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Principals' Perceptions of Factors Leading to Academic Improvement in Minnesota Elementary Schools

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by

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Abstract

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the principals' perceptions of factors leading to academic improvement in Title I elementary schools in Minnesota. Participants included eight Title I elementary principals who led their schools from 2016-2019 and significantly improved their students' math and reading Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) scores during that time period. Interviews were coded through MaxQDA and synthesized to develop themes connected to school improvement. The data suggested seven total themes for perceived factors in school improvement: the principal's focus and intentionality, the principal's continuous improvement mindset, strategic use of academic data, a culture of high expectations and accountability, teaching academic standards and utilizing formative assessment, academic support and interventions, and teacher continuous improvement. Factors such as academic interventions and formative assessment were not as readily discussed in the literature, but prevalent in the research data. This research provides significant practical applications such as identifying a focus for the school, developing an intervention system, and collecting data for decisions. Future research could explore perceptions of middle or high school improvement principals; another geographical location; or specific aspects of school improvement such as the principal's intentionality, interventions and support, or data and assessments.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my wife Kasey for her unwavering support of my academic, professional, and personal goals.

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I am deeply indebted to numerous individuals for their support during this dissertation process. A significant thank you to my family, including my parents and brothers, who have supported me through my entire academic journey. I am grateful for all the principals, teachers, and coaches from my years of school who challenged me to be my best. Thank you to my professors at St. Olaf College who established the framework for my academic writing and set high-expectations early in my academic career. Thank you to the eight principals who took significant time out of their busy schedules to discuss school improvement with me. Their relentless commitment to students, staff, families, and communities is incredible. Thank you to the many friends who were willing to read, respond, and discuss my work during the dissertation process and for understanding the time and energy it takes to complete a doctoral degree. I am grateful for my readers Dr. Tracy Reimer and Dr. Marta Shaw who care deeply about scholarship, set high expectations, and appreciate the value of education. The most significant thank you to my advisor Dr. Emily Storbeck for her incredible support during my dissertation journey. Her commitment to my work and to school improvement are greatly appreciated and very admirable.

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List of Abbreviations

AYP	Adequate Yearly Progress
ELL	English Language Learner
ESEA	Elementary and Secondary Education Act
ESSA	Every Student Succeeds Act
FRP	Free and Reduced-Price Lunch
MCA	Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment
MN	Minnesota
MTSS	Multi-Tiered System of Support
PBIS	Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports
PD	Professional Development
PLC	Professional Learning Community
RtI	Response to Intervention
SIP	School Improvement Plans

Chapter I: Introduction

Introduction

Every day in the United States, principals create positive change in their schools in alignment with their own values (Green, 2017; Ubben, Norris, & Hughes, 2016). At some schools, those changes include simple strategies such as encouraging timely attendance to class (Litminov, Alvarez, Long, & Walker, 2018). At other schools, more extreme challenges exist. Some students rarely attend class due to significant circumstances leading to absenteeism, or violence in schools makes the learning environment ineffective and toxic (Litminov et al., 2018) Factors existing outside of school including poverty, homelessness, immigration, food insecurity, gangs, and drugs have negative impacts on schools; students in the United States face multifaceted challenges (Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010; Litminov et al., 2018; Ubben et al., 2016). Although these challenges transpire outside of school, the reverberating effects carry into the school environment, forcing students to concentrate less on school. Outside factors create concerns about shelter, safety, security, and love more than a focused effort on learning (Leithwood et al., 2010). Due to these challenging factors, schools seek transformational leaders to create positive change (Ubben et al., 2016).

Schools labeled as turnaround, improvement, or needing support often face insurmountable challenges such as poverty and homelessness (Leithwood et al., 2010). Although people removed from public schools might consider these challenges in only large, urban districts, principals face these challenges throughout the state of Minnesota (Webster & Golden, 2018). In large urban districts, the issues compound, leading to difficult situations for students, teachers, and leaders in improving education (Tileston & Darling, 2008). In smaller or more rural districts, the challenges may be more focused on socioeconomic status as over 24% of rural

students live in poverty (AASA, 2017). Schools in rural areas often receive less funding leading to a shortage in available resources for students and staff. Even though high levels of poverty exist in rural communities, they often receive less Title I funding than their urban and suburban counterparts (AASA, 2017). While schools in urban and rural communities face somewhat different challenges, the leader's focus often revolves around improving their current realities. The challenge for any school needing improvement is finding leaders with the skillset to make positive change through the use of motivation, organization, and vision. Principals and school leaders have one of the largest impacts on the direction of the school (Allen, Grigsby, & Peters, 2015; Fullan, 2006; Lynch, Smith, Provost, & Madden, 2016; McCarley, Peters, & Decman, 2016; Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Sebastian, Huang, & Allensworth, 2017).

Schools have been a critical part of society since the inception of the United States. Parents and guardians rely on schools to prepare their students for future success, admission to colleges, or the workforce. Even though society holds schools in high regard, they have rarely met those expectations when analyzing progress and test scores (Candal, 2018; MN Department of Education, 2019; NAEP, 2019). No Child Left Behind (NCLB) established in 2001 under United States President George Bush and his administration, was a law holding schools accountable for educating all students, closing the achievement gap, and creating competitive U.S. schools (Green, 2018; Klein, 2015; Ubben et al., 2016). The purpose of the initiative was to help all students learn (Green, 2018). In a world context, the United States produced lower academic results than other countries, so NCLB also focused on creating a more competitive educational experience in the United States (Klein, 2015). Educational writers suggest the new role of school administrators is to be the learning experts in the building, thus helping every

single student in the school achieve at the highest level (Green, 2018; Ubben et al., 2016). For schools who face insurmountable challenges, that task is an extensive undertaking.

School improvement has always existed, but it became more focused when President George Bush in 2001 enacted NCLB. Along with NCLB came AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) which held schools accountable to measure academic success (Klein, 2015; Turner, 2015). Early in the NCLB process, it was evident that some schools would not meet AYP even if that expectation were placed on the schools and its leaders (Turner, 2015). Critics argued that AYP focused too much on standardized tests to measure progress, leaving many schools destined to fail before even taking the exam (Klein, 2015), but the government still labeled them failing or underperforming (Turner, 2015). One goal of NCLB and other state versions of school improvement, was to close the achievement gap between White students and students of color, English Language Learners (ELL), and Special Education (Green, 2018; MN Department of Education, 2019; Klein, 2015). Although politicians and educational leaders created reforms, the challenge consisted of finding leaders who could change the narrative and reach AYP for some schools. In 2009, United States President Barack Obama dedicated five billion dollars to significantly overhaul the nation's lowest performing schools, and he revised a version of NCLB (Klein, 2015). The United States implemented Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) with the goal of guiding every student to a specific achievement level on standardized tests.

ESSA struggled on certain levels, and in 2010, an estimated 5,000 schools were identified as underperforming in the United States (Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, & Tallant, 2010). The dearth of quality schools in Minnesota and around the nation has greatly impacted student performance and outcomes, especially for students of color and those in poverty (Howard, 2010). While education struggles nationally, Minnesota has also seen its challenges including one of the

largest achievement gaps in the nation (Grunewald & Nash, 2019). In 2018, only 26.5% of African American students in Minnesota met math standards and 34% of African American students met reading standards (MN Department of Education, 2019). The result of low academic performance is an urgent effort by the national, state, and local government to reform schools. Specifically, departments of education create a narrow focus on improving underperforming schools when analyzing yearly data. Some districts and superintendents focus on completely reshaping the school and its achievement through school turnaround or even closure (Thielman, 2012). According to Kutash, Nico, Gorin, Rahmatullah, and Tallant (2010) and Zavadsky (2012), four different school turnaround models exist:

- Turnaround: Replace the principal and less than 50% of the staff.
- Restarts: Turn the school over to a "school operator" for improvement.
- Closure: Close the school all together and do not reopen it.
- Transformations: Replace the principals and use resources to improve the school.

Specifically, Minnesota focused on ensuring all students and schools reached a specific level of achievement. The Minnesota Department of Education (2019) improvement plan concentrated on five total indicators with three varying levels of improvement needs:

- tests scores and academic achievement,
- elementary and middle school progress,
- high school graduation rates,
- ELL progress, and
- school quality.

Since the early 2000s, the nation's schools have seen insufficient changes. According to The Nation's Report Card (2019), Grade 4 and Grade 8 reading scores decreased from 2017 to

2019. In Grade 4, the average test score decreased by one point and in Grade 8, the scores decreased by three points. On a larger scale, the nation only had one state increase test scores, 34 stay stagnant, and 17 decreased in average test scores (NAEP, 2019). Because school improvement implies growth and improvement, the number of stagnant states indicates the challenge of moving students, schools, and states to higher test scores. While the United States attempts to close the achievement gap, it has seen very little progress: White students scored an average of 230 in Grade 4 reading tests while Black students scored 204 (NAEP, 2019). Despite the many efforts of schools, communities, states, and the nation, our schools still struggle to improve learning.

Significant opportunity to research school improvement exists. Not only is studying school improvement essential, it is also important to focus on the leaders, their perceptions, and their process. School improvement leaders utilize highly effective skills that help them lead in unique and aggressive ways. Researchers argue the leader must have significant development in Emotional Intelligence and understanding of oneself to make the most impact (Reitzug & Hewitt, 2017; Reynolds & O'Dwyer, 2008; Wang, Wilhite, & Martino, 2016). Sound decision-making skills allow leaders to impact the school culture and climate while a purpose for their work sets the strategic plan and vision. Developing systems challenges the school to improve education for all students. In-depth knowledge of teaching and learning guides the change in academics, behavior, and attendance (Green, 2018; Reitzug & Hewitt, 2017; Ubben et al., 2016).

School improvement demands more focused research for the future. While some information does exist on the improvement process or turnaround leaders (Brown, Thompson, Townsend, & Roney, 2017; Clark, 2017; Reitzug & Hewitt, 2015, 2017), little research outlines the leader's perceptions of improvement. More specifically, there is limited previous research on

improvement principals in Minnesota elementary schools designated as Title I. Exploring the principal's perception of the school improvement process provides valuable research to potentially guide others in making significant transformation in schools.

Statement of the Problem

Significant gaps in test scores and graduation rates exist throughout the entire United States. Nationally, only 23% of Grade 12 students were proficient in math, 36% were proficient in reading, and 21% were proficient in science (NAEP, 2019). Large discrepancies exist in academic achievement on standardized tests between low-income and affluent students; gaps between students of color and White students also exist (Candal, 2018; Harris, 2008). The United States discusses the achievement gap frequently, and many school improvement models focus on closing those gaps.

The gaps in learning exist at the local level as well. According to the Minnesota Department of Education (2019), only 55.4% of all Minnesota students met math proficiency, 59.64% met reading standards, and 83.7% of students graduated in four years. Fewer than 50% of Minnesota Grade 8 students were proficient in reading, math, and science standards, according to the Nation's Report Card (NAEP, 2019). In Minnesota elementary schools, the problem of low tests scores is evident. It is especially evident when comparing White students to students of color. School improvement is not only improving learning for the highest achievers, but the efforts must lessen the gap between White students and students of color. Table 1 summarizes the significant discrepancies existing for students in Minnesota (MN Department of Education, 2019).

Table 1

MCA Proficiency Scores and Graduation Rates

Minnesota Academic Measures	White	Black or African Am.	Hispanic or Latino	American Indian
Grade 3 Math	76.3%	38.5%	41.6%	40.8%
Grade 3 Reading	63.6%	32.1%	33.4%	31.6%
Grade 4 Math	74.8%	34.8%	38.6%	37.5%
Grade 4 Reading	65.4%	30.6%	32.8%	31.0%
Grade 5 Math	61.7%	25.8%	29.2%	23.2%
Grade 5 Reading	75.1%	42.1%	45.5%	41.6%
Graduation Rates	88.7%	69.9%	69.9%	50.8%

In 2019, Minnesota identified 47 total schools performing at the lowest possible level and in need of immediate support because of low test scores, lack of academic growth, low graduation rates, large achievement gap, and/or poor attendance (MN Department of Education, 2019; Uren, 2018). Minnesota developed a framework to help the lowest 5% of schools, including on-site coaching, dropout prevention, reading and math content support, and equity implementation (MN Department of Education, 2019). The lowest 5% of schools possess the largest combination of needs and support from the state of Minnesota, so they require the highest level of leadership to impact students and families in a positive way (MN Department of Education, 2019). Grunewald and Nash (2019) reported that Minnesota had one of the largest achievement gaps in the United States. The combination of low performing schools and significant achievement gap leads to the need for highly-effective leadership.

Despite the challenges, some Minnesota schools earned "Beating the Odds" status through outperforming other schools with similar poverty rates (Webster & Golden, 2018). "Beating the Odds" schools refer to the Minneapolis *Star Tribune's* annual report on schools achieving higher than expected outcomes on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) despite student poverty levels. According to the Minnesota Department of Education (2019) data,

32 total elementary schools made 8% or more improvement in math and reading MCA scores from 2017 to 2019. Bright areas exist throughout the state of Minnesota and in the United States as schools overcome challenges and improve student achievement.

Leadership in schools, specifically the school principal, is one significant aspect in developing a positive learning environment, growth in learning, and positive behaviors from students within the school (Allen et al., 2015; Green, 2017; Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Sebastian et al., 2017). Scholars concluded that a highly-effective principal has a significant impact on students performing better than expected in academics (Allen et al., 2015; Brown et al., 2017; Finnigan, 2012; Reitzug & Hewitt, 2017). Some scholars have specifically researched the factors leading to improvement schools (Meyers & Hitt, 2018; Meyers & Sadler, 2018; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016). Only some research has used the qualitative approach to explore the many facets of school improvement (Brown et al., 2017; Portin, Russel, Samuelson, & Knapp, 2013). Therefore, the exploration of elementary schools with Title I designation in Minnesota and principals' perceptions of improvement provided an opportunity to gain significant insight about the process.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the principals' perceptions of factors leading to improvement in MCA math and reading test scores in Minnesota Title I elementary schools. The study highlighted principals who led their schools during the 2017-2019 school years to improve MCA math and reading test scores. The study aimed to elicit insights from the principals as to why they believe the school made significant improvements.

Research Question

RQ_1 What are the perceptions of Minnesota elementary school principals on the factors leading to their school's academic improvement?

Significance of the Study

Research significance. Research has focused on school improvement principals and their practices in a variety of settings (Clark, 2017; Finnigan, 2012; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015, 2017). Clark (2017) researched the various ways principals build capacity to lead in the school and concluded that building capacity leads to empowerment, trust, and change. Finnigan (2012) also concluded that building trust, support, instructional leadership, and inclusive practices helps support and sustain change in low-performing schools. Hewitt and Reitzug (2015, 2017) used qualitative research to explore the school improvement principal's personality characteristics and the challenges of school turnaround leadership. Exploring elementary school principals' perceptions of improvement allows for unique insight into the factors leading to success.

The participant selection and narrowed focus contributes to research significance. Little research focuses specifically on Minnesota, elementary schools, MCA test scores, Title I designation, and factors leading to improvement over time. While research on elementary schools exist, much of the improvement leadership focuses on high schools and their efforts (Huggins, Klar, Hammonds, & Buskey, 2017; McCarley et al., 2016; Portin et al., 2013). Narrowing the research to elementary schools allows for greater insight to the factors: leadership, strategic plan and data, culture and climate, academics, schedule and systems, behavior, personnel and resources, and attendance and family engagement. An in-depth literature review reveals that these are the critical factors principals consider when improving their schools. The

exploration of elementary schools provides understanding of improvement for the state's youngest learners.

Similar to elementary schools, the Title I designation provides focused insight to a more challenging situation for school leaders and students who face poverty. Because early education and poverty significantly impact long-term success (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010; Tileston & Darling, 2008), studying the factors leading to improvement of Title I elementary schools is critically important.

While considerable research highlights school improvement and turnaround, much of the research focuses very specifically on a theory, teacher perception, capacity building, or Professional Learning Community (PLC) (Brown et al., 2017; Carpenter, Bukoski, Berry, & Mitchell, 2017; Clark, 2017). These research studies lend themselves well to a specific concept or theory in school improvement, but few studies consider the principals' perceptions of the factors leading to successful school improvement. The research provides an outward dialogue concerning school improvement, and allows the researcher to understand process, decisions, and strategies on a more holistic and applicable level.

Practical significance. Although prior research studies explore unique concepts on school turnaround and improvement, few offer practical approaches. Hewitt and Reitzug (2015, 2017) provided two unique insights about a turnaround leader, but the studies contributed little practicality for someone conducting the work. Likewise, Meyers and Stadler (2018) identified numerous initiatives to improve schools, but the research focused specifically on the district level instead of the school level. Cosner and Jones (2016) found that a fundamental characteristic of improving schools was goal setting, teacher learning, and curriculum evaluation. While those are crucial factors, the analysis leaves out much of the holistic school improvement such as why they

matter or how they were implemented. Brown, Thompson, Townsend, and Roney (2017) researched simple, quick efforts from the principal to improve schools, but their results are only the starting point of a lengthy and complex process.

This research study aimed to yield specific practical applications for aspiring improvement leaders, practicing principals, superintendents, and school districts. Hitt and Meters (2018) provided research on the practical theoretical frameworks for school improvement. Utilizing their research to set a framework provided a great base for the practical significance of the outlined research study. On a larger scale, this particular study could provide superintendents and districts with considerations for helping administrators become more effective in school improvement. This research fills a void in school improvement literature and provides a more practical approach to improvement than previously studied.

Research on factors leading to school improvement could guide leadership and principal preparation programs. By looking at this particular study, graduate schools who prepare future leaders could explore various factors, create a plan to implement them into the curriculum, and guide potential leaders in utilizing those strategies during their professional careers. Lochmiller and Chesnut (2017) researched a program designed for school turnaround leaders in an apprenticeship model. This dissertation research is a practical way to further develop programs that prepare school leaders. Also, utilizing the information from this study, future researchers can apply aspects of the study in researching school improvement at elementary and Title I designated schools.

Definition of Terms

Achievement gap. The difference between White students, Black students, and other students of color in regards to test scores, grades, behavioral referrals, and suspensions. School

improvement leaders and reforms often focus on the achievement gap in the process. Howard (2008) wrote:

> the achievement gap is the discrepancy in educational outcomes between various student group, namely, African American, Native America, certain Asian American, and Latino students on the low end of the performance scale, and primarily White and various Asian American students at the higher end of the academic performance scale. (p. 10)

Elementary school. Due to utilizing MCA test scores as a criterion for school improvement, an elementary school must include at least Grade 3 because it is the first-time Minnesota students take the MCA tests in math and reading.

Emotional Intelligence. Goleman (1995) first developed the concept of Emotional Intelligence. It focuses on the four key areas of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Bradberry and Greaves (2009) explained, "Emotional intelligence is your ability to recognize and understand emotions in yourself and others, and your ability to use this awareness to manage your behavior and relationships" (p. 17). The concept of Emotional Intelligence crosses over with other concepts such as grit and growth mindset, especially in the areas of self-awareness and reflection, empathy, optimism, and self-control.

Mindset. What leaders think about, reflect on, value, and consider when they go through the school improvement process. Dweck (2006) and Duckworth (2016) both explored the concept of mindset in their work as they refer to growth mindset and grit. Kamphoff (2018) researched the high-performance mindset, focusing on how the best in the world utilize their mind for performance.

Professional learning communities (PLCs). Educators working together in similar teams in order to better develop learning for students. The teams focus on core standards, common

assessments, analyzing data, and using data to better help students learn. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2010) wrote that a PLC "is an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (p. 11).

Process. Various steps, decisions, strategies, and systems put together in order to make progress on school improvement. For school improvement principals, the process is the plan for school improvement and the steps in implementing the plan.

Purpose. In the context of this research, purpose refers to the "why" of school improvement leadership. Sinek (2009) argued the following about purpose: "By WHY I mean what is your purpose, cause or belief? WHY does your company exist? WHY do you get out of bed every morning? And WHY should anyone care" (p. 39).

Rural schools. For the purpose of the study, a rural school is defined as being outside of the third ring suburbs of Minneapolis and St. Paul. The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) refers to rural as at least five miles away from any urbanized location.

School climate. The feeling that students, faculty, and staff experience when being involved in the school (Allen et al., 2015; Green, 2017).

School culture. The underlying values, behaviors, and beliefs of a school that leaders, teachers, and students follow each day. The values and beliefs of a school are continually changing and evolving (Hollingworth, Olsen, Asikin-Garmager, & Winn, 2018).

School improvement. Although some utilize school improvement and turnaround interchangeably, they are not exactly the same. School improvement refers to any principal or school who develops a process for improving specific areas of the school which may include, but

are not limited to the following: test scores, attendance, behavior, school culture, and/or achievement gap.

School turnaround. According to Kutash et al. (2010), four different types of school turnaround exist: turnaround, restarts, closures, and transformations. The challenging aspect of defining school turnaround is that different experts use various metrics to measure the specific turnaround (Kutash et al., 2010). The Minnesota plan focuses on five total indicators: tests scores and academic achievement, elementary and middle school progress, high school graduation rates, ELL progress, and school quality (MN Department of Education, 2019). Other leaders use attendance, behavior referrals, culture, and achievement gap to measure school turnaround (Pappano, 2010). Similar to the measurements of turnaround, experts suggest a certain amount of time for the process to happen.

Many believe that the federal definition of school turnaround is too restrictive (Zavadsky, 2012). For the sake of the study, then, a more fluid definition has been developed for school turnaround leaders. For example, in Zavadsky's (2012) work, she describes school turnaround as "the difficult process of improving chronically failing schools" (p. 7). In this definition, it is simple to see why school improvement and turnaround are used interchangeably.

Suburban schools. For the purpose of the study, suburban schools were defined as a district in a first, second, or third ring suburb of Minneapolis and St. Paul. All schools were in a 30-mile radius of Minneapolis/St. Paul. The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) refers to suburban as any community outside of a city with a population of 250,000 or more, but inside an urbanized location.

Title I. The Title I designation in Minnesota refers to any school that has over 40% of its students receiving free and reduced-price lunch (FRP) (MN Department of Education, 2019).

Transactional leadership. In transactional leadership, the leader focuses on achieving results through whatever means possible, and takes less into account the process and the people along the way (Allen et al., 2015; Burns, 1978).

Transformational leadership. The leader transforms an organization or school through positive behaviors, actions, and systems by focusing specifically on the process connected to school improvement (Finnigan, 2012; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015).

Urban schools. For the purpose of the study, an urban school is defined as a school located in one of the three largest districts in Minnesota including Anoka-Hennepin School District, Minneapolis Public Schools, or St. Paul Public Schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2006), an urban location is inside a city and urbanized area of at least 100,000 people.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

Chapter Two's literature review explores various theories, themes, strategies, and decisions that connect with school turnaround and improvement. Chapter Three includes the research study procedures and methodology. Chapter Four presents the findings from the study and Chapter Five focuses on future research.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The literature review develops background research on school improvement that leads into a discussion on leadership. Throughout the review, two significant theories develop: Transformational Leadership Theory and Distributed Leadership Theory. School improvement leaders gravitate to these theories as they guide progress and improvement. Research on Emotional Intelligence, mindset, and personality characteristics provides a framework for the school improvement leaders completing this work. The remaining sections of the literature review focus on strategic planning and data, culture and climate, academic strategies, schedule and systems, behavior, personnel and resources, and attendance and family engagement. The organization of the literature review aligns with the research interview questions and protocol.

School Improvement and Turnaround

School turnaround refers to a dramatic shift and change in academic and behavioral success of a once failing or struggling school (Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015; Hollingworth et al., 2018; Lynch et al., 2016; Meyers & Sadler, 2018). Leaders and scholars often utilize school turnaround and improvement synonymously, yet turnaround sometimes refers to a mandated process by the state or district, but not always. While some states mandate school turnaround, others like the case-study in Thielman (2012) are driven by administrators and teachers who see a need to provide a stronger education for students. Leithwood, Harris, and Strauss (2010) suggested three stages of the turnaround process:

(1) eliminate decline and create conditions for improvement,

(2) give hope for survival and see small wins, and

(3) reach satisfactory performance and strive for more.

Research by Brown et al. (2017) and Leithwood et al. (2010) concluded most school turnaround commences after a change in the principal or leader of the school. According to research, when teachers take the lead on turnaround, it feels more authentic, real, and purposeful (Thielman, 2012). Principal and staff alignment create a better opportunity for successful school improvement.

Most school improvement leaders and scholars agree on a holistic approach to improvement including safety, academics, test scores, behavior, and attendance (Meyers & Smylie, 2017; Portin et al., 2013; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016). Researchers concluded that principal leadership styles have an impact on the holistic improvement approach (Allen et al., 2015; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). School improvement is a system-wide effort for positive change in all these areas (Kutash et al., 2010). The aforementioned research suggested the combination of effective leadership and a holistic approach to improvement leads to more sustained efforts.

Research concluded that school improvement leadership incorporates considerable detail and planning for sustainability (Clark, 2017; Fullan, 2006; Hitt & Meyers, 2018; Thielman, 2012). For that reason, Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, Levy, and Saunders (2008) recommended that school improvement leaders focus their efforts on less initiatives at one time, but devote more time to each area to create growth. Focusing on too many initiatives during a short period of time leads to frustration and confusion for those implementing the changes. Duke et al. (2008) argued that specific planning and organization should take place prior to attempting school turnaround. The planning develops anywhere from over one summer to a year or more in advance (Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, Levy, & Saunders, 2008). Cognizant leaders realize the value of planning a “less is more” approach to improvement. Effective school improvement

leadership focuses specifically on planning for improvement. The combination of less initiatives and focused planning creates the potential for sustainable improvement.

Leadership

Educational leadership for change. Although the definition seems intuitive, scholars define educational leadership as a combination of the skills, attributes, organization, motivation, and other characteristics that help make a school function and perform at the highest level (Dolph, 2017; Green, 2017; Mitchell & Sackney, 2016). Researchers argued that a significant reason why a school succeeds, fails, or stays stagnant is because of the leader in the principal chair (Allen et al., 2015; Lynch et al., 2016; McCarley et al., 2016; Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Sebastian et al., 2017; Thielman, 2012). Research described improvement leaders as having a strong disposition, laser focus, high-performance mindset, and work ethic, all of which are needed to sustain the school improvement process (Clark, 2017; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016). Educational leadership, especially in school improvement, is a complex and difficult position requiring great understanding of the larger picture.

The leader's ability to develop a strategic plan and system greatly impacts how the school functions on a daily basis (Dolph, 2017; Green, 2017; Sorenson & Goldsmith, 2018; Ubben et al., 2016). The principal expects to make changes in vision, strategic plan, instruction, learning, essential curriculum, behavior, testing, and community engagement (Dolph, 2017). Research from Cosner and Jones (2016) concluded that goal setting and planning for achievement separates effective improvement school leaders from the rest. Due to various moving parts of school improvement or leadership in general, very specific organization and structure is critical to success. The most effective leaders develop specific and steadfast systems and plans (Clark, 2017; Finnigan, 2012; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015; Mitchell & Sackney, 2016). Due to many

setbacks during the change process, sustaining the systems becomes a more challenging endeavor.

Research often points to the principal as critical to leading school change, but the principal is never the only person performing the work. School staff and teachers have a significant role in improvement work (Clark, 2017; Klar, Huggins, Hammonds, & Buskey, 2016; Sebastian et al., 2017). While the principal creates the mission and vision for the school, it is the staff who implement the action plan. The powerful combination of strong leadership and an effective staff leads to sustainable improvement.

Transformational leadership. Research on school turnaround and improvement parallels Transformational Leadership Theory; scholars define Transformational Leadership Theory as utilizing various strategies to change the organization, people, or situation (Allen et al., 2015; Burns, 1978; Finnigan, 2012; Ross & Cozzens, 2016). In school improvement, the leader works to transform a school through positive behaviors, actions, and systems by focusing specifically on the process connected to school improvement (Finnigan, 2012; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). Transformational leaders often take risks to implement what they know is effective even if challenging or unpopular (Huggins et al., 2017).

Transformational leadership and school improvement align very specifically: the main goal of school improvement is to transform the attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs of a school in order to achieve higher levels of success in numerous areas (Knudson, Shambough, & O'Day, 2011; Kutash et al., 2010). Conversely, transactional leadership involves the follower completing tasks in exchange for monetary rewards or professional status from the leader. The exchanges support the end goals of the organization (Green, 2017; Ubben et al., 2016). In transactional leadership, the leader focuses more on achieving results through exchanges, but takes less into

account the process and the people along the way (Allen et al., 2015; Burns, 1978). Research showed that leaders utilize transformational leadership because it encourages people to follow the leader and lean into the challenging work together instead of working in isolation (Allen et al., 2015; Finnigan, 2012; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015; McCarley, et al., 2016). Research suggested a positive correlation between transformational leadership and school climate, culture, motivation, and academic achievement in reading (Allen, et al., 2015; Finnigan, 2012). School improvement relies on concepts of Transformational Leadership Theory to creative positive change.

Distributed leadership. Research posited that distributed leadership and capacity building make significant impacts on school improvement (Bagwell, 2019; Clark, 2017; DeMatthews, 2014; Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Hollingworth et al., 2018; Huggins et al., 2017; Klar et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2010). When school leaders distribute leadership and build capacity in other people, it becomes a group effort to make positive impacts on the school (Bagwell, 2019; Berg, Connolly, Lee, & Fairley, 2018; Clark, 2017; Thielman, 2012). Distributed leadership means a school principal identifying school leaders, developing their skill sets, facilitating transitions, and providing effective support (DeMatthews, 2014; Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Green, 2018; Hollingworth et al., 2018; Klar et al., 2016; Mitchell & Sackney, 2016). School leaders systematically apply distributed leadership because of the impact is has on schools (Green, 2017), and leaders utilize a variety of concepts to instill distributed leadership: input from teachers, learner centered, professional development, teacher reflection, and collaboration (Clark, 2017; Kutash et al., 2010).

Two research studies analyzed entire school turnaround situations created on the premise of distributing leadership among teachers and found great success (Bagwell, 2019; Berg et al.,

2018). Implementing distributed leadership evens out the challenges of school improvement as principals cannot complete the exacting work on their own, so they recruit other teacher-leaders to assist the process (Green, 2017; Spillane, 2006; Ubben et al., 2016; Von Esch, 2018). By identifying and developing others in the school to help with school improvement, the leader communicates many underlying standards to the school and community, but the leader must also reflect on who can lead (Bagwell, 2019; DeMatthews, 2014; Hollingworth et al., 2018; Klar et al., 2016). A study by DeMatthews (2014) suggested principals had a significant role in who would lead the Professional Learning Community (PLC) process, which distributes the leadership and empowers teachers. Through distributed leadership and capacity building, the leader creates trust with other people in the school community as they realize they are important in the change process (Clark, 2017; DeMatthews, 2014; Finnigan, 2012; Hollingworth et al., 2018; Huggins et al., 2017). Further research by Cosner and Jones (2016) found allowing teachers to lead aspects of instructional improvement creates sustained success. A leader who avoids distributing leadership delivers a different message about their work together. Teachers want to feel trusted by the principal to help lead positive change.

In addition to trust, the distributive leadership model provides ownership to others in the building and gives them a voice in important initiatives. This ownership leads an improved passion and purpose for the work completed (DeMatthews, 2014; Fullan & Pinchot, 2018). Distributed leadership creates a more powerful team of individuals who are all focused on the same goal. In addition to teachers, principals in improvement situations focus on developing and distributing leadership to assistant principals. In one study by Reed and Swaminathan (2016), an urban school principal took pride in developing assistant principals into principals who could lead school change as they continued their careers. Mentoring and developing other leaders

within the building to lead in the current school or lead their own schools only helps school improvement as a whole.

Turnaround/improvement leadership traits. Researchers explored the personalities of school improvement and turnaround leaders (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020; Dolph, 2017; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015, 2017). Common personality characteristics appear when analyzing leaders who make significant impacts on their schools, especially schools that need substantial improvement. First, the leaders are always mission and vision driven. They have a clear idea of their goals, and they set themselves and their schools up for reaching that vision (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020; Dolph, 2017; Fullan, 2006; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2010). Leithwood et al. (2010) found that after the leader develops mission and vision, they utilize each of them to create more specific goals with their teaching staff. Even when the challenges build up and the stress heightens, those leaders keep themselves and their people focused on the mission moving the plan forward while adapting and shifting with changing needs (Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015, 2017; Thielman, 2012).

The leader's vision for the future had a significant impact on the school's success (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020; Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2010). Howard (2008) analyzed multiple schools that experienced achievement gap or low achievement, and found that all the principals at the turnaround schools took every chance to talk about their visionary leadership. Researchers described the leader's vision as an obsession with student achievement and academic performance within the school (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015; Howard, 2008). To achieve the vision, the leader was always calm in the face of adversity and continued to lead the group of teachers through it (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). Researchers described the turnaround leader as "clutch," or having the ability to

come through in tough and high-stakes situations while keeping the mission at the center (Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015).

School improvement leaders provide tough love and support. They have the compassion to understand how people are feeling, but they have incredibly high expectations for the people who work in the building and have been hired to create change (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020; Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). Research described multiple situations when the school turnaround leader listened to people, but then focused on getting them to pull together and get back to work (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). The researchers described the turnaround principal as very businesslike, holding others accountable in all situations (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). Barreau and McIntosh (2020) described the leader as "Boss Lady" for her business minded attitude toward work. In order for teachers to do their jobs at the highest levels, principals focused on providing as much support as possible and eliminating all other distraction while also creating high expectations (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020; Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2010).

Effective school improvement principals build trust with their teachers (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020; Finnigan, 2012; Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). Fullan and Pinchot (2018) found the same concept: "going slow to go fast" (p. 49), meaning creating a balance between urgency and relationships. Although the challenges, expectations, and stakes were significant, the principal would listen and value what people had to say (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020). Through the trust and relationships built, many respected her and the work she did for the school (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). Research by Barreau and McIntosh (2020); Berg, Connolly, Lee, and Fairley (2018); and Fullan and Pinchot (2018) focused on principals that built trust first between everyone in order to tackle the most

challenging problems together, leading to sustained improvement. Through the leader's confidence in others, the people in the school wanted to follow and help change the school in a positive way (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020; Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015).

School improvement principals created incredibly high expectations for their students, teachers, and staff members in the building, and they were extremely clear with their standards (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020; Finnigan, 2012; Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2010). Those expectations were not just for the teachers, staff, and students in the building; the standards started with the school improvement principal before anyone else (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). The expectations were sometimes so high that it created intimidation for the people around the leader (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). Research concluded that school turnaround leaders often believed that their staff could perform at a much higher level and created an always-learning mindset (Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2010). Embedded within the high expectations were ways to hold every individual accountable for doing the critical work needed such as analyzing test scores or developing goals (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020; Brown et al., 2017; Finnigan, 2012; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). Even through frustrating and challenging work, the leader upheld the same level of expectation (Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015, 2017; Thielman, 2012). At the beginning of one school turnaround principal's work, she interviewed teachers and found what she called "deficit thinking," so she attempted to change that the entire year: "student[s] can do it, you can do it, and we can do it" was her motto (Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). The expectations for everyone in the building create the vision for improvement.

Emotional Intelligence. Goleman (1995) developed four domains and 12 competencies that he titled Emotional Intelligence in Leaders. The concept argues Emotional Intelligence is

often more significant than standard IQ as it helps people develop relationships and connections with others around them. School leaders with the Emotional Intelligence characteristics of self-motivation and reflection, relationships and trust, and empathy often had strong impacts on their schools (Clark, 2017; DeMatthews, 2014; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015).

Effective leaders utilize Emotional Intelligent leadership characteristics to self-motivate, reflect, and adapt to each situation to continue working toward goals (Clark, 2017; DeMatthews, 2014). Their ability to make difficult, quick, and smart decisions while adapting to determine needs has a direct impact on the success of school improvement (Green, 2017; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). School improvement principals develop the goal of building positive relationships and trust with others and within their communities. The relationships that leaders build with those they lead are critical to the success of the organization (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009). Research by Pierce (2014) concluded that a direct relationship exists between the principals' Emotional Intelligence and the teachers' collective efficacy, or the teachers' feelings about creating positive change in schools. Combining the leader's belief, trust, and relationship with the impact on collective efficacy leads to a powerful change synergy. Brinia, Zimianiti, and Panagiotopoulos (2014) highlighted the importance of empathy when working in schools. Empathy for others is a critical piece of social awareness and in making positive changes in leadership positions (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009).

Grit and growth mindset. In Angela Duckworth's (2016) book titled *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, she discussed the concept of grit. One of the major arguments within the text is that a person's passion, perseverance, and work-ethic outweigh IQ and lead to more success (Klocko, 2019). In school leadership, grit aligns with a principal's resiliency in challenging situations (Day, 2014; Klocko, 2019; Turk & Wolfe, 2019). Developing grit or

resiliency supports leader's future success in schools and other areas (Day, 2014; Duckworth, 2016; Turk & Wolfe 2019). Researchers concluded that many school leaders had overcome significant adversity and were willing to continue through the challenges (Day, 2014; Turk & Wolfe, 2019). Klocko (2019) posited that effective school leaders commit to breaking down barriers to their success and for those that they lead, which comes with extreme challenges at times. Building capacity, grit, and resiliency in teachers and staff contributed significantly to the success of schools and districts (Day, 2014; Klocko, 2019). Although grit concentrates on focused effort over time, it relates to growth mindset as the leader must continually grow and evolve to reach goals.

Growth mindset means with enough persistence, people can achieve the goals they have for themselves and others. Growth-minded people see the challenges they face as opportunities to learn and grow in their work (Dweck, 2006; Ziegler, 2017). Growth-minded people understand who they are which relates to Goleman's (1995) Emotional Intelligence. By understanding the many facets of themselves, they face challenges with more focus and clarity. Growth-minded individuals focus on the process rather than the end product, thus they are well-equipped in overcoming failures when they occur (Dweck, 2006; Ziegler, 2017). They work toward a vision, but also develop quality habits to help them reach their goals. Growth-minded individuals are reflective which guides them in success (Dweck, 2006; Ziegler, 2017). In school improvement, the principal is at the center of using a growth mindset as there will be failures and shortcomings. Ziegler (2017) argues that the school leader needs a growth mindset for a variety of areas: hiring, professional development, evaluations, conversations, parent relationships, decisions, and self-talk. The leader utilizes a growth mindset to overcome challenges on the way

to helping the school and the students achieve higher levels of learning (Dweck, 2006; Ziegler, 2017).

Strategic Plan and Data

Strategic plan. Education scholars Bernhardt (2018), Goldman and Sorenson (2018), and Odden (2011) created a systematic approach to strategic planning including committee development, community input, data collection and analysis, and plans for success. School improvement begins with a plan and a system for success. An important piece of strategic planning is goal setting. Cosner and Jones (2016) and Bagwell (2019) concluded goal setting as a critical component of school improvement, especially in urban settings. To help reach goals, Knudson, Shambough, and O'Day (2011) argued for districts and schools to be more systematic in their approach to school improvement, suggesting eliminating all barriers to improvement. Numerous research studies suggest that local systematic planning contributes to a more focused and empowered approach by the individuals involved.

School improvement leaders must develop specific and holistic plans to move schools forward (Bernhardt, 2015). Even though systematic planning impacts learning, Meyers and VanGronigen (2019) found that in many elementary School Improvement Plans (SIP) principals practiced the behavior of meeting minimum requirements or minimal work to satisfy the requirement. The research findings contradict the importance of strategic planning and school improvement process that other studies found (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019). With a more focused approach to planning, leaders shift improvement at a more rapid pace and impact student learning (Bagwell, 2019; Bernhardt, 2015; Knudson et al., 2011; Odden, 2011). Many of the SIPs analyzed focused solely on improving test scores instead of the holistic process of culture/climate, systems, instruction, or data (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019). Barreau and

McIntosh's (2020) and Bernhardt's (2015) research concluded that to significantly improve schools, utilizing numerous data sets and strategic planning play critical roles. Research found that 86% of SIPs did not have an appropriate or sufficient timeline for improvement, which is a main tenant of both strategic planning and school improvement (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019). The research on strategic planning is clear as numerous studies suggested its importance for improving schools (Bagwell, 2019; Bernhardt, 2015; Knudson et al., 2011; Odden, 2011); other research proved the lack in planning lessens the impact of school improvement (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019).

Data driven school improvement. Data driven school improvement is an established practice, but it is becoming more evident now that schools and districts focus on satisfying accountability initiatives (Bagwell, 2019; Hitt & Meyers, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2010). Bagwell (2019), Duke et al. (2008), and Thielman (2012) argued that the first step in school improvement and turnaround is diagnosing why the school is low performing. These researchers suggested analyzing data on student achievement, instruction, school organization, and culture in order to diagnose the situation. Bernhardt (2015) argued change occurs when there is focus on specific strategies, gathered from data, that impact student learning. While challenging, data begins the conversation about how to start the change process (Thielman, 2012), and data drives the continuous school improvement model (Bernhardt, 2018; Ubben et al., 2016; Zavadsky, 2012).

To clearly diagnose trouble areas or gaps in achievement, leaders often utilize committees to analyze data, and data driven school improvement plans must be systematic (Bernhardt, 2015; 2017; Sorenson & Goldsmith, 2018). Researchers suggested organizing stakeholders into committees so that all stakeholders have a voice and are empowered to make change in their schools. The committees should be diverse and represent all stakeholders within

the school (Abbot & Wren, 2016; Huguet, Farrell, & Marsh, 2017). The school leaders should allow members to consider the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities the school has to improve, and they should utilize data provided by the school (Lynch et al., 2016). The development and refining of the school's goals or vision should focus on data and numbers should drive improvement decisions (Bernhardt, 2015; 2018; Brown et al., 2017; Sorenson & Goldsmith, 2018).

When analyzing data, research suggested a variety of information including demographics, student achievement, staff, school processes, community, culture, and climate should be used (Bernhardt, 2018; Ubben et al., 2016). One example from a school turnaround case-study was that the principal made all students take the SAT in order to gather baseline data for further improvement (Thielman, 2012). This particular example is only one way to gather data, however. Bernhardt's (2015, 2018) research argued for collecting four types of data for school improvement: demographics, perceptions, student learning, and school process. These four provided a holistic representation of the school that guided decision making. Barreau and McIntosh (2020) and Fullan and Pinchot (2018) argued for gathering significant data by listening to the staff early in the improvement process. School leaders have access to numerous state tests or services that provide formative assessments for students, and they utilize these assessments as a snapshot of academic performance (Bernhardt, 2015; Bernhardt, 2018; MN Department of Education, 2019). This data provides opportunities to understand the student body and its needs.

By collecting and using data, schools have an opportunity to consider their successes and challenges, and teachers can use it as an opportunity to reflect on their practices (Datnow & Park, 2015; Guskey, 2009). The challenge is for school leaders to decide what data is the most important to collect for improvement (Guskey, 2009). While data is critical to the success of

students, school leadership must guide teachers in collaborative work and understanding data and assessment; school leaders set the tone for data in a school (Datnow & Park, 2015; Guskey, 2009). Through the data analysis process, stakeholders search for gaps or deficiencies in their schools and focus on them to begin the process. After considering the data, stakeholders must focus on developing goals, standards, and strategies that will help in improving weaknesses and staying consistent with successes. By also utilizing all stakeholders within the school community, people feel empowered to help reach those particular goals within the school (Bernhardt, 2018; Sorenson & Goldsmith, 2018). In addition, school leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders must consider what success looks like for them, how they will track progress, and when they will check progress (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010; Guskey, 2009; Marzano, 2017). Establishing these criteria guides the school and holds everyone accountable for reaching the particular goals within the school.

Datnow and Park (2015) state that high levels of learning in school is the responsibility of everyone in the building, not just a few people. When data show signs of improvement, the school should decide how they will celebrate success and communicate their success with all stakeholders. Reyes and Garcia (2013) interviewed a school turnaround principal, and his school celebrated their wins often in order to continue building positive culture. School change, improvement, and turnaround are challenging endeavors, so when the school reaches particular goals, they should focus on celebrating them and finding joy in their accomplishments (Bernhardt, 2018; Dolph, 2017). Data, along with the strategic planning process, create a systematic roadmap for school improvement leading to celebration

PLC data analysis for improvement. The Professional Learning Community (PLC) process is both challenging and empowering when developed correctly. Datnow and Park (2015)

and Bagwell (2019) argued for data driven instruction to work, teachers need the proper PLC time to collaborate. DuFour (2015) stated that "the most important criterion for determining whether educators are 'doing data right' is whether their use of data leads to improved student learning" (p. 23). Thus, the use of data is critical in improving low-performing schools. PLC data analysis for improvement happens through common assessments, analysis, and intervention (Bagwell, 2019; Datnow & Park, 2015; DuFour et al., 2010).

One main staple of academic success for students is developing common formative and summative assessments and using them to analyze data (DuFour et al., 2010; Marzano, 2017). Teachers in common grade levels or subjects consider the required standards, and they develop common assessments to track their students' progress on those particular standards. After developing the assessments, teachers give and evaluate the assessments to determine where each student is at with the skills (DuFour et al., 2010; Guskey, 2009; Marzano, 2017).

DuFour et al. (2010) and Marzano (2017) outlined very specific ways to collect and analyze data in PLCs. In their small groups, teachers discuss individual questions, teaching techniques, and overall student outcomes. Teachers discuss the most effective ways to teach a particular topic or idea and help each other get better results on the data (Datnow & Park, 2015). DuFour (2015) describes four critical questions when PLCs look at data: Which students fell short? Which students need enrichment? Which colleagues had great results and what can we learn from them? Which area did all of us struggle on and how can we improve? Asking these four questions during collaborative time helps set the agenda and creates a direction for using data correctly.

Based on data and discussions, teachers develop systematic interventions for students that need support with specific skills. For many schools, developing a list of students who struggle to

meet standards helps get those students the support they need to improve. Zavadsky (2012) concluded that many schools using data make it very transparent around their schools, and it can often be found in the office for teachers to see. Reyes and Garcia (2013) concluded that one principal set up data charts to track progress of students to understand what was happening in each classroom. To support all students, schools utilize systems such as Response to Intervention (RtI) or Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) programs to further guide struggling students once they have tracked students through PLC and other data.

Culture and Climate

Culture and climate improvement strategies. In school improvement, change, or turnaround, culture and climate indicate success and potential sustainability (Allen et al., 2015; Finnigan, 2012; Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015; Ross & Cozzens, 2016). Although school climate and culture are often used synonymously, taken separately, they both play a significant role in school improvement for turnaround leaders. School culture means the underlying values; behaviors; and beliefs of the school that the leaders, teachers, and students follow each day, and they are constantly changing and evolving in a school (Hollingworth et al., 2018). School climate means the feeling that students, faculty, and staff have when being involved in the school (Allen et al., 2015; Green, 2017). Thielman (2012) suggested a critical step in school improvement is creating engagement, empowerment, and buy-in from the people within the building: help every person see the direction and importance of the vision. When a principal takes over a struggling school, research suggested to interview the staff and determine what areas are effective and ineffective (Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Reyes & Garcia, 2013).

An early step for principals in a school improvement situation is to identify and understand the current culture and reality in the school (Dolph, 2017; Fullan & Pinchot, 2018;

Reyes & Garcia, 2013; Thielman, 2012). Reyes and Garcia (2013) posited that the first step in a school turnaround was for the principal to change the entire culture of the school from negative and dysfunctional to positive and functional. Schools function heavily on having a positive school climate and culture, and the school culture has a dramatic impact on the behaviors and interactions within the school (Brown et al., 2017; Dolph, 2017; Meyers & Hitt, 2018). In struggling schools, insufficient school climate and culture exist, yet they improve when the leader focuses on providing the resources and environment for teacher success (Allen et al., 2015; Hollingworth et al., 2018; McCarley et al., 2016). Both academic success and school climate improves when leaders focus on using a transformational leadership approach within the school (Allen et al., 2015; McCarley et al., 2016; Ross & Cozzens, 2016). Kundu (2018) found that teachers and staff in turnaround schools were incredibly optimistic and confident in improving the school, which develops a positive climate and culture in the building. Meyers and Hitt (2018) concluded that developing a positive culture and climate is a quick and critical win for any school searching for improvement.

High-expectations. One of the main tenets of school culture and school improvement is setting and reiterating high expectations that all students can and will learn the material presented without rewards for doing what is expected (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). Prior to the school improvement efforts, low expectations often exist, but the expectations rise as the school improves and develops (Day, 2014; Brown et al., 2017).

Many school administrators work together with staff to develop the expectations for school improvement in order to build stronger ownership over the work (Green, 2017; Ubben et al., 2016). The principal collaboratively creates the expectation from the beginning, and he or she outlines what the expectations look, feel, and sound like. The school leader, including the

superintendent and building administrator, effectively communicates the high expectations to all stakeholders. The expectations developed at the beginning of the year are consistently reiterated throughout the year in staff meetings, conversations, newsletters, classrooms, and hallways (Allen et al., 2015; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). In addition to developing the expectations, highly effective leaders and school improvement situations focus on holding people accountable to that particular standard (Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). The expectations are clearly defined throughout the school that all students will learn at high levels and all staff members will work at high levels to achieve the goals (Bagwell, 2019). To hold people accountable, the school leader participates in difficult or challenging conversations with those individuals who do not or will not meet the expectation (Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015; Odden, 2011). At times, some staff members may be asked to leave if they are unwilling to meet the expectation that has been set for them (Odden, 2011).

Urgency, hope, and belief. In analyzing two New York City schools, Kundu (2018) found that a key aspect of school improvement and school culture is the belief by everyone that improvement can and will happen. When leaders show the work matters, teachers and support staff also see the value, significance, and purpose in the work. Odden (2011) and Pappano (2010) argued that a sense of urgency for making improvement in schools aids in getting all individuals to make significant impacts.

Because improving schools is challenging, a sense of collective efficacy aids in teachers working together to make an impact on the school and students (Donohoo, Hattie, & Eells, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2010). Collective efficacy is the general feeling that the combined work of everyone involved leads to achieving the goals they have together. This form of collective efficacy helps teachers realize that the work they are doing makes an impact and helps with morale early in the process (Leithwood et al., 2010). Hewitt and Reitzug (2015) found that when

a school turnaround leader developed a sense of urgency and belief that everyone in the school could become better, an improved sense of collective efficacy occurred. Donohoo, Hattie, and Eells (2018) concluded collective efficacy creates behaviors of high expectations among adults and students in the building. Donohoo et al. (2018) synthesized John Hattie's *Visible Learning*, making note that one of the highest aspects connected to student achievement is teacher efficacy. Without a sense of collective efficacy, schools struggle to create significant improvement (Leithwood et al., 2010).

Clark (2017) and Leithwood et al. (2010) focused their research on school improvement and building capacity in others. When school leaders utilize transformational leadership and build belief in others, teachers find the courage to make change and continue improving and working. Day (2014) focused research on trust, hope, ethical purpose, and optimism in school turnaround and improvement situations. These four particular points were all similar in school improvement principals interviewed for the research. School turnaround and improvement are challenging endeavors, but research suggested that building a sense of urgency and creating hope and belief in teachers and students creates an environment for change and growth (Day, 2014).

Academics

Instructional leadership and feedback. Although principals have numerous duties within a school, their first challenge is to guide teachers, so students can achieve academically and behaviorally in their work (McCarley et al., 2016). Effective leadership within a school improvement situation revolves around feedback from the principal to the teachers in order to improve instruction for students (Bagwell, 2019; Dolph, 2017; Kelley & Dikkers, 2016; Tuystens & Devos, 2017). The principal in school improvement must be the instructional leader within the building (DeMatthews, 2014; Finnigan, 2012; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). Research

suggested that principals who have been teachers themselves build their credibility as an instructional leader within the school and district (Finnigan, 2012; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). Due to the challenges teachers face, they want a leader who understands their struggles and provides support when they need it. In addition, the feedback provided to teachers must be understood as a process approach where teacher-leadership and capacity are built over time (Huggins et al., 2017). To better aid in school improvement, the leader in the school must focus on developing teachers' instructional approach, and the leader must focus on developing teachers to help lead the improvement (Bagwell, 2019; Finnigan, 2012; Thielman, 2012). Thielman's (2012) research suggested the principal provided instructional strategies, increased professional development, encouraged visiting classrooms as exemplars, and coached teachers throughout the year.

Highly effective instruction. The leader in the building must develop a system and vision for effective instruction through high expectations for teaching and learning (Day et al., 2016). Instructional scholars suggested that leaders and teachers develop the specific standards and skills they want to focus on in their classrooms (DuFour et al., 2010; Marzano, 2017). Teachers want a vision for the school, ideas for instruction, and an emphasis placed on goals for student learning (DeMatthews, 2014; Finnigan, 2012; Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). Cosner and Jones (2016) and Bagwell (2019) concluded that the leader in the school must help teachers maintain a focus on highly effective teaching and learning within the school. In Bagwell's (2019) study, one urban school improvement principal's main focus was on the instructional practices of the staff and the impact it had on student learning. DeMatthews (2014) suggested highly effective instruction focuses on the belief that students can and will learn.

These core standards and skills are the basis for the teaching and learning that happens in the classroom every day. Marzano (2017) and DuFour et al. (2010) both argued for the

development of sound assessments that align specifically with standards and have very specific criteria for evaluation. Marzano (2017) suggested developing rubrics or scales that outline expectations for each individual assignment is critical. Lessons, activities, and applications should allow students to develop or create their work as it reaches higher order thinking skills and meets the specific criteria for effective instruction (Marzano, 2017).

After developing sound expectations for teaching and learning, instructional leaders often gather, analyze, and utilize observational data to guide students to higher academic achievement (Fullan & Punchot, 2018; Lynch et al., 2016; Meyers & Sadler, 2018). According to their research, Day, Gu, and Sammons (2016) and Fullan and Pinchot (2018) concluded that leaders in school improvement focus on instructional rounds to observe effective instruction in action after developing core beliefs around teaching. Day et al. (2016) found that in secondary schools needing improvement, the use of data and teaching policies made the largest impact on improvement. Researchers concluded that sound instruction and a focus on improving teaching leads to improvement in student outcomes (Abbot & Wren, 2016; Brown et al., 2017; Finnigan, 2012; Fullan & Pinchot, 2018).

Highly effective instruction focuses on research-based strategies to move student learning. Howard (2008) and Day et al. (2016) described that all schools they studied had highly effective teachers who utilized research-based strategies to impact student learning. Robert Marzano (2017) synthesized research outlining the most critical aspects of teaching and learning. Those characteristics include the following: learning goals, assessments, direct instruction, practice and deepening lessons, knowledge application lessons, engagement strategies, rules and procedures, relationships, and high expectations. Meyers et al. (2017) concurred that utilizing strategies such as learning goals, common standards, and rubrics creates positive changes in

student learning. Kutash et al.'s (2010) research concluded the use of individualized learning and instruction model greatly impacts learning and school improvement. To better prepare teachers for research-based strategies, professional development must be provided on assessments and aligning quality instruction to meet the needs of students (Kutash et al., 2010; Thielman, 2012). The research is very specific and clear on effective instruction and its ability to improve student outcomes.

Professional learning communities (PLC). DeMatthews (2014) and Reed and Swaminathan (2016) focused on researching the connection between school improvement, the PLC model, and the school leader organizing and leading the change. The PLC model focuses on teams within the school collaborating to develop curriculum, common assessments, and data analysis that drives academic success and progress in school (Bagwell, 2019; Clark, 2017; Mitchell & Sackney, 2016; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016).

The process of developing a PLC is extensive and the leader in the school plays a role in it by reorganizing schedules so teachers can collaborate together, providing leadership to teachers, giving feedback on the process, and giving a voice to all teachers (DeMatthews, 2014; Leithwood et al, 2010). DuFour et al. (2010) also created very specific guidelines: first, create the specific team teachers will work in; second, develop team norms and goals that will be the focus of the work; finally, develop common assessments and track student progress. A case-study on school turnaround by Thielman (2012) also found that teachers focused on developing common curriculum around core standards. Through common curriculum, the school provided an equitable education to all students. DeMatthews' (2014) research found that in effective PLCs, teachers had aligned their values about student learning, and they felt a connection to the school's mission, vision, and values which in turn helped sustain the PLC model. As suggested,

the process helps teachers focus on academic strategies that impact student learning. Effective school improvement leaders also encourage teachers to reflect while working in teams (Clark, 2017; DeMatthews, 2014). Most often when discussing academic strategies for school improvement, leaders focus their work on shared goals and responsibility, personal reflection, and group reflection (DeMatthews, 2014; Finnigan, 2012).

Achievement gap. Tileston and Darling (2008) and Howard (2010) focused extensively on the achievement gap that exists between students of color and White students. Though the achievement gap often focuses on test scores, issues of access, graduation rates, special education placement, AP and honors course placement, and behavioral referrals (Howard, 2010; Tileston & Darling, 2008). When reflecting on struggling or failing schools, many of them are located in areas of high poverty and cultural diversity leading to large discrepancies for students of color. Because of that reality, Fullan (2006) charged that improving underperforming schools is about closing the gaps between various groups within the school. One specific example focused on Bernhardt's (2015) research from Hawaii: the school used data to find increasing gaps in learning between high-need and low-need students every year. Through analyzing data, the district developed a plan to close the gap.

Bernhardt (2015) and Tileston and Darling (2008) extensively discussed various ways to improve achievement and close the gap. Improving achievement happens through quality instruction, ELL, Title I, Special Education programming, specific standards, RtI and MTSS systems, and after-school programming. In addition, leaders close the achievement gap through focusing on learning, differentiating instruction, culturally responsive teaching, and literacy improvement. Fullan (2006) and Odden (2011) argued for the most effective teachers and leaders being placed in the most challenging situations as they have the ability to solve problems. The

achievement gap is a specific challenge in struggling schools, and due to many difficulties these schools face, lessening the achievement gap can be daunting. Scholars City and Dolly (2017) encouraged leaders to develop systems and strategies for lessening inequities. Some of those include standing up to injustices, creating diverse relationships, and guiding colleagues and staff. Without the leader focusing on equity work, it is challenging for others to follow.

Schedule and Systems

School schedule. Miles and Frank (2008) and Benner and Partelow (2017) both posited that the structure of the school day and its schedule plays an important role in school improvement. Miles and Frank (2008) and Benner and Partelow (2017) focused on three key ideas in their writing: first, the amount of time students are in class; second, opportunities for small group intervention during the school day; and finally, ways for teachers to collaborate with one another to guide student learning.

One major reason to adjust the schedule is to increase the amount of time students attend core academic subjects and are in the classroom learning. Research by Thielman (2012) and Poppink, Ma, and Shen (2019) concluded that extending the school day had a significant, positive effect on improving student achievement and reaching AYP. Miles and Frank (2008) gave examples of some schools decreasing passing period by one minute or lessening the lunch period by a few minutes to make more time for instruction. At the secondary level, Thielman (2012) provided an example of the principal making Grade 9 English a block class in order for students to receive more instruction. Fullan and Pinchot (2018) developed block scheduling within the school that allowed for more instruction and interventions or enrichment. Block scheduling utilizes longer class periods for more direct instruction in key academic areas (Miles

& Frank, 2008). Through these schedule changes, schools focused more direct instruction on core classes, leading to positive changes in academic achievement.

The second promising change to the school schedule is utilizing small group work for focused instruction and intervention (Benner & Partelow, 2017; Canady & Rettig, 1995; Miles & Frank, 2008; Poppink, Ma, & Shen, 2019). The most effective schools have found ways to provide student intervention or enrichment for at least 5-10% of the student body throughout the school day (Benner & Partelow, 2017; Miles & Frank, 2008). At the secondary level, many examples of this particular strategy exist, but the most common ones are a time throughout the day where students either receive academic support or work on other items. Individual tutoring or small group instruction provide opportunities for in-depth support (Benner & Partelow, 2017; Marzano, 2017; Miles & Frank, 2008). Marzano (2017) synthesized research on utilizing time throughout the day or week during which students receive academic support in specific areas.

The final positive change to the elementary school schedule is providing opportunities for teachers to collaborate during the school day (Benner & Partelow, 2017; Miles & Frank, 2008; Poppin et al., 2019). The most effective schools develop opportunities for staff members to collaborate throughout the school day in their PLC cohorts (DuFour et al., 2010; Leithwood et al., 2010). At the elementary school level, common planning time often occurs during student lunch, recess, or specialists throughout the day (Benner & Partelow, 2017). At the secondary level, many schools either utilize a late start or an early release model where everything is pushed back one hour allowing teachers to collaborate and improve student learning and instruction (Miles & Frank, 2008; DuFour et al., 2010).

Response to intervention and multi-tiered systems of support programs. The concept of MTSS is one that focuses on providing academic support to students who need it most (P.K.

Yonge Developmental Research School, 2014). Through the use of very specific data tracking, the leadership team and teachers identify students. P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School (2014) suggested that committing to MTSS or RtI is doing what is best for all students to learn at the highest levels possible. Three levels of support exist in an MTSS system:

(1) Tier 1 focuses on the entire class and what they are given to be successful as a group.

(2) Tier 2 focuses on a small group of individuals who might need support within the class.

(3) Tier 3 focuses on individual support to the students who need the most help in a specific academic area.

One of the most important aspects of developing a strong MTSS program is developing a schoolwide schedule to support the needs of all learners and the work that everyone does in the building (Miles & Frank, 2008). Tracking students who exceed, partially meet, and do not meet proficiency provides a clear picture of where students need support. Miles and Frank (2008) and Odden (2011) recommend having the most experienced and most effective teacher work with students who need the most support. It is up to the administrative team to outline a schedule that is beneficial for all students and places the most effective teachers in a position for the greatest impact.

Fullan and Pinchot (2018) found that the first system implementation of the school improvement principal was Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) and an MTSS plan. Bohanon, Gilman, Parker, and Amell (2016) researched the implementation of MTSS programs and found six stages of implementation: exploration and adoption, program installation, implementation, full operation, innovation, and sustainability. The use of this process creates a

systematic approach to MTSS development and sustainability. Furthermore, Bohanon et al. (2016) suggested that best practices in MTSS programs include weekly meetings that address the academic, behavioral, and emotional challenges of students within the school. Within the meetings, teachers, administrators, and support personnel help decide what levels of support students need. In addition, within each tier of support, there are remediation and prevention strategies to help students succeed (Bohanon, Gilman, Parker, & Amell, 2016). The final aspect of MTSS programs is tracking and utilizing student data within the program based on interventions; strategies; and academic, behavior, and emotional support (Bohanon et al., 2016).

Avant (2016) found that RtI and MTSS programs lead to a higher level of social justice leadership and equity within schools. The study found two key components: first, staff found a greater sense of fairness and equity when utilizing RtI and MTSS programs as all students received the help they needed to be successful. Second, in addition to equity and fairness, the researcher found intervention programs aid in both academic and behavior challenges within a school. The programs guide students in managing their work and receive help with positive and constructive behaviors. Bohanon et al. (2016) researched MTSS programs and academics, and found that when utilized and implemented correctly, student learning and achievement were impacted. The program must be in alignment with the SIP in order to work effectively.

Academic preparation and student failures. In elementary schools, academic preparation is critical. According to a long-term study by The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2010), reading well by the end of Grade 3 is an indicator of what happens to students academically. The report enacted numerous state laws for school districts to develop reading plans for K-3 students to ensure that all students were proficient in reading. According to the study, reading by Grade 3 impacts many areas as students move through their educational

experiences including academic preparation, earning and growth potential, and a less educated society and workforce. Unfortunately, the gap between low-income and students of color exists extensively in Grade 3 reading which furthers the achievement gap (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010). Elementary school in general, but especially in Grade 3 reading, has impacts that reverberate within society for years.

In secondary schools, research by Vera et al. (2016) found that by lessening failures in Grade 9, students were less likely to drop out later in their high school careers. The process to helping them stay in school was a summer program for incoming high school students. Three middle schools all combined into one large high school and students were selected by their middle school counselors to join the summer program leading to Grade 9. The purpose of the program was to focus on positive feelings about high school, understanding the expectations of high school, and positive feelings about going on to higher education. McKee and Caldarella (2016) and Vera et al. (2016) found similar recommendations for moving forward with lessening failures and dropouts. First, school dropouts in high school can be predicted by a low grade point average (GPA) in middle school. School leaders and teachers should implement ways to help students succeed in middle school and leading into high school. Second, middle school students with little course completion lead to higher dropout rates in high school. Lastly, low daily attendance and absenteeism is a major cause for high school dropout. Researchers for both the Grade 9 summer program and middle school indicators of high school success, suggest finding positive ways to lessen failure rates, increase GPAs, increase course completion, and increase attendance rates in order to improve student learning and school success.

Behavior

Behavior strategies and PBIS. In addition to academic strategies and leadership, school improvement principals often look for behavioral strategies that make a positive impact on the school, especially the safety of students (Day et al., 2016; Fullan & Pinchot, 2018). Behavior referrals within the school have a large impact on student learning especially those that are violent or threatening as they erode trust with the community (Day et el., 2016; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016; Sebastian et al., 2017). Lessening behavior challenges within a school leads to more students in class and learning at any given time. Bohanon et al. (2016) researched the impact of positive behavior interventions in schools through a school improvement lens. One of those programs, according to Fullan and Pinchot (2018) is PBIS, which focuses on developing positive behaviors within the school. They found that utilizing positive behavior supports aid school improvement efforts. The researchers mentioned, however, that the positive behavior interventions must be in alignment with the overall improvement plan for the school. In addition, school safety is an important piece in providing a safe culture and climate in which students and staff can work.

According to PBIS (2019), there are four key areas to the concept: developing systems, using data, utilizing practices, and measuring outcomes. Similar to MTSS programs focused on academic improvement, PBIS utilizes a tiered system where one tier is for all students, and the pyramid becomes more focused for those who need it more.

Systems. The only way PBIS works is through utilizing the systems of support concept. The leader must work with the leadership team and committee to determine what those systems look like and how they work within the school setting.

Data. In PBIS (2019), data drives decision making about the school and the students in the school. Like other decisions in leadership, data should be collected and analyzed prior to making significant decisions. Bernhardt (2018) outlines an entire process for improving a school utilizing data as the driving force for change.

Practices. PBIS does not happen unless the practices to make it work are put into place within the entire school. PBIS (2019) suggests that these practices must include regular leadership team meetings, weekly routines and organization, consistent statements about positive behavior, and data practices. In addition, on a more micro level in classrooms, teachers must establish routines, behavior expectations, discourage negative behavior, and continually communicate with families (Marzano, 2017). These practices are all the Tier 1 concepts that must be implemented prior to providing other support in Tier 2 or Tier 3.

Outcomes. For every system or school to achieve, the leader and the team must establish specific outcomes utilized to track progress. Numerous writers and scholars suggest the importance of creating goals and steps to reaching them in the school improvement process (Bernhardt, 2018; Collins, 2001; Green, 2018; Odden, 2011; Ubben et al., 2016). PBIS (2019) suggests that the outcomes might be fewer office referrals, lessened negative student behavior in classrooms, or a more positive learning experience for students and teachers. The school must work together to establish the outcomes they are looking for within the school. In this school improvement plan, those are based off of the previous year's data.

Personnel and Resources

Teaching staff. One of the most significant aspects of improving schools are the individuals within the building who have the capacity to help achieve the results (Abbot & Wren, 2016; Bagwell, 2019; Duke et al., 2008; Miles & Frank, 2008; Odden, 2011; Zavadsky, 2012).

According to Fullan (2006), school improvement takes motivated people who all believe in education. Duke et al. (2008) and Miles and Frank (2008) mentioned that although turnover was challenging, it was often a necessary part of the improvement process. Those who cannot or will not align with the vision must move on. Some principals and districts choose to part ways with many of the people who are not on board with the school improvement plan, or those teachers choose to leave themselves (Brown et al., 2017; Duke et al., 2008; Zavadsky, 2012).

The people who choose to stay or ask to stay have a significant impact on improving the school. Brown et al. (2017) concluded that many improvement principals sell their schools on the mission they have together which helps hire the right people. Once the teachers are in place, then principals often help them improve through numerous coaching and instructional feedback strategies (Brown et al., 2017; Finnigan, 2012; Tuystens & Devos, 2017). Blasé and Blasé (2001) argue for empowering teachers to help create the change needed within the building. In school improvement, teachers take on significant responsibilities in deciding instruction during their PLC time and using data to guide instruction (Abbot & Wren, 2016; DeMatthews, 2014). Specifically in elementary schools, Clark's (2017) research found that receiving input from teachers, creating a student-centered culture, professional development, reflection, and collaboration all contributed to higher-levels of success in school improvement situations. Clark (2017) also concluded that capacity building falls on the building principal. Principals who built capacity among teachers, utilized their input, and built trust maintained their initiatives more effectively. According to Cosner and Jones (2016) and Miles and Frank (2008), teaching staff also needs ongoing professional development success and career development. Finally, research by Leithwood et al. (2010) found that in the later stages of school improvement, the goal is to celebrate the work of teachers, making them feel positive about the work they have done so far.

Human capital and hiring. Leithwood et al. (2010), Odden (2011), and Zavadsky (2012) all argued for recruiting, hiring, onboarding, and developing top talent in order to help the school improve at a high level. The leader at the top is the most significant person to make the change as he or she also has the ability to improve other areas of human capital. Zavadsky (2012) argued that having a reliable and stable leader makes a significant difference in the direction of the school. At the highest level, many school districts develop their own leadership academies in order to create more leaders who can complete the challenging work (Odden, 2011; Zavadsky, 2012). Leithwood et al. (2010) described three ideas connected to hiring capable turnaround teacher leaders: obtain highly-effective instruction, believe that all students can learn, and practice patience and optimism about the process. In addition to the leaders in the buildings, recruiting and hiring effective teachers makes a difference. In 2003, Boston Public Schools developed their own 13-month teacher-training academy that incentivized people to become teachers and lessen turnover within the district (Odden, 2011; Zavadsky, 2012). Another strategy that Odden (2011) discussed was partnering with a local college or university in order to recruit the best students directly out of school.

Outside resources. Kutash et al. (2010), Thielman (2012), and Pappano (2010) recommended that the principal utilize every resource possible when creating change in schools including those within the larger community such as non-profit organizations and companies. Research by Hitt and Meyers (2018) reviewed the literature on sustained turnaround, and how the allocation and use of resources including time, money, people, and other capital contributes to sustainability. One key suggestion by Knudson et al. (2011) and Meyers and Smylie (2017) focused on utilizing outside resources to support the principal in the position, helping him or her succeed in the job. These outside resources include organizations that could help in any way with

improving the lives of the students and families who attend the school (Leithwood et al., 2010). Those resources must be strategically used and not add more work for the principal. For example, Cosner and Jones (2016) concluded that utilizing outside instructional resources such as curriculum, baseline testing, and other systems that support instruction make a significant impact on school improvement. Fullan and Pinchot (2018) suggested these outside resources could be more experienced individuals or consultants for advice. In another example from Kundu (2018), turnaround schools often rely on volunteers and tutors to increase their effectiveness as they focus on redefining what schools looks like.

Attendance and Family Engagement

Community and parent engagement. According to ESEA School Turnaround Principles, Brown et al. (2017), and Pappano (2010), one critical factor to help school turnaround and improvement is community engagement. Part of building community and parent engagement is creating more confidence in the school for the work it is doing (Fullan, 2006). School turnaround challenges leaders to consider how they are engaging the community to help support learning and improvement. Ubben, Hughes, and Norris (2016) explain the incredible impact schools have on the community in both positive and negative ways. Each day within a school district, the media reports on the negative aspects of schools as well as the positive. The challenge for school leaders, then, is to continue to communicate and engage with the community in a positive way to garner their support.

Ubben et al. (2016) also shared that numerous outside community forces, neighborhood influences, and community groups impact support and engagement. In research by Hitt and Meyers (2018) and Berg et al. (2018), the absolute importance of creating community partnerships and engaging families in the “sustained school turnaround” effort is essential.

Family and parent engagement are significant aspects of the improvement process, especially for low achieving students (Berg et al., 2018; Duke et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2010). Pappano (2010) when analyzing schools in turnaround, found a critical question: will average parents become invested in the school improvement enough to make it work? This particular question speaks to the importance of having every person part of the solution. Meyers and Hitt (2018) mentioned a quick win is something as simple as making sure the appearance of the school is engaging to the community. Often, the school is the center of the neighborhood and represents the larger community, so if they are not proud of it or if it does not reflect their standards, negativity fills the voids. Reyes and Garcia (2013) focused on improving the connection with parents and guardians at the school in order to improve student achievement and culture. Those parents became volunteers at the school in a variety of ways and sat on various committees (Leithwood et al., 2010).

Reitzug and Hewitt (2017) conducted qualitative research on personality traits of a school turnaround leader, and they suggested that school turnaround principals utilize strategies that engage students, teachers, and community at large, helping to impact the success of the school. Cosner and Jones (2016) and Leithwood et al. (2010) argued that school leaders within turnaround situations focus on shielding teachers and students from external factors and pressures that exist as they take away from the positive aspects happening within the school.

Conclusion

The concept of school improvement is critical to making sure that all students learn at the highest levels in schools. The principalship is challenging to complete on one's own, so many leaders focus on distributing the leadership to others within the school to help lead the improvement process. The underlying theories of transformational leadership and distributed

leadership help drive a lot of positive change in schools. Leaders then work to develop academic, behavior, and culture/climate strategies to help impact success in schools.

Chapter III: Methodology

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore principals' perceptions of factors leading to improvement in MCA test scores in Minnesota Title I elementary schools. The study included principals who led their schools from the 2016 to 2019 school years and showed improvement in MCA math and reading test scores.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Transformational Leadership Theory parallels the context of school improvement. Burns (1978) and Bass and Riggio (2006) coined the term transformational leadership. The theory focuses on leaders who have a vision for the future, develop a plan, and create change that impacts many people within an organization (Finnigan, 2012; McCarley et al., 2016). Burns (1978) juxtaposes specific leadership models: transactional vs. transformational. In transactional leadership, leaders direct attention on the final outcome and the bottom line, and they work to achieve this through numerous means. Transformational leadership directs more attention on people: leaders who are transformational often raise the level of motivation and focus of those who follow them (Green, 2018). According to Allen, Grigsby, and Peters (2015), transformational leadership contributes to a positive impact on school climate, a leading aspect of school improvement.

Previous researchers have also utilized Transformational Leadership Theory to underpin their research (Allen et al., 2015; Finnigan, 2012; McCarley et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2016). First, school improvement must focus on planning a vision for the future (Finnigan, 2012; McCarley et al., 2016). Leaders in school improvement often collaborate with individuals to strategically plan for school improvement and this is often an extended and lengthy process.

Second, leaders who utilize transformational leadership develop specific strategies that align with the long-term vision. Finnigan (2012) found that teachers and staff do not want low expectations in the vision, but they want to be challenged by the leader. Third, Finnigan (2012) and McCarley, Peters, and Decman (2016) argued that transformational leadership often motivates teachers and staff to complete difficult work. Finally, transformational leadership reflects not only a change in results, but also a change in the social construct of the environment. For example, transformational leadership changes outcomes for people, and shifts the culture and climate within the school (Allen et al., 2015; McCarley et al., 2016).

Research Design

The research conducted falls under a basic qualitative approach and combined several frameworks in qualitative methodology. Creswell (2014) described a variety of worldviews connected to qualitative research including constructivist and pragmatic underpinnings. This study aimed to learn about individuals and how they created meaning from their leadership situations (Creswell, 2014): elementary school improvement principals, working in Minnesota, with schools designated as Title I, and focused on improving student outcomes. In the constructivist worldview, the researcher asks open-ended questions to allow participants to explain and describe the situation, aiding in a better understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, the researcher established the pragmatic worldview in an attempt to have the freedom of choice in approach when studying school improvement principals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In pragmaticism, the researcher focuses more on the practical approach of the research rather than the philosophical, the action rather than the principle. Looking through the pragmatic lens, the researcher aimed to develop a study that gathered data on factors leading to success so other practitioners might utilize similar strategies.

While some aspects of school improvement could be measured implementing quantitative research, the researcher aimed to gain deeper, personal insights through questioning, talking with principals personally, and learning their perceptions regarding school improvement. Because qualitative research employs the researcher as the primary data-gathering instrument, the researcher concentrated on understanding the problem in more depth, analyzing the participants' experiences, considering the meaning they developed, and utilizing their responses as data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through the researcher being the primary instrument, qualitative research provides an opportunity to inductively analyze data, considering topics, themes, and theories during the process (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Qualitative research. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of elementary school improvement principals in Minnesota Title I designated schools. The researcher conducted qualitative research in the applied format and utilized pragmatic underpinnings. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), applied research helps improve a specific practice such as school improvement. The researcher developed a study focused on creating positive change in education and guiding others to understand the factors in elementary school improvement. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described this approach as critical research and "the goal is to critique and challenge, to transform and empower" (p. 10). Qualitative research focuses on providing in-depth descriptions of people or a group of people by using interviews, observations, and document analysis. Scholars describe this work as "richly descriptive" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.17) while Bogdan and Biklen (2007) describe aspects of qualitative research as "thick description" (p. 31). More specifically, the researcher captured the experiences of these individuals and the ways in

which they developed meaning from their experiences (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Due to the intimacy of school improvement, the researcher chose to explore elementary principals' experiences and focus on clear descriptions of the participants' thinking on the improvement process to better understand its complicated nature.

Researchers describe qualitative research in more specific ways such as phenomenology, case-study, ethnography, or grounded theory (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The described research was a basic qualitative study and "the overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24), and it should explore how participants view the issue or problem (Creswell, 2014). The basic qualitative approach aligned most clearly with the purpose and research question for the study.

Research Question

RQ_1 What are the perceptions of Minnesota elementary school principals on the factors leading to their school's academic improvement?

Sampling Design

The researcher applied purposive sampling because of the specific individuals utilized in the study (Orcher, 2014; Patten, 2014). The sample included elementary school principals in Minnesota working in Title I elementary schools. The researcher elected to focus on Minnesota due to the proximity of gathering information and data and the opportunity to talk with principals personally.

The Minnesota Department of Education Data Analytics Team compiled a list of Minnesota's 903 elementary schools and each school's growth on MCA math and reading scores from 2017-2019. Because of the definition of improvement and turnaround, the researcher centered on a three-year time period for improvement. The data set listed the percent

improvement for each test and both tests combined, which allowed the researcher to sort the data easily.

The data set was sorted from the most improved school to the least improved by combining math and reading proficiency percentages. Schools not improving by at least 3% over the past three years were eliminated from the list, which contracted from 903 to 157 schools. The next step included highlighting the most improved schools within a convenient distance from the Minneapolis-St. Paul area and organizing schools as urban, suburban, and rural.

From 157 schools, the list narrowed to 17 elementary schools where the principal led the school during the 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years. Next, Title I designation was determined. The Minnesota Department of Education (2019) defined Title I as over 40% of the student population receives free and reduced-price lunches. The list narrowed to 11 principals who matched these criteria. The list included two urban principals, two charter principals, four suburban principals, and three rural principals. Nine principals led traditional elementary schools and two led charter schools (one urban and one suburban). Six principals were female and five were male. The participation email was sent to all 11 principals on the list (Appendix C).

Instrumentation and Measures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted utilizing a protocol with specific questions that provided opportunities to ask follow up questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested opening the interview with motives, intentions, purpose, participant anonymity, consent, and any payment provided. Details regarding length of the interview and explaining the procedure for completing the interview were shared prior to the interview. The researcher conducted video interviews in order to capture each principal's personality more thoroughly.

Field Tests

Three experienced professionals in educational leadership reviewed the interview protocol to determine the effectiveness of each question, items to remove, or elements to add. The researcher revised the interview questions numerous times to reach the desired syntax. The researcher also focused on aligning the research objective, research question, interview questions, and literature. Clear alignment allowed for easier analysis when coding and developing overarching themes.

After the final interview questions were developed, the researcher conducted two pilot interviews with educational leaders working in public schools who were not participants in the official study. The purpose of the pilot interviews was to determine length, receive feedback on the questions, and practice gathering data. After each pilot interview, the researcher and the principal discussed the questions, and the principal shared feedback on the questions. The leaders provided feedback on asking a few pointed follow-up questions to gather specific examples utilized within each improvement factor. The feedback offered the researcher important ways to improve the interview process and outcomes.

Table 2 shows the interview protocol that was used for the research question "What are the perceptions of Minnesota elementary school principals on the factors leading to their school's academic improvement?"

Table 2

Improvement Principals Interview Protocol

Question Focus	Interview Question	Literature Review
Introduction/ Open Ended	Please tell me your title, experience in education, and years in the discussed position. What factors contributed to the academic improvement your school made during the 2016-2019 school years?	
Leadership	What role does the principal play in the school improvement process?	Allen et al. (2015); Lynch, Smith, Provost, and Madden (2016); McCarley et al. (2016); Ross and Cozzens (2016); and Sebastian, Huang, and Allensworth (2017) all concluded that a significant reason why a school succeeds, fails, or remains stagnant is because of the leader in the principal chair. Dolph (2017) found the leader's ability to develop a plan, vision, mission, and system for change greatly impacts how the school functions on a daily basis. According to Dolph's (2017) research, effective school improvement leadership focuses on the principal providing feedback to teachers in order to improve instruction.
Strategic Plan and Data	What role does the strategic plan and/or data play in the school improvement process?	The leader's vision for the future had a significant impact on the school's success (Leithwood et al., 2010). Duke et al. (2008) argued that the first step in school improvement and turnaround is diagnosing why the school is low performing. They suggested taking a look at data on student achievement, instruction, school organization, and culture.

Question Focus	Interview Question	Literature Review
Culture and Climate	What role does culture and/or climate play in the school improvement process?	Finnigan (2012) and Hewitt and Reitzug (2015) found that improving the climate and culture of a school are often key factors in the school improvement, change, and turnaround process. Dolph (2017), Fullan and Pinchot (2018), and Reyes and Garcia (2013) argue for the school improvement principal to identify, understand, and analyze the current culture in the school. According to Allen et al. (2015), McCarley et al. (2016), and Ross and Cozzens (2016), academic success and school climate improves when leaders focus on using a transformational leadership approach within the school.
Academics	What role do academic or instructional strategies play in the school improvement process?	The principal has a very direct role in leading the academic growth within the school (Sebastian et al., 2017). DeMatthews' (2014) research found that in effective PLCs, the teachers had all aligned their values about student learning, and they felt a connection to the school's mission, vision, and values which in turn helped sustain the PLC model.
Schedule and Systems	What role do support systems and the daily schedule play in the school improvement process?	Bohanon et al. (2016) suggested that best practices in MTSS programs include weekly meetings that address academic, behavioral, and emotional challenges of students within school. Within the meetings, teachers, administrators, and support personnel help decide what levels of support students need. In addition, within each tier of support, there are remediation and prevention strategies to help students succeed (Bohanon et al., 2016). Bohanon et al. (2016) researched the impact of MTSS programs on academics, and they found that utilizing the programs and implementing them in the correct way impacts student learning and achievement. Fullan and Pinchot (2018) developed block scheduling that allowed for more instruction and interventions or enrichment. Miles and Frank (2008) argued for the same concept of doing more instructional time in core academic classes such as reading and math.

Question Focus	Interview Question	Literature Review
Behavior	What role does improving student behavior play in the school improvement process?	Day et al. (2016) and Fullan and Pinchot (2018) argued that school improvement principals implement behavioral strategies that make a positive impact on the school, especially the safety of the students. Fullan and Pinchot (2018) found that the first implementation of the school principal was Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS).
Personnel and Resources	What role does the teaching staff, school staff, and other resources play in the school improvement process?	Spillane (2005) first discussed the concept of distributed leadership and focused on the idea that one person cannot fully complete all the items a school needs. Green (2018) stated that distributive leadership focuses on leaders providing duties to others in order to help lead positive change. Research by Clark (2017); Klar, Huggins, Hammonds, and Buskey (2016); and Sebastian et al. (2017) showed that the people around the principal and the teachers within the school have a significant impact on school improvement. Duke et al. (2008) stated that although turnover was challenging, it was often a necessary part of the improvement process. Leithwood et al. (2010), Odden (2011), and Zavadsky (2012) all argued for recruiting, hiring, onboarding, and developing top talent in order to help the school improve at a high level. Hitt and Meyers (2018) found that sustaining school improvement happens through creating community partnerships and utilizing outside resources.
Attendance and Family Engagement	What role does attendance and family engagement play in the school improvement process?	Berg et al. (2018) found that engaging families and building trust led to sustaining school improvement. Berg et al. (2018), Duke et al. (2008), and Leithwood et al. (2010) found that family and parent engagement is a significant aspect of the improvement process, especially for low achieving students within the school.
Conclusion	Is there anything else you would like to tell me about school improvement leadership that I have not asked about?	

Data Collection Procedures

This basic qualitative study utilized semi-structured interviews for data collection. A purposive sample was identified utilizing specific criteria. The researcher emailed 11 individuals identified as participants for the study. The personal emails (Appendix C) focused on the positive impact they made and the purpose of the study. If the participant did not respond, the researcher sent a follow up email (Appendix D) one week later. If the first two attempts yielded no response, the researcher called the potential participant and read a script (Appendix E) asking for participation. If the participant did not answer the phone, the researcher left a voicemail and waited for a response.

Once principals agreed upon participating, the researcher sent an informed consent document through email which was signed prior to starting the interview. The researcher conducted eight interviews through video. The researcher collected data in May and June of 2020 and employed voice recording on an iPad as that was the simplest way to capture interviews (C. Hansen, personal communication, November 18, 2019). In addition to taking detailed notes during the interview, the researcher crafted summaries after each interview to create a running document of reflections. After capturing the interviews, the researcher utilized rev.com, a confidential online transcription service to transcribe each interview (C. Hansen, personal communication, November 18, 2019).

During the interview process, the researcher determined if saturation of the data occurred (Creswell, 2014). If the researcher gleaned no new information from the interviews, then the researcher determine saturation had been reached. After the first five interviews, few new codes developed in the last three interviews. While some codes combined or changed names, the same concepts emerged significantly in the first five interviews. The researcher determined if

saturation occurred by coding and analyzing the interviews immediately after each interview; scholars argue data analysis in qualitative research should happen during the data collection process (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Analysis

Creswell (2014) provided a specific flow chart for analyzing qualitative data: transcribe, organize, read all data, code, themes, and analysis. In addition, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described a system when analyzing data including collection, labeling codes, developing themes, and repeating the process while addressing any biases.

First, interviews were collected and transcribed and any identifiable information about the participants were removed to preserve confidentiality. Then, the data analysis process commenced. Through this ongoing analysis process, Creswell (2014) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated codes begin to develop and adjustments are made to future interviews, if necessary. The researcher organized and studied all of the data to comprehend its entirety and analyzed all transcripts for accuracy. The researcher also confirmed accuracy with each participant by sending the transcribed interview to each principal. Reading through the entire data set allowed the researcher to ask questions and gain a deeper understanding prior to initial coding (Creswell, 2014).

Next, MaxQDA was utilized to code and analyze data, a common and accepted technological tool in qualitative research. According to Creswell (2014), three ways exist to develop codes: allow them to emerge naturally, develop them prior to data analysis, or a combination of both. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest reading through the first interview and making note of any categories or codes that emerge. The researcher focused on using both strategies in combining a priori coding and emergent coding to develop richer, more nuanced

analysis. A total of 12 a priori codes aligned directly with the literature review and guided further development of the coding system (Creswell, 2014). The researcher utilized the first interview to highlight any a priori codes that existed and labeled other categories that developed, creating an initial list of codes.

Once the researcher read, coded, and developed categories for the first interview data, the researcher repeated the same strategy with the next two interviews. The first three interviews were analyzed and coded four times each to develop a more specific coding structure for the remaining interviews. During this process, new subcodes also emerged in the data, and those codes were added to the initial coding list. Then, the last five interviews were coded in the same fashion: read once to comprehend data and utilize the coding system to highlight segments.

Prior to the second round of coding, the researcher analyzed all initial 30 codes, combined some, and eliminated others to develop 20 final codes that reflected the data. To label and organize the codes more accurately, the researcher constructed a "qualitative codebook" that contained the most frequent codes emerging from the data (Table 3; Appendix F) (Creswell, 2014). Codes were eliminated from the codebook when not all principals used the code, the code was used less than 10 times, or the code lacked intensity from the principal responses. The codebook was continually updated and revised during the second round of coding to ensure each code was used properly.

If a new code emerged in the later interviews, the researcher added it to the codebook and then utilized that code during the second round of coding. Through this process, the data analysis became more deductive, searching for various codes within the subsequent data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To provide intercode agreement, another qualitative scholar analyzed the data in order to reach a consensus about the coding system. The researcher then synthesized themes

based on codes that helped answer the research question (Appendix G). MaxQDA aided in organizing the information in a more logical format for the researcher to analyze themes gleaned from the study (Creswell, 2014).

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested creating themes based on the researcher's choice, the participants' words, or the topics in literature. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) challenged researchers to find categories that "cuts across your data" (p. 207). In other words, create themes that represent the entirety of the data. Implementing axial coding, the researcher organized seven themes as Creswell (2014) recommended. The seven themes in the results section utilize participant language as headings to capture the nuances of the results.

In the final aspect of data analysis, the researcher utilized the major themes from the data to draw conclusions and develop analysis (Creswell, 2014). The researcher utilized those themes to draw critical conclusions about the principals' perceptions of factors leading to school improvement (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Table 3 lists and defines each code and how each was applied within the transcript.

Table 3

Codebook

Question Topic	Code	Code Definition
Leadership	Awareness	Any mention of the principal showing awareness of social or relational situations during the improvement process
	Equity	Any mention of creating equitable experiences for students, staff, and families
	Relationships and Support	Any mention of the principal building relationships with community, parents, teachers, or students, or providing support
	Continuous Improvement	Any mention of the principal committing to continuous improvement or a growth mindset
	Focus and Intention	Any mention of the principal focusing the efforts and being intentional about the work the school was doing
	Distributed Leadership	Any mention of the principal allowing other teachers or staff to take leadership roles either as individuals or as a team
Strategic Plan and Data	Academic Data	Any mention of using academic data or its impact on school improvement
Culture and Climate	Collective Efficacy	Any mention of the principal, teachers, and students believing they can achieve their goals and the work together
	Student Centered	Any mention of the school culture being safe, caring, or student centered or teachers creating that environment for kids
	Celebrate Success	Any mention of the principal, teachers, students or school celebrating their successes
	Expectations and Accountability	Any mention of high expectations being set for students/staff and the principal holding others accountable to those expectations

Question Topic	Code	Code Definition
Academics	Formative Assessment	Any mention of formative assessments guiding the improvement process
	Instructional Feedback	Any mention of the principal or others providing feedback to teachers
	Standards	Any mention of aligning specific standards, goals, or other criteria within the classrooms or the school to help improve the school
Schedule and Systems	Academic Support and Intervention	Any mention of an intervention support system to help improve academic outcomes
	Support Staff	Any mention of support staff that help guide intervention programs
Behavior	None	
Personnel and Resources	Continuous Improvement	Any mention of teachers who have a growth mindset, are committed, and open to change for themselves or their students
	Collaborative	Any mention of teachers collaborating to help improve student learning
	Vulnerable/Risk Takers	Any mention of teachers taking risks or being vulnerable
Attendance and Family Engagement	Family Engagement	Any mention of engaging families in the school community and improvement process

Reliability, Validity, and Trustworthiness

The researcher implemented numerous strategies to ensure reliability, validity, and trustworthiness that are essential in all research (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Creswell (2014), validity refers to "the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures" (p. 201) while reliability "indicates that the researcher's approach is consistent across different researchers and different projects" (p. 201). The researcher

implemented member checks in two ways as an important part of validity: the researcher sent the transcripts of the interview to the participants to check for accuracy; and the researcher developed aspects of the findings and disseminated a rough draft to the participants to check for accuracy. Early in the dissertation, the researcher stated his positionality and biases as a way to make the research more valid. The researcher crafted detailed descriptions within the results section, hoping to provide more perspective and realism. Utilizing peer debriefing provided another opportunity for a scholar to read the study, ask questions, and provide feedback about the study; peer debriefing transpired numerous times throughout the dissertation process, taking place three times during data gathering and writing the analysis in Chapters Four and Five. Finally, an independent auditor with no connection to the project evaluated the entire project and provided feedback prior to finishing the work (Creswell, 2014). The independent scholar read and analyzed the work after the completion of Chapters Four and Five in order to ask questions and provide any other insights the researcher may have missed.

In order to develop a more reliable study, the researcher utilized intercoder agreement (Orcher, 2014). An intercoder agreement means another scholar checks the codes used for the study to determine if that person would implement the same codes (Creswell, 2014). Another way to create a more reliable study is to define the codes to ensure accurate coding practices which happened before and during the coding process.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe the trustworthiness of the study relates directly to the ethics, rigor, and thinking behind the study itself. Trustworthiness means collecting, analyzing, and writing about the data as they actually are, instead of how researchers hope they turn out. The developed study integrated an ethical approach to research in all areas.

Limitation and Delimitations

As with any study, limitations exist within this particular study as well. The first limitation was the study analyzed school improvement and turnaround, and these concepts in general have large arguments about their true definition (Kutash et al., 2010). For example, some people contend improvement means simply raising test scores in a certain amount of time, others argue it should be a combination, and still others put a very strict timeline on improvement (Kutash et al., 2010). Future studies could focus on the true definition of school turnaround and seek out larger districts with designated turnaround schools and leaders.

The sample itself created another limitation in the study. Due to resources and time, focusing only on Minnesota helped limit the research. Expanding the search for school turnaround leaders would greatly impact the number of possible participants. For example, a larger school district such as New York City, Chicago, or Las Vegas would produce numerous school turnaround principals that focus solely on that work.

The participant sample also only included the principals and their perceptions of the factors leading to improvement. A different perspective of school improvement could emerge from superintendents, teachers, and/or students. Focusing on only the principal provides a one-sided perspective. Another study could focus on other stakeholders within the school improvement process.

The time constraints and geographical location created another limitation for the study. The researcher focused on gathering data within a certain amount of time and provided principals with the option of meeting face-to-face during the COVID-19 global pandemic, so it offered little opportunity to travel outside of the greater Minneapolis-St. Paul area. A researcher or team of

researchers with more time could potentially utilize other approaches such as observations and travel outside of one area to improve the study.

Ethical Considerations

Research positionality means the researcher's identity matches that of the participants in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although some misalignment between the researcher and the participant will always exist, it is helpful to have some similar values and goals. As a practicing teacher, coach, teacher-leader, and future school leader, the concept of school improvement, turnaround, and leadership are significant interests to the researcher. In addition to working in schools, the researcher aspires to become a leader in public education as an opportunity to impact others positively**.**

Even though the researcher's experiences lead to an understanding and interest in school improvement, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that researchers bracket their assumptions of the research participants and the sites. It was the researcher's goal to set aside prior beliefs about leadership and school improvement (Creswell, 2014). By bracketing, the researcher was better able to listen, understand, and analyze the position of the participant.

In research ethics, the Belmont Report (1979) focused on stating three principles that protect research subjects from any harm. With any research, the possibility that people may be harmed should be the greatest concern. In the outlined research study, physical harm of individuals was not possible as they completed interviews; however, connection with schools in need of improvement, turnaround, or failing could lead to negative feelings about the research or about past experiences. One main concern for principals in this position was that they will be named, making their schools and themselves look negative in the process. Negative effects on their reputation were a legitimate concern, so the researcher took significant measures for

confidentiality even if the focus of the research was on the positive aspects of their work. The researcher explained that the research was completely confidential and that all indicators of the school or the principal were kept confidential in the writing. Ensuring that no names or schools were attached to the research helped show respect for all participants (Creswell, 2016; Orcher, 2014; Patten, 2014). When contacting each principal, the researcher focused on the positive impact principals make and the significant change they make for students.

In addition, the researcher explained that the interviews were completely voluntary and principals may terminate their participation at any point. Because some principals may be willing to participate early on, but decide later they want to stop, it was important for the researcher to describe that process before they began. Every participant had the right to discontinue, and they received no negative repercussions from Bethel University or the researcher.

Chapter IV: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore principals' perceptions of the factors leading to improvement in MCA test scores in Minnesota Title I elementary schools. The study included principals who led schools from the 2016 to 2019 school years that showed significant improvement in combined MCA math and reading test scores.

Discussion of the Sample

The criteria for the participants included Minnesota elementary school principals working in Title I designated schools who led their schools from 2016-2019 during which improvement took place in math and reading MCA scores. The average MCA improvement over this three-year time period ranged from 5.7% to 11.8%. For perspective, only 61 total Minnesota elementary schools improved over 5.7% and only 32 total Minnesota elementary schools improved over 8% from 2016-2019. Of those 61 elementary schools, only 11 principals fit the research criteria and were invited to participate.

Eight of the 11 total principals were interviewed, of which three had taken other positions at the time of the interview, including two new principal jobs and an assistant superintendent position. The principals interviewed included three males and five females. The data included one urban school principal, three suburban school principals, and four rural school principals. All schools in the data sample were designated as Schoolwide Title I which is defined as schools with over 40% of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch (FRP) (MN Department of Education, 2019). The FRP% ranged from 42% to 56.4% of the student body. Because of the sample size, the researcher chose to exclude information that could lead to identifying the schools and the principals including FRP and the school type as seen in Table 4.

Table 4

Data Collection Overview

		MCA Improvement				
Pseudonym	Gender	Reading	Math	Average	Interview Date	Interview Duration
Denise	Female	13.7%	8.5%	11.1%	5/15/2020	29 minutes
Peter	Male	8.7%	6.5%	7.6%	5/21/2020	45 minutes
Rashad	Male	13.2%	5%	9.1%	5/26/2020	34 minutes
Harriet	Female	12%	11.6%	11.8%	5/27/2020	56 minutes
Susan	Female	8.6%	7.5%	8.1%	6/2/2020	47 minutes
Maggie	Female	9.8%	9.2%	9.4%	6/2/2020	38 minutes
Mandy	Female	9.3%	3.0%	6.2%	6/9/2020	31 minutes
Frank	Male	5.1%	6.3%	5.7%	6/9/2020	48 minutes

Introduction to Themes

The development of themes commenced through analyzing whether (1) all eight participants stated a particular code and (2) determining which codes were stated most frequently by participants using MaxQDA's visual function titled the Code Matrix Browser (Figure 1). Figure 1 shows all the codes and the number of times stated by each participant in the interview. The researcher chose to analyze seven themes for the final data based on recommendation from researchers and scholars (Creswell, 2014). The results section utilizes participant language to create a more specific theme that reflected the data. Although a code such as "student centered" was stated 41 times, not all eight principals reflected on its importance. In addition to codes being stated by all participants, intensity and importance placed on the code contributed to the development of themes. Codes such as distributed leadership did not produce the same intensity as other perceived factors in improvement.

The organization of the themes is based on the literature review and interview question order. Discussing the themes in this way provided coherence and alignment in each section of the dissertation. Table 5 provides a visual representation of the interview question topic, codes

utilized, and themes developed from the codes. The following seven themes emerged from the codes as perceived factors in school improvement: the principal's focus and intentionality, the principal's continuous improvement mindset, strategic use of academic data, a culture of high expectations and accountability, teaching academic standards and utilizing formative assessment, academic support and interventions, and teachers' continuous improvement mindset. Not all topics in the interview developed a specific theme because certain topics were more important from the principals' perspectives. Behavior, attendance, and family engagement did not produce any overarching themes from the data, while at least one theme emerged from the other six topics (leadership, strategic plan and data, culture and climate, academics, schedule and systems, and personnel and resources).

The themes helped answer the following research question:

RQ_1 What are the perceptions of Minnesota elementary school principals on the factors leading to their school's academic improvement?

Code System	Frank	Mandy	Maggie	Susan	Harriet	Rashad	Peter	Denise	SUM
Leadership									0
Awareness	5		3	3	7	3	6	2	29
Equity	2		3	7	11	1			24
Relationships/Support	6	1	8	5	8	5	2	1	36
Continuous Improvement	8	1	4	10	9	2	11	1	46
Focus and Intention	17	4	8	27	2	8	12	4	82
Distributed Leadership	3	3	4	2	2	1	1	2	18
Strategic Plan/Data									0
Academic Data	4	9	6	4	7	5	4	4	43
Culture/Climate									0
Collective Efficacy	3		2	6		1	4		16
Student Centered	9	2	10	6	4	8	2		41
Celebrate Success	1			4			3	4	12
Expectations/Accountability	9	2	12	6	14	8	14	1	66
Academics									0
Formative Assessment	2	7	5	7	3	5	2	6	37
Instructional Feedback	3	1	2	5	1	1	2	5	20
Standards Alignment	11	2	5	7	8	1	4	4	42
Schedule and Systems									0
Academic Support/Interventions	11	13	10	9	6	11	13	8	81
Support Staff	2		2	5	3	2	6	1	21
Behavior									0
Resources and Personnel									0
Teachers									0
Continuous Improvement	8	6	5	3	12	3	7	5	49
Collaborative	3	1	2	10	5		2	1	24
Vulnerable/Risk Takers	3	1		3	4		2	1	14
Attendance and Family Engagement									0
Family Engagement	4		1	8	7	7	4	5	36
SUM	114	53	92	137	113	72	101	55	737

Figure 1 Coding System

Table 5

Theme Development

Question Topic	Codes	Themes (Perceived Factors)
Leadership	Awareness Equity Relationships/Support Continuous Improvement Focus and Intention Distributed Leadership	The principal's focus and intentionality The principal's continuous improvement mindset
Strategic Plan and Data	Academic Data	The strategic use of academic data
Culture and Climate	Collective Efficacy Student Centered Celebrate Success Expectations/Accountability	A culture of high expectations and accountability
Academics	Formative Assessment Instructional Feedback Standards Alignment	Teaching academic standards and utilizing formative assessments
Schedule and Systems	Academic Support/ Interventions Support Staff	The use of academic support and interventions
Behavior	None	None
Personnel and Resources	Continuous Improvement Collaborative Vulnerable/Risk Takers	The teachers' continuous improvement mindsets
Attendance and Family Engagement	Family Engagement	None

Leadership

Theme 1: "School improvement has to be intentional and it has to be laser-focused."

The theme of focus and intentionality from the principal appeared in all eight interviews. During the interviews, the principal's focus and intention was the most stated code with 82 total segments. When leaders discussed the factors leading to improvement or growth, they often started with focus areas and how intentional they were with moving toward their vision. The focus and intentionality of the entire school started with the principal's placement of his or her attention and energy.

Denise, one of the principals interviewed, stated the following about school improvement:

> So, you've got to figure out … for you, [what] makes the most sense for what you know about the staff and the students, and what they need, and take one step in the right direction. Because if you get too many things going, you're going to go crazy.

She chose to emphasize this point as it provided guidance for the direction of her school. Peter was very specific when talking about school improvement and the leader's ability to be focused and intentional about all aspects of the school:

> School improvement has to be intentional and it has to be laser-focused. And it has to be laser-focused with the right thing, with the right time, and it has to be one thing, for a certain amount of time. I can't give you the exact number of days or number of weeks, but when we started to talk about our learning targets, that was our laser focus first for an entire year.

Peter chose to use the language of "intentional" and "focused" to describe the impact his focus played in school improvement. Rashad, who often received feedback that he did not listen

to his staff, was trying to focus staff on a few particular ideas. He stated, “Well, no, I listen, but what you brought to me wasn't necessarily something that I thought aligned to where we need to go, or we didn't have the resources to do it.” Susan often reflected on the importance of staying focused by asking important questions such as, “What do we do different and where do we put our focus?” Her understanding of school improvement guided her in reflecting on the focus and intentionality of her school.

Maggie’s focus, as a principal, was for all students to make one year of academic progress during the school year. Like Susan, Maggie was reflective in thinking about the focus of their work and the intentionality around her vision. She stated, “So it's really intentional about taking a look at, ‘Are they growing? If so, let's keep going. If they're not growing, what are we going to do next?’” The approach to focus and intention came out clearly in the interview.

Frank discussed that school improvement was “just focused work.” Frank routinely expressed the importance of systematic and intentional practices on only a few particular pieces of school improvement. He also stated it was his job “to help create the vision and the focus.” Frank narrowed the definition of school improvement and his perception of the various factors that impact these initiatives, including focus and intention.

Leadership from the principal emerged in the form of guiding the school with focus and intentionality. All principals discussed the importance of identifying focus areas and then determining ways to implement strategies to achieve those goals. The discussion of leadership around school improvement rarely focused on the principals themselves, but rather the conversation that aligned with measures they took to improve the school. All principals had the perception that focusing on specific areas and acting with intentionality made a significant impact on their improvement process.

Theme 2: "I'm willing to change and adjust and I'm willing to be challenged." The theme of the principal's continuous improvement mindset appeared in all eight interviews when asking participants about leadership in school improvement. The principal's mindset code was the sixth most coded concept with 46 total segments mentioned throughout the interviews. The continuous improvement mindset from the principals focused on the leader believing that they could improve or there were opportunities to always improve within the school. At the beginning of the improvement process, Peter worked with the Regional Centers for Excellence to help improve his own leadership: "And so when they started with my mindset of growing my mind as a leader, as the principal, I was able to come out of these meetings and start seeing things completely different with best practices." He focused on gaining knowledge and insight to better lead the school and teachers. Early in the process, Peter focused on improving his own learning and understanding before asking staff to improve: "And so I think when they saw me jump into that role of learning, I didn't ask them to change anything. I told them for the first four months all I'm doing is trying to grow me." One perception of school improvement is that it always begins with the leader improving.

Rashad reiterated the need of "not having all the answers" when it comes to school improvement. He focused much of his time trying to gain understanding in order to improve the school in some way. Like Rashad and Peter, Harriet grew significantly early in the process and continually focused on improving herself and her own mindset:

> I have grown from my colleagues. I have grown from working here. Getting hired for this job, I was going to be the savior. I had the savior prophecy like, I was going to fix all the problems for all these families that go to school here. My mind has shifted so much. All of my thinking has shifted into, "I'm going to meet the needs that are here, but there's no

> fixing that needs to happen," because what I used to think I considered a need or a problem was my problem. I had to figure out how to get over my preconceived notion of how something should be done. You can't fault somebody that's never worked in that… had to go through that, I guess, but it's such a beautiful gift.

It is evident from Harriet's mindset that it had shifted dramatically from early in the school improvement process. The change from wanting to save to understanding herself and finding ways to improve herself was perceived as a factor leading to improving Harriet's school. Maggie participated in professional development in order to improve her own continuous improvement lens:

> It's probably the most incredible leadership training I've ever been through myself. And basically what it helped me do was know myself to lead myself. That's what it is. Know yourself to lead yourself is actually one of the tools.

Numerous principals discussed improving themselves and knowing how they lead as a factor that helped them work through the improvement process.

Susan focused on the importance of utilizing a continuous improvement plan that helps everyone achieve: "We have a continuous improvement team, and we have a continuous improvement plan that we write every year. Yeah, I'm definitely part of that, leading that, kind of helping us hone in on that." Although Susan talked about her own mindset less, she used the language of continuous improvement and what that looks like in her leadership. Frank was intentional about asking questions leading to continuous improvement for himself and his school: "'We have an area that we need to really have a growth mindset on.' And being able to look at it and go, 'This is a weakness that we could have immediate impact on.'" Frank was always

looking for ways to improve himself and his school, modeling a continuous improvement mentality.

It was evident from the data that all principals interviewed had a continuous improvement mindset. That mindset focused on first improving themselves and admitting that they do not have all the answers. After improving their own mindsets, they focused on continuous improvement actions that helped the teachers and school improve. The continuous improvement lens was a perceived factor in helping to improve their schools.

Strategic Planning and Data

Theme 3: "Using data to inform all decisions and not just willy nilly because it feels good." All eight principals in the study stated that utilizing and analyzing academic data was a significant perceived factor leading to their schools' improvements. Academic data was the seventh most coded concept in the study with 43 segments throughout the interviews suggesting data was critical to improvement. While some emphasized the use of data more than others, all principals consistently utilized academic data to move students to higher MCA scores and higher learning within their schools.

Denise began the entire conversation with "Data is very important." It was the first line of the first interview in the entire study. Rashad emphasized utilizing data to learn about students: "Catching things early based on data and intervening on the spot and making interventions" provides important help for students to improve. Mandy suggested that utilizing screening tests and data helped move students forward: "So using the universal screening data was essential, and then developing, working with classroom teachers to look at that." All principals discussed the use of screening or diagnostic data to have a pre-assessment and then use it to track progress along the way.

Like the other principals, Harriet's school utilized data, but she was more hesitant about the extreme focus on data: "As much as I love numbers, I think they're usually pretty clear. Here's the number, how much do you want to admire it?" While her school utilized data, she did not want it to take away from solutions: "We could make it pretty, or we could say, this is the number, I want to admire the solutions. That's what the staff wants." Harriet's perspective on data was different than the other seven participants who all said data was one of the most important factors. Although data was important to Harriet, she wanted to analyze the solutions and focus on improvement. Similar to Harriet, Maggie hoped to focus on application and next steps. She stated, "So their PLC time consisted of number one, taking a look at data; number two, taking a look at the research, application, and what their next steps are." A clear picture developed of using data to impact learning for students and moving the school forward.

In the first year of the improvement process, Peter hesitated to make data more public. Later in the process, he made it very apparent:

> But then when we put up the data wall, we had a race car and of course it was a race to the percentage that we set our goals and if they reached a goal of a certain percentage from fall to winter, we did an ice cream float party.

The transparency of the data allowed all stakeholders' access to student performance even though it did cause stress and anxiety for some staff members.

Susan's school implemented "data days" into the calendar for staff to analyze data, determine solutions, and develop a plan to move forward. Her school benefited from a district-wide emphasis on data collection and analysis. Frank was very intentional about systematic, researched-based practices. He focused on nationally normed tests to determine student performance:

> And it's like, 'Yes, you need to know where they are in relation to the whole.' And so, we use nationally normed information and data to be able to really drill down and really be able to identify who and then we use that specific information on where students are. And we really try to align interventions to what the student's needs are.

All eight principals discussed the importance of analyzing and then utilizing data to improve the school. Some principals put a heavier emphasis on its use such as the data wall from Peter and others, like Harriet, did not want the data to distract teachers from implementing strategies to reach the goal or solve problems. In all situations, utilizing academic data was a significant perceived factor in school improvement.

Culture and Climate

Theme 4: "Because if you have high expectations, they will repay results." All eight principals interviewed for the study discussed high expectations and accountability as being a perceived factor of school improvement to establish the culture and climate of a building. Expectations and accountability was the fourth most coded theme with a total of 66 segments throughout the interviews. Only some principals specifically stated the words "high expectations" or "accountability." However, those that did not explicitly state these terms used language, descriptions, and narratives that suggested expectations and accountability as factors. Much of the accountability and high expectations to shape the culture and climate were developed through the principals' everyday leadership.

Susan was reflective when thinking about expectations, and she asked questions of herself, "Are we clearly communicating those expectations? Am I clearly communicating that to my adult learners [staff], and then are my teachers clearly communicating those [expectations] to

the students?" By asking these questions, it forced her to consider the various perspectives of expectations that needed to be set within the school.

Peter focused on putting together expectations for all students in the entire building, especially at the beginning of the year:

> We laid out, for example, obvious expectations. Every student to start the year went into every location, cafeteria, hallway, [and] bathroom. I did the recess, we brought the buses over. We laid out the expectation of the building for all 650 students.

Peter wanted to be sure that all students knew what was expected of them as they moved throughout their day. Rashad agreed with setting expectations, especially for students. He argued, "So with climate, setting expectations, and putting it in simplest terms, kids [need to] know where the line in the sand is. If you do A, B is going to happen, and being consistent with that." The expectations for students were clearly communicated and the logical consequences lessened the gray area.

Rashad noted the importance of high expectations and accountability for teachers: "Accountability. There's support, there's PD [professional development], and clear expectations, but with that, there's accountability. If we have PD in this area, support in this area, then there's certain things that you are expected to follow through on." The expectation in Rashad's school was that if they focused on a particular strategy, then every teacher was held accountable for focusing on that specific concept. All participants discussed walking through their schools, making notes on if a specific required strategy was being implemented, and talking with those teachers who were not implementing it. Harriet agreed with the idea that if professional development was provided, all teachers were expected to implement the strategies: "If I had an expectation for something, I made sure to align that with the professional development."

Numerous principals including Harriet, Maggie, and Frank focused on walkthroughs to determine whether teachers were meeting expectations. Harriet said:

> I'm going to take data down. Are you teaching what … your posted learning target says you're going to be teaching? Are you following the schedule that you turned into me that I've given you several opportunities to tune up and refine? If it's not, what's really happening in your classroom? I never had teachers turn in lesson plans, but I can say it's very, very effective.

Maggie added, "And teachers know exactly what I'm looking for when I'm coming in. So there's never a secret when I go into a classroom. These are the things I'm going to be looking for every single time." Frank said:

> I try to do walkthroughs in as many classrooms as I can. And when I was doing walkthroughs early on, only a handful of people were even putting up student learning targets on the board. And I just came out and said, this is the expectation.

Harriet, Maggie, and Frank's commitment to walkthroughs and tracking expectations forced accountability for the focus and vision of the school. If those practices were not happening in the classroom, the principal had difficult conversations with those teachers, thus holding them accountable. Harriet stated, "I became very skilled at having difficult conversations with staff."

Frank also discussed the importance of autonomy for staff, but having tough conversations with staff if needed:

> But at the same time, if they're not doing their job, then that's where I get really involved. Right? And it's maintaining and saying, "we're going to have high expectations across the board, no matter who it is, for whatever it is. And we want to make sure that everybody's doing really good things."

Although Frank had high expectations, he emphasized the importance of expectations and accountability while also building relationships and partnerships:

> And we do because we create the vision and alignment, and we hold individuals accountable, but we also build partnerships. That's a huge one. It's not, speak softly and carry a big stick. That's crap. It's about partnerships, it's about accountability.

All eight principals in the study mentioned and discussed aspects of high expectations and accountability as perceived factors in improving their schools. Some principals discussed specifically laying out the expectations for students early in the year. Other principals discussed the importance of walkthroughs to hold teachers accountable for their work. Multiple principals suggested the importance of having difficult conversations when high-expectations were not met.

Academics

Theme 5: "Teach them standards, assess, analyze results, reteach based on what the results are telling you." To develop this theme, the researcher utilized the codes formative assessments and academic standards. The focus on using standards in the classroom and assessing students on them contributed to creating one theme. All eight principals discussed the importance of teaching and aligning academic standards while also utilizing formative assessments to understand student performance. It was the third most coded concept with a total of 71 coded segments. Without implementing standards, it seemed challenging for teachers to formatively assess each student's current level of learning.

Denise focused on standards in the improvement process: "The alignment of the standards so the teachers are teaching to those standards." Susan discussed the importance of embedding standards in the curriculum. She posited, "If you're not intentional about embedding them, they get lost. Then they don't get addressed." Maggie emphasized the utilization of

standards throughout the curriculum multiple times: “What matters to me is that you teach this standard, using the resources that will fit that standard.” She also asserted, “I want you to teach the standard. You can use that curriculum if that's what's going to support that standard. Otherwise, you need to find something else.”

Out of all the principals, Frank was the most specific and passionate about utilizing standards to align throughout the school. He focused heavily on systematic intervention to help students meet those standards. He said his teachers needed to first understand standards: “‘Do we have [a] common understanding of what it is that the standard means?’ Let's break it down.” According to Frank, utilizing standards allowed his teachers to dig even deeper with instruction. He explained, “We're having a common language, common alignment of instruction. We also have a really good understanding of what does proficient look like, and then as we dig down deeper.”

Because the standards were aligned with benchmark assessments and MCAs, multiple principals screened all students prior to or early in the school year to determine where each student was at in their learning. One key concept of assessment for Susan’s school was assessing students prior to the school year: “We are lucky enough that we have students come in before the school year starts, for a couple of days. They're given an individual reading assessment on that benchmark assessment system by Fountas and Pinnell.” While Maggie’s school did not have students come in before school started, she did utilize the first two weeks to assess. She said, “Basically the second week of school, we start assessments on our kids. We do use FastBridge, which is out of the University of Minnesota. And we collect data on reading and math, both.” Mandy’s approach aligned with Maggie’s, and she stated, “Using the universal screening data was essential and then developing, working with classroom teachers to look at that, but grade

level as a whole, it wasn't by class." Mandy also stated how to use classroom assessments: "They [teachers] would analyze their formative assessment and determine what needs to be taught." Utilizing formative assessments that aligned to the standards allowed teachers to analyze student learning and make decisions about teaching.

In alignment with teaching the standards in academics, every principal discussed the importance of utilizing formative assessment within the classroom or as benchmarks for learning. Their focus was on teaching specific standards that aligned with these assessments in some capacity. Denise's school utilized a four-week cycle to teach and assess in order to determine where students needed support: "Making sure we have effective screenings in place … to identify those students that were at risk for failure and to get them some support. Very important."

Rashad agreed with utilizing a cycle: "Assessment, we did a teaching and learning cycle, teach them standards, assess, analyze results, reteach based on what the results are telling you, and the cycle starting over." Harriet also utilized a cycle of formative assessment. She explained, "We're going to go through a full data cycle for every single formative assessment we do, or summative assessment, or whatever." Frank also agreed with the four-week cycle: "So teams on that four-week cycle, they're pre-assessing students, they're teaching." The cycle of learning started with an assessment, focused on teaching the standards, and then moved into reassessing and intervening if necessary.

All principals focused on aligning the standards taught in the classroom with formative assessments. The formative assessments were both standardized tests such as FastBridge and teacher developed assessments. It is evident that aligned standards and assessments were

important perceived factors in school improvement, and principals felt their school would not show an increase in test scores or student learning without them.

Schedule and Systems

Theme 6: "What is the intervention? And does it fit the student?" All eight principals placed a significant emphasis on utilizing academic support and interventions to improve student learning through schedules and systems. Intervention and support was the second most coded concept in the study with a total of 81 coded segments. It was clear in the study that in order to implement academic interventions, numerous support staff were needed, so it is important to address this in the findings.

Peter suggested that developing an intervention block during the school day was a quick win during the improvement process. He stated, "We added in WIN [What I Need] time of 30 minutes to make sure that we had an intervention block studying." Rashad also mentioned the importance of building in interventions throughout the day: "What we did was intervened. We built our schedule so kids were getting a double dose of math [and] literacy during the school day."

Peter suggested that his school focused on the middle students and pushing them above the 50 percent mark on standardized tests:

> The purpose of LLI [Leveled Literacy Intervention] is to push them above that and we spent two years doing absolute overhaul of those bubble students because we needed to do everybody, but our tier system needed to be aligned where we were hitting the middle students.

Both Rashad and Frank focused their efforts on catching students early and intervening. Rashad stated, "Catching things early based on data and intervening on the spot and making

interventions." Along with Rashad and Frank, Mandy wanted her teachers to identify struggling students and use classroom time to intervene. She stated, "We also really worked on core instruction and the tier one, the intervention that the teacher was providing."

Denise mentioned identifying students through data and then developing interventions for them:

> Once we had identified those students that were the most struggling students, we targeted the information that we had to get the most struggling students into intervention programs. With some outside time with a licensed teacher, doing research-based strategies.

Susan agreed with analyzing students through data:

> We take a look at the data of that whole grade level, and then we see who looks like they have it, they're on, they're ready to go. Or those students that are in the red, that right now are below and not making it, or have huge gaps.

Through using data, Maggie utilized reflective questions about intervention and its impact on learning. She posited, "If they're not [meeting grade level standards], 'What steps are we going to take next? Do we have to change their intervention? Is the intervention working? How many data points do we have that support that it's working?'" Frank echoed the reflective response to intervention. He stated, "It's not, does the student fit the intervention? It's what is the intervention? And does it fit the student?"

Similar to intervention and support staff, data and interventions also fit together as all principals used assessments and data to determine the type of intervention and level of support for students. Susan's perception of her school's improvement was based on the combination of

sound teaching and interventions. She stated, “I think that's where we saw some acceleration because we actually were getting an intervention on top of some real strong core instruction.”

Harriet focused her responses on the importance of discussing interventions with the leadership team: “We'd talk about how we were going to do interventions with those students.” All principals discussed the importance of utilizing the leadership team to look at individual students and groups of students to figure out how to intervene. Each principal developed a student support team that analyzed students who needed interventions and support.

Utilizing academic support and intervention was a significant perception of why schools improved. Along with interventions outside of core instruction, many teachers and support staff implemented these interventions within their classrooms. Every principal placed a significant emphasis on the impact interventions had in improving learning for specific students, especially those that needed higher level supports.

Personnel and Resources

Theme 7: “We're looking for hungry, humble, smart individuals.” All eight principals discussed the importance of teachers having a growth mindset, working hard to improve, and doing what was best for students and the school. Teacher continuous improvement was the fifth most coded concept with a total of 49 segments throughout the interviews. While much of the interview participants discussed specific aspects of data, interventions, and focus, teachers implementing improvement initiatives largely impacted progress. According to the interviewees, teachers helped move the vision forward.

Denise talked about the most effective type of school improvement teacher: “Well, they have to be open, ready to go, because if they weren't, we would have gone nowhere. So

thankfully they were open and willing to learn and to grow with me. So that's significant."

Harriet communicated a strong opinion on the type of teacher that fit the improvement process:

> I'm looking for teachers that have a strong, strong desire to learn about something other than who they are. If you aren't interested in looking outside of yourself and really digging deep at who you are from a cultural lens, this is not the school for you.

Susan also argued for a specific type of teacher. She stated:

> I do like a teacher that has a lot of energy, but that doesn't mean that they talk fast and they're high energy. It just means that they have the energy to kind of sit down and put in the work.

Mandy stated the best teachers in school improvement have specific characteristics. She stated:

> Those that did it the best were also ones who read professionally beyond our district offered staff development, … [and] understood what was research-based. They understood. They were part of a Facebook group, a Twitter group… they had their own PLN [Personal Learning Network] that they really just sought out more information.

Frank shared his thoughts on the type of teacher he needs for school improvement:

> They want to be the best individual they can be. They want to be the best teacher. They're smart. And that they're people smart, not intellectually smart. They're people smart. They know how to navigate systems. They know how to ask for help.

Frank shared that he needed teachers who always want to improve in order to help their students learn.

Peter developed a team of committed and improvement focused teachers to help lead the change by using an application process. He stated, "Everybody was on board with that system because we knew we're a focus school, and our goal was to get out of this focus school status in

three years." Developing a team of committed, hardworking teachers helped drive positive change in his school. Peter wanted a very specific type of teacher in his school, "And so the best teachers are those, yes, willing to ask questions, but yes, willing to put your differences aside and to move forward with the culture and the best practices that we are presenting as a school." Frank also talked about hiring the most effective people for the job:

> I want to hire people who are going to be smarter than me someday. That's my goal, if they're not already, I want them to be smarter than me. And I want to support them in getting smarter than me at some point.

He went on to say he was looking for unique individuals to join his school. He stated enthusiastically, "We're looking for hungry, humble, smart individuals." Maggie wanted teachers who were committed to students and good with people, but they were also willing to learn:

> I'm a full believer in that because I can teach them how to teach, but I can't teach them how to be a people person. I can't teach them to want to be in front of kids and to teach the way that they need to, but I can teach them how to teach.

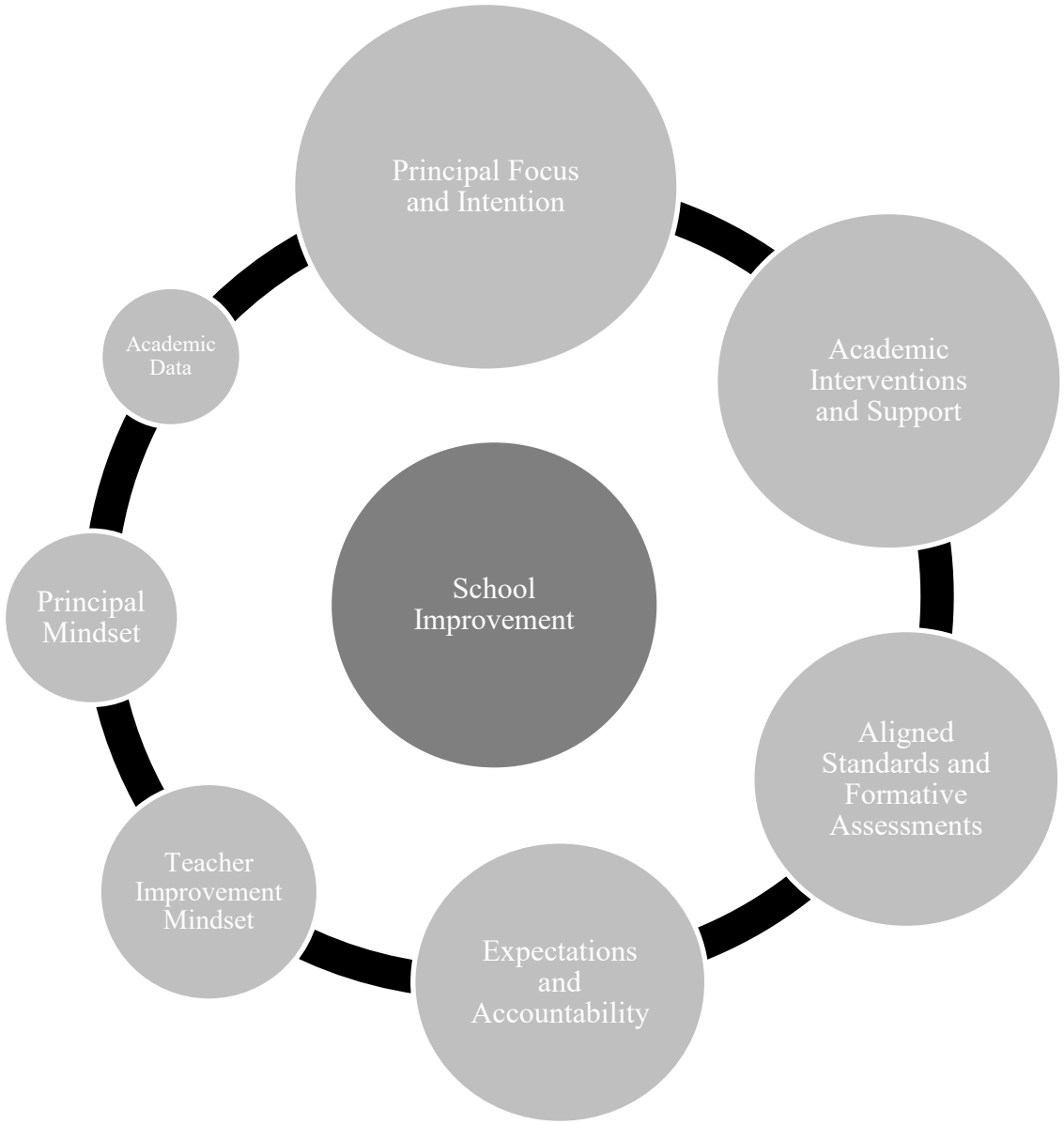
Teachers help drive change in a school improvement situation. All eight principals in the research study focused on the importance of having teachers who have a continuous improvement mindset. Teachers must be willing to improve themselves as much as helping their students improve. According to the principals interviewed, many teachers in their schools were driven and focused to make positive change. Teachers who were willing to learn was a perceived factor in helping a school improve.

Concept Map

The concept map developed in Figure 2 outlines the perceived factors (themes) in school improvement as well as the interconnectedness of the factors. Within the nondirectional cycle,

the factors surround the concept of school improvement, representing the importance each principal placed on them during the interviews. Principals often work between concepts or focus on some aspects more than others depending on time and focus. Lastly, the circles are larger based on the importance placed on them within the interview. It is critical to remember that these concepts only represent a small portion of principals who work in very specific settings and do not necessarily reflect all principals' perceptions of school improvement.

Figure 2 School Improvement Concept Map



Chapter V: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore principals' perceptions of factors leading to improvement in math and reading MCA test scores in Minnesota Title I elementary schools. The study interviewed eight principals, through video due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, who led their schools from the 2016 to 2019 school years. The interviews were transcribed; analyzed for accuracy; coded by the researcher and independent peer reviewer; and communicated to participants to improve transparency, validity, and reliability. Seven themes developed through the coding and analysis process.

Research Question

RQ_1 What are the perceptions of Minnesota elementary school principals on the factors leading to their school's academic improvement?

Conclusions

The following themes emerged as perceived factors of improvement: the principal's focus and intentionality, the principal's continuous improvement mindset, strategic use of academic data, a culture of high expectations and accountability, teaching academic standards and utilizing formative assessment, academic support and interventions, and teachers' continuous improvement mindset. Factors leading to success in Title I elementary schools vary slightly across schools and principals; however, each principal interviewed provided a unique reflection on how interrelated the elements of school turnaround are and how this highly collaborative work leads to success.

School Improvement Factors are Deeply Interrelated and Collaborative

Little research addresses the interconnected nature of key factors in school improvement. Current research focuses more on aspects of improvement such as the school leader, quick wins, and academic support (Huguet et al., 2017; Meyers & Hitt, 2018; Reitzug & Hewitt, 2017). This study highlights the importance of considering a holistic approach and how one aspect impacts, relates, or connects to another.

When principals considered academic strategies, they often discussed data use, standards, formative assessments, and interventions as part of increasing achievement. These characteristics reflect the interconnectedness of school improvement. The study also highlighted the collaborative nature of implementing these factors. Mandy explained:

> And that data would be collected between the classroom teacher and the Title I teacher. They would communicate that. They would come to core team and we would look at that information and determine what things [interventions] can be done.

All school principals interviewed discussed the interrelated aspects of school improvement and the collaboration needed for their implementation.

The Principal's Mindset, Focus, and Intentionality Guide Improvement

Previous studies outline the significant role of the principal (Allen et al., 2015; Brinia, Zimianiti, & Panagiotopoulos, 2014; Cai, 2011; Clark, 2017); however, few studies analyze the principal's mindset, focus, and intentionality as the foundation of school improvement. The conducted research provides insight to the criticality of these principal characteristics. Principals' language during interviews indicated their thinking and focus had the potential to impact student learning. Principals reflected on the necessity to continuously improve themselves and their mindsets in order to model those behaviors and actions for staff.

All interviewees discussed focus and intentionality during the school improvement process, revealing the importance of concentrated efforts for extended periods of time. Peter stated that "we actually spent over a half year just on the guided reading practice profile" and "when we started to talk about our learning targets, that was our laser focus first for an entire year." It seemed impossible for principals to add more initiatives without losing focus on the school's vision. The conducted research aligns with the literature findings that principals are an important factor in the development and improvement of the school (Dolph, 2017; Finnigan, 2012; Huguet et al., 2017), yet the findings provide insightful data on the principal's mindset, focus, and intentionality.

School Culture Develops through High Expectations and Accountability

Developing a culture and climate within a school has emerged as an important concept in school improvement (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Brown et al., 2017; Hitt & Meyers, 2018; Hollingworth et al., 2018). This research found that a culture of high expectations and accountability developed through everyday collaborative actions by the principal and the teachers, which emerged little in previous research. Strategies such as tough conversations and explicitly stating expectations led to creating a culture of accountability. Harriet discussed every day conversations: "I will say that there were times I made this a very public, intentionally public conversations in front of a large group of people."

While Rashad discussed the importance of "having common expectations" and explained that "it sounds simple;" however, developing school culture takes significant work each day. Those expectations and accountability were part of the everyday interactions in the school, developed by the principals, and delivered clearly to the staff and students.

Academic Support and Intervention Move the Academic Needle

Interventions and support are common themes in research on school improvement (Avant, 2016; Muñoz & Branham, 2016). Academic interventions and support staff emerged in this study as emphasized factors in school improvement. Research outlines that academic support and interventions must also utilize a system that supports every student (Avant, 2016; Bohannon et al., 2016; Muñoz & Branham, 2016). The principal's intentionality around creating systems for support allows for identifying students early and focused intervention.

The interventions and support utilized highly trained teachers and support staff to collaborate to complete the work. Frank said, "we had one intervention teacher per grade level. And they were meeting [with] all of the kids who qualify for tier two, and tier three throughout the course of the day." Although Avant (2016) and Bohannon et al. (2016) both discussed interventions, the collaborative work of support staff utilized was often overlooked in school improvement research, as staff contribute significantly to intervention functioning. Frank and Mandy argued that "interventions do take place in classrooms" and it is important to enhance "the intervention that the teacher [is] providing" when improving schools.

Data Drives Decisions about Student Learning and Teaching

The significant emphasis principals placed on data aligns with other studies (Abbott & Wren, 2016; Bernhardt, 2017; Huguet et al., 2017); however, researchers placed less emphasis on data gathering assessments. The principals in this study often described using assessments and data as the starting point for school and student performance analysis.

Formative assessments emerged as a way to determine student learning. Susan found data and assessments critical to her school's success: "We are lucky enough that we have students come in before the school year starts . . . They're given an individual reading assessment."

Implementing assessments prior to the school year allowed for more analysis and planning in preparation for improvement.

Principals discussed using baseline assessments for data and collaborating with leadership teams to determine proper interventions. Mandy shared her process:

> Progress monitoring [shows] what's happening on a regular basis. We were having [assessments take place] every six weeks … [Progress monitoring was] scheduled with our tier three students and their classroom teachers looking at progress [and] monitoring data that determine[d] what our next steps were—change interventions [or] move on to evaluation.

The intensity with which principals discussed assessment data provided insight to their perceived impact on student learning, and the highlighted the interconnectedness and collaboration of school improvement.

Limited Focus on Behavior, Attendance, and Family Engagement

The school improvement literature concludes that behavior, attendance, and family engagement are factors in school improvement (Berg et al., 2018; Day et al., 2016; Duke et al., 2008; Fullan & Pinchot, 2018; Leithwood, 2010); however, the study found principals focus their time, energy, and effort on factors within their control. Principals discussed family engagement, but they did not feel it impacted school improvement. Frank argued, “I control what I can control within the school day.” Denise echoed these sentiments: “Unfortunately, they're things [attendance, behavior, family engagement] we have very little control over.”

Table 6 summarizes the connections, contradictions, and contributions of this study to existing literature on school improvement and turnaround.

Table 6

Study Alignment to Existing School Improvement Literature

School Improvement Factors	Study Connections to Literature	Study Contradictions to Literature	Contributions to Literature
School Improvement Factors are Deeply Interrelated and Collaborative	Existing research documents factors in school improvement and seven factors aligned directly with the conducted research (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020; Duke et al., 2008; Fullan, 2006; Kutash et al., 2010).	Literature focuses on individual aspects of improvement (Huguet et al., 2017; Meyers & Hitt, 2018; Reitzug & Hewitt, 2017).	School improvement must take on a holistic approach with factors that interrelate and connect.
The Principal's Mindset, Focus, and Intentionality Guide Improvement	Principal impact has been widely documented (Allen et al., 2015; Brinia, et al., 2014; Cai, 2011; Clark, 2017; Dolph, 2017; Finnigan, 2012; Huguet et al., 2017).	Little research has specifically explored the principal's mindset, focus, or intentionality during school improvement (Cai, 2011; Reitzug & Hewitt, 2017).	The principal's mindset, focus, and intentionality were significant perceived factors in improving schools.
School Culture Develops through High Expectations and Accountability	Culture is an important piece in school improvement (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Brown et al., 2017; Hitt & Meyers, 2018; Hollingworth et al., 2018).	Past research offered explanation of specific strategies and school wide programs to develop school culture (Brown et al., 2017; Hollingworth et al., 2018).	The principal develops a culture of high expectations and accountability through small, everyday actions.
Academic Support and Intervention Move the Academic Needle	Research supports utilizing interventions (Avant, 2016; Bohannon et al., 2016; Muñoz & Branham, 2016).	Past research does not adequately explain the significance of support staff in the intervention process (Bohanon et al., 2016; Munoz & Branham, 2016).	Utilizing academic support, interventions, and support staff are critical first steps in school improvement.

School Improvement Factors	Study Connections to Literature	Study Contradictions to Literature	Contributions to Literature
Data Drives Decisions about Student Learning and Teaching	Research supports the use of data in schools (Abbott & Wren, 2016; Bernhardt, 2017; Huguet et al., 2017).	Existing research spends less time exploring the connection and relationship between standards, assessments, and data (Huguet et al., 2017).	Aligning standards, assessments, and data contribute to a significant piece of the school improvement process.
Limited Focus on Behavior, Attendance, and Family Engagement	Literature suggested that attendance, behavior, and family engagement are critical factors in school improvement (Berg et al., 2018; Day et al., 2016; Duke et al., 2008; Fullan and Pinchot, 2018; Leithwood, 2010).	Few principals in this study discussed attendance, behavior, or family engagement as significant factors in school improvement.	Principals focus their time, energy, and efforts on factors in their control and within the walls of the school.

Implications for Practice

With many students performing below grade level in Minnesota and other states, stakeholders have a vested interest in improving schools (MN Department of Education, 2019; NAEP, 2019). The implications of this research are significant as they provide insights from urban, rural, and suburban Minnesota Title I elementary schools about how those who have already improved their schools perceive their successes. Educational leaders can follow the lead of these eight Title I elementary school principals to continue improving our educational systems. Despite the setting of the school, principals can implement and utilize the three most discussed practices that each interviewee stated specifically, numerous times, and with intensity. The School Improvement Concept Map in Figure 2 outlines these factors. The three most discussed aspects suggest principals should decide where to focus their attention, develop systems of intervention, and utilize assessments for data gathering and decision making.

The first implication for practice is that the principal must begin by deciding what matters most and where to focus his or her time, energy, and resources. Some researchers call these the quick wins within in a school. Within the first few months of working toward improvement, principals must decide what the school, teachers, and students need to improve academically. Identifying the needs of the school provides a more foundational approach for improvement over the next three years. Assessing the larger picture needs of the school allows the principal to develop a plan to focus time and energy on a few specific areas. A principal trying to focus on too much can lead to frustration and less academic progress, according to the principals interviewed.

The second implication for practice is developing an academic support system for all students. Principals in this research focused heavily on their school's developed and

implemented intervention system which focused specifically on reading and math skills. These interventions were short, small group sessions during the school day. The system utilizes the school's schedule, teachers, support staff, assessments, and data in order to impact student learning. A robust intervention system provides focus on students who need the most support, offering deeper insight to the challenges students in the school face. By understanding where each student is at, teachers are better prepared to educate with strategies in a way that aligns with student needs. The interconnectedness of school improvement becomes clearly visible when discussing interventions as assessment, data, and teaching strategies.

The final significant implication for practice is utilizing formative assessments or diagnostic tests aligned specifically to standards. Once schools implement specific standards, classroom instruction becomes aligned and helps students improve academically. These particular assessments provide significant data on what students know and how they are performing. Assessing students on very specific skills provides an opportunity to make decisions on how to best teach in the classroom. Although school improvement has specific perceived factors, principals focus their time and energy on some areas more than others. Gathering data through assessing students helps principals decide how to move forward and guide teachers in making an impact on student learning. Table 7 provides a visual reference of implications for practice.

Table 7

Initial Steps for School Improvement

Factor	Action	Impact
Develop Focus and Intentionality	Identify the focus for the year and create intention around every decision aligning with the focus.	The school builds momentum through early improvements and deepens the progress on key areas during the year.
Create Systems of Intervention	Decide how the school will support struggling students and create an intentional system to intervene.	Raises the level of academic success for every student in the school.
Assess and Analyze Data	Assess students, gather data to guide decision making, and monitor student progress.	Each decision has a reason and every student receives instruction and support where needed.

Recommendations for Future Research

Although significant research exists around school improvement and school turnaround (Meyers & Hitt, 2018; Meyers & Sadler, 2018; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016), little research covers the larger, systematic perceptions of improvement, especially in Minnesota Title I elementary schools. The opportunity to further develop this baseline research is extensive.

By utilizing the developed study, future research could focus on elementary schools that are not designated Title I schools and explore the perceptions of those principals. The challenges in a Title I school are often more significant due to higher levels of poverty existing within the school and its community (MN Department of Education, 2019). The exploration of non-Title I schools would provide a greater scope about school improvement in elementary schools.

Further research could be completed on how the perspective changes from elementary to middle to high school principals. While school improvement strategies in this study were relatively consistent at the elementary school level, future research should consider what factors

are most critical at middle and high school levels. Replicating the same study utilizing middle or high school Title I schools would provide a new avenue for qualitative research on school improvement.

Another area for further research would be focusing on various demographics of principals (gender, race, and years of experience) or only rural, suburban, or urban school principals. Due to the small sample size in this particular study, the researcher cannot generalize that one factor works for all schools or different types of schools. More research should gather a larger sample size of principals with a specific demographic or working in urban, suburban, or rural schools. These adjustments help narrow the research and provide another unique perspective.

Future research could focus on exploring the teachers' perceptions of improvement. While the principal of a school has been discussed as making a significant impact (Allen et al., 2015; Brown et al., 2017; Finnigan, 2012; Reitzug & Hewitt, 2017), teachers also play a significant role, so they may perceive the factors in a different way than those of the principal leading the school. Combining the research on principal and teacher perceptions could provide significant insight for a more comprehensive approach to school improvement.

One final way for potential further research is to narrow the individual factors leading to success and explore those in greater detail. While the discussed research is broad in its exploration, it is narrowed in the participant selection. Further research could be broader in study participants to have greater opportunities for responses and then focus more on one perceived factor of success in school improvement. For example, interventions and support staff are perceived factors from this study that play a significant role in school improvement in Title I

elementary schools. Future opportunities exist for research on the implementation of those practices in a school improvement setting.

Concluding Comments

Providing quality education for students is a critical aspect of a democratic society in the United States of America. Although not all children receive excellent educations or achieve at the level educators set for them, many principals and educators in schools around the United States and the world work tirelessly to improve their schools and the education children receive. In Minnesota Title I elementary schools, principals have numerous perceptions of factors leading to improvement in their schools. The results conclude that school improvement is a highly interconnected endeavor with numerous moving parts. Some of those pieces include the principal's focus and intentionality, the principal's continuous improvement, strategic use of academic data, a culture of high expectations and accountability, teaching academic standards and utilizing formative assessment, academic support and interventions, and teacher continuous improvement mindset. The relentless dedication principals have to serve their students and communities provides hope for continued improvement of the educational system in the United States.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent/Participation Letter

CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH WITH HUMANS

Dear Participant Name,

My name is Sean DuBé, and I am a doctoral student at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota. You are receiving this letter because you were identified as a principal who has made significant improvements in your school(s). This letter is an invitation to participate in my dissertation research in partial fulfillment of my doctoral degree.

The purpose of the study is to explore the school improvement process of elementary principals working in Minnesota.

There are no monetary gifts participating in the study. Participation allows the participant to reflect deeply on the process of improving schools. The participants will be encouraged to think critically about their mindsets and the processes they have implemented.

If you decide to participate, I will contact you for an interview. The total anticipated participation time is around 60 minutes for a face-to-face interview at a location of your choice or a video interview if you prefer. A follow up reading of the transcript for accuracy may take another 30 minutes.

Participation in the research study is completely voluntary, and participants may discontinue their participation at any point in time. There are no potential risks to participating in the study other than the time it takes to meet, record the interview, and follow up with the transcript.

The process will be kept confidential in a number of ways including using pseudonyms, using a computer and applications with password access, and deleting any identifiable information while writing the results. If you choose not to participate or want to stop your participation in the study, your relationship with Bethel University or myself will not be impacted in any way.

The research is being conducted under Bethel University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and my advisor Dr. Emily Storbeck. You can reach my advisor at [redacted] or at 218-591-0959. You can contact me at [redacted] or [redacted] at anytime if you have further questions.

Participant Name	Date
Participant Signature	Researcher Signature

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Question Focus	Interview Question	Literature Review
Introduction/ Open Ended	Please tell me your title, experience in education, and years in the discussed position. What factors contributed to the academic improvement your school made during the 2016-2019 school years?	
Leadership	What role does the principal play in the school improvement process?	Allen et al. (2015), Lynch et al., (2016), McCarley et al. (2016), Ross and Cozzens (2016), and Sebastian et al., (2017) all concluded that a significant reason why a school succeeds, fails, or remains stagnant is because of the leader in the principal chair. Dolph (2017) found the leader's ability to develop a plan, vision, mission, and system for change greatly impacts how the school functions on a daily basis. According to Dolph's (2017) research, effective school improvement leadership focuses on the principal providing feedback to teachers in order to improve instruction.
Strategic Plan and Data	What role does the strategic plan and/or data play in the school improvement process?	The leader's vision for the future had a significant impact on the school's success (Leithwood et al., 2010). Duke et al. (2008) argued that the first step in school improvement and turnaround is diagnosing why the school is low performing. They suggested taking a look at data on student achievement, instruction, school organization, and culture.

Question Focus	Interview Question	Literature Review
Culture and Climate	What role does culture and/or climate play in the school improvement process?	Finnigan (2012) and Hewitt and Reitzug (2015) found that improving the climate and culture of a school are often key factors in the school improvement, change, and turnaround process. Dolph (2017), Fullan and Pinchot (2018), and Reyes and Garcia (2013) argue for the school improvement principal to identify, understand, and analyze the current culture in the school. According to Allen et al. (2015), McCarley et al. (2016), and Ross and Cozzens (2016), academic success and school climate improves when leaders focus on using a transformational leadership approach within the school.
Academics	What role do academic or instructional strategies play in the school improvement process?	The principal has a very direct role in leading the academic growth within the school (Sebastian et al., 2017). DeMatthews' (2014) research found that in effective PLCs, the teachers had all aligned their values about student learning, and they felt a connection to the school's mission, vision, and values which in turn helped sustain the PLC model.
Schedule and Systems	What role do support systems and the daily schedule play in the school improvement process?	Bohanon et al. (2016) suggested that best practices in MTSS programs include weekly meetings that address academic, behavioral, and emotional challenges of students within school. Within the meetings, teachers, administrators, and support personnel help decide what levels of support students need. In addition, within each tier of support, there are remediation and prevention strategies to help students succeed (Bohanon et al., 2016). Bohanon et al. (2016) researched the impact of MTSS programs on academics, and they found that utilizing the programs and implementing them in the correct way impacts student learning and achievement. Fullan and Pinchot (2018) developed block scheduling that allowed for more instruction and interventions or enrichment. Miles and Frank (2008) argued for the same concept of doing more instructional time in core academic classes such as reading and math.

Question Focus	Interview Question	Literature Review
Behavior	What role does improving student behavior play in the school improvement process?	Day et al. (2016) and Fullan and Pinchot (2018) argued that school improvement principals implement behavioral strategies that make a positive impact on the school, especially the safety of the students. Fullan and Pinchot (2018) found that the first implementation of the school principal was Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS).
Personnel and Resources	What role does the teaching staff, school staff, and other resources play in the school improvement process?	Spillane (2005) first discussed the concept of distributed leadership and focused on the idea that one person cannot fully complete all the items a school needs. Green (2018) stated that distributive leadership focuses on leaders providing duties to others in order to help lead positive change. Research by Clark (2017), Klar et al., (2016), and Sebastian et al. (2017) showed that the people around the principal and the teachers within the school have a significant impact on school improvement. Duke et al. (2008) stated that although turnover was challenging, it was often a necessary part of the improvement process. Leithwood et al. (2010), Odden (2011), and Zavadsky (2012) all argued for recruiting, hiring, onboarding, and developing top talent in order to help the school improve at a high level. Hitt and Meyers (2018) found that sustaining school improvement happens through creating community partnerships and utilizing outside resources.
Attendance and Family Engagement	What role does attendance and family engagement play in the school improvement process?	Berg et al. (2018) found that engaging families and building trust led to sustaining school improvement. Berg et al. (2018), Duke et al. (2008), and Leithwood et al. (2010) found that family and parent engagement is a significant aspect of the improvement process, especially for low achieving students within the school.
Conclusion	Is there anything else you would like to tell me about school improvement leadership that I have not asked about?	

Appendix C: Initial Email

Dear Participant Name,

My name is Sean DuBé, and I am a doctoral student at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota. You are receiving this email because you were identified as a principal who has made significant improvements in MCA tests scores at _____ (Elementary School Name) in the _____ (School District) during your time there. This letter is an invitation to participate in my dissertation research in partial fulfillment of my doctoral degree. The purpose of the study is to explore the principal's perceptions of the factors leading to improving their schools.

The research is being conducted under Bethel University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and my advisor Dr. Emily Storbeck. You can reach my advisor at [redacted] or at [redacted]. You can contact me at [redacted] or [redacted] at anytime if you have further questions.

If you are interested in participating, we will set up a one-hour interview at a time and location convenient for you or a video interview if you prefer during which I will ask a series of about ten questions, record them, transcribe the interview, and analyze the data. All identifiable information will be eliminated from the data. I hope that you will consider helping me and others learn about the school improvement and growth process.

Sincerely,

Sean DuBé

Appendix D: Follow-Up Email

Dear Participant Name,

My name is Sean DuBé, and I am a doctoral student at Bethel University in St. Paul. You have been identified as a principal making significant improvement in your school. One week ago, I sent you an email regarding my research on school improvement principals and their process for school improvement. Your participation is really important in understanding school improvement leadership.

The research will include a 60-minute interview at a time and location of your choice or a video interview if you prefer, and I will follow up to discuss the accuracy of the interview and transcription. Confidentiality is incredibly important, so I will use pseudonyms, password protected computers and applications, and the data will be deleted once the dissertation is complete.

If you are willing to participate, please let me know as soon as possible. Your leadership in your school is really important for others to understand. I appreciate your consideration!

Sincerely,

Sean DuBé
Doctoral Student, Bethel University
Email: [redacted]
Phone: [redacted]

Appendix E: Phone Call Transcript

Dear Participant Name,

My name is Sean DuBé, and I am a doctoral student at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota. You are receiving this call because you were identified as a principal who has made significant improvements in your school(s). I would like you to participate in my dissertation research in partial fulfillment of my doctoral degree.

The purpose of the study is to explore the school improvement process of elementary principals working in Minnesota. Your participation in the study will help others better understand how to improve their own schools.

If you decide to participate, we will set up a face-to-face interview or a video interview if you prefer. The total anticipated participation time is around 60 minutes for the interview. A follow up reading of the transcript for accuracy may take another 30 minutes.

If you are willing to participate, we will set up an interview time, and I will have an informed consent letter for you to sign. I really appreciate your consideration. Do you have any questions that I can answer for you?

Appendix F: Codebook

Question Topic	Code	Code Definition
Leadership	Awareness	Any mention of the principal showing awareness of social or relational situations during the improvement process
	Equity	Any mention of creating equitable experiences for students, staff, and families
	Relationships and Support	Any mention of the principal building relationships with community, parents, teachers, or students, or providing support
	Continuous Improvement	Any mention of the principal committing to continuous improvement or a growth mindset
	Focus and Intention	Any mention of the principal focusing the efforts and being intentional about the work the school was doing
	Distributed Leadership	Any mention of the principal allowing other teachers or staff to take leadership roles either as individuals or as a team
Strategic Plan and Data	Academic Data	Any mention of using academic data or its impact on school improvement
Culture and Climate	Collective Efficacy	Any mention of the principal, teachers, and students believing they can achieve their goals and the work together
	Student Centered	Any mention of the school culture being safe, caring, or student centered or teachers creating that environment for kids
	Celebrate Success	Any mention of the principal, teachers, students or school celebrating their successes
	Expectations and Accountability	Any mention of high expectations being set for students/staff and the principal holding others accountable to those expectations

Question Topic	Code	Code Definition
Academics	Formative Assessment	Any mention of formative assessments guiding the improvement process
	Instructional Feedback	Any mention of the principal or others providing feedback to teachers
	Standards	Any mention of aligning specific standards, goals, or other criteria within the classrooms or the school to help improve the school
Schedule and Systems	Academic Support and Intervention	Any mention of an intervention support system to help improve academic outcomes
	Support Staff	Any mention of support staff that help guide intervention programs
Behavior	None	
Personnel and Resources	Continuous Improvement	Any mention of teachers who have a growth mindset, are committed, and open to change for themselves or their students
	Collaborative	Any mention of teachers collaborating to help improve student learning
	Vulnerable/Risk Takers	Any mention of teachers taking risks or being vulnerable
Attendance and Family Engagement	Family Engagement	Any mention of engaging families in the school community and improvement process

Appendix G: Codes and Themes

Question Topic	Codes	Themes (Perceived Factors)
Leadership	Awareness Equity Relationships/Support Continuous Improvement Focus and Intention Distributed Leadership	The principal's focus and intentionality The principal's continuous improvement mindset
Strategic Plan and Data	Academic Data	The strategic use of academic data
Culture and Climate	Collective Efficacy Student Centered Celebrate Success Expectations/Accountability	A culture of high expectations and accountability
Academics	Formative Assessment Instructional Feedback Standards Alignment	Teaching academic standards and utilizing formative assessments
Schedule and Systems	Academic Support/ Interventions Support Staff	The use of academic support and interventions
Behavior	None	None
Personnel and Resources	Continuous Improvement Collaborative Vulnerable/Risk Takers	The teachers' continuous improvement mindsets
Attendance and Family Engagement	Family Engagement	None

Appendix H: Study Alignment to Existing School Improvement Literature

School Improvement Factors	Study Connections to Literature	Study Contradictions to Literature	Contributions to Literature
School Improvement Factors are Deeply Interrelated and Collaborative	Existing research documents factors in school improvement and seven factors aligned directly with the conducted research (Barreau & McIntosh, 2020; Duke et al., 2008; Fullan, 2006; Kutash et al., 2010).	Literature focuses on individual aspects of improvement (Huguet et al., 2017; Meyers & Hitt, 2018; Reitzug & Hewitt, 2017).	School improvement must take on a holistic approach with factors that interrelate and connect.
The Principal's Mindset, Focus, and Intentionality Guide Improvement	Principal impact has been widely documented (Allen et al., 2015; Brinia, et al., 2014; Cai, 2011; Clark, 2017; Dolph, 2017; Finnigan, 2012; Huguet et al., 2017).	Little research has specifically explored the principal's mindset, focus, or intentionality during school improvement (Cai, 2011; Reitzug & Hewitt, 2017).	The principal's mindset, focus, and intentionality were significant perceived factors in improving schools.
School Culture Develops through High Expectations and Accountability	Culture is an important piece in school improvement (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Brown et al., 2017; Hitt & Meyers, 2018; Hollingworth et al., 2018).	Past research offered explanation of specific strategies and school wide programs to develop school culture (Brown et al., 2017; Hollingworth et al., 2018).	The principal develops a culture of high expectations and accountability through small, everyday actions.
Academic Support and Intervention Move the Academic Needle	Research supports utilizing interventions (Avant, 2016; Bohannon et al., 2016; Muñoz & Branham, 2016).	Past research does not adequately explain the significance of support staff in the intervention process (Bohanon et al., 2016; Munoz & Branham, 2016).	Utilizing academic support, interventions, and support staff are critical first steps in school improvement.

School Improvement Factors	Study Connections to Literature	Study Contradictions to Literature	Contributions to Literature
Data Drives Decisions about Student Learning and Teaching	Research supports the use of data in schools (Abbott & Wren, 2016; Bernhardt, 2017; Huguet et al., 2017).	Existing research spends less time exploring the connection and relationship between standards, assessments, and data (Huguet et al., 2017).	Aligning standards, assessments, and data contribute to a significant piece of the school improvement process.
Limited Focus on Attendance, Behavior and Family Engagement	Literature suggested that attendance, behavior, and family engagement are critical factors in school improvement (Berg et al., 2018; Day et al., 2016; Duke et al., 2008; Fullan and Pinchot, 2018; Leithwood, 2010).	Few principals in this study discussed attendance, behavior, or family engagement as significant factors in school improvement.	Principals focus their time, energy, and efforts on factors in their control and within the walls of the school.

Appendix I: Initial Steps for School Improvement

Factor	Action	Impact
Develop Focus and Intentionality	Identify the focus for the year and create intention around every decision aligning with the focus.	The school builds momentum through early improvements and deepens the progress on key areas during the year.
Create Systems of Intervention	Decide how the school will support struggling students and create an intentional system to intervene.	Raises the level of academic success for every student in the school.
Assess and Analyze Data	Assess students, gather data to guide decision making, and monitor student progress.	Each decision has a reason and every student receives instruction and support where needed.