work. This gave principals a clear purpose for what they were learning and why they were learning it. The focus began with a clearly defined vision for the district’s work, provided by the district’s Guiding Tenets. The Guiding Tenets were foundational to the learning and work of principals and ensured alignment between the different professional development opportunities in which they participated. The clear internal focus did not prohibit the district from implementing outside initiatives or stop them from forming strategic partnerships with stakeholders. Instead, it provided the case district with a clear sense of identity that guaranteed the learning and work in which principals were engaged was prioritized around to the district’s core values and goals.

Evaluating the principal learners’ needs required the researcher to examine their learning in the specific context of the district. Knowles et al. (2015) acknowledged there were many applications for andragogy, and the assumptions about adult learners had to be examined within the context they were being applied. In the case district, the influence of the goals that were driving principal learning was instrumental in evaluating the andragogical assumptions. One theme emerged related to Research Question 2 (RQ2), the use of school and district improvement as a mechanism for principals’ professional development. Principal learners’ needs were being met as learning was embedded with and related to their day-to-day work.
Principals’ job-embedded learning was centered upon what Knowles et al. (2015) identified as institutional goals. The district utilized structures and systems as well as specific strategies within the structures to support the principal learners’ needs as they worked toward improved outcomes for students, teachers, and schools. School and district improvement became relevant and engaging professional development for the district’s principals as they engaged in collaborative problem solving, identified their learning needs in the context of their respective schools, connected learning to district initiatives and classrooms, and provided feedback to one another.

**Conclusions Drawn From Findings**

Themes have been presented as they relate to the two guiding research questions. The themes that emerged from the analyzed data described how the organizational features of the district created an environment for principal professional development (RQ1) and how principal learners’ needs were affected as a result (RQ2). The subsequent conclusions are based upon these emerging themes, are presented in order of significance.

**Conclusion 1.** Aligning multiple levels of district leadership to principal professional development created a strong commitment to ongoing learning among district principals.

Through principals’ monthly interactions with their supervisors, both individually and collectively in their grade-level collaboratives, as well as their monthly meeting with their superintendent, a strong commitment to learning and development was fostered. Enomoto’s (2012) study, which examined the onboarding and development of rural assistant principals through a job embedded professional development program, identified several factors that impacted the administrators’ commitment to professional development activities. First, interruptions from the day-to-day emergencies that occurred in the professional lives of the
administrators seemed to take precedent over professional development activities. Second, administrators’ commitments to participate in professional development were directly related to the perceived level of leaders that organized or led the activities. Activities planned by central office were seen as important and became prioritized items in the administrators’ schedules. Last, administrators displayed independence upon returning to their respective schools, often opting out of follow-up activities related to their learning. These factors pointed to the importance of a professional development plan that was supported by multiple levels of leadership and was seen as a district investment rather than a series of isolated incidents.

In the case district, principals were provided with regular structured activities, which allotted time within their work for collaborative learning and problem solving. These activities were facilitated and supported by a variety of district leaders, from the superintendent to content-area coordinators, who participated with principals in the design of their professional development and the application of learning in their respective schools. The district vision and goals were clear to all parties, and undergirded the learning and work of the principals. Because of the clear vision provided by the district’s Guiding Tenets, principals’ learning was appropriately narrowed to focus upon the most essential information that would support school and the district improvement.

Darling Hammond et al. (2007) wrote that researchers needed to explore “the combination of factors that must be in place for learning to be robust and for candidates to develop a deep commitment to the work (p. 13).” The combination of a regular structured time for professional learning, multiple layers of interaction with district leaders, and the clear guiding vision that created alignment among these interactions speaks to Darling-Hammond’s et al. (2007) call to understand more about the conditions needed to implement effective principal in-
service programs. Because of these factors, principals viewed their interactions with district leaders as an aligned series of events focused on their needs and the needs of their teachers and students. As a result, they were committed to growing and developing according to these needs.

**Conclusion 2.** Principal development in areas aligned to broader leadership standards was contextualized to the district and the schools in which the principal served.

Johnson and Uline (2005) emphasized the importance of aligning pre-service and in-service principal development programs to nationally accepted leadership standards. They suggested that principal development in leadership standards-defined skills and dispositions was essential to increasing student achievement and addressing disparities in students’ educational outcomes, making it too important to be left to chance. Upon initial observation, one could potentially see the broader leadership skills defined within standards such as TILS or the 2015 Professional Standards for Education Leaders (formerly ISLLC) as largely unrepresented in the district’s professional development for principals. Among the case district principals, the most articulated example of leadership standards influencing their learning was through their annual evaluations against the state’s principal leadership rubrics. The evaluation process included opportunities for principals to reflect and provide evidence against the indicators within the rubrics. However, none of the interviewed principals identified the findings of the evaluation as a focus of their development as leaders. The interviewed district leaders only identified the evaluation indicators as a professional development need for principals when they had a demonstrated weakness requiring more intensive support from their supervisors.

Even though explicit links to the language of the standards and indicators that defined instructional leadership skills within the state rubrics or national standards were not always provided through principal professional development, principal learning regularly addressed
many of the skills needed by effective school leaders. Leaders expressed appreciating the
opportunity to reflect through the process of being evaluated, but preferred not using the rubrics
as a professional development focus because it felt “disconnected from the work.” The
collaboratives and interactions with district leaders pushed principals to develop many of the
standards-defined skills in ways that applied to the district context. For example, Standard 3
from the 2015 Professional Standards for Education Leaders calls for leaders to “strive for equity
of educational opportunity… to promote each student’s academic success and well-being”
(National Policy…, 2015, p. 11). The observed superintendent collaborative was evidence of an
ongoing process where principals had been engaged in a cycle of learning and problem solving
to address the needs of their poorest yet most capable elementary students. This pattern of
collaborative learning and designing, with the influence of the superintendent as a moderator and
couch, operationalized principal growth in this set of skills without placing a label on the
associated leadership standards. Principal 1 felt that her professional growth, as it related to
broader leadership standards, was supported through her participation in the more job-embedded
experiences she had as a principal. She stated, “I feel like the expectation that we are held to is
so high, that when I look at that rubric, I feel like we are hitting those indicators all the time.”

Derrington and Sherrat (2008) conducted a study of districts where superintendents were
using the ISLLC standards exclusively to evaluate principals. Superintendents in the study cited
several strengths related to the use of leadership standards including increasing the consistency
of conversations among leaders, hiring principals, and planning professional development. In
the case district, these standards were not explicitly emphasized for all principals. Instead, the
consistency of conversations and professional development for administrators was built upon the
common goals, structures, and systems that operationalized principals’ learning and work.
Through the implementation of and engagement in these organizational features, principals developed broader leadership skills as needed to serve their population of teachers and students.

**Conclusion 3.** The principles of adult learning promoted improved performance within the district.

This study was aimed at understanding more about principals as learners and the impact of professional development experiences designed, facilitated, and supported by a school district. Knowles et al. (2015) stated, “Adult learning becomes a powerful organizational improvement strategy when it is embedded in a holistic performance improvement system framework” (p. 153). Principals’ descriptions of their experiences through professional development suggested significant alignment to the andragogical assumptions, especially with regards to learner motivation, problem-oriented learning, the need to learn new information, and principal readiness to learn. Satisfaction of these adult learning principles was cultivated through the combination of organizational features (structures, systems, and resources) that created an improvement system within the district. While adult learning was never explicitly identified as an improvement strategy being employed by district leaders, the satisfaction of these assumptions impacted the attitudes and work of principals and supported systematic improvement at the district level.

Whether the learning was collective, through the monthly collaboratives and instructional rounds, or individualized through research during the district’s visioning process, principals displayed a high degree of motivation to participate in district provided professional development and rarely separated their own needs as learners from those of the district, their teachers, or their students. This was best captured by Principal 2 who linked her motivation to
learn more about effective strategies for behavior management to the long term opportunities it afforded the district’s students and the community overall. She stated:

If [students] are successful and they get a high school diploma, they are going to be productive members of society. I want them to be that. So, if all I have to do is research and find an article or find a best practice out there and that will help them, I’m going to do it.

Principals assessed their individual needs as learners through the district’s needs and their responsibilities as they related to district improvement. Principal 3 cited many external professional development opportunities that she had attended related to her role in the district’s blended learning effort stating, “If it aligns to the work that I’m doing, that’s what [the district leaders] send me to… I don’t need to attend things that aren’t relevant to the work that I’m doing.”

The district was addressing a variety of system-level efforts through principal professional development during the time of the research study. The development of district-wide behavioral interventions and supports, expansion of the district’s capacity for blended and online learning, and the adoption of new curricular standards and the accompanying instructional shifts required by teachers were among the issues being addressed. Each of these concentrations supported greater organizational outcomes for the district as a whole. However, the responses from interviewed principals suggested a high degree of individual ownership for these outcomes. Since the success of these efforts rested on the shoulders of those who would lead teachers in implementing changes in practice, it seemed that this type of individual motivation among the principals could only increase the potential for district improvement in these areas. The more motivated principals were to learn and the more they saw their own needs as learners reflected in
the needs identified at the district level, the more likely the district would be to engage the principal workforce in leading and sustaining needed changes in practice.

**Implications**

The findings of the study and subsequent conclusions drawn by the researcher have several implications for the case district and those charged with leading principal professional development.

**The case district.** The case district leaders should continue to use the monthly collaborative structures to lead principal learning. The problem-centered collaborative cohorts provided principals with meaningful learning and application that aligned strongly with district and school improvement goals. The three monthly *collaboratives* with the superintendent and principal supervisors provided the principals with regularly structured time for learning and direct application of their learning to their day-to-day work. Principal supervisors acted as more experienced mentors or coaches. A clear vision was provided by the district’s Guiding Tenets, which focused the principals’ learning. Principals were able to demonstrate changes in leadership skills, which aligned to broader educational leadership standards, even though these were typically not explicitly labeled in the work of the district or the learning for principals. The activities and the structure of the *collaboratives* aligned closely with what research suggested were the strategies and components of effective principal preparation and professional development programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Davis & Darling-Hammond 2012). The collaboratives provided the district with a systematic approach to principal growth and development as well as district and school improvement.

While district leaders were focused on developing principals to lead their specific initiatives and to address current needs of their school, they may want to consider additional
ways to engage the principals in differentiating or identifying their own learning needs. There appeared to be channels through which the district principals were able to inform the work that would occur through the *collaboratives*. However, the focus of their learning was largely collective in nature and aligned to goals set by the district. Encouraging the administrators to explore additional learning goals and even supporting them in seeking out individually relevant learning could broaden the knowledge base of the district and prevent the collective expertise of the district from becoming too narrow. Even though principal learning that centered upon their current day-to-day work supported the principals’ engagement as adult leaners, failing to build differentiated or broader skill sets among administrators over time could result in gaps in leadership skills among the district principals.

**Providers of principal professional development.** Through this study, suggestions for those charged with providing an in-service approach to principal professional development were offered. First, principal professional development was accomplished through organizational alignment. A set of well-established structures and systems, which included the engagement of district leaders at various levels and alignment to a clear district vision, created a systematic approach to principal professional development that engaged and motivated the principals as leaders and learners. Efforts aimed at principal professional development should consider the organizational factors that could support or inhibit principal professional development. Professional development leaders must ensure that these organizational factors are aligned so that professional development is viewed by the principals as a district level investment supported by district leadership at all levels.

Next, professional development for principals in the case district was focused upon what Knowles et al. (2015) identified as institutional growth goals. Even though these goals were not
necessarily designated by the principals, school leaders’ learning and work were naturally tied to the needs of schools and the district, making these goals relevant and motivating foci for their growth and development. Knowles et al. (2015) suggested that the assumptions related to adult learners’ needs must be examined in the context in which they are applied. Factors such as the goals and purposes for learning, individual learner differences, and situational differences impacted which assumptions were most relevant for learners and how the assumptions looked in practice. Leaders of principal learning, who wish to take a learner-focused approach, should consider the nature of the goals and purposes for principal learning as they consider strategies and systems for engaging principals as learners. As the goals or purposes for learning shift from the individual to the institution (district), different supports and structures may be required to maintain principal ownership of the required learning.

Recommendations

This study highlights several aspects of the school district organization that worked to support professional development opportunities. The influence of culture, leadership, structures, and systems were among the factors that created deeper learning experiences for principals and increased their commitment to the work. However, no single organizational feature resulted in a better learning environment for principals. Instead, the combination and interdependence of organizational factors was key. Future research studies should continue to explore the role of district leaders and the organizational decisions that demonstrate increased engagement of principal learners across a larger body of districts. More information is needed about how these organizational factors work together to create learning experiences and focus principal development through ongoing learning.

Also, when considering the purposes and goals that are driving principal professional development, there may be room to examine principal development more specifically through
the lens of human resource development (HRD). Knowles et al. (2015) saw adult learning as an important aspect of HRD, but the acquisition of individual knowledge and expertise were not the full picture. Instead, HRD was aimed at increased performance at the organization, work process, or individual level. The goals and purposes for learning were held by the organization, not the individual. The complexity of principals’ roles today necessitates the development of a broad knowledge base and a focus on increased performance of the organizations (schools and districts) they represent. Principals’ responsibilities as leaders may necessitate a different approach to their professional development that that of a traditional teacher. Future studies of principal development programs could explore these differences further to determine needed modifications in principal development programming that lead to improved organizational outcomes. Researchers should seek to understand the influence of organizational goals on the content and structure of principal professional development.

**Reflections**

The selection of this topic was personally relevant and based upon my experiences as a district leader and assistant principal in a large suburban school district. Principal professional development in my experience had been largely managerial in context and rarely equipped principals to problem-solve or deepened their leadership skills. The observations that were conducted and interviews that were held shed light on not only the procedural steps the school district used to facilitate principal development, but also on the underlying philosophy that supported learning and ongoing growth for everyone in the district.

A surprising discovery was made in uncovering the lack of emphasis district leaders and principals placed on the standards and rubrics that guided principal evaluation. In my experience, strengthening the links between professional development and evaluation criteria
created a more comprehensive approach to ongoing growth. However, the principals and district leaders opted to maintain a focus on the current priorities for the schools and district, and used this pragmatic focus as a vehicle to authentically address the broader leadership skills held in the standards.

Should my future responsibilities require planning or leading principal professional development, conducting this study has provided several significant takeaways that might inform my practice. First, the urgency for principals to engage as learners is fostered through a learning culture that provides leadership and support at a variety of levels. The role of district directors, supervisors, coordinators, etc., must be aligned to support the learning needs of administrators over time and across contexts. Secondly, organizational improvement depends on school leaders that are focused on the goals of the district. District leaders must mobilize the organizational elements at their disposal to support collective ownership of these institutional goals and maintain a strong focus for those whose learning is imperative to accomplishing district priorities. Last, blurring the lines between doing the work and learning about the work is an important strategy for principal professional development. Embedding meaningful interactions between principals and their supervisors, collaborations among principals, and focused opportunities for reflection into the day-to-day activities of principals may be the best vehicle for their professional development.
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Appendix A

District Leader Interview Protocol
District Leader Interview Protocol

1. What is your current role in the district? How long have you been in this position? Describe your responsibilities as they relate to professional development and principal management.

2. How often do principals engage in professional development or what you would characterize as a professional learning experience within your district?

3. What are the specific ways that you and other district leaders provide formal and/or informal professional development opportunities?

4. Which current district goals provide specific areas of focus for principal development? Tell me about any professional learning experiences that are aligned with this goal?

5. Overall, what steps has your district taken to support better professional development opportunities for principals?

   - Additional probing questions may be applied to elicit further information in the following areas:
     - Personnel – redefining/establishing positions to support the work or organizing people around the work
     - Resources – investments in training and personnel, discontinuing ineffective strategies, etc.
     - Structures/Systems – organizational chart, advisory committees, support networks, clear criteria for performance measures, etc., district improvement plans
     - Stakeholder Involvement – school board and local educational organizations
- Environment – response to... government initiated efforts, accountability metrics, implementation of externally developed frameworks for instruction or evaluation, private agency partnerships with districts
- Culture – beliefs about what we do and how we do it, learning as a part of the mission and vision of the district.

6. Now think about the most beneficial professional learning experience that your district has provided for principals. This may be one of the activities you have already highlighted or a different experience. Describe how the district planned, delivered, supported, and assessed that experience.

- Questions below will be used to fill in the gaps from the participant description or to probe more deeply.
  - What district-level decisions were made that helped to ensure principals received the most benefit from this experience?
  - Why was this new learning relevant for the principal(s) and how was a strong purpose for their learning demonstrated through this experience?
  - What role did the principals’ prior professional experience play in their learning?
  - Were there opportunities for them to set their own objectives for learning or make decisions about the path their learning would take?
  - Were principals expected to practice or apply their new learning? If so, where and when did they practice?
  - Would you say principals were motivated to participate in this experience? Why or why not?
7. What aspect of principal professional development do you believe to be most successful in your district? What has the district done to make that happen?

8. What aspect of principal professional development in your district would you like to improve? What might the district do to make that happen?

9. What else would you like to add to our conversation on principal professional development?
Appendix B

Principal Interview Protocol
Principal Interview Protocol

1. How long have you been a principal? Have you worked in other school districts in this same role?

2. How often do you engage in what you would characterize as a professional learning experience within your district?

3. What are the specific ways that your district leaders provide you with formal and/or informal professional learning opportunities?

4. What is an area that you feel you have grown in over your time as a principal? How did professional learning experiences within your district play a role in this development?

5. Now think about the most beneficial professional learning experience that your district has provided you as principal. This may be one of the activities you have already highlighted or a different experience. Describe that experience.

• Questions below will be used to fill in the gaps from the participant description or to probe more deeply.
  
  ▪ How motivated were you to participate in this experience and what factors impacted your motivation? How did those facilitating the learning set a strong purpose for the learning?
  
  ▪ How important was your prior experience to those facilitating the activity? How did connections to your own experiences help guide your new learning or the learning of others?
  
  ▪ What role did you play in identifying your own needs as a learner? Were their opportunities for you to direct your own plans for learning?
How did this learning experience connect to problems or scenarios that you were currently facing as a principal? How did you apply the learning that you were experiencing in a real-world context?

6. What were the direct benefits of participating in this experience? Would you want to participate in something like this again? Why or why not? When you consider professional development offered to you by your school district, what do you wish you had more of? Less of? Why?

7. What actions has your district taken that have directly impacted the quality, quantity, and/or content of your professional development as a school leader?

- **Probe towards the following areas in which districts may be faced with decisions:**
  - Personnel – redefining/establishing positions to support the work or organizing people around the work
  - Resources – investments in training and personnel, discontinuing ineffective strategies, etc.
  - Structures/Systems – organizational chart, advisory committees, support networks, clear criteria for performance measures, etc., district improvement plans
  - Stakeholder Involvement – school board and local educational organizations
  - Environment – response to ... government initiated efforts, accountability metrics, implementation of externally developed frameworks for instruction or evaluation, private agency partnerships with districts
  - Culture – beliefs about what we do and how we do it, learning as a part of the mission and vision of the district
8. What aspect of your professional development are you most pleased with? Least pleased with? Why?

9. What else would you like me to know about your professional development experience as a principal?
Appendix C

Principal Survey Protocol
Principal Survey Questions

1. What is the most beneficial district-provided professional development experience that you have participated in, and why was it beneficial?

2. What is an area that you feel you have grown in over your time as a principal? How did professional learning experiences within your district play a role in this development?

3. How do professional learning experiences within your district build upon your own needs and/or prior experiences as a learner?

4. What opportunities do you have to determine your own goals for learning/development and how do your district leaders support you in developing your own plans or goals for learning?

5. What decisions or actions have occurred at the district level that directly impacted the QUALITY of principal professional development?

6. How are decisions about the CONTENT of principal professional development made in your district?

7. Would you agree that there is a culture of collaboration that exists in your school district?

8. If you answered "YES" above: How does this culture impact you as a learner?

9. Overall, would you say you are PLEASED or DISPLEASED with your professional learning experiences as a principal? Why?

10. Feel free to add anything else you would like to share about your professional learning experiences in your district or about your district's approach to principal growth and development.
Appendix D

Principal 3 Coding Matrix
### Principal 3 Coding Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization: ENVIRONMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Need to Know</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self Directed (Self-Concept)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Learner’s Experience** | Q: Does the evaluation process feel like a growth opportunity?  
A: Yes, because in my post conference we will sit down and go through that rubric and talk about where we are and where I need to go, and we will develop a couple of goals so that I can work on those between now and my next unannounced. But, I appreciate that doesn’t drive the work that I have to do, that it’s really about that vision and what we believe in [our district] and staying true to that. |
| **Readiness to Learn** | Q: How do you feel like the [principal evaluation model impacts your professional development]? When you think of the bigger picture of leadership skills and the development of those skills does that have a place right now in your work and should it have a place?  
A: I feel like the standard that we are held to is so high… my evaluation is in December when [the superintendent] will come and spend the day with me… I feel like the expectation that we’re held to is so high, that when I look at that rubric, I feel like we are hitting those indicators all the time. But I do feel like because of the expectation that were held to and the strong vision that we have in place, we’re going to be developed on that rubric. We don’t have to look at that rubric and go indicator-by-indicator to say, “Are we using data the way that we need to?... We’re doing that because I think that starts at the top, and they’re supporting us to meet what’s in that rubric. Now we do look at that rubric, and I gather evidence and I [categorize it] to show what I’m doing that [the superintendent] might not be aware of because he’s not in my building everyday. But I feel like because of the expectation they hold us to and the activities they allow us to participate in, we’re meeting the indicators on that rubric. I love that we’re trying to meet that but also go beyond that. We’re not letting that just box us in. Even though it’s research-based and a good thing to use, we’re looking at where we are and where our vision is… |
| **Orientation to Learning**
**(Problem-Centered)** | NA |
**Organization: ENVIRONMENT (Cont’d)**

**Motivation**

I also feel like, and this may be going off on a different tangent, the application process that we go through to become a principal... you have to write two essays and take a personality assessment. I feel like they know who they are getting and they know you're going to be committed to learning. **We are lifelong learners and we're constantly going to be trying to improve ourselves based on research and where we are currently.** I appreciate that we are not driven by that rubric. But we do use that because it is part of what Tennessee expects.

Q: Does Eval process feel like a growth opportunity?
A: Yes, because in my post conference we will sit down and go through that rubric and talk about where we are and where I need to go, and we will develop a couple of goals so that I can work on those between now and my next unannounced. **But I appreciated that doesn't drive the work that I have to do, that it's really about that vision and what we believe in Kingsport and staying true to that.**

But I feel like because of the expectation they hold us to and the activities they allow us to participate in, we’re meeting the indicators on [the principal evaluation] rubric. **I love that we’re trying to meet that but also go beyond that.** We’re not letting that just box us in. **Even though it’s research-based and a good thing to use, we’re looking at where we are and where our vision is...**

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<tr>
<th>Need to Know</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Self Directed (Self-Concept)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Learner’s Experience</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Readiness to Learn</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Orientation to Learning (Problem-Centered)</strong></td>
<td>NA</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Motivation</strong></td>
<td>NA</td>
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<td>Organization: CULTURE</td>
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<td><strong>Need to Know</strong></td>
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<td>I also feel like, and this may be going off on a different tangent, the application process that we go through to become a principal... you have to write two essays and take a personality assessment. I feel like they know who they are getting and they know you're going to be committed to learning. We are lifelong learners and we're constantly going to be trying to improve ourselves based on research and where we are currently.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Self Directed (Self-Concept)</strong></td>
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<td>Would it have been beneficial for me to have someone who [walked me] through how a kid gets a high school diploma... the things that define an honors level course from a general education course... the things that define a remediation course? That may have been beneficial for me. But, I also am Polyanna and I appreciate that I have had to learn it the hard way because maybe I have made more meaning from that. And also, I had a system that said, “What are you doing... but we’re going to help you through that.” So, I appreciate that.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Learner’s Experience</strong></td>
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<td>I also think the quality of colleagues that I have. When we meet, not every time we like to have a good time as well, but we are trying to help each other and encourage each other through resources and discussions that we have and going back try guiding tenets and our vision to make sure everything is in line. So, there are lots of ways for us to develop ourselves individually and as a group.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Readiness to Learn</strong></td>
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<td>I feel like in [this district] if there’s anything that we do well it’s that we know what our vision is. We are always trying to develop ourselves and our teachers toward meeting that vision. I think also, I do feel like the level of collaboration that goes on between us as a group of principals is second to none. We are a supportive and collaborative group.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Orientation to Learning (Problem-Centered)</strong></td>
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| Q: So what has your district done to make [collaboration] happen? How does that happen?  
A: They foster it. They allow it. They provide opportunities for us to collaborate at the district level, secondary level. That’s with [our supervisor]. As long as I’ve got support in place at my school, I can step out if I need to and go meet with another principal or collaborate. After school I can go. I think they foster that. They encourage that. As a result, I think that’s who we are. |
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>The level of collaboration with my colleagues has been the best professional learning experience that I have had. <strong>We are a supportive, collaborative group.</strong> We are not competitive. There are some school systems where that’s the goal... you’re going to be better than this school over here. It’s not about that. When you look at our two middle schools, they have the same schedule this year. That’s because they want their teachers to be able to collaborate. That’s a result of the building level leadership. <strong>I feel the same with all of us as principals. We want each other to do the best that we can do, so we are going to work together.</strong> I feel like that’s been the most invaluable professional development or learning experience that I’ve had as a principal.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Need to Know</td>
<td>And I don’t know if anybody told you but [the superintendent] <strong>sends out a newsletter each week.</strong> <strong>Within that memo, he links to and cites research.</strong> So he may paraphrase, in a paragraph or two, an article about low socio-economic minority students, but he will link it to the article so you can go and read it. We often discuss those in our <strong>collaboratives</strong> each month. So, I feel like everything is aligned, so we are not all over the place, which is very helpful for a visionary outside of the box thinker like myself. <strong>It keeps me focused and grounded.</strong></td>
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<td>Self Directed (Self-Conpect)</td>
<td>We have a principal travel budget, which we try to use to attend something that’s going to propel us forward in the current role we are in. Last month I went to the INACOL conference in Texas with our E-learning coordinator. We work closely together, and I would say a lot of my professional development comes from her.</td>
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<td>Q: How is PD provided by the district? A: Through all the meetings that we have each month, and they’re always aligned. It’s not like we’re going from one thing to the next and again for someone like me I appreciate that being aligned... We always go back to our guiding tenets, if we have a great idea, “How does that align to who we are and what we expect to do in Kingsport?” <strong>Giving us that travel budget and giving us a professional learning budget within our school are ways that they let us develop ourselves professionally speaking.</strong></td>
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**Self Directed (Self-Concept) (Cont’d)**

KW: What are some of the things that you’ve used your principal travel budget for? - INACOL and the district has sent me to a lot of things. [The e-learning coordinator] and I presented at the __ conference last year. I’ve used mine to go to the [state] elementary association (for principals)... and they send me to a lot of things like COSN because it aligns to what I do. I went to Washington DC last year we presented there as well. I went to the COSN teaming for transformation. So, if it aligns to the work I’m doing that’s what they send me to or I will request to go to, which I appreciate, because I don’t need to attend things that aren’t relevant to the work that I’m doing.

**Learner’s Experience**

Q: Do you have anything specifically that you would link [your growth] to?  
A: Yes... Feedback that I was given by those around me... “This is great and I’m glad that you’re doing this.” [My supervisor] is great to keep me on track and make sure that I’m focused on what I need to be focused on. Also, doing book studies as a group, like on the strengths finder. I found value in that in being able to leverage my strengths to help the vision as a whole. As a group, we did it this past summer, as a group of principals. I think that type of work has also helped me as a principal to be aware of who I am.

Q: [The superintendent] really believes in [organizational improvement] work... And that gives you as an administrative group, a common language?  
A: Right, when someone says “strategic plan,” we’re not like “what is that?” We know that. Something else that I appreciate about this district is if I need something, it doesn’t matter the cost, within reason. What does matter is that I know how that links back to who we are and how it is going to move us forward. So, I can articulate my needs better to everyone, because I know that it needs to align with everything. I appreciate that.

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<tr>
<th>Readiness to Learn</th>
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<tr>
<td>Orientation to Learning (Problem-Centered)</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<td><strong>Organization: STRUCTURES</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Need to Know</strong></td>
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<td>And I don’t know if anybody told you but [the superintendent] sends out a superintendent’s newsletter each week. Within that memo, he links to and cites research. So he may paraphrase, in a paragraph or two, an article about low socio-economic minority students, but he will link it to the article so you can go and read it. <strong>We often discuss those in our collaboratives each month.</strong> So, I feel like everything is aligned, so we are not all over the place, which is very helpful for a visionary outside of the box thinker like myself. It keeps me focused and grounded.</td>
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Q: How is PD provided by the district?
A: **Through all the meetings that we have each month and they’re always aligned.** It’s not like we’re going from one thing to the next and again for someone like me I appreciate that being aligned… I feel like it’s the same thing from a top-down. **We always go back to our guiding tenets,** if we have a great idea, “How does that align to who we are and what we expect to do in Kingsport?”

I think having a clear focus certainly is **affecting the content** [of the professional development provided to principals].

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<th><strong>Self Directed (Self-Concept)</strong></th>
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| Q: Correct me if I’m wrong… **It sounds like because the work (learning) is so built into what is happening now in terms of the needs of my students, the needs of the teachers at my schools…** All your learning really is driven by that piece. **So you’re always bringing your needs as a learner to that conversation.**
A: Yes absolutely, and I think as principals they know that [my school offers blended and online instruction]. So, if they need some help with that, they can come to us and we are a resource. |

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<th><strong>Learner's Experience</strong></th>
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<td>The level of collaboration with my colleagues has been the best professional learning experience that I have had. <strong>We are a supportive, collaborative group. We are not competitive.</strong> There are some school systems where that’s the goal… you’re going to be better than this school over here. It’s not about that.</td>
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<td><strong>Organization: STRUCTURES (Cont’d)</strong></td>
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| **Readiness to Learn** | "I feel like in Kingsport if there’s anything that we do well it’s that we know what our vision is. We are always trying to develop ourselves and our building teachers towards meeting that vision (Guiding Tenets)." I think also, I do feel like the level of collaboration that goes on between us as a group of principals is second to none. We are a supportive and collaborative group.  
  
Q: [The superintendent] really believes in [organizational improvement] work... And that gives you as an administrative group, a common language?  
A: **Right, when someone says “strategic plan,” we’re not like “what is that?” We know that.** Something else that I appreciate about this district is if I need something, it doesn’t matter the cost, within reason. **What does matter is that I know how that links back to who we are and how it is going to move us forward.** So, I can articulate my needs better to everyone, because I know that it needs to align with everything. I appreciate that. |
<p>| <strong>Orientation to Learning</strong> | <strong>Orientation to Learning (Problem-Centered)</strong> | <strong>Motivation</strong> |
|  | &quot;Q: Correct me if I’m wrong... <strong>It sounds like because the work is so built into what is happening now in terms of the needs of my students, the needs of the teachers at my schools... All your learning really is driven by that piece. So you’re always bringing your needs as a learner to that conversation.</strong> - Yes absolutely&quot; | &quot;The level of collaboration with my colleagues has been the best professional learning experience that I have had. We are a supportive, collaborative group. We are not competitive. There are some school systems where that’s the goal... you’re going to be better than this school over here. It’s not about that... <strong>We want each other to do the best that we can do, so we are going to work together.</strong> I feel like that’s been the most invaluable professional development or learning experience that I’ve had as a principal.&quot; |</p>
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<th>Organization: SYSTEMS</th>
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<td><strong>Need to Know</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Self Directed (Self-Concept)</strong></td>
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| Q: So from [Principal 2's] stance, and it sounds like from yours as well, if I can justify within that **visioning process** that this is somewhere I need to go, this is something I need to learn, **then the resources will be available to do that.**
| A: You better believe it. |
| **Learner's Experience** | NA       |
| **Readiness to Learn**  | NA       |
| **Orientation to Learning (Problem-Centered)** | NA |
| **Motivation**          | NA       |
Appendix E

Survey Consent Letter
Survey Consent Letter

Dear Potential Participant:

You are being asked to take part in a research study that will examine how your school district is organized to support school principals as adult learners. As a current school principal, you are being asked to take part in the study. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: The purpose of this study is to learn how the decisions made by school district leaders and organizational elements within the district potentially support or hinder professional learning opportunities for principals. The study is rooted in adult learning theory and therefore will examine principals’ professional learning experiences through the lens of adult learning. The research project being conducted by the researcher is being used toward the completion of a doctoral dissertation.

WHAT YOU ARE ASKED TO DO: If you agree to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to complete a survey. The survey will include questions about your background, your job, your professional growth over time, professional learning experiences you found beneficial, and professional learning experiences you found ineffective. You will also be asked to identify actions that the district leaders have taken that may have influenced your experiences as you were engaged in professional learning. The survey consists of a series of short answer questions and will require 15-30 minutes to complete.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: The researcher does not anticipate any risks resulting from participation in this study other than those encountered in normal day-to-day life. However, if at any point you find a survey question to be sensitive in nature or you feel uncomfortable answering the question, you may skip that question or discontinue the survey at any time.
Additionally, there are no direct benefits from participating in this study. However, your participation will become part of the larger contribution that this study will make to the field of education and research related to school districts and principal professional development.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private and will be maintained by the researcher in a password-protected computer. Any additional records will be kept in a locked Ole and only the researcher will have access to the records. The final dissertation resulting from this study will be made public, but will not include any information that could be used to identify the school, district, or the individual participants in the study. Your individual responses will NOT be shared with your school district or any individual involved in the study, other than the researcher.

TAKING PART IS VOLUNTARY: Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide not to take part or to skip some of the questions, it will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher or the school district. If you decide to take part in the survey, but change your mind during the course of completion, you are free to withdraw at any time.

COMPENSATION: There is no compensation for participating in this survey.

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS: The researcher conducting this study is Keith Wilson. Please ask any questions you have before proceeding with the survey. If you have questions later, you may contact Keith Wilson at __________________________. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Carson- Newman University at irb@cn.edu. You may request a copy of this form to keep for your records.
STATEMENT OF CONSENT: I have read the above information. I understand that typing my name and entering a date below will serve as an electronic signature signifying my consent to take part in the study. After this consent form is signed electronically the survey will begin.

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the study.

Enter your first and last name: (submitted electronically)

Enter today's date. (submitted electronically)
Appendix F

Interview Consent Letter
Interview Consent Letter

Dear Potential Participant:

You are being asked to take part in a research study that will examine how your school district is organized to support school principals as adult learners. As a current school principal, you are being asked to take part in the study. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

**What the study is about:** The purpose of this study is to learn how the decisions made by school district leaders and organizational elements within the district potentially support or hinder professional learning opportunities for principals. The study is rooted in adult learning theory and therefore will examine principals’ professional learning experiences through the lens of adult learning.

**What we will ask you to do:** If you agree to participate in this study, the researcher will conduct an interview with you. The interview will include questions about your background, your job, your professional growth over time, professional learning experiences you found beneficial, and professional learning experiences you found ineffective. You will also be asked to identify actions that the district leaders have taken that may have influenced your experiences as you were engaged in professional learning. With your permission, the researcher would also like to audio-record the interview to ensure that he is able to accurately capture your thoughts and reflections.

**Risks and benefits:** The researcher does not anticipate any risks resulting from participation in this study other than those encountered in normal day-to-day life. However, if at any point you find an interview question to be sensitive in nature or you feel uncomfortable answering the question, you may skip that question or discontinue the interview at any time.
There are no direct benefits from participating in this study. However, your participation will become part of the larger contribution that this study will make to the field of education and research related to school districts and principal professional development.

**Compensation:** There is no compensation for participating in this study. However as a token of appreciation, each interview participant will receive a $10 gift card.

**Your answers will be confidential.** The records of this study will be kept private and will be maintained by the researcher in a password-protected computer. Any additional records will be kept in a locked file and only the researcher will have access to the records. The audio-recorded interviews will be destroyed after they have been transcribed, which the researcher anticipates will occur within six months of the original recording date. The final dissertation resulting from this study will be made public, but will not include any information that could be used to identify the school district or the individual participants in the study.

**Taking part is voluntary:** Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide not to take part or to skip some of the questions, it will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher or the school district. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

**If you have questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Keith Wilson. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Keith Wilson at _____________________________. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Carson-Newman University at irb@cn.edu. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.
**Statement of Consent:** I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature ______________________________ Date ____________________________

Your Name (printed) __________________________________________________________________________

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview tape-recorded.

Your Signature ______________________________ Date ____________________________

Signature of person obtaining consent __________________________________________________________

Date ____________________________

Printed name of person obtaining consent ____________________________

*This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the study.*
Appendix G

System: Visioning Process for District Initiatives
## Visioning Process for District Initiatives

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<tr>
<td><strong>1. Guiding Tenets</strong></td>
<td>• Align initiative to district mission, vision, and goals.</td>
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</table>
| **2. Research** | • Identify current practices in the field of interest through traditional research.  
• Conduct site visits to learn from practitioners in the field. |
| **3. Findings** | • Identify key best practices based upon the conducted research. |
| **4. Program Model** | • Provide description of integral components of district program/initiative.  
• Communicate core priorities of the initiative. |
| **5. Supports** | • Identify the impact on workforce and operations and needed areas of support. |
| **6. Impact** | • Identify the anticipated impact on teaching and learning.  
• Recognize indicators for progress monitoring. |
| **7. Launch Forward** | • Complete development of the Program Model.  
• Develop plans for measuring initiative results. |
Appendix H

Structure: District Guiding Tenets
District Guiding Tenets

Mission (What we are hoping to accomplish): The mission of [redacted] is to provide all students with a world-class and student-focused education that ensures college and career readiness.

Vision (Our desired future): Student Focused...World Class

Core Values (What we believe):
- Exemplary student learning
- Guaranteed and viable curriculum
- Collaborative professional learning communities
- Engaged families and the community
- Data-driven decisions for continuous improvement
- Culture of shared leadership

Goals (What we strive to achieve):
- Goal One: Deliver world-class curriculum and instruction.
- Goal Two: Provide committed and innovative educators.
- Goal Three: Furnish safe, appropriate, and well-maintained facilities that support teaching and learning.
- Goal Four: Ensure business operations effectively support teaching and learning.
- Goal Five: Engage families and the community.

Core Competencies (Who we are):
- Promote and support exemplary leadership through programming and succession planning.
- Offer a rigorous, comprehensive, and engaging curriculum.
- Engage students in learning through the use of transformative tools and innovative instructional practices.
- Provide personalized professional learning opportunities for all employees.
- Actively engage and serve our families and community.
- Support and sustain the organization with a performance improvement system.

Key Practices (What we do):
- Plan, teach, assess, and evaluate to inform instructional practices through the use of the 4 critical questions.
- Incorporate problem-solving and innovation in teaching and learning.
- Guide teaching and learning using internationally benchmarked standards.
- Seek to understand and engage our families and community.
- Recruit, retain, and develop highly competent educators.
- Build leadership capacity within our educational community.

4 Critical Questions (How we plan for learning):
- What is it we expect our students to learn?
- How will we know when our students have learned it?
- How will we respond when our students do not learn?
- How do we respond when our students have mastered the content?